



Dhaka Division

Rub your eyes and blink. You are finally free of the last of the crazy Dhaka traffic jams and in front of you stretches a rural wonderland. This large district, comprising of some 25,000 villages and hardly any towns, is the most densely populated area of Bangladesh and epitomises the diversity of this surprising country.

While there are dappled forests, great rivers and hilly panoramas, much of the region is given over to radiant rice paddies, filling your vision with more hues of green than you ever knew existed. It's this farming soul, where life revolves around the gentle clip-clop of an ox and cart and the slow rotation of the seasons, that is, for the adventurous tourist, the appeal of this little visited region. It's the sort of place where brief encounters turn into solid friendships and a person can fall in love with a much maligned nation. This is the reason you came to Bangladesh, so dive right in.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Pace the streets of a city of gold in regal **Sonargaon** (opposite)
- Dance with cobras, get lovey-dovey with pythons and be spellbound by the magical residents of **Ghuradia** (p73)
- Munch on Monad, search for 99 elephants disguised as policemen and slither your hips like a pole dancer in **Muktagacha** (p77)
- Monkey around spotting the spotted deer in the patchy forests of **Madhupur National Park** (p77)



SONARGAON

A great day trip from Dhaka (about 23km) is an excursion to Sonargaon (sometimes known as Old Sonargaon), the country's first capital. Combining countryside, culture, archaeology, adventure and friendship in one tidy bundle, the village is an ideal way to experience all the best of Bangladesh in one easy step.

Except for some mosques, a bridge, a few tombs and stupas (Buddhist monuments), and some indistinguishable mounds (most of which are found around the small modern village of Mograpara), nothing much remains of the original city of Sonargaon. For most people, enchanting Painam Nagar (p72) is the real jewel.

Unfortunately the government's archaeological department has done precious little to preserve the buildings of Sonargaon and, on the rare days that work is undertaken, the results are normally totally out of keeping with the surrounding buildings. Some of the poorer residents reportedly sell the bricks from ramshackle buildings to be broken into gravel for construction work. Since

Independence, only Goaldi Mosque, a pre-Mughal bridge and a single rajbari (landowner's palace) called Sadarbari (now housing a folk-art museum) have been restored.

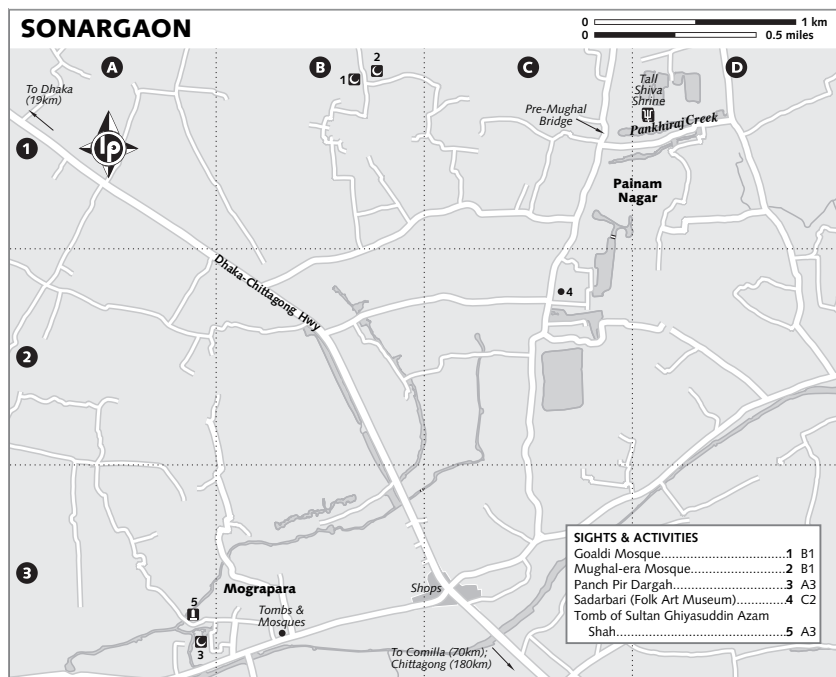
Sights & Activities

MOGRAPARA

A thriving village located on the Dhaka–Chittagong Hwy, Mograpara claims most of the remains of the old capital, including the **Tomb of Sultan Ghiyasuddin Azam Shah** (the oldest surviving Muslim monument in Bangladesh) and the **Panch Pir Dargah**. Most of these are 1km or 2km west of Mograpara. These monuments aren't very impressive and most visitors, believing only Painam Nagar to be Old Sonargaon, don't even know they exist.

SADARBARI (FOLK-ART MUSEUM)

Built in 1901, this stunning rajbari is an appropriate building for a **folk-art museum** (admission Tk 10; ☎ 9am–5pm, Fri–Wed). The building has two façades. The one facing the street, with steps leading down to the water and life-size English horsemen in stucco on either side, is one of



the most picturesque in Bangladesh. The other, at the museum's entrance, is profusely embellished with a mosaic of blue and white tiles, and has something of an Andalusian look to it.

Inside, the unadorned rooms are stuffed full of folk art and handicrafts, but everything is very poorly labelled and badly displayed. Around the back of the rajbari, and on the opposite side of the lake, is a new building containing another museum of folk-art objects. This one is much better organised and laid out.

For most people though, the highlight of a visit are the beautiful water-soaked gardens where trees, lawns and ponds have come together in a close impression of heaven. Bird-watchers should bring some binoculars because the trees and bushes are full of different kingfisher species. Relaxed Bangladeshis from the city come here for some fresh air on Friday.

GOALDI MOSQUE

Built in 1519, the graceful, single-domed **Gouldi Mosque** is the most impressive of the few extant monuments of the old capital city, and a good example of pre-Mughal architecture.

The mosque 50m beyond Goaldi, built in 1704 during the Mughal period, is historically less important.

PAINAM NAGAR

The once elegant town of **Painam Nagar** is busy fighting a losing battle with nature, and with every passing year the trees and vines drape themselves a little further over the decaying houses. The result is a delightful ghost-town quality where the buildings appear to hang like exotic fruits from the branches of the trees.

Constructed almost entirely between 1895 and 1905 on a small segment of the ancient capital city, this tiny settlement consists of a single narrow street, lined with around 50 (now dilapidated) mansions built by wealthy Hindu merchants. At the time of Partition, many owners fled to India, leaving their elegant homes in the care of poor tenants, who did nothing to maintain them. Most of the remaining owners pulled out during the anti-Hindu riots of 1964, which led up to the 1965 Indo-Pakistan War. Despite the rot, a few people do continue to live in some of the houses and their bright shades add a technicolour tint to the village.

Getting There & Away

Sonargaon is only 23km from central Dhaka and makes an easy day trip. From Dhaka's Sayedabad bus station, say the buzz word 'Mograpara' (Tk 30, 40 minutes – if the traffic is on your side!). If you ask for Sonargaon, you will likely end up at the Pan Pacific Sonargaon Hotel. Once you're in Mograpara, a short rickshaw ride will get you to the museum and

A GOLDEN TOWN

The ancient capital of Sonargaon (or 'Golden Town' in Hindi) flourished as the region's major inland port and centre of commerce during the pre-Muslim period. By the 13th century it was the Hindu seat of power. With the Muslim invasion and the arrival of the sultan of Elhi in 1280, its importance magnified as the region's de facto Islamic capital. Some 42 years later, the first independent sultan of East Bengal, Fakhruddin Mubarak Shah, officially established his capital in Sonargaon.

For the next 270 years, Sonargaon, known as the 'Seat of the Mighty Majesty', prospered as the capital of East Bengal, and the Muslim rulers minted their money here. Mu Huany, an envoy from the Chinese emperor, visited Sultan Ghiyasuddin Azam Shah's splendid court here in 1406. He observed that Sonargaon was a walled city with broad streets, great mausoleums and bazaars where business of all kinds was transacted. In 1558, famous traveller Ralph Fitch noted that it was an important centre for the manufacture and export of *kantha* (traditional indigo-dyed muslin), the finest in all of India. Ancient Egyptian mummies were reportedly wrapped in this *kantha* exported from Bengal.

When the invading Mughals ousted the sultans, they regarded Sonargaon's location along the region's major river as too exposed to Portuguese and Mogh pirates. So in 1608, they moved the capital to Dhaka, thus initiating Sonargaon's long decline into oblivion. Yet its legendary fame for incredibly fine muslin fabric continued undiminished until foreign competition from the British (and their import quotas) ruined the trade.

CENTRE FOR THE REHABILITATION OF THE PARALYSED (CRP)

An inspiring organisation that has been operating since 1979, the **Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Paralysed** (CRP; ☎ 771 0464/5; www.crp-bangladesh.com) helps paralysed people develop skills that enable them to become self-sufficient and productive.

In addition to selling fish, fruit, poultry, handicrafts and wheelchairs, CRP's funding is also derived from the guesthouses it runs in the tea gardens of Moulvibazar.

The centre has branches in Gonokbari, Gobindapur, Manikganj and Mirpur, but its headquarters is on the northeastern outskirts of Savar Bazar on the Dhaka–Aricha Hwy, from where you can buy postcards, stationery and other trinkets produced by CRP patients.

Visitors are most welcome at this sprawling complex; various training sessions and workshops are held daily from 8am to 1pm, and from 3pm to 6pm. The centre is closed Thursday afternoon and Friday. Volunteers, both skilled and unskilled, are always required – see the website for details.

other sights. Rickshaw-wallahs will guess what you're there to see.

SAVAR

☎ 06626

A popular day excursion for Dhaka locals is a trip to Savar (*shar-var*). The town, Savar Bazar, is on the Dhaka–Aricha Hwy, 15km north of Gabtali bus station in Dhaka. Tuesday is market day in Savar Bazar, which becomes very animated, especially along the banks of the Bangsi River just west of town.

The main attraction is the historic **National Martyrs' Memorial** (Jatiya Sriti Saudha), which is 8km further along the Dhaka–Aricha Hwy, just off the road. The tapering 50m-high structure is a memorial to the millions who died in the struggle for independence. The beautifully kept grounds contain a number of grassy platforms that cover the mass graves of some of those slaughtered in the Liberation War. This is an important place for Bangladeshis, who wander the grounds with an air of reverence.

If you need to eat, there's a large Parjatan restaurant across the road from the National Martyrs' Memorial. Downstairs the food is fast and cheap; upstairs it's more expensive and tasty. There is a well-marked Chinese restaurant on the main drag in the centre of Savar Bazar.

Buses for Savar (Tk 30, one hour) leave from Gabtali bus station throughout the day. Tell the driver that you want to get off at the memorial.

DHAMRAI

☎ 011

Dhamrai, an excellent side trip from Savar, is little more than a village, but its single main street packs quite a punch. Rotting slowly, and

in the most pleasant of manners, are a dozen or so extravagant century-old houses built by the wealthy Hindu families who once lived here. Today the town continues to be home to a substantial Hindu population and the inhabitants are renowned for their skill in brass work and for their *jamdani* (embroidered muslin or silk) weaving. Most of the finest Rajera buildings are occupied by brass or weaving workshops, and are slowly being restored to their former glory. These workshops are well worth a peek, as the process of making brass objects (often Hindu religious statues) using the lost-wax technique is a fascinating one. The quality of the goods they turn out is generally excellent and, with no pressure or sales pitch whatsoever, it's a good opportunity to browse. One workshop that has received high praise is **Dhamrai Metal Craft** (☎ 832 620).

Saturday, which is market day, is a good time to come for some local colour. The multi-storey Jagannath (chariot), adorned with painted images from Hindu mythology, sits in the centre of town and is paraded down the street during **Rath Jatra**, the festival held here during the full-moon in late June/early July (see p162).

Dhamrai is 5km west of the Savar and 1km north off the Dhaka–Aricha Hwy. Buses between Savar and Dhamrai cost about Tk 5.

Buses to Dhamrai (Tk 35, one hour) leave from Dhaka's Gabtali bus station. A baby taxi will be quicker but costs around Tk 250.

GHURADIA

Are you scared of snakes? If so give Ghuradia a wide berth because it's in this little village on the banks of the Dhaleshwari River (a few kilometres from Savar) that your worst nightmares will come true. There