



Bangladesh has left an image in our minds of many smiling, curious faces against a background of green. The faces are of men, women and children, although fewer women, that immediately gathered in small crowds whenever we stepped outside and happened to pause for more than a few seconds. The trick for turning the faces from curious stares to wide smiles was to acknowledge the attention and say “hello, how are you?” However, without that tricky ploy one could get quite intimidated by the instantaneous celebrity status that comes with being a foreigner in Bangladesh. Certainly it also helped to cover up, and our Bangladeshi acquaintances appreciated Ruth’s stylish Salwar Kameez, bought in Nepal and custom fitted in India.

Bangladesh is the planet’s most densely populated country, if you exclude the city states, so we were keen to avoid the really big centres, in particular Dhaka, its capital. This resulted in a circuitous route from our entry in the North West of the country as we made our way East then South to Chittagong, where we had a date with a container ship. Our route took in innumerable small villages: centres of local commerce arranged along the main road with small stalls, chai stops and markets dominated by men, this being a strongly patriarchal Islamic society. We stayed in hotels in the larger towns, getting out in the evenings to take a cycle rickshaw to the best local restaurants. Here we could really flaunt our celebrity status to receive embarrassingly eager service. One waiter, after persuading us to try paan, a spicy and chewy traditional after-dinner aid-to-digestion, was very concerned to know if we were “suffering OK?” Back in the business hotels, no backpacker or tourist ghettos here, the over-eager service continued: one incident required four hotel employees of escalating status to replace a broken telephone just so the manager could call to check that we had our passports safely returned after check-in.

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