

# Khulna Division



If your idea of adventure is one of unexplored jungle swamps teeming with wildlife as deadly as it is beautiful, then you'll love Khulna division. Comprising in large parts of nothing but marshlands, waterlogged jungles and rivers, this archetypal explorer country is not easy to navigate, but it promises unlikely stories you'll be recounting for years to come. Imagine telling your friends of how you travelled by paddle-wheel steamer to secret villages where men fish with tame otters, and where steel masks are worn to provide protection from tiger attacks. Imagine their faces when you talk of crocodiles being hand-fed chickens in the grounds of a moody mosque, or of helping to steal honey from the hives of giant killer bees. Think of their surprise when you tell them you spoke with a guru who could cure illnesses through nothing but faith and a magic touch, and of a saint who sang his way to the throne of God.

Magical Khulna division is unquestionably the highlight of Bangladesh, so get out and explore!

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Keeping a nervous eye out for tigers while drifting through the surreal **Sundarbans** (p92), the world's largest mangrove forest
- Casting a line with the **fishing otters** (p82) of the Narail and Gopalganj areas
- Singing and dancing your way to religious ecstasy in the backwater town of **Kushtia** (p83)
- Wishing you had a suit of armour in the race to find the world's most dangerous **honey** (p94)
- Searching for crocodiles among the treasure-trove mosques of **Bagerhat** (p88)



## JESSORE

☎ 0421

Standing close to the bold and brash gates of India, many travellers arriving from Kolkata bring with them a haughty notion that Bangladesh will be little more than India's vaguely entertaining side-kick. But give them two hours and such silly notions are utterly shattered – and the amazing thing about this transformation is that Jessore, like many Bangladeshi towns, has no real tourist sights. Rather, its attractions are all in the exotic and chaotic atmosphere and in the web of narrow winding backstreets overcrowded with possible adventures.

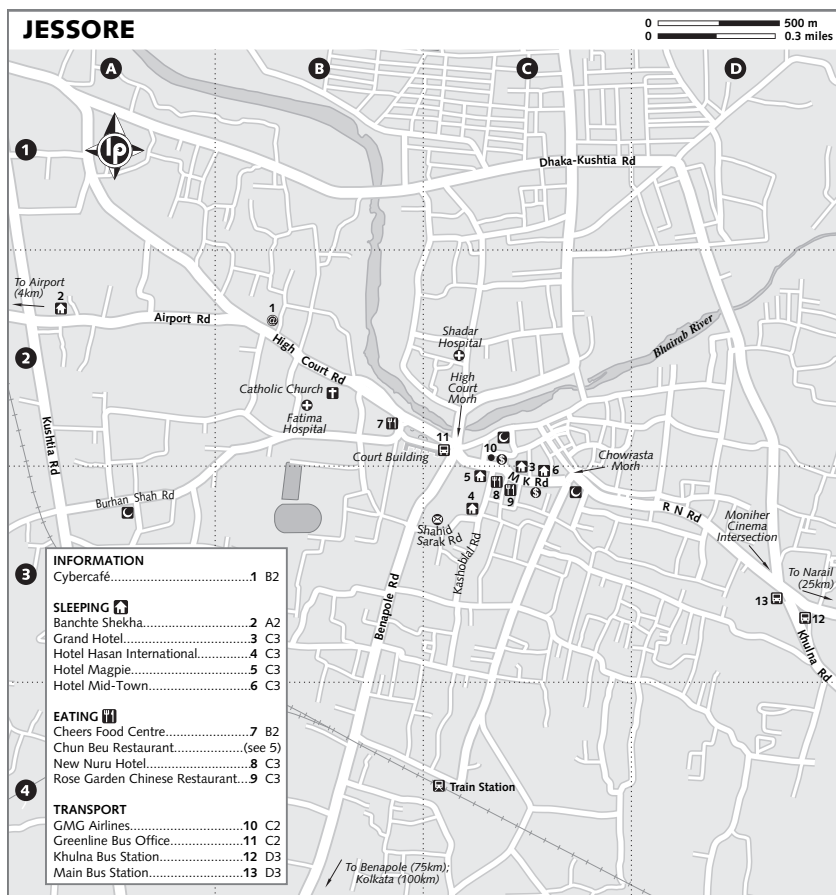
There's a **Cybercafé** (High Court Rd) at the west-end of town, but no ATM.

## Sleeping

### BUDGET

**Hotel Mid-Town** (☎ 01711 940160; MK Rd; s/d from Tk 135/200) A strict hotel with a list of rules a mile long including a no-woman policy, which is a shame because it could do with a bit of a female touch. If you're a bloke on a tight budget then it'll do for a night or so. The hotel is visible from MK Rd but accessed just off it.

**Grand Hotel** (☎ 73038; grand@khulna.bangla.net; MK Rd; s/d Tk 150/400) This budget hotel is managed like a midrange one and is the best budget base in Jessore. You enter the rooms through red theatre curtains and discover carefully looked after rooms and the sort of boisterous welcome worthy of the theatre. Both men and women are welcome.



**LEARNING HOW TO SURVIVE** *Heather Butler*

The Banchte Shekha Foundation (Learn How to Survive) was founded in 1975 by Angela Gomez, a non-Muslim teacher who, touched by the mistreatment of women in Bangladesh, endured death threats while trying to set up education and health centres for women and children (see blow). She works directly with the villagers, encouraging them to empower women. Her efforts have earned her the Asia Nobel Prize.

**Hotel Maggie** (☎ 72162; MK Rd; s/d Tk 250/500) If it weren't for the crazy road noise then this would be a real find. It's bright, well lit, clean and friendly. For budget hotel prices you get midrange standards.

There are some more budget options near the bus station at the east end of town, on Khulna Rd.

**MIDRANGE**

**our pick Banchte Shekha** (☎ 66436/68885; Shaheed Mashur Rahman Rd just off Airport Rd; r Tk 300-800) Just east of the bypass road to Benapole, Banchte Shekha (*bach-tah shay-kah*) is surrounded only by the noise of leaves blowing in the breeze and chirping birds. You could be forgiven for thinking this is just a cheap hotel, but make no mistake, this place is something special. It is in fact a small, local NGO-run women's training centre/hotel and your money goes directly towards funding its aid projects (see boxed text, above). The rooms are basic but more than adequate and come with hot showers, satellite TV and clean sheets smelling of mothballs. For single women travellers, this almost completely female-run establishment is a dream. If you let staff know in advance, you can share the family-style meals for a small fee. It's true that there are more luxurious hotels in Bangladesh, but Banchte Shekha is deserving of the 'Our Pick' selection, and your custom.

**Hotel Hasan International** (☎ 67478; cnr Kashoblal & Shahid Sarak Rds; s/d Tk 700/1200, ste Tk 2000-2500) On the surface, it's the best city centre hotel with large rooms, hot water and satellite TV, but thanks to some serious road noise and staff who haven't learnt how to smile, it won't be winning awards any time soon.

**Eating**

The K'Purti Rd area is a great place for street food, fresh produce and a carnival-like atmosphere.

**Cheers Food Centre** (High Court Rd; mains Tk 30) A new, shiny-orange snack bar modelled along Western

lines with a variety of fried and unhealthy, but undeniably tasty, snacks of the burger ilk.

**New Nuru Hotel** (MK Rd; mains Tk 80) The unchallenged curry king of Jessore, but the fiery kebabs are also worthy of mention. Be prepared for some relentless staring.

**Rose Garden Chinese Restaurant** (Jess Tower, MK Rd; dishes around Tk 180) All your favourite (or by this stage in the game, possibly not) Bengali Chinese dishes. It's tucked away on the upper floors of a small shopping centre.

**Chun Beu Restaurant** (4th fl, Hotel Maggie, MK Rd; soup Tk 100, mains Tk 250) A rare, authentic Chinese restaurant with a casual atmosphere helped along nicely by the equally casual blue-and-white checked tablecloths. It's ideal for a go-slow meal with friends.

**Getting There & Away****AIR**

The airport is around 6km and a Tk 100 rickshaw ride west of the city centre.

**GMG Airlines** (☎ 73280; RS Tower) flies from Jessore to Dhaka (Tk 2770, 40 minutes) daily at 8.50am and 5.25pm (Saturday 3.55pm). **United Airways** (☎ 171 3398783; at the airport) has flights to Dhaka (Tk 2645) every day except Friday.

**BUS**

From Dhaka, buses for Jessore leave from Gabtali bus station (p67).

Buses leave for Dhaka (ordinary/air-con coach Tk 230/325, seven to 10 hours, 6am to 10.30pm). There are also super deluxe coaches (whatever that might be) for Tk 475 from the main bus station. Several companies have offices around the main bus station.

There are buses for Benapole (Tk 30, 1½ hours, periodically from 6am), also from the main bus station, and if you're headed to Kolkata count on about six hours for the entire trip.

There are also buses to Khulna (Tk 50, 1½ hours), Bogra (Tk 220, eight hours), Kushtia (Tk 100, three hours) and a hundred other places.

**TRAIN**

The **train station** (☎ 5019; Rail Rd) is 2km south of the central area. There's an express to Rajshahi (1st/sulob class Tk 215/75, daily at 7.59am).

It's simpler to travel by bus on the short journey to Khulna, although there is an inter-city (IC) train (1st/sulob class Tk 85/35, 1½ hours, daily at 12.30pm).

There is also a daily train to Benapole (Tk 20, 8.50am).

**AROUND JESSORE****Baro Bazar Mosque**

This pre-Mughal mosque, dating from the 15th or early-16th century, is a good example of a single-domed mosque with thick walls, arched doorways, a square shape, sparse exterior embellishment and a low semicircular dome. Not well-known by the locals, it's about 18km northeast of Jessore on the Jessore–Magura Hwy at Baro Bazar.

**Sonabaria Temple**

The Sonabaria Shyam Sundar Temple, built in 1767, is similar in style to Kantanagar Temple (p111). Like Kantanagar, it's a simple square structure, rising in three diminishing storeys, and extensively decorated with terracotta art. It's only about half the size though, and not as beautiful or well preserved.

As the crow flies, it's about 30km southwest of Jessore, near the Indian border. To get there from Jessore, take the road west towards Benapole for 25km to the tiny village of Navaron (about two-thirds the distance

to Benapole), where you'll find a country road heading south. It's about 15km along that road.

**BENAPOLE**

Benapole (also spelt Benapol) is the border town situated on the overland route from Kolkata. The town is essentially a 2km-long road lined with trucks waiting to cross the border. It's a friendly enough place, but not one you'd visit unless you were crossing the border.

If you've arrived at a reasonable time, it's probably best to spend your first night in Jessore. Failing that, there is some accommodation in Benapole – the **Parjatan Hotel** (r with/without air-con Tk 1000/600, ste Tk 1500) has large, clean suites that for some reason have two bathrooms and two bedrooms. Bickering couples will find it perfect!

There are a number of cheap **restaurants** with meals from around Tk 40.

Minibuses ply the route between Benapole and Jessore (Tk 30, 1½ hours). Ask for both 'Benapole' and 'border' to avoid confusion. The word 'India' may also come in handy.

**OTTER FISHING VILLAGES**

Human beings are a resourceful and enterprising lot, and over the centuries we've come up with all manner of weird and wonderful machines to help make life that little bit easier. Often though you just can't beat good old Mother Nature for pure design brilliance. In riverside villages in the **Narail** and **Gopalganj**

**CROSSING THE BORDER**

Border officials see quite a few travellers crossing at Benapole and things are relatively efficient. The border is open every day between 6am and 6.30pm.

Some travellers who've arrived in Bangladesh by air have been asked for a 'change of route' permit when trying to leave by land. These can be obtained for free at the Immigration and Passport Office (p167).

**Changing Money**

If you're coming into Bangladesh, be sure to have cash on you, as you'll be hard-pressed changing travellers cheques and the nearest ATM is in Khulna.

**Entering & Exiting**

Travelling from the railway station at Bangaon in India to the border costs Rs 50 by baby taxi (mini auto-rickshaw). Take a rickshaw or three-wheeler cart to the bus stand in Benapole (between Tk 10 and Tk 20). From here you can get a local bus to Jessore (Tk 30, 1½ hours).

If you're going into India, from Bangaon you can take the cheap and cheerful local train to Kolkata.

## OF OTTERS AND MEN

Fishing with otters has been taking place for at least 1000 years and was once fairly widespread across the world; in the UK it didn't die out until 1880. There are two techniques employed by the fishermen; one involves the otters individually catching fish and returning them to the fishermen while the other (and the technique employed in Bangladesh) involves a net being lowered into the water and 'shuffled' along the river bed or against clumps of water plants to disturb the fish which the otters then chase into the net. On good nights the otters can help catch up to 50kg of fish, which can net the fishermen a not insignificant US\$50 to US\$60 a day. This makes skilled otters valuable possessions, and a pair of fishing otters can exchange hands for over US\$100.

Whatever you do, don't try and cuddle them. Otters are powerful and aggressive and in 1992 a group of otters killed a fisherman in India!

areas (a couple of hours east of Jessore), the local fishermen know this and instead of using sea-bed devastating drag nets and other such fishing 'marvels', they've stuck with a technique that died out elsewhere in the world eons ago. Each night small groups of fishermen pile into little wooden boats and set out to catch fish using the ultimate fishing machine – the otter (see also boxed text, p84).

With a little patience, it's possible to visit the villages the fishermen live in and even go out fishing with them and their furry friends, but be warned it's not an easy task for independent travellers. However if you manage it this might well turn out to be one of your most memorable experiences in Bangladesh.

To get there, first take a bus from Khulna or Jessore to Noapra (Tk 15), a small riverside town. From here hop into a little passenger ferry (Tk 2) over the river and then take a tempo (auto-rickshaw) to the village of Gobra (Tk 20). Once in Gobra village, you must take a rickshaw or baby taxi to Singasolhur village and finally another little ferry to the tiny village of Hariar.

This is where the otter fishermen live, but don't worry if you get hopelessly lost and end up elsewhere as many of the riverside villages in these parts engage in otter fishing and most people will quickly grasp what you want to do. Even so, only about three or four tourists a year visit these villages and nobody speaks anything other than Bengali so trying to discuss anything of significance will be difficult. Note also that there is nowhere to stay or eat around here and the journey from Jessore or Khulna on public transport is likely to take all day. The hospitality of the villagers is such that you probably wouldn't be left to sleep on the street, but don't rely on them.

The real business of fishing takes place at night so you will probably have to rouse the fishermen and otters from their sleep and arrange an hour or two out on the river (for most people this is sufficient). There is no set fee for this but be generous in what you give – Tk 800 to Tk 1000 between two of you should be fine.

An easier, though undeniably less adventurous, alternative is to arrange a car and driver through one of the tour companies in Khulna. **Guide Tours** (☎ /fax 731 384; www.guide-tours.com; KDA Bldg, KDA Ave, Khulna) can supply a car and the excellent, English-speaking Mr Shaheentoor, who knows the fishermen well. It can also arrange an overnight boat ride from Khulna, which is a superb way to get there. All these tours are customised and the price varies, but expect to pay around Tk 45,000 for a day-long road trip.

## KUSHTIA

☎ 071

Kushtia is a bustling town just south of Rajshahi division, but largely in the middle of nowhere. At first sight it may appear an unlikely spot in which to find a living guru, and the shrine of a saintly man with a sweet voice and a sensible view on life, but then this is one of the poorest areas in the country, so maybe they did choose appropriately.

## Sights

### SHRINE OF LALON SHAH

The burning white shrine of Lalon Shah is, for most Bangladeshis, the first and only reason for visiting Kushtia and come they do, in their hundreds. Lalon Shah is one of the most famous holy men in Bangladesh (see p85) and his shrine is a fascinating peak into

a mystical side of Bangladeshi life, and proof that Islam here isn't as straight-laced as it may at first appear. The shrine centres on the holy man's tomb and that of his adopted parents, while around the perimeter of the shrine are the tombs of various local dignitaries. Behind the tomb complex is a covered area where musicians continually play and sing Lalon Shah's songs, and pilgrims sometimes burst into dance.

Outside the shrine complex are numerous stalls selling a variety of holiday tack and pan-religious knick-knacks, including small talismans, Christian crucifixes and Hindu tridents. Next to the shrine is a private house, used as a sometimes-home to an important guru who is reputed to be able to cure illnesses through faith and touch. If he is around you have a good chance of being invited in to meet him and his disciples.

In February/March and October, huge melas (festivals) take place here, attracting thousands of pilgrims, itinerant vendors and holy men from across the subcontinent.

The shrine is a Tk 15 rickshaw ride from the town.

### TAGORE LODGE

It's a worthwhile trip to **Tagore Lodge**, as much for the journey there as for the lodge itself. A ride to the lodge on a three-wheeler affords the privilege of witnessing village life candidly unfold in front of you.

This picturesque home was built in the mid-19th century and the famous Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore lived here for over 10 years from 1880, composing some of his immortal poems, songs and short stories. He returned in 1912 for several years, translating

his works into English and earning the Nobel Prize for Literature (1913) in the process.

The estate is on the south bank of the Padma River, outside Shelaidaha, east of Kushtia. To get here, cross the Gorai River then hire a three-wheeler to take you the remaining 8km to the lodge. The cart should cost about Tk 150 return if you bargain successfully.

Opening hours depend on what the groundskeeper feels like doing, but if you rock up at a sensible time you'll generally be able to have a look.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel Al-Amin** (☎ 54193; Nawab Sirajuddul Rd; s from Tk 200, d with air-con Tk 550; 🍴) It's not certain whether foreigners can stay here or not, but persistence normally pays off. The rooms, though not palatial, are clean and that's what counts. It's on the main drag.

**Azmiree Hotel** (☎ 53012; 107/1 RCRC Rd, Court Para; s with/without air-con Tk 230/180, d with/without air-con Tk 750/280; 🍴) The old Azmiree (aj-mee-ree) has some impressively clean rooms and shutters that look as though they could withstand a siege. It's given some gentle touches with the addition of desks and chairs, and is the hotel most likely to accept foreigners. It's poorly marked so you'll have to ask directions near the train station.

There are the usual local eateries, the best of which is the **Jangail Hotel**. A renowned sweet shop, **Dodhi Bhandar**, can be found on the way to the shrine. Its milk-based desserts and sweets are as superb as local opinion holds.

### Getting There & Away

Coming into Kushtia, you'll likely be dropped off on a main road away from the main

### MR RATAN – OTTER FISHERMAN

I have been fishing with otters for over 30 years now. There are around 200 otter fishermen in this area and this is the only part of Bangladesh where people fish with them. Winter nights at low tide are the best time to go as this is when the most fish are around, but the fish levels have been dropping over the last 20 years and now it's not easy to make a living from otter fishing. We take our fish to the village depot and from there they are sold to markets all over Bangladesh.

I learnt to fish like this from my father but I am not teaching it to my children as there isn't enough money in it and I want them to go to school instead.

Sometimes the otters are caught in the wild and trained, but other times they breed and the baby otters learn from their parents. It takes about a year for a baby otter to learn how to fish with us. I have three otters at the moment – a couple and their baby who is still learning to fish. We never handle our otters as they can bite.

*Mr Ratan is an otter fisherman from the village of Hariar*

### THE SINGING SAINT

No one is quite certain when or where Lalon Shah was born. He claimed to have merely 'arrived' and certainly his discovery (aged 16, and suffering from smallpox, he was found by a local farmer floating in the river near Kushtia) lends credence to his claim that he 'came from water'. As the boy recovered, it became clear that he was possessed of great wisdom and he quickly attracted many followers.

Lalon was a humanist and vehemently opposed to all distinctions of religion and caste (throughout his long life he said nothing of the time before his discovery and nobody has ever been able to prove whether he came from an Islamic or Hindu background), though he often spoke positively on aspects of all religions. Instead he encouraged people to look 'into themselves' for answers and, being a talented poet and musician, he used music to get his messages across.

Lalon died in 1890 around the ripe old age of 116.

drag. It might be worth getting a rickshaw to Nawab Sirajuddula Rd so you can get your bearings.

The bus ride to Jessore (Tk 75, three hours) can be punctuated with stops, but the roads are reasonably well maintained.

There are a few luxury coach companies on Babar Rd, at College Gate, that service Dhaka (Tk 200 to Tk 300, 6½ hours).

## KHULNA

☎ 041

Khulna, capital of the province, is a town on the frontier. Beyond its scraggly streets awaits a Boys Own range of extraordinary adventures that, for many travellers, are the sole reason for coming to Bangladesh. Though the town itself offers few tangible sights, this frontier sensation hangs heavy in the air and only the most jaded of travellers won't feel a flutter of excitement as they disembark from the bus or the boat that carries them here.

### Orientation & Information

Most of the cheap hotels and restaurants are located in the city's heart. Khan A Sabar Rd, also known as Jessore Rd, is the main drag through the city, and KDA Ave is the major thoroughfare on the western side.

**Bengal Tours** (☎ 724 355; 236 Khan Jahan Ali Rd)

**Cafe.net** (2/2 Babu Khan Rd; per hr Tk 30) A cyber café that actually has a café.

**Guide Tours** (☎ /fax 731 384; www.guidetours.com; KDA Bldg, KDA Ave)

**Hotel Royal International** (☎ 721 638/9; royal@btbtb.net.bd; 33 KDA Ave) General tourist information and car rentals. Also does package tours to the Sundarbans.

**New Market** (Upper Jessore Rd; per hr Tk 20) The best place for internet access, with a few different establish-

ments on the 1st floor. New Market is also a great place to shop; the environment is pressure-free and prices are fixed.

**Standard Chartered Bank** (KDA Ave) Changes money and has an ATM; near Shiv Bari Circle.

### Sights & Activities

There are few physical sights in Khulna, but the **old town** streets, centred on the riverfront and Helatala Rd, are an energetic mish-mash designed to confuse and inspire the senses. From the ghats (steps or landings) down by the waterfront, you won't have to struggle to find someone to take you out in a small boat for a half-hour people-watching session along the river (Tk 100 to Tk 150 should be ample).

If you've got some time to kill before a boat or bus departure, the small collection of objects garnered from around Bagerhat and on display at the **Divisional Museum** (admission Tk 50; ☎ 2.30-6pm Mon, 10am-1pm & 1.30-6pm Tue-Thu & Sat, 12.30-6pm Fri Apr-Sep, 1.30-5pm Mon, 9am-1pm & 1.30-5pm Tue-Thu & Sat, 9am-12.30pm & 2-5pm Fri Oct-Mar) should help pass half an hour or so. Opposite the Hotel Jalico is a large **Hindu temple** (Sir Iqbal Rd) dedicated to Shiva, in which colour and incense are virtually compulsory.

For information about Sundarbans tours, see p94.

### Sleeping

#### BUDGET

Khulna's cheap hotels are concentrated in the heart of the city in an area 1km south of the train station. Most are well marked in English.

**Society Hotel** (☎ 720 995; Helatala Rd; s/d 50/80 deluxe s/d Tk 80/130) The brightly painted and well-tended rooms make this one of the city's best value cheapies. Unusually for a bottom-end





hotel, the English-speaking staff are happy to see you. It's in a colourful neighbourhood.

**Khulna Hotel** (☎ 724 359; s/d Tk 120/150, ste Tk 500) Larger rooms than at the Society Hotel but because it's dirtier, it's the inferior option.

**Hotel Arcadia** (☎ 732 552; Khan A Sabar Rd; s/d Tk 250/350) Excellent value budget rooms with – are you ready for this – brand new, unsullied bedding! The rooms are small but well kept and the bathrooms have sit-down toilets, which is rare for this price range.

#### MIDRANGE

**Hotel Babla** (☎ 813 641; 65 Khan A Sabar Rd; s/d Tk 200/450, d with air-con Tk 600; 🚿) The clean Hotel Babla has character, both in its uneven architecture and in its English- and German-speaking manager. It's something of a backpacker hang-out, but is a little difficult to find as its sign is in Bengali.

**Hotel Jalico** (☎ 811 883; Sir Iqbal Rd; s/d Tk 500/700, ste Tk 1600) This central hotel is large enough to ensure that there are always rooms available and when you get inside said rooms, you will find them equally large, with shiny, tiled floors and soft furniture. Some also have good views over the city. The management is charming and speaks some English. Add 15% tax for suite rates.

#### TOP END

**Western Inn International** (☎ 733 191; western@btb.net.bd; 51 Khan A Sabur Rd; r from Tk 800, ste from Tk 1600) The garish, flashing Christmas-tree lights covering the outside of the building may not inspire much confidence, but once inside you will find one of the ritziest places in town, and the best value for its type. The Western Inn is extremely professional in its service and outlook. The very good attached restaurant is also a big plus. Add 5% tax for suite rates.

**Hotel Royal International** (☎ 721 638/9; royal@btb.net.bd; 33 KDA Ave; s/d from Tk 800-950) If '70s disco is your favourite music then the décor at the Royal will please. The all-in-one desk/table/window combo in the rooms are especially funky and you can't fault the price. The service is pretty lacklustre though. There's a travel agency in the lobby where you can make arrangements for car rental and guided trips to the Sundarbans.

**Hotel Castle Salam** (☎ 730 725; castle@khumlanet.net; cnr Khan Jahan Ali Rd & KDA Ave; r Tk 960-1200) The boudoir red rooms of the Castle Salam vie

with those of the Western Inn for king-of-the-castle status and offer good value for money. The service is warm and friendly and the staff keen for a chat. The lobby contains a display of cricket bats signed by the members of the respective national cricket teams who stayed here during the World Cup.

#### Eating

**Aloka Restaurant** (☎ 733 342; 1 Khan A Sabar Rd; mains Tk 60) We think this place is simply lovely and we're not the only ones. Locals flock here to gorge on a feast of quality Bangladeshi fare.

**Grillhouse** (☎ 730 245; New Market; mains Tk 150) Widely considered the best restaurant in Khulna, the locals rave about the kebabs and Chinese dishes (which form the bulk of the menu) at the Grillhouse, near New Market. There are also a few Indian and European dishes thrown in to lighten the mix. Be warned that the orange juice has salt mixed with it – apparently to improve the flavour of bad oranges! Fortunately the food doesn't need much improvement.

**Safe 'n' Save** (New Market; ☎ 9am-6pm) This supermarket is a good place to stock up on snacks and more before a Sundarbans adventure.

For really cheap food, head for the food stalls around the train station.

#### Getting There & Away

##### AIR

The nearest airport is at Jessore. **GMG Airlines** (☎ 732 273) provides a direct bus service (about one hour) between Jessore airport and their Khulna office.

##### BOAT

The **Bangladesh Inland Waterway Transport Corporation** (BIWTC; ☎ 721 532) office looks like a small house. It's just behind the train station and opens every day at around 9am.

Between Khulna and Dhaka there are six Rockets (1st/2nd/deck class Tk 1010/610/150) per week in each direction. They stop at Mongla (1st/2nd/deck class Tk 140/80/15), Barisal (1st/2nd/deck class Tk 530/310/70) and several smaller ports. Reserve several days in advance to ensure a 1st-class cabin.

Departures from Khulna are scheduled at 3am, though there can be delays.

##### BUS

The main bus station is **KDA bus terminal** (also known as Sonadanga bus terminal), 2km

northwest of the city centre. A rickshaw costs about Tk 10 from the city centre and Tk 20 from the Rupsa ghat. Inside KDA terminal, bus companies servicing common destinations are grouped in the same area. The station serves all points except Mongla and Bagerhat; for these two towns you have a choice of either catching a bus from the new bus station on the southern edge of town (near the new bridge) or taking a little ferry over the Rupsa river (Tk 2) and catching one from there.

Buses headed to Mongla (Tk 35, one hour) and Bagerhat (Tk 30, 45 minutes) depart throughout the day.

Country buses to Dhaka (Tk 280, 7½ hours) depart throughout the day. **Greenline Buses**, just along the road from Hotel Castle Salam, charges between Tk 525 and Tk 775 depending on the class.

Buses for Barisal (Tk 250) mostly leave in the early morning and early evening, while buses for Jessore (Tk 50 to Tk 60, one hour) leave frequently until the early evening.

## CAR

You can rent a car and driver through **Guide Tours** (☎ /fax 731 384; www.guidetours.com; KDA Bldg, KDA Ave) or **Bengal Tours** (☎ 724 355; 236 Khan Jahan Ali Rd) but at an average of Tk 4000 to Tk 4500 per day it isn't cheap. On the plus side, the drivers are excellent.

## TRAIN

The main **train station** (☎ 723 222) is near the city centre. There are four IC trains a day to

Jessore (1st/sulob class Tk 85/30, 1½ hours) and three mail trains, which also take passengers but are slower. The 6.30am IC express continues on to Rajshahi (1st/sulob class Tk 255/125, 6½ hours), and the 7.50am express goes to Saidpur (1st/sulob class Tk 355/170, nine hours).

There's a night train to Dhaka (1st/sulob class Tk 625/235, 11 hours, departs 10pm), though buses are preferable given the disruptive need to switch trains en route.

## BAGERHAT

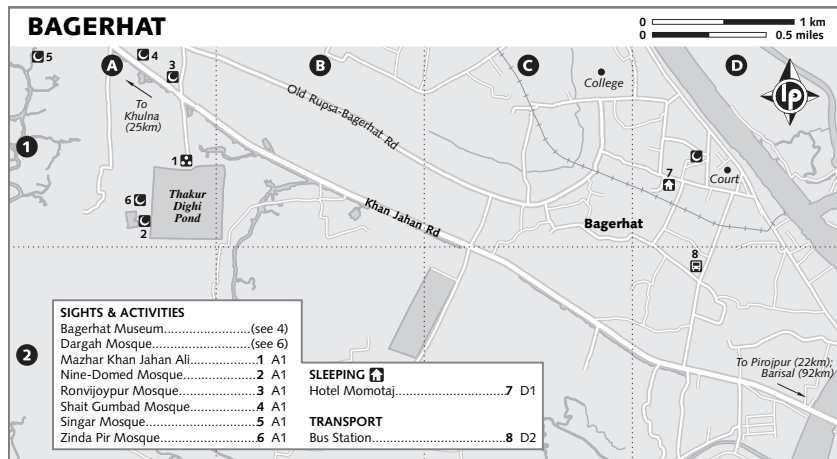
☎ 401

Unesco-protected Bagerhat, with its treasure-trove of historical monuments, will send a shiver of excitement down the spines of archaeology buffs. Hidden among the green folds of the surrounding countryside are more ancient mosques and mausoleums than anywhere else in Bangladesh (except Dhaka), but the crowning jewel of this fabulously little-known collection is the Shait Gumbad Mosque – a multi-domed medieval masterpiece.

The creators of such buildings also understood the value of good scenery and the tranquil countryside, full of tropical trees, ponds and birds, is a joy to walk through.

Bagerhat was also home to one of the most revered men in Bangladeshi history, Khan Jahan Ali (see opposite), and is a significant cradle of Islam in Bangladesh.

The town lacks decent hotels and restaurants, so it's sensible to visit Bagerhat as a day trip from Khulna or Mongla.



### KHAN JAHAN ALI

Khan Jahan Ali was a Sufi (a Muslim mystic, the counterpart of the Hindu sadhus or Indian yogis) from Turkey who settled in Bagerhat in the middle of the 15th century after decades of wandering and learning.

Upon arriving in Bagerhat with thousands of horsemen, clearing the jungle and founding Khalifatabad (as the town was originally named), this warrior-saint quickly initiated a huge construction programme. He adorned his capital city with an incredible number of mosques, bridges, brick-paved highways, palaces and other public buildings. Large ponds of water with staircase landings were built in various parts of the township to provide salt-free drinking water in this predominantly saline belt.

When he died, a mausoleum was raised to his memory, which you can still see standing, along with some of the major mosques. Today Khan Jahan Ali is the patron saint of the area and his name equates with a major pre-Mughal architectural style in Bangladesh.

### Sights

The principal 15th-century mosques are in one large area 5km west of Bagerhat.

### BAGERHAT MUSEUM

This small and neatly arranged **museum** (joint admission to museum & Shait Gumbad Mosque Tk 50; ☎ 2.30-6pm Mon, 10am-1pm & 1.30-6pm Tue-Thu & Sat, 10am-12.30pm & 2.30-6pm Fri Apr-Sep, 1.30-5pm Mon, 9am-1pm & 1.30-5pm Tue-Thu & Sat, 9am-12.30pm & 2-5pm Fri Oct-Mar) is located opposite the Shait Gumbad Mosque. It contains relics from the surrounding area and is a good place to get your bearings before setting out to explore Bagerhat.

### MOSQUES

Built in 1459, the same year Khan Jahan Ali died, the famous **Shait Gumbad Mosque** is the largest and most magnificent traditional mosque in the country. Shait Gumbad means 'the Temple with 60 Domes' – a misnomer given that there are actually 77. This fortress-like structure has unusually thick walls, built in the tapering brick fashion known as Tughlaq, and is an impressive sight.

Around Shait Gumbad are three other smaller, but equally worthy, mosques, all single-domed and in reasonably good condition. These are **Bibi Begni's Mosque**, which has some interesting floral motifs and is located about 500m behind Shait Gumbad and across a large pond; the bulbous **Chunakhola Mosque**, in a paddy field about 500m behind Bibi Begni's; and **Singar Mosque**, across the highway from Shait Gumbad.

On the western bank of the Thakur Dighi Pond, the recently repaired **Nine-Domed Mosque** is an impressive structure. The mihrabs

(niches) are embellished with terracotta floral scrolls and foliage motifs, with a prominent chain-and-bell terracotta motif in the centre.

You might also want to check out the tumbledown **Zinda Pir Mosque** just north of the Nine-Domed Mosque.

About 2km east of Shait Gumbad is the splendid **Ronvijoypur Mosque**. It is singularly impressive, with the largest dome in Bangladesh, spanning 11m and supported by 3m-thick walls.

### MAZHAR KHAN JAHAN ALI

**Khan Jahan's Tomb** is the only monument in Bagerhat that retains its original cupolas (domed ceilings). The cenotaph at the entrance is covered with tiles of various colours and inscribed with Quranic verses, but it is usually covered with a red cloth embroidered with gold threads. The mausoleum and the single-domed **Dargah Mosque** are enclosed by a massive wall with short towers at each corner and archways on the front and back. It's a popular pilgrimage site and therefore has a little more colour and flair than some of the other monuments around here. The pond out front has a couple of crocodiles lurking in its depths which get regular chicken dinners from the site caretaker.

### KHODLA MATH TEMPLE

The 20m-high spire on this extraordinary beehive-like **Hindu building** makes it one of the tallest Hindu structures ever built in Bangladesh and a must see. It was built by a Brahman in the early-17th century. The entrance façade is thought to have originally been decorated with moulded terracotta art, but it's now badly weathered.

Khodla Math is just outside the village of Ayodhya, about 11km from Bagerhat. Take a rickshaw or baby taxi to the market town of Jatrapur. From there ask directions to Ayodhya, 3km east along winding, paved paths.

## Sleeping & Eating

Pickings are slim on the sleeping front.

**Hotel Momotaj** (Rail Rd; r Tk 200) A very basic lodging – not only are the rooms only for the most hard core, but they're also highly overpriced. There are a couple of other similar places nearby.

There are some equally basic local **restaurants** and street stalls along the main road.

## Getting There & Away

### BUS

The bus from Khulna (Tk 30, 45 minutes) takes you through some enchanting countryside. The bus passes Shait Gumbad (5km before town) on the left, where you can disembark and start sightseeing.

If you're headed to Mongla, it may be faster to take a bus to the Khulna–Mongla Rd intersection and hail another bus there. You may have to stand, but the 33km trip from the intersection takes less than an hour. Buses from Khulna headed east to Pirojpur and Barisal also pass through Bagerhat, but finding a seat might be difficult.

### CAR

You can organise a hire car from Khulna to take you to and around Bagerhat (see p88). The bus ride is an easy one though, and it's the sort of scenery in which you don't mind being delayed.

## Getting Around

From the bus station, hire a rickshaw for a few hours to take you to the various sights and back to the bus terminal. You could start the bidding (and may be successful) at around Tk 70, but when you see the narrow bumpy roads that inflict wear and tear on the rickshaw, you may feel like upping the price.

## MONGLA

☎ 04658

At its core Mongla, 42km south of Khulna, is nothing more than a single, sandy street and it can be hard to believe that the town is actually a major port. For many years Mongla has been

plagued with that curse of ports the world over – a reputation for danger and seediness. This is a largely unfounded reputation and most people you meet here will go out of their way to help you have a good time.

The Sundarbans begins only 5km south from here.

## Sights & Activities

### BOAT TRIPS

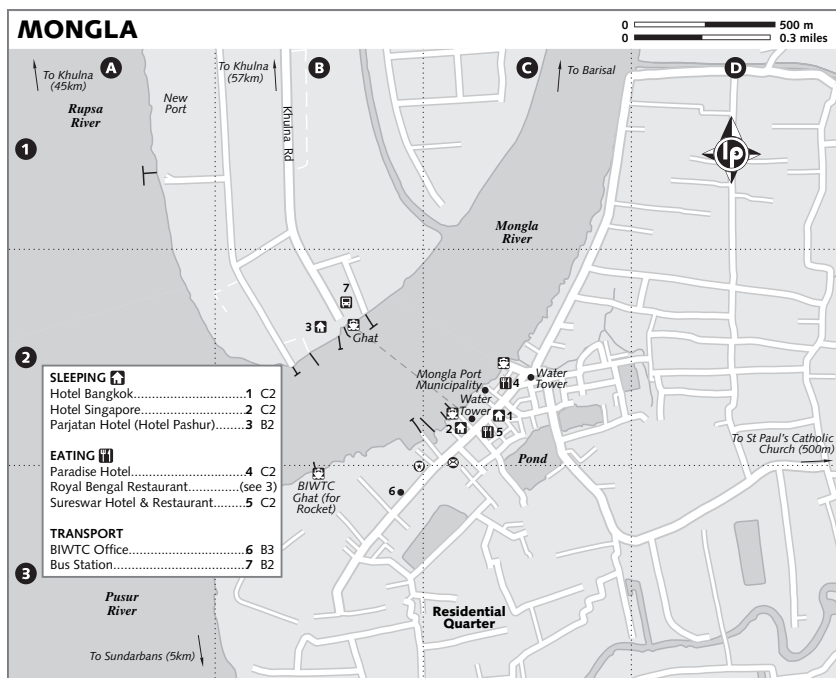
At the outset, it's worth saying that despite Mongla's proximity to the Sundarbans National Park, if you really want to explore and appreciate the forest in any depth then Khulna is the better place from which to organise a **boat trip**. If, however, you just want a cheap and cheerful day trip then Mongla is the place to start.

In recent years, the forestry department has banned any independent boats from Mongla (and other towns) from taking tourists on overnight trips into the Sundarbans. This rule was brought in after a couple of nasty incidents involving lost boats. Nowadays, no matter what boatmen in Mongla may tell you, the only way to travel independently into the Sundarbans from Mongla is on a day trip to the **Karamjal Forest Station**. With raised walkways, viewing platforms and a small 'zoo' it's hardly the back of beyond, but surprisingly in recent years it's been one of the best places to see a tiger thanks to a lone cat that has developed a taste for chilling out in the vicinity.

In the past, many travellers reported bad experiences in the form of hostile negotiations, overcharging and/or failure to deliver on what was promised when organising a trip from Mongla, but the introduction of new regulations seem to have gone some way to reducing these. Even so, when you're shopping around for quotes, be clear on what is included in the price, where the boat will go and how long it will go for. Don't pay everything up front.

A day trip can cost between Tk 2000 and Tk 4000, depending on what's included, the length of time and your bargaining skills. Note that you do not need permits to visit Karamjal.

There are some good operators in Mongla – **Jahangir Enterprises** (☎ 880 04658 566/513), **Mr Emdad** (☎ 0171 6079829) and **Mr Sobhan** (no phone – ask for him at the Hotel Bangkok) have been recommended.



## ST PAUL'S CATHOLIC CHURCH

Built in 1992, **St Paul's Catholic Church** is a fascinating Catholic church disguised as a mosque! Skilfully embroidered wall hangings depict a Bangladeshi Christ and there are some bold stained-glass windows. You can purchase stunning embroideries from the attached sewing centre (open 9am to noon and 2pm to 4pm, closed Sunday).

## Sleeping

**Hotel Bangkok** (☎ 0171 3975311; Main Rd; s/d Tk 150/300, with shared bathroom Tk 80/150) The deep-green rooms are small, but well kept. Some rooms have nice river views – some have road noise. It is the friendliest hotel in Mongla.

**Hotel Singapore** (s/d Tk 100/200) There isn't much to pick between this and the Hotel Bangkok. Singapore might get a little more light but to counter this the rooms are a little tattier.

**Parjatan Hotel** (Hotel Pashur; ☎ 75100; Khulna Rd; r with/without air-con Tk 1200/600; ♿) The nicest place to stay is the Parjatan, across the river (an easy Tk 2 ferry ride) from town. It only rarely receives foreign tourists which is a shame as it's one of the chain's better bets. It looks a

little like an old colonial palace (though it is in fact a modern creation) and is set in peaceful gardens. Rooms are bright and clean, with a small balcony overlooking Mongla River and the busy port beyond.

Staff can help you track down a boatman for a trip to the Sundarbans.

## Eating

Mongla isn't overflowing with eating options. The local favourite is the **Sureswar Hotel and Restaurant** (Main Rd; mains Tk 30), located on the main drag, next to the Hotel Bangkok. It stocks the standards and has a handy 'food catalogue' painted onto the wall in English.

Also on the main drag, and identical in almost everyway, is the **Paradise Hotel** (Main Rd). If you need an escape, head across the river to the Parjatan Hotel (Hotel Pashur, Khulna Rd), where you'll find the **Royal Bengal Restaurant** (mains Tk 120), with a decent selection of Bangladeshi and European options in a quiet environment.

At the north end of town, before the bridge, there are a couple of bakeries with some basic snack foods.

## Getting There & Away

### BOAT

The BIWTC office is 150m south of the ferry ghat, and the Rocket ghat is 100m further south. You may have difficulty booking 1st and 2nd-class Rocket tickets here; if possible, book in Khulna or Dhaka.

The Rocket goes to Dhaka (1st/2nd/inter class Tk 870/530/135, departs 6.20am) via Barisal and in the other direction to Khulna (1st/2nd/inter class Tk 140/80/15, departs 5am).

### BUS

Almost all buses leave from the bus station across the Mongla River, just outside the Parjatan Hotel. It costs Tk 2 to cross the river on the public wooden boats.

Buses for Khulna (Tk 35, one hour, 6.40am to 7pm) leave every 20 minutes or so.

## SUNDARBANS NATIONAL PARK

A shroud of mystery and danger looms over the Sundarbans National Park, the largest mangrove swamp in the world. This gloomy forest of baffling waterways stretches some 80km into the hinterland from the coast and its name translates into the 'beautiful forest', a misnomer if ever there were one. For most people, the Sundarbans is a horrifying

matrix where, on average, a person is eaten every third day. To venture into this forest is to return to a primeval world of big trees and big creatures. It is one of the wildest and least known environments in all of southern Asia.

The Sundarbans begins about 5km southwest of Mongla along the Pusur River, and covers an area (split between Bangladesh and India, with the tiger's share in Bangladesh), of about 10,000 sq km, which is around half of what it was just 200 years ago. About one-third of the total area of this forest is covered in water – river channels, canals and tidal creeks varying in width from a few metres to a few kilometres. The land is constantly being reshaped by tidal action, and cyclones also wreak their havoc.

The ecological balance of these impenetrable forests is extremely delicate and influenced greatly by tidal shifts that affect the salinity, and hence the growth rates, of the surrounding vegetation. The eclectic inhabitants of the Sundarbans range from deer, pigs and crabs to the mighty Royal Bengal tiger. The Divisional Forestry Office supervises activities to protect the delicate ecological balance and botanists, zoologists, environmentalists and conservationists around the world keep eager eyes on this ecological repository.

### LIFE IN THE SUNDARBANS

There are no permanent settlements within the forest, apart from a few government camps housing the labour force for the extraction of timber. These camps are either built on stilts or 'hang' from the trees because of the soft muddy ground and the 2m-high tides that course through the coastal areas.

From November to mid-February thousands of fishermen from Chittagong converge on Dublar Island, at the mouth of the Kunga River, a Sundarbans estuary, to harvest schooling shrimp that come here to breed, and to catch fish and sharks.

During the same period, thousands of low-caste Hindus from Khulna, Barisal and Patuakhali come to the island for a three-day mela (festival). They set up statues of deities in makeshift temples, bathe in the holy waters and release or sacrifice goats. During the mela, sweetmeats, dried fruit, toys, hookahs, wooden clogs and religious paraphernalia are sold in the market (though in 2007 the authorities forbade the mela to take place – it remains to be seen if it will be allowed in the future). A few weeks after the festival-goers departure, the fishermen also return to Chittagong. For the next nine months the island is deserted.

You might also see fishing families who live like sea gypsies in the Sundarbans. They have large boats with thatched roofs and cabins. Some woodcutters working in the Sundarbans also live in boats or temporary dwellings on the edge of the forest, usually at a height of 3m or so, for protection from tigers.

Besides yielding fish in great quantities, the region produces the *sundari* tree (see boxed text, opposite). Other forest products include *gol* leaves (from a local shade tree of that name), reeds and snails.

### THE SUNDARI TREE

The Sundarbans derives its name from the *sundari* trees that grow here. These 25m-high trees are very straight, have tiny branches and keep well in water – they become rock hard when submerged for a long time and are thus suitable for shipbuilding, electric poles, railway sleepers and house construction. *Gema* wood, also felled in the Sundarbans, is mainly pulped for the Khulna newsprint factory. Timber workers here are called *bawalis*.

The dry season, November to April, is the most popular season for visiting the Sundarbans.

### History

The first record of settlement in the region is from the 13th century. Hindus fleeing the Muslim advance sought refuge in the forests, eventually settling and building a number of temples. They were later joined by the Khiljis, who were fleeing the Afghans. In the 17th century, Portuguese-Mogh pirates probably caused the population to leave the area, although lack of fresh water and an unhealthy climate must have been contributing factors.

The Sundarbans was added to the Unesco World Heritage list in 1997.

### Wildlife

The Sundarbans is home to some unique sub-continental wildlife, though spotting them in the thick mangrove forests is difficult. Most visitors report seeing little, but many argue that it is the pristine environment and not the wildlife that is the real attraction. Elevated viewing towers have been constructed to help visitors spot wildlife.

### ROYAL BENGAL TIGERS

The creature everybody wants to see (and the one that you really have very little chance of sighting) is the magnificent Royal Bengal tiger. Tigers, which have been known to grow to a body length of more than 2m, have a life span of around 16 years and prey on deer, boars and fish stranded on river beds at low tide. It is only in old age, when they have lost their physical agility and canine fangs, that they prey on workers in the area.

There are estimated to be around 5000 wild tigers left in the world, with the Sundarbans providing a home to 200 to 450 cats – the highest tiger density in the world. Above all else, the tigers of the Sundarbans are famous for their supposed taste for human flesh. Recent scientific surveys reveal that the number of people eaten by tigers in the Sundarbans may be as high as 120 a year – much higher than had previously been thought. Spread over the course of a year this is one death every three days, something to keep in mind on a four-day Sundarbans tour... Why Sundarbans tigers are so partial to human flesh remains a mystery, but for a long time people thought that drinking salty water may have turned the tigers a little crazy. However scientists are beginning to reject this idea.

The **Sundarbans Tiger Project** ([www.sundarbans-tigerproject.info](http://www.sundarbans-tigerproject.info)) is a superb website put together by one of the world's leading authorities on Sundarbans tigers, Adam Barlow. His team are currently involved in a slightly controversial project to collar wild tigers, and though some people have expressed dismay at this, the information they have been gathering is of vital importance for tiger conservation. It's also slowly helping to change the way villagers, who live on the fringes of the forests and have long regarded the tiger as a fearful creature to be persecuted, view these wonderful animals.

### BIRDS

Over 300 different bird species have been recorded in this region, including about 95 species of water birds and 35 species of birds of prey. Birds found here include snipes, white and gold herons, woodcocks, coots, yellow-legs, sandpipers, common cranes, golden eagles and the *madan-tak* (adjutant bird), which always looks worried and dejected.

### OTHER WILDLIFE

Other wildlife in the Sundarbans includes deer, wild boars, clawless otters, monkeys, crocodiles, 35 species of reptiles (including large cobras and pythons, and eight species of amphibians) and numerous river dolphins.

There are an estimated 30,000 spotted deer in the Sundarbans. They're relatively easy to find given that they use clearings and riverbanks to drink. Monkeys have curiously been observed to drop *keora* leaves whenever deer appear on the scene.

## DEADLY HONEY

One of the most important natural resources to emerge out of the Sundarbans is honey. Indeed, this is one of the country's richest sources of honey (*madhu* or *mau*), producing over 250,000kg annually. About 90% comes from the far western area called Satkhira, where certain flowering trees thrive on the higher salinity.

The people who gather honey, known as *maualis*, occasionally constitute a part of the diet of the Royal Bengal tiger. Indeed, they are far more vulnerable to tiger attack than anybody else. The *maualis* carry no protection and in the frenzy of following the bees to their hives, can't keep an eye out for tigers as well. Tigers attack from the rear and in a matter of seconds can crush a victim's head or break his neck. On the Indian side of the Sundarbans, the forest department has developed iron head-masks for the *maualis*, which have proven quite effective. But in Bangladesh, honey collectors continue to work unprotected.

And if you thought the tigers were bad news, just wait till you meet the bees! The giant honey bee, which forms colonies sometimes tens of thousands strong, is renowned for its ferocious nature and for chasing attackers long distances in large swarms. In order to get close to their nests, the *maualis* must use smoke to subdue the bees, but it takes years of painful practise to get it right.

The honey-gathering season is tightly controlled and greeted with much festivity when it kicks off at **Burigoalini** on 1 April with a volley of gunshots. The boats of the *maualis* then race off downstream and into the forest in search of the best honey-hunting areas. The season lasts for around two months.

**Guide Tours** (Map p86; ☎ /fax 041-731 384; KDA Bldg, KDA Ave, Khulna) organises occasional tours to follow the *maualis* and hunt honey with them. It would be hard to think of a more fascinating, and gruelling, way of seeing the Sundarbans.

As if man-eating tigers weren't bad enough, the Sundarbans provide a home to another bad tempered animal – the giant honey bee (see boxed text, above).

## Information

Unless you are just engaged on a day trip from Mongla to the **Karamjal Forest Station** (see p90), the only way to enter the forest is as part of an organised tour with a recognised travel agency. They will take care of all logistics for you. A small, local tourist industry has recently sprung up around Munshigonj in the northwest section of the park. Boatmen here will take you on day trips into a truly wild part of the forest (and the place where the most tigers are to be found). At the time of research it wasn't possible to stay overnight in this area, but getting to Munshigonj and organising the trip promises to be quite an adventure.

## Organised Tours

The easiest (and indeed the only) way to penetrate the forest in any depth is on an organised boat tour. Most companies offer fairly similar packages and all concentrate on the far southeast of the swamp. Boat quality and environmental awareness varies

between operators, and the less you pay the less you get.

The only complaint we have against any of the following tour operators is that a lot of time is spent just getting to this south eastern sector, during which time opportunities to see anything of the Sundarbans wildlife is limited.

**Guide Tours** Dhaka (Map p62; ☎ 02-988 6983; 1st fl, Darpan Complex, DIT II Circle, Gulshan); Khulna (Map p86; ☎ / fax 041-731 384; KDA Bldg, KDA Ave, Khulna) knows these forests like nobody else and is heavily involved in conservation and research projects here. It gets fantastic reports for its tours, and its guides are a wealth of information. The more people in a group, the less you'll pay, but to have any chance of seeing anything it's best

## BEWARE THE WHITE FIGURE

Many people have reported an encounter with an unusual hitchhiker in the Sundarbans. It's said that a person wrapped in white cloth hails passing boats in order to help them cross the river. They say or do nothing while they are in the boat, but on reaching the opposite bank they simply vanish into thin air.



### WHALE-WATCHING

The Swatch of No Ground, a deep-water canyon a short way offshore of the Sundarbans, acts as something of a magnet to Brydes whales and bottlenosed dolphins. Between December and February, **Guide Tours** (Map p86; ☎ /fax 731 384; www.guidetours.com; KDA Bldg, KDA Ave, Khulna) organises boat trips out to this canyon where schools of up to 750 dolphins have been seen, and whale sightings are virtually guaranteed. It's a one-day excursion that is added onto the Sundarbans tour at a cost of US\$50. You will travel on a scientific boat and in addition to watching whales, you get to watch the scientists at work.

to go on a small group tour. The cheapest four-day trip will cost around Tk 9500 on the largest boats, while the small group tours on the most luxurious boat is Tk 15,000 per person. Fees include all food, accommodation and transport, but you will need to pay an additional Tk 2500 for permits.

**Bengal Tours** Dhaka (☎ 882 0716; www.bengaltours.com; house 66, Rd 10, block D, Banani); Khulna (☎ 724 355;

236 Khan Jahan Ali Rd) offers an almost identically priced package as Guide Tours to the same areas and is equally knowledgeable of the forest and as environmentally aware. We have received nothing but positive reports about its trips.

**Unique Tours & Travels** (Map p62; ☎ 988 5116-23; 51/B Kemal Ataturk Ave, Dhaka) has also been recommended.



# Barisal Division

Barisal division is marked by the branches of the Padma that braid through it to the Bay of Bengal, creating a maze of waterways. This wide, flat region has little to offer in the way of historical monuments but, in many ways, Barisal division is the quintessential Bangladesh. There is hardly any industrial development in this luxuriously green region fringed by rivers and the sea. The land is intermingled with ponds, marshes and streams, which keep the soft, fertile ground moist.

Though first impressions might show that there is little here, Barisal division in general (and the southern half in particular) should get the hearts of explorers racing in excitement. The possibilities for adventure in this remote corner are almost limitless. The best way to tackle the area is just to pick a spot on the map and ask at chaotic Barisal port about boats heading there. It might take time, it might get uncomfortable and sweaty, it might involve numerous changes of boat and days spent stuck in muddy villages marked on no map and then, when you finally reach your goal there might be nothing of note to see, but rest assured that nothing will beat the experience of lying on the deck of a ship on a steamy night, listening to the sounds of the swamps and rivers, destined for a place you don't know.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Get lost in the grimy backstreets of atmospheric **Barisal** (opposite)
- Board a **boat** (opposite) from Barisal for an adventure through the chocolate-coloured rivers of southern Barisal division



## BARISAL

☎ 0431

Barisal (*bore-ee-shal*) is a major port city and one of the gateways to the world for Bangladesh, yet it's also utterly isolated from the rest of the country. Appropriately, perhaps, it's much easier to reach by boat than road. It's one of the more pleasant cities in the country, with several ponds in the city centre and handsome buildings from the Raj era in quiet backstreets – but it's the busy river port, constantly humming with life, that is the real star. To arrive here by boat in the early-morning mist is a quintessential exotic Bangladeshi experience.

### Information

There are a couple of ATMs scattered around the city.

**Dutch-Bangla Bank** (Sadar Rd) Changes money and has an ATM.

**Genius Café** (Sadar Rd; per hr Tk 20) Most of your money will be spent waiting for the computer to do something.

### Sleeping

Quite a few of the cheaper hotels near BIWTC Ghat Rd are loath to accept foreigners.

**Hotel Ababil** (East Bogura Rd; ☎ 0119 8038781; s/d Tk 100/200) Just above the Yan Thai Restaurant, this is a spot-on place for those on a tight budget. Rooms are startlingly clean and the price as low as Bangladesh can get. Single women may well be viewed with the utmost suspicion.

**Paradise Hotel** (☎ 64643; Hospital Rd; s/d from Tk 250/350) The exterior looks a bit shabby but there's private parking, a small garden and, besides some musty carpets, it's clean and well furnished. All rooms have attached bathroom.

**Hotel Ali International** (☎ 64732; Sadar Rd; s with/without air-con Tk 700/250, d with/without air-con Tk 1100/700; ♿) One of the more salubrious places to stay; it's orderly, well-managed and has knowledgeable reception staff. Some rooms share a common bathroom, while the pricier rooms are large and spotless with comfortable armchairs and beds, fans, coffee tables and sit-down toilets.

**Hotel Athena International** (☎ 65233; Katpotty Rd; s with/without air-con Tk 900/400, d with/without air-con Tk 1100/700; ♿) The most popular hotel in town with that rare breed, passing foreigners, the Athena has a clean design with equally clean and slick rooms for a decent price.

### BARISAL GUNS

Since the 1870s, booming noises resembling cannon fire have been heard coming from the Bay of Bengal. Termed 'Barisal guns' by the British officials who first reported this strange phenomenon, their source remains a mystery. It is possible that the sound still occurs today...but who could hear a cannon above the traffic?

### Eating

There are numerous small, cheap, seemingly makeshift restaurants in the area around the intersection of BIWTC Ghat Rd and Faisal Huq Ave. Some cha (tea) stalls specialise in 'red tea' – cardamom tea without milk.

**Rose Garden Restaurant** (Sadar Rd; mains Tk 50-60) One of the locals' favourite places is the Rose Garden. It's unidentifiable curries all the way, but unidentifiable certainly tastes good. Occasional female patrons soothe the atmosphere.

**Kirtonkhola Garden Restaurant** (Chnmari; mains Tk 80-100) Perfectly sited on the lazy banks of the Kirtonkhol River, this Thai- and Chinese-influenced restaurant is considered one of the more enjoyable places to get stuck in.

**Yan Thai Restaurant** (East Bogura Rd; mains Tk 100; ♿) Bringing the spicy tastes of Thailand to the water world, this cosy and clean little restaurant serves Thai delights, and has plenty of Bangladeshi favourites to enjoy.

### Getting There & Away

#### AIR

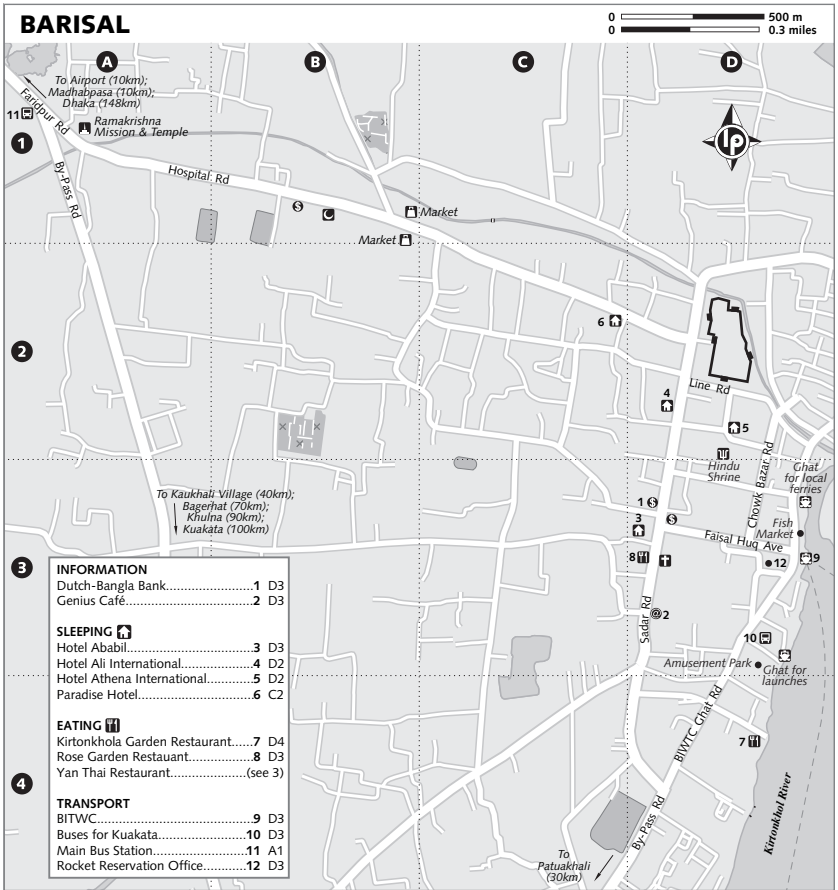
**United Airways** (☎ 893 2338) is about to launch twice weekly flights from Barisal to Dhaka (Tk 2595, 30 minutes). A baby taxi (auto-rickshaw) to the airport will cost around Tk 90.

#### BOAT

The Rocket (see p175) from Barisal to Dhaka (1st/2nd/deck class Tk 480/300/80, departs 6pm daily except Saturday) is supposed to arrive in Dhaka at 6am the following morning, but during the high-water season (monsoonal, July and August) it can take up to 16 hours.

The Rocket to Khulna (1st/2nd/deck class Tk 530/320/75, departs 5am daily except Saturday) also stops at Mongla (1st/2nd/deck class Tk 390/240/50).

On Tuesday there is a Rocket to Chittagong (1st/2nd/deck class Tk 850/560/120, departs



BARISAL DIVISION

8.30pm). Don't risk taking this boat during the monsoon as it often crosses very rough open-ocean.

This same boat also stops off at both Hatiya Island (1st/2nd/deck class Tk 375/255/60) and the even more off-the-beaten-track Sandwip Island (fares about 50% more). Memorable adventure is included in the price.

For information and reservations for the Rocket, visit the **BIWTC** (Bangladesh Inland Waterway Transport Corporation; Barisal harbour) or the **reservations office** (BIWTC Ghat Rd).

Numerous other vessels of all shapes and sizes drift slowly upriver to Dhaka at around 6pm nightly. Prices vary but a double cabin on a standard boat should cost around Tk 700, while deck class is an uncomfortable Tk

120 to Tk 150. A 'super luxurious' cabin will be more like Tk 1600 to Tk 1700. The journey takes around 10 hours. The departure point in Barisal is just south of the BIWTC terminal.

Recommended operators are **Suravi** (☎ 01711 332084), **Parabat** (☎ 01711 346080) and **Kirtonkhola** (☎ 01711 171605)

**BUS**

Buses from Dhaka to Barisal depart Dhaka from the Gabtali bus station (p67). Day coaches depart each way, mostly in the morning from around 6.30am, while night buses depart mostly between 6pm and 9pm. Buses for Dhaka (Tk 250, five to seven hours) depart from the northern entrance to Barisal, 4km from the town centre.

Buses also travel south to Kuakata (Tk 130, five hours, 110km, hourly between 6am and 4.30pm). Buses for Kuakata leave from the southern end of town.

## AROUND BARISAL

The village of **Madhabpasa**, about 10km to the northwest of Barisal, has a **lake** that is known for attracting birds. There is also a **Hindu temple** close to the village. **Kaukhali** village, close to the city, has some interesting pottery factories where daily utensils and figurines for Hindu festivals are made in the oldest of manners.

## KUAKATA

☎ 0441

This isolated beach at the southern tip of the delta, about 100km from Barisal, was named by the original Mogh (Rakhine) Buddhist settlers whose ancestors remain today. *Kua* means 'well', and *kata* means 'dug'.

The river mouths east and west of the beach ensure that the sea is rather murky, and sharks drying on racks along the beach similarly don't augur well for swimming. Though Kuakata isn't the archetypal turquoise, tropical ocean, the vibe is right. The town suffered heavily at the hands of Cyclone Sidr in November 2007.

There is a **Buddhist temple** close to the Parjatan Motel, about 100m from the beach on a slightly raised mound. The ugly tin-walled shrine holds a much prettier 100-year-old statue of Buddha, said to be the largest in the country. The nearby **forestry reserve** is pleasant but succumbing to illegal logging.

Some travellers report that hiring a fisherman to take you to nearby forested **islands** is a fun excursion.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel Sunrise** (☎ 63945; s Tk 100, d Tk 250-300) A rickety beach shack with more atmosphere than amenities. The engaging manager organises package tours to nearby areas and the not-so-nearby Sundarbans.

**Parjatan Motel** (☎ 64433; d Tk 500-750, with air-con Tk 1250; set Bangladeshi meal Tk 55) The rooms are decent but otherwise unremarkable. It is becoming outshone by the plethora of new establishments springing up along the main road. Be warned that 'eggs any style' means any style that is an omelette. French fries are Tk 10 and the tasty chicken-and-corn soup is Tk 20.

**Hotel Neelanjna** (☎ 01712 927904; r with/without air-con Tk 1890/690) The fancy pants hotel of Kuakata has sea views that alone justify the price. Everything is lovely and tidy without any signs of tropical rot setting in. All rooms are twin bed only so couples needn't worry about bringing any contraception! A discreet chat with the receptionist should see some reduction on the overpriced air-con rooms.

**Shaphired Restaurant** (mains Tk 60) Directly opposite the Parjatan Motel. It doesn't have a menu, but does have a nice attitude.

## Getting There & Away

The road between Kuakata and Barisal isn't as good as that between Barisal and Dhaka, largely due to extensive renovations.

Buses to Barisal cost Tk 130.