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For expatriates in Kunming, [Chinese New Year](#) is rarely the heartfelt time for family it is for the local population. Instead, it means valuable vacation time away from work, and the opportunity for travel and adventure. There is one caveat however, as travel costs during this time of year skyrocket. I challenged myself to find a locale unaffected by tourism and the time of year. It was a very short list that led me to decide on Bangladesh. All it took was cursory research to form a basic itinerary, and a persistent attitude to convince a couple friends — suckers — to join me on what seemed like a quixotic quest. No goal and no real plan, just an opportunity to leave China for a moment.



Within minutes of arriving in Bangladesh, a man threatened to break my fingers. Apparently I had not returned a borrowed pen fast enough. Unblinkingly, and without pause, I had an immediate impression of how my ten days in Bangladesh would progress. Granted, my fingers never came to any actual harm, and neither did the rest of my person, but the absurdity and random happenstance repeated itself on many occasions.



After an odd visa-on-arrival process where we paid exactly US\$51 in cash, we were allowed to leave Shahjalal Airport. An enormous fence cage, where Bengalis of all intents forced themselves against the slats, surrounds the arrivals area. The visual effect was nothing short of jarring. Luckily, we had a driver waiting for us. His name was Mr Joy, and he was able to whisk us away to the charming neighborhood of Joar Shahara. Over the next couple days, the neighborhood served as a respite from the greater madness that was Dhaka.



The madness of Dhaka

Dhaka, put as honestly and diplomatically as possible, is a megacity unlike any other. With a greater area population of 17 million people, 600,000 rickshaws, and the lack of any sort of highway infrastructure, it takes a seeming eon just to cross the street. The population density, combined with an incredibly vibrant culture — which seems to literally ooze from every edifice — makes the city both a marvel and a drain on all the senses. Put simply, Dhaka is not a city to unabashedly enjoy, à la Chiang Mai or Prague, but rather to experience in all possible aspects.



In Dhaka, there are beggars everywhere. No sooner than we left the airport, old women and small children with hands outstretched, were tapping on our car windows. Even in relatively calm Joar Shahara, small children followed us up and down the streets. They tried grabbing our arms, getting in our way, and even straight-up asking for Bangladeshi *taka*. By the end of our first day, the local people had organically divided evenly into halves — those who wanted to help, and those who wanted something from us.



Regardless of which half someone fell into, the staring was a unifying constant. According to my visa, I was the one-thousand-three-hundred-twenty-fourth visitor to the country this year. To put that in perspective, Yunnan's Stone Forest received approximately eight times that number, on average, every day of 2015. Foreign backpackers such as my friends and I were seemingly uncommon to the point of myth. Really, we were treated closer to unicorns rather than as fellow human beings. For instance, if we got tea at a local stand, if we asked for directions, or got into a random conversation, then the whole neighborhood would come and stare. God forbid that we ran into other white people, then the local reaction was comparable to that of the Second Coming.



On our second day in Dhaka, we thought it'd be prudent to take in some of the sights. We never made it very far. Traffic was an absolute nightmare. We made it to the 'New Market' area, where a student protest was going on. While it calmed down rather quickly, it seemed rather intense for a moment. The protest turned out to be beneficial, as it forced us onto a pedestrian bridge and put us in a position to get an overhead view of Dhaka's rush hour traffic. If I thought it was bad before, it nothing compared to what the roads turned into. As far as I could see, there was a sea of rainbow-colored rickshaws and trucks that looked far older than anyone I was traveling with. We were trapped, as the traffic meant that no rickshaw driver was willing to take us back north to Joar Shahara. In the end, we found a hotel that was willing to call a private car.



Due to a misunderstanding, the car dropped us off one neighborhood too soon. As we walked the rest of the way, we passed a shop called Coffee Bean, and another named Gloria Jean's. In every other country I've been to, these places would be casual, run-of-the-mill coffee shops. In the chaos of Dhaka, however, they have more in common with multi-story fortresses, complete with airport-level security. This meant guards, bag scanners and metal detectors. I'd never seen anything like it.



After two days, enough was enough, and it was time to venture forth to greener and cleaner pastures. For three nights, the white sand, blue ocean, and green trees of Saint Martin's island became our new reality. When left alone by the locals, it was as quiet and serene as one would hope. But being left alone was not a common occurrence.



Chittagong and the ship-breaking yards

While our next major stop would be [Chittagong](#), we spent a night along the way in [Cox's Bazar](#). Well known as the longest stretch of beach in the world, Cox's Bazar is where Bangladeshi tourists go for fun. Complete with resorts, a passable circus imitation, and the beach itself, it's hard not to see Cox's domestic popularity. The next day, however, we arrived in the urban quagmire that was Chittagong.



An ancient port city with a history going back nearly 2,500 years, it gives off every sense of having been dragged, kicking and screaming, into the twenty-first century. The air was like Beijing on a really bad day — I have never been anywhere more obviously polluted. According to the World Health Organization, it is the [fourth worst on our planet](#). The closest neighborhood to us was a sprawling maze of shops selling everything from cell phones, to [shalwar kameez](#), to fish and other livestock. Unlike similar places in [Luang Prabang](#), Bangkok, [Hanoi](#), and Kunming, it was entirely uncommercial. It was only one stall owner in ten that called out to us. The place was authentic and raw, with a myriad of colors, languages, and items on display. The scene which we were in could have occurred in any century over time, be it the fourteenth or the eighteenth. It was only the cell phones, and lungfuls of pollution, that dragged us back into reality.



Internationally, Chittagong is not known for its markets, or even its urban pollution. It's known rather, for its [human rights abuses in relation to its ship-breaking industry](#). The largest of its kind in the world, the yards employ 200,000 Bangladeshis, and accounts for a majority of the country's steel output. On the surface, this seems fine — countries all over the world engage in the scrapping of old ships. The difference here, is that the 'employees' in Bangladesh are provided with neither safety equipment nor training. In fact, reports claim that at least one worker dies on the job every week. Following international pressure, notably from Greenpeace, the yards have sworn off child labor. Even in baby steps, progress is progress.



Getting into the yards took a great deal of feigning 'Western ignorance'. It took a while, including a misguided rickshaw ride to the Chittagong Airport, but we were eventually able to communicate our desire to visit where the ships were taken apart. We knew we were getting closer when the air became nearly unbreathable and our eyes watered without provocation. All along a fence were signs denying any engagement in child labor, while others indicated that foreigners were unwelcome.



Luckily, I'm an entertainment nerd, and knew that *Avengers: Age of Ultron* contained a scene filmed there. As the guard tried to make us go away, we kept saying that we just wanted to see where Robert Downey Jr, Mark Ruffalo, and James Spader filmed. Of course, the actors were never there, and the yards were only used for exterior shots, but it was no time for the truth. Eventually, after making us promise to not use our cameras, the guard decided we were harmless, and permitted us to walk along the edge of the yards.



It soon transpired, however, that the guard's decision was no act of generosity. The 'perimeter' was about 110 meters long, and completely composed of silt and mud. For what seemed like forever, we waded through the muck, occasionally at knee-high depth. We were slipping, sliding, and descending, all while the Bengali workers watched us from within the yards. Occasionally, a couple kids were sent out to mind us, or to help us across a particularly difficult stretch. As we neared the yards proper, the composition of the silt began to change. Slowly, it took on an even more polluted appearance. First, it turned green, and then bits of trash and other refuse began to block our progress. Things improved slightly when solidified bags of concrete showed up along the way, which we used as stepping stones. By the time we got our first proper view of the facility, huge puddles of crude oil were present as well.



The ship-breaking yard was exactly as I had imagined. The shell of an old tanker stood alone, a monolith in the middle of a desolate beach. Just as Charlton Heston stumbled upon the Statue of Liberty in the film *Planet of the Apes*, we came upon this hulking remnant. All post-apocalyptic metaphors instantly seemed appropriate. In the distance, we could make out a platoon of workers using torches to take the ship apart bit by bit. Moving up beach, back to shore, more ship-corpse laid dormant on the beach. We could see more workers standing there, admiring the upcoming labor while one man started the project.



An accidental meeting with the military

Our mission accomplished, we trudged back to the entrance. Soon though, we realized how absolutely filthy we were. Our shoes especially, were covered in mud that looked almost like liquefied plastic. The encrusted muck had a slightly chromatic sheen, and could have been mistaken for being solid. Later, I ended up having to throw away the shoes entirely. At the time, however, we just wanted to get clean enough to be able to get back in our rickshaw.



Looking for a place to wash off, we noticed a tiny village on the other side of the road from the yard entrance. It was filled with crowds of brightly dressed people, as well as all manner of carnival equipment. The villagers quickly noticed the state of our clothes, and immediately took steps to help. First, they showed us to a water spigot, and it became clear it would help little in removing the toxic silt. A group then walked us over to their washing pool. On the way, they explained that they were a Hindu minority village, and they were celebrating [Vasant Panchami](#), or Hindu Spring Festival. This explained the clothing, as well as the makeshift festivities.



As we washed off — and it took awhile — everyone took the time to get to know us. It was all the typical questions we had received over the course of the whole trip, but this time had a far friendlier bent. Maybe it was because they helped us so thoroughly, but even requests to take photos with us seemed far less objectionable than before. By the time we were guided back to our rickshaw, we agreed the day was the highlight of our entire trip. Everyone waved us off as our rickshaw headed back to the main road.



On our way back to Chittagong, it was a reasonable assumption that the day's excitement had come to an end. We were wrong. Along an empty stretch of road, our driver abruptly took a turn onto a dirt road, and after a few minutes, we found ourselves passing unannounced through a military training area. Soldiers were in formation, setting up a target range and waiting for their next set of order.



The latter was delayed because of us. We got the driver to stop, and I was able to snap a couple of pictures before the commanding officer spotted us. First, he told us to take no more pictures., and it was definitely more than a request. Oddly enough, it didn't lead to be the end of our interaction. While we were not allowed to take his picture, we were indeed able to ask several questions. He told us that the soldiers in his charge were fresh recruits — they were two weeks into their training. Apparently, we were located three kilometers from an army base that played host to joint-exercises with India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan. The commander emphasized that the United States had absolutely no involvement. Eventually, he returned to the task-at-hand. We were quick to oblige, and our rickshaw continued back to the city.



With our reason for being in Chittagong realized, there was no reason to linger. Arriving back in the capital, Mr. Joy was positively joyful to see us. Now at the tail-end of our travails, Dhaka and specifically Joar Shahara, took on a new perspective. There was amazingly delicious *shwarma* on every corner, people did not instantly gawk at us, and we discovered a slight amount of peace, even outside of the hotel.



The following day, with our departure back to Kunming imminent, our journey truly came full circle. That said, it did not do so in the cliché way that one would expect. The man who once threatened to break my fingers was on the flight back. While he had nothing to say to me this time around, his presence seemed appropriate.



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