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Travel & Outdoors: Friday, December 26, 2003

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Essay

Traveler didn't set foot in Bangladesh, but he was there

By Jon Letman
Special to The Seattle Times

Editor's note: The Travel Essay is written by our readers about a travel adventure or insight.

If you asked me if I've ever been to Bangladesh, it would be easy to say "no," but I will answer "yes." Indeed, I have been to Bangladesh.

OK, so it was only a 45-minute stop-over on a flight from Singapore to Kathmandu, but those 45 minutes and the hour of flying time above that water-logged patchwork of green rice paddies sticks in my mind like Chittagong mud.

When I first saw Bangladesh from the plane window, I nodded and thought, "So that's why this is the land of endemic flooding." As far as I could see, a mosaic of fields was crisscrossed, bisected and dissected by ribbons of silver waterways — the rivers that flow from the glaciers of Tibet and the Himalayas, snaking through Sikkim and Nepal, tumbling over rocks in Bhutan and Meghalaya, weaving braids of water across the highlands before finally emptying their silty, muddy contents into the Bay of Bengal.

The land was flat as a chapatti and porous as a sponge. It seemed an incredibly cruel joke to squeeze 131 million people into a flood plain slightly smaller than Iowa. But where were all the people in the world's eighth most populous nation? From my window I saw no signs of habitation. No cars, no buses, no houses, no schools and no hospitals. I saw no men, no mosques, no roads nor rails. Overpopulation? It looked like pre-history.

But then we flew over a small hamlet, and another and another. They were collections of squat mud red buildings huddled together, surrounded by the verdant earth and everywhere flowing water. And then a human form could be seen, a child running along a small track, thin and straight as string. The small boy was pushing a large ring the size of a hula hoop with a stick, guiding it as he ran. No one else was in sight in this flat green world of rivers and rivulets, banana patches and palm trees; just one boy alone running across the floodplain on that hazy morning in May before the monsoon.

Beyond this pastoral scene rose Dhaka, the capital and a home to some 9 million people. Viewed from the plane, the city appeared literally out of nowhere, as if it had sprouted from the earth, a weedy jumble of concrete and steel, monstrous and imposing, as tall as the countryside was flat. From

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the air Dhaka gave the impression that once entered, one would be swallowed up, escape impossible.

Landing at Zia International, the Singapore Airlines jumbo jet came to a halt, and three security guards, men in black berets with razor-thin moustaches and machine guns slung over their shoulders entered the cabin. And then, in a scene reminiscent of the railways of India, the sweepers came in. Scraggly thin women, dressed in pink and green cotton saris, these small hunched figures with faces hidden swept the floor of the airplane, removing bits of rubbish from beneath the passenger's feet. They worked quickly and in silence and were gone as fast as they had appeared.

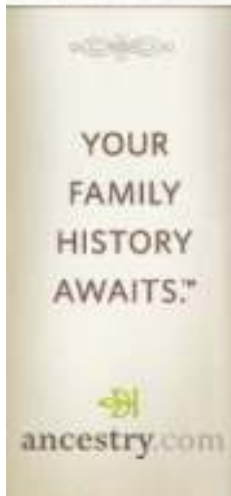
We never had the chance to leave the plane. I never made it onto the tarmac, let alone into the terminal. I never met the crush and crowds of Dhaka, nor did I hear the call to prayer from the minaret of Baitull Mukarram. There was no time to stroll in the clouds of dust raised by the masses in old Dhaka.

I was only there long enough to see a lone boy rolling his hoop down the muddy track, and the sweepers clean our plane, which minutes later would roar into the sky, crossing the alluvial plain where the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers flow like arteries through the flat green land of Bangladesh, beating with life.

(Jon Letman lives in Lihue, Hawaii.)

The Travel Essay runs each Sunday in The Seattle Times and also online at seattletimes.com. To submit an essay for consideration, make sure it's typed and no longer than 700 words. Essays, which are unpaid, may be edited for content and length. E-mail to travel@seattletimes.com or send to Travel, The Seattle Times, P.O. Box 70, Seattle, WA 98111.

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