



# Rajshahi Division

If Indiana Jones were a real man, then he'd be living in Rajshahi division. For tucked away in this unknown corner of the country are a plethora of ruins and reminders. In fact there's so much history stashed away up here that you sometimes feel that you can't move without tripping over some other forgotten temple or decaying palace. Though today largely removed from mainstream Bangladeshi life, the rich soils of Rajshahi division once held court for powerful Buddhist kingdoms, neutered Hindu empires and fell easily to the embrace of Islam; all of which have left their mark in the tumble-down walls that litter the region.

However, it's not just about relics: there are small villages where children will leap in the air in excitement at the sight of you; passionate market towns full of colour; and, if you're very lucky, views to the great Himalayan peak of Kanchenjunga.

But at the end of the day it's the sense of past glories that is the highlight of this region, and what is so remarkable about this historical fantasy is that you will almost certainly have these ancient sights all to yourself – even Indiana Jones hasn't got the secret map to Rajshahi's treasures.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Perusing the art of **Kantanagar Temple** (p111) and relishing the gorgeous countryside
- Standing in the footsteps of the Buddha at **Paharpur** (p104), the most impressive archaeological site in Bangladesh
- Counting back the years at **Mahasthangarh** (p103), the oldest known city in Bangladesh
- Chilling under the mango-tree mosques of **Gaud** (p120)
- Wondering where everyone else is in temple-riddled **Puthia** (p117) and philosophising with sadhus (itinerant holy men) in **Natore** (p118)



## BOGRA

☎ 051

Bogra, a sprawling town with a small heart, serves primarily as a base from which to explore two of the country's most famous and impressive archaeological sites – Mahasthangarh (p103) and Paharpur (p104). The former is 10km north of town, and the breathtaking latter, 53km to the northwest. It would be an exaggeration to describe Bogra itself as attractive or exciting, but it does have a couple of little treats that make saving a morning for the town worthwhile. These include the Chandi (a boisterous central market area), an interesting rajbari (palace) and an eccentric dream zoo.

### Information

There is a **Standard Chartered Bank** (Sherpur Rd) with an ATM, just visible from Sat Mata. You can hook up with the wider world at the **Skylink Cybercafe** (Kazi Nazrul Islam Rd; per hr Tk 20) just upstairs from the Quality Sweets & Restaurant. More computers are available at **Wait & Browse** (Nawab Bari Rd), just around the corner.

### Sights

Two blocks east of Sat Mata, the **Nawab Syed Abdus Sobhan Chowdhury Memorial Museum** (admission to grounds Tk 10, to museum Tk 5; ☎ 10am–8pm) is one of only a handful of furnished rajbaris in Bangladesh. The mosaic ceiling of the audience hall is impressive, and the rooms have mannequins dressed to impress in both Bengali and British fashions. The last room you'll see is dedicated to modern art – it's a compelling display, but the lack of English explanation leaves it somewhat obscure. Look out also for the rare gharial (a type of crocodilian). We're sure you'll agree that they look far better nailed to the wall here than they would do in the wild...

The grounds of the museum have been turned into a rose- and lover-filled garden (all the lovers appear to help themselves to the roses) and a quirky **amusement park** with rickety fairground rides and charmingly naive statues of peasants, bullock carts and wild animals. In the far corner is a small row of cages containing depressed monkeys with heavy chains around their necks.

Just next to the museum's entrance is a statue 'zoo' of painted cement animals, where you'll find monkeys seeing, hearing and speaking no evil (a first for a monkey), goril-

**BOGRA**

0 400 m  
0 0.2 miles

To Hindu Ruins (500m)

To Bogra Central Bus Station (2km); Motel Safeway (2km); Mahasthangarh (12km); Rangpur (103km)

To Parjatan Motel (2km), Sherpur (19km); Natore (64km); Rajshahi (103km); Dhaka (189km)

Train Station

Railway Station Rd

Kazi Nazrul Islam Rd

Sherpur Rd

Nawab Bari Rd

Sat Mata

Chandi Market

Park

Kuratya River

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las shimmying a little sexy salsa and frogs that have outgrown the pandas. The cages these animals live in are often better than those their real-life cousins have to put up with. The real highlight though is the terrifying cave. Hand over your cash (Tk 15) and enter only if you dare!

### Sleeping BUDGET

**Bogra Boarding** (☎ 65609; Nawab Bari Rd; r without bathroom Tk 140, s/d with bathroom Tk 120/160) A three-storey building with an English sign and a charming old gentleman manager. The well-presented green and red rooms are tiny but relatively clean, and come with fans and mosquito nets.

Cheaper and less hygienic beds can also be found at the **Hotel Metro** (Nawab Bari Rd) and the **Naz Hotel Complex**, but neither contain the promise of a delightful night.

#### MIDRANGE & TOP END

**Hotel Al-Amin Abashik** (☎ 72937; s/d with air-con Tk 500/700, without air-con Tk 300/500) The more expensive rooms have sit-down toilets and more furniture and rooms of all prices come with that ever important mosquito net. If the cleanliness isn't all that you hoped for then ask them to clean it again and they'll quickly, and happily, get it scrubbed up for you. It's down a little mud side street and the sign is in Bengali only, but everyone seems to know where it is.

**Motel Safeway** (☎ 66087; safeway@bogra.desh.net; s/d Tk 990/1280) Gorgeous homely rooms that are some of the cleanest you'll come across in northern Bangladesh, though the bathrooms in the single rooms are cramped. The best thing about this hotel is the thick grassy lawn where you can relax beside the pond. It's a major hike from the town centre but is very handy for the bus station (though far enough away to avoid the noise).

**Parjatan Motel** (☎ 66753; r with/without air-con Tk 1200/750) The large Parjatan Motel comes with bird noise at the back and road noise at the front. Rooms are kept clean and have little balconies, but wear and tear is just beginning to make its presence felt. The price is absolutely right and the attached restaurant good news. The Parjatan is a long way south of the centre, but this gives plenty of room to breathe. To get into town just hop into any passing tempo (auto-rickshaw; Tk 5 to Sat Mata).

#### Eating

**Quality Sweets & Restaurant** (Kazi Nazrul Islam Rd; mains Tk 50) The Quality Sweets & Restaurant is overflowing with both character and drool inspiring food. It's tucked down a little alley off the main drag – there's no exterior English sign, but there is a small sign in English beside the interior door. The dhal here is especially good and much thicker than is normal in Bangladesh. Its sweet selection is deserving of the name.

**Akboria Mishty Mela** (☎ 9am-9pm; mains Tk 50) A kickback café with a range of sickly-sweet Bengali cakes and almost equally sweet Western cakes. It also delves into coffee and

light snacks, and Chinese meals are dished out upstairs.

**Parjatan Motel** (☎ 66753; mains Tk 160) It's nothing special but if you're staying here and can't face the long trek into town then you'll be pleased to know that the Bangladeshi and Chinese dishes at the Parjatan are satisfying.

**Lilian Restaurant** (☎ 61800; mains Tk 180) Small, intimate and a good place for a more drawn out Chinese or Thai meal. It's close to the Akboria Mishty Mela.

**Cozy Café** (☎ 00610; Sherpur Rd; mains Tk 180) The Cozy Café, where the young of the town come to see and be seen, is Bogra's trendiest eating experience and is very much a new concept for Bogra. The décor is dark and cool, the Chinese dishes really delicious, the staff will be genuinely pleased to see you and, if another reason were needed to stop by, they have a music collection that includes such old-school 'classics' as Bon Jovi, Europe and A-ha!

Finally, at the **Touch & Take Supermarket** you can stock up on hard-to-come-by food-stuffs and toiletries; unfortunately, despite the name, you do have to pay for items.

#### Getting There & Away

##### BUS

Buses usually arrive at Bogra's central bus station, 2km northwest of town at the junction of the Rangpur Bypass road and the road to Naogaon (close to the Motel Safeway). From here it's a Tk 10 rickshaw ride into town.

Ordinary buses travel to Dhaka (Tk 120, 4½ hours) via the Bangabandhu Bridge. Most coach offices for buses to Dhaka are west of Sat Mata, but the Green Line bus office is just to the south of Sat Mata. Deluxe air-con buses cost between Tk 350.

Buses leave the central station throughout the day for Natore (Tk 30, 2½ hours) and Rajshahi (Tk 70, three hours). There are several buses to Khulna (Tk 200, 8½ hours, depart around 9am) and Rangpur (Tk 60, 2½ hours, every 20 minutes from 5.30am to 6pm). Travellers to Paharpur can take regular buses throughout the day to Jaipurhat (Tk 50, 1½ hours) and a tempo or bus (Tk 10) on to Paharpur. Buses also run to Mahasthan (Tk 10, 30 minutes, 11km).

##### TRAIN

Bogra doesn't have great train connections and most people take the bus, but there is one train a day to Dhaka (1st/sulob class Tk

320/215, 1.07pm daily except Saturday) which arrives in Dhaka at 8.20pm, and a night train departing at 9.56pm nightly except Monday.

There are no direct trains from Bogra to Dinajpur or Rajshahi.

## AROUND BOGRA

### Sariakandi

For a bit of good adventure, consider heading 20km east via Gabtali (General Zia's home town) to Sariakandi and hiring a motorised boat to take you out onto the Jamuna River. It will cost around Tk 50 for half an hour. During the monsoonal season you can see broken embankments, and people living on the tiny islands created by the massive annual flooding.

The banks of the Jamuna are about the most erosion-prone places in the country, forcing farmers off their land during flood season. Many dispossessed farmers join the ranks of the rickshaw-wallahs.

### Hat Bazar

Every Friday in a village just south of Bogra there's a hat bazar, a small open-air market that attracts so many people that they spill onto the highway. Roaming around the bazar can be great fun.

## MAHASTHANGARH

The oldest known city in Bangladesh, dating back to at least the 3rd century BC, Mahasthangarh (an easy half-day trip from Bogra) is an archaeological site consisting largely of foundations and hillocks hinting at past riches.

The principal site, the Citadel, contains traces of the ancient city. Many other sites in the vicinity are lumped together under the name Mahasthangarh. The whole area is rich in Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim sites, but most have all but vanished. The Buddhists were here until at least the 11th century; their most glorious period was the 8th to the 11th centuries, when the Buddhist Pala emperors of North Bengal ruled. It is from this period that most of the visible remains belong.

### Sights

#### MAHASTHANGARH SITE MUSEUM

This small but well-maintained **museum** (admission 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) has a lively set of objects discovered in the antique rich surroundings.

The highlights are the statues of Hindu gods, terracotta plaques depicting scenes from daily life and some well-preserved bronze images mostly found in monasteries from the Pala period. Other notable objects are the necklaces that look just like those sold in hippy markets all over the West and the fragments of toilet seats – they certainly don't make them like that anymore! The gardens are an attraction in their own right.

### THE CITADEL

Adjacent to the museum, the **Citadel** forms a rough rectangle covering more than 2 sq km. It was once surrounded on three sides by the mighty Karatuya River. Hindus still make an annual pilgrimage to the Karatuya River in mid-April.

Probably first constructed under the Mauryan empire in the 3rd century BC, the site shows evidence of various Hindu empires, and Buddhist and Muslim occupations (though it's doubtful the helipad dates back that far). The Citadel fell into disuse around the time of the Mughal invasions. Most of the visible brickwork dates from the 8th century, apart from that added during restoration. Nowadays there isn't a lot left to see aside from the edge of the exterior walls and various unidentifiable grassy mounds. However, it's a perfect place for a walk and a picnic. The Citadel's interior is used as both agricultural land and a leisure area, with cricket matches taking place in the cool evening light. If cricket isn't your cup of tea then there will be plenty of other people around (some with flasks of tea) who will be keen to pass the time of day with you.

Outside the Citadel, opposite the museum, the remains of a 6th-century **Govinda Bhita Hindu Temple** (admission Tk 20) overlook a picturesque bend in the river. The temple, which looks like a broken-down step pyramid, is a quiet spot to get away from everyone. Opening hours are as for the Mahasthangarh Site Museum.

Back in the drab little town of Mahasthan (1.7km from Mahasthangarh) there is a small **Muslim shrine** that every other person will try to lead you to when you step off the bus – it's very missable! There are further **ancient sites** in the nearby countryside and any rickshaw-wallah will be keen as mustard to whip together a tour for you (around Tk 150).

## Sleeping & Eating

If it's not full, you can stay at the **Archaeology Department Rest House** (d Tk 200), across the road from the museum, overlooking the Karatuya River. The three rooms have a fan, mosquito netting and bathroom. There's also a small dining room. The museum caretaker can hunt down the person in charge.

The town of Mahasthan has a few basic restaurants.

## Getting There & Away

Buses run from Bogra to Mahasthan (Tk 10, 30 minutes, 11km). From here you can take a rickshaw (Tk 15 to Tk 20) or walk the 1.7km to the Citadel and museum. If there are no buses heading back to Bogra then you can hop in a shared baby taxi (mini auto-rickshaw, Tk 10).

## PAHARPUR

The Somapuri Vihara at Paharpur was once the biggest Buddhist monastery south of the Himalaya. It dates from the 8th century AD. This is the most impressive archaeological site in Bangladesh; it was declared a protected archaeological site back in 1919, although the scholar-traveller Dr Buckman Hamilton had shown interest in it as far back as 1807. The name of the site has changed over the eons; it began life as Somapura (abode of the moon), then became Mahavihara (greatest monastery) before taking its current combination name. Getting to Paharpur is a bit of a pain on public transport, but it all adds to the element of discovery.

## Sights

### SOMAPURI VIHARA

The impressive stupa and temple complex at **Somapuri Vihara** is in the shape of a large quadrangle covering 11 hectares, with monks' cells making up the walls and enclosing a courtyard. The 20m-high remains of a stupa rise from the centre of the courtyard. Its cruciform floor plan is topped by a three-tier superstructure; the 3rd level has a large tower structure similar to that of Moenjodaro in Pakistan.

Look out for the clay tiles lining the base of the *mahavihara* (great monastery) which depict various people and creatures, including an animal that might be the rhinoceros that is now extinct in Bangladesh.

Lining the outer perimeter are over 170 small monastic cells. Seventy-two of these

contain ornamental pedestals, the purpose of which still eludes archaeologists. It is possible they contained the remains of saintly monks who had resided here.

On the east side of the courtyard you can make out the outline of what was once a miniature model of the temple. On the western wing of the north side are remains of structures that baffle archaeologists. On the eastern wing of the south side is an elevated brick base with an eight-pointed star-shaped structure that must have been a shrine. To the west lie the remains of what appears to have been the monks' refectory and kitchen.

Except for the guardhouse to the north, most of the remains outside the courtyard lie to the south. They include an oblong building, linked to the monastery by a causeway, which may have been the wash house and latrines. In the same area is a bathing ghat, probably of Hindu origin. Only 12m southwest of the ghat is the rectangular Temple of Gondeswari, with an octagonal pillar base in the centre and a circular platform to the front.

The monastery is thought to have been successively occupied by Buddhists, Jains and Hindus, which explains the curious mixture of artwork. The Jains must have constructed a *chaturmukhar* (a structure with all four walls decorated with stone bas-reliefs of deities). The Hindus replaced Buddhist terracotta artwork with sculptural stonework of their own deities, and terracotta artwork representing themes from the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. Artefacts discovered at the site range from bronze statues and bas-reliefs of the elephant-headed Hindu god Ganesh, to statues of the Jain god Manzurī, bronze images of the Buddha and statues of the infant Krishna.

### MUSEUM

The small **museum** (admission 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) gives a good idea of the range of cultures that have used this site. Stucco Buddha heads unearthed here are similar to the Gandhara style of Indo-Hellenic sculpture from what is now north-western Pakistan. Sculptural work includes sandstone and basalt sculptures, but the stonework of Hevagara in passionate embrace with Shakti is the collection's finest item. The most important find, a large bronze Buddha,

is usually away wooing fans on a seemingly endless world tour.

## Sleeping & Eating

The small white building between the museum and the temple is the **Archaeological Rest House** (☎ 0571 89119; per person Tk 200). Staff at the museum should be able to point you to the appropriate person if you want to stay. The large and functional rooms are kept clean and offer superb value for money. As it's inside the grounds of the ruins you can even go for a lonely, and creepy, night stroll around the complex on your own. It all adds up to a very peaceful and romantic getaway for a day or so.

Basic meals can be obtained from the shacks near the museum entrance.

## Getting There & Away

From Bogra, take a bus to Jaipurhat (Tk 50, 1½ hours, 44km). From there, buses leave regularly between 7am and 4pm for Paharpur (Tk 10, 25 minutes, 9km). To get to the sights from Paharpur village, take a rickshaw (around Tk 20).

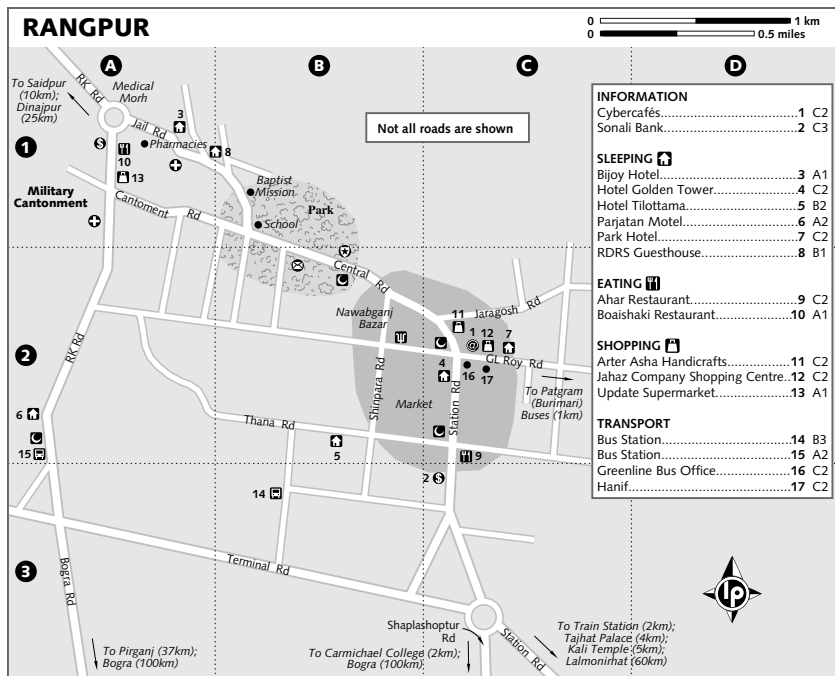
You can always get a baby taxi back to Jaipurhat, but it will cost around Tk 250. Don't count on getting a bus from Jaipurhat to Bogra after 6pm.

## RANGPUR

☎ 0521

Rangpur is the best of storybook-exotic Bangladesh, and a better introduction to the wonders of the entire subcontinent it would be hard to find. The central area is a rainbow-flavoured lollipop of markets and rickshaws. This playful atmosphere is like a heavyweight drug – once you've tasted it you'll forever be smitten.

A major transit point for the northern half of Rajshahi division (sometimes referred to as North Bengal), the town is, in addition to its bossy streets, home to several public buildings of the Raj era, including Carmichael College and Tajhat Palace. The town is also one place you may see members of the Kochi ethnic group, an Indo-Tibetan people related to the plains tribes of Assam, and recognisable by their rounder, more Southeast Asian faces.



## Orientation & Information

Rangpur is a sprawling place, but once you've got to grips with it you'll find it simple enough to navigate and there are only really two areas of interest to travellers. Rangpur 'centre' is based on Nawabganj Bazar (GL Roy Rd between Shinpara and Station Rds), a cacophony of clashing colours, and the more stately Medical Morh, where you'll find one of the better hotels. Separating them both is a pleasant stretch of parks, gardens and sports fields. The train station is about 3km south at the end of Station Rd. At the time of research there were no ATMs in town.

**Cyber cafés** (nr Station & GL Roy Rds; per hr Tk 20)

**Sonali Bank** (Station Rd) About 500m south of Nawabganj Bazar, Sonali changes cash and travellers cheques. You need to show your passport for both.

## Sights

### TAJHAT PALACE

The domineering **Tajhat Palace** (admission Tk 100; ☎ 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 one of the finest rajbaris in Bangladesh. During the regime of General Ershad (1982-91), the palace was used by the High Court division of Bangladesh's Supreme Court, but today it houses a small museum stuffed with old manuscripts and bits and bobs from Paharpur and Mahasthangarh.

The palace, which is structurally intact but deteriorating fast, is similar to Ahsan Manzil in Dhaka. It has a frontage of about 80m and is crowned by a ribbed conical dome and features an imposing central staircase made of imported white marble. The balustrade originally featured marble sculptures of classical Roman figures, but these have long since disappeared.

The palace was constructed in the 19th century by Manna Lal Ray, a Hindu who was forced to emigrate from the Punjab and found his way to Rangpur. He became a successful jeweller, acquired a lot of land, eventually won the title of raja (landlord or ruler) and built this huge mansion. Local villagers believe there is treasure hidden in its walls.

The palace is 5km south of Nawabganj Bazar and 2km south of the train station, outside the de facto city boundaries.

### KALI TEMPLE

The delightful architectural folly of **Kali Temple** is modelled on a Florentine dome (or at least

a Bengali vision of an English adaptation of a Florentine dome) and is topped with blue-rinse Hindu gods. The courtyard also doubles as a village school and your arrival will send reams of children into a whiz.

The temple lies about 1km south of Tajhat Palace. Take a rickshaw from High Court Rd and ask around the neighbourhood for 'Kali mondir'.

### CARMICHAEL COLLEGE

This famous old **college** is one of the largest in the country in terms of both area and student enrolment. Situated on the outskirts of town, the college dates from 1916. Similar in inspiration to Curzon Hall in Dhaka and with a grand frontage of over 100m, it is a splendid fusion of classical British and Mughal architecture. Its domes rest on slender columns and a series of arched openings all add to its mosque-like appearance. It is spacious and rural, with cows grazing on the main lawn and students keen to talk of the wider world while resting in the shade.

## Sleeping

**Bijoy Hotel** (Jail Rd; s/d Tk 120/220) Basic cubes and lots of mosquitoes (net provided), but surprisingly comfortable beds and private bathrooms. Despite not being at all used to foreigners, the staff are super cool with the idea of you staying. There is no English sign, so ask around.

**Hotel Tilottama** (☎ 63482; Thana Rd; s Tk 150, d Tk 210-275) This happy budget option is on a quiet road and has staff who race around trying to make you comfortable. The airy green rooms are surprisingly tidy for the price and come with attached bathrooms. If you opt for the 'deluxe' room you get a tatty scrap of carpet and a proper sit-down toilet – albeit perched over a squat toilet... The business card boasts of a 'Lonely Atmosphere', which in Bangladesh can be a virtue indeed. It's quite hard to find, so ask, ask, ask!

**The Park Hotel** (☎ 66718; GL Roy Rd; s with/without air-con Tk 600/260, d with/without air-con Tk 425/750; ☎) For fancy budget travellers, this central hotel is a delight. The rooms might lack character but this means they are sterile clean. All have wooden bedheads and desks. In the pricier rooms you can relax on the toilet with a book, while in the cheaper ones it's a squat-and-run job. It has the best positioning of all the hotels.

**Hotel Golden Tower** (☎ 65920; Station Rd; s/d Tk 800/1000; 🍴) A decent midway option in the heart of the downtown mess. The staff don't seem totally convinced by foreigners but if you get in you'll find that the low-ceilinged rooms are neat and air-con cool.

**Parjatan Motel** (☎ 63681; RK Rd; r with/without air-con Tk 1380/690; 🍴) An excellent serving from the Parjatan group. This low-slung mellow yellow building is set in pleasant flower gardens on the edge of town. The rooms are universally clean and comfortable with balconies and large bathrooms. The air-con and non-air-con rooms are otherwise identical. There is also a restaurant (fixed Bangladeshi meal Tk 120) with the usual mix of Chinese, Bangladeshi and Western dishes. A rickshaw from the town centre costs in the region of Tk 10 to Tk 15.

**ourpick RDRS Guesthouse** (☎ 66490; [www.rdrsbangla.net](http://www.rdrsbangla.net); s/d Tk 1086/1569; 🍴 📺 📞 📧) Let's cut straight to the chase. Beautiful Swedish princesses have been known to stay here. Enough said! In addition to sleeping in the same bed as a Swedish princess, you will be helping out a highly deserving NGO which works on health, educational and agricultural projects throughout northwest Bangladesh. But even without all those incentives, this would be a sweet pick, because the ivy-clad red-brick building – with its polished and spacious rooms, piping hot showers, satellite TV, plenty of mosquitoes (bring your own net), internet access, pool table and superb restaurant (mains Tk 150) – is as good as northern Bangladesh gets. And, just in case you missed it the first time – Swedish princesses...

## Eating

The best way to pick a place to eat is to head into Nawabganj Bazar and wander down some side streets. As well as the local holes-in-the-wall, there are some slightly pricier restaurants in this area that serve sensational food in surprisingly clean surrounds.

**Boaishaki Restaurant** (RK Rd; 🍴 6am-midnight; mains Tk 60-80) This place is so popular it's just silly, but as normal the locals know best. As well as delectable curries there are a few harder to come by dishes such as biryani. If the staff take a shine to you then you might find yourself leaving with a free red rose, and a cha or two better off.

**Ahar Restaurant** (cnr Thana & Station Rds; mains from Tk 100) At night it's damn near impossible to

miss this flashing Christmas tree of a restaurant. During the day it's marginally more subtle, but even so the bright lights, bright pink interior and bright balloons are obviously of great appeal to the girls of Rangpur as this seems to be the only restaurant in the entire country where female diners outnumber male. The staff proudly announce that they can make 'anything', though they mean anything Bangladeshi. Still, the biryani is well worth the trip.

## Shopping

**Arter Asha Handicrafts** (☎ 092 150; House 3, CP Sen Rd) This eye-catching boutique store specialises in handmade traditional clothes. Fashions and souvenirs at Arter Asha don't come cheap, but they do come classy.

**Jahaz Company Shopping Centre** (GL Roy Rd) The perfect place to splash out on the elaborate souvenir sari that you may wear once when you get home. As well as the overwhelming collection of clothes and jewellery, you'll also find electronic goods.

**Update Supermarket** (RK Rd) There's a healthy range of groceries and toiletries at the Update Supermarket. There's also an attentive employee who will try to promote every product within a 2m radius.

## Getting There & Away

Commercial flights haven't operated to Rangpur for some time now, but it's worth checking with **GMG** (☎ 02-711 4155/7 in Dhaka) and **United Airways** (☎ 02-895 7640 in Dhaka; [www.uabd.com](http://www.uabd.com)) to see if there has been any change.

The **Karma Para bus station** (RK Rd) sits snugly just south of the centre of town. There are regular buses for Bogra (Tk 65, two hours, every 20 minutes from 7am to 5.30pm). For towns such as Dinajpur and Thakurgaon you may have to change at Saidpur (Tk 30, one hour, regularly until 7pm). Many buses leaving this bus station get to their final destination via Bogra.

Only a few buses make the journey to Rajshahi (ordinary Tk 180, luxury Tk 220, 4½ hours); the last leaves at around 3pm. There are no chair coaches on any of these routes.

**Greenline** (☎ 63940; cnr Station & GL Roy Rds) and **Hanif** (☎ 62462) both operate coaches to Dhaka (Tk 450, five hours, 325km) at various times between 7am and 11pm.

There is a train to Dinajpur at 7.08pm (two hours) daily except Sunday.



## SAIDPUR

☎ 0552

Saidpur is a quiet backwater town where the atmosphere of the Raj lingers. Near the old train station is one of Bangladesh's few surviving **English-style churches**. The southern part of town has some impressive **red-brick buildings** from the latter period of the Raj. The town used to be home to Rangpur airport and received a few visitors. But with no commercial flights currently operating, few people visit. If you want to slow the pace right down then this is a nice place to get into small-town life.

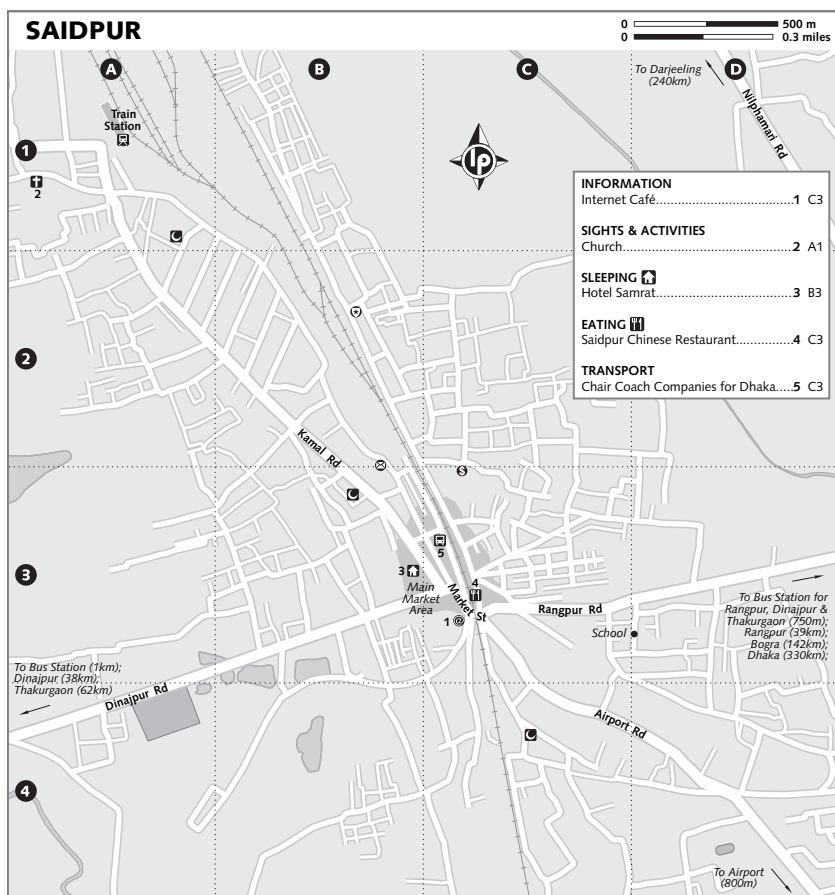
There are a couple of banks that might be persuaded to change cash at bad rates, but you'll have to continue on to Rangpur or Dinajpur to change travellers cheques. There

is an **internet café** (☎ 9am-11pm; per hr Tk 20) with s-l-o-w connections past the railway lines.

The dirty central **market** is a fun place to explore and is alive with the sights, sounds and smells of southern Asia. At the northern end of town, near the train station, is the rusty red 150-year-old **church**, built by the British. It's kept locked but the caretaker lives in the house next door and will open up for you. It's in surprisingly good condition and services are attended by the members of the 25 Christian families in the neighbourhood.

## Sleeping & Eating

It's hard to think why you might choose to stay overnight in Saidpur, and even if you do there is only one hotel that accepts foreigners.



**CHARS OF THE BRAHMAPUTRA** *Bruno De Cordier*

An adventurous side trip, and a good way to see how rivers affect people's livelihoods, is to visit one of the chars in the Brahmaputra River. Chars are large sandbank islands that once belonged to the mainland. There are literally hundreds of chars, but their number and position change with the process of silting and erosion. There are estimated to be 230,000 char-dwellers in northern Bangladesh. They scratch out a living from agriculture, livestock and seasonal labour in towns on the mainland. When their makeshift villages flood and eventually disappear, they pack up and move to another sandbank.

To get to the chars, first go to the town of Kurigram and on to the village of Chilmari, about 40km south of Kurigram. There, take one of the long, engine-driven wooden 'service boats' that link the chars to the mainland.

**Hotel Samrat** (☎ 2105; Kamal Rd; s/d/VIP Tk 60/120/300) There's not much to recommend the standard rooms at the Samrat. However, the VIP room has chairs, a TV and a rooftop pretty much to itself. It's not pristine but it's private and has character.

There's a nice food culture on Market St; have a wander to see what's on offer. Opposite the Hotel Samrat is the **Saidpur Chinese Restaurant** (meals Tk 100), which is certainly the nicest place in town to eat.

**Getting There & Away**

The main bus station is about 1.5km east of the town centre. There are departures every few minutes until around 7pm for Rangpur (Tk 30, one hour) and Dinajpur (Tk 40 to Tk 50, one hour), and slightly less frequently for Thakurgaon (Tk 50, 1½ hours). If you're headed south for Jaipurhat (near the Paharpur ruins) you may have to wait so long for a direct bus that you're better off taking a series of buses.

There are chair-coach offices for Dhaka (Tk 200 to Tk 350) in the centre of town along Station Rd. Most coaches leave Saidpur after dark.

**DINAJPUR**

(☎ 0531)

On paper, Dinajpur is one of the largest centres in northwest Bangladesh, but in reality it acts like little more than an inflated village. The exotic central core is a cluttered labyrinth of mucky markets and soiled streets, and is the kind of place that can make home feel like a long way away.

The main reason for visiting is to ogle the nearby Kantanagar Temple and, in the town itself, interesting Dinajpur Rajbari with its adjoining Krishna Temple.

**Orientation & Information**

The train station is in the heart of town. The market, and most hotels and restaurants, are just north. South of the train station is the administrative area, including the circuit house, some imposing Raj-era buildings (the post office, mapping office etc) and a maidan (grassed area) that hosts cricket and badminton matches as well as political demonstrations.

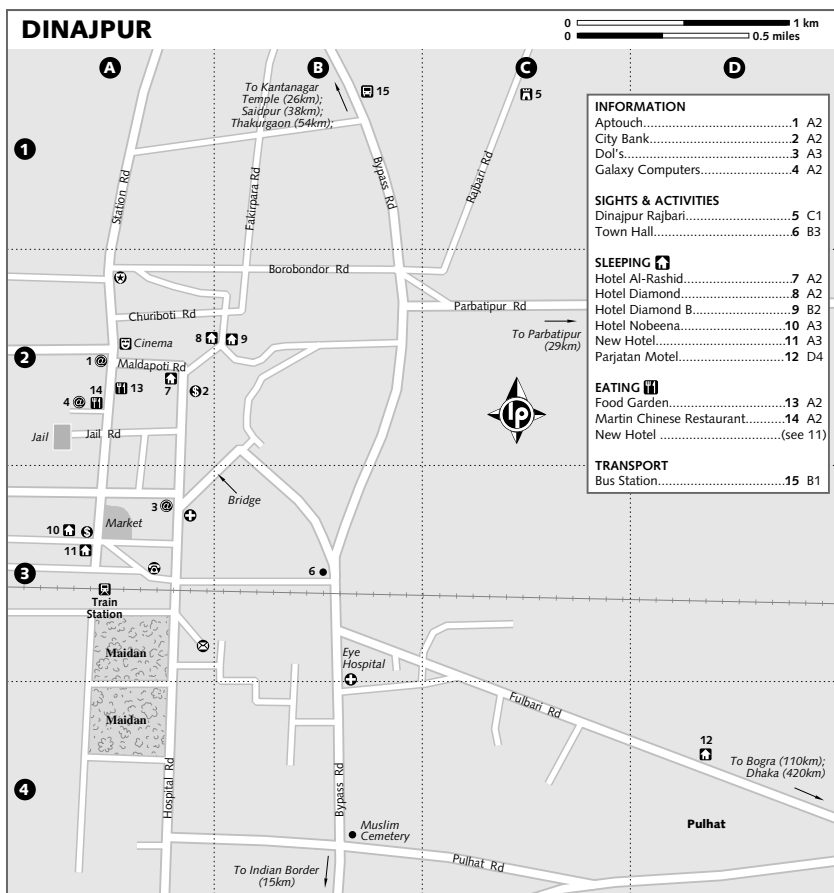
You may be able to change money at **City Bank** (Hospital Rd), about 1km north of the train station, but there are no ATMs in the town. There are a few cyber cafés in town: **Dol's** (Hospital Rd), and **Aptouch** and **Galaxy Computer** off Station Rd.

**Sights**

Almost nothing now remains of the 100-year-old **Dinajpur Rajbari** save for a few mouldy walls and pillars, but the two Hindu temples standing within the grounds are both in good condition and well-worth hunting down. The rajbari is about 4km northeast of central Dinajpur. A rickshaw will cost at least Tk 20.

The **Krishna Temple**, to the left of the rajbari, is slapped in bright and bold paint, and full of columns and statues. Thanks to Dinajpur's Hindu population of around 38% (one of the highest in the country) the temple is still a living temple. Hindus coming out of the town to make *puja* fill the courtyard with laughter, and several Hindu families live permanently in the yellow-wash houses surrounding the temple.

If you are a colonial architecture buff, it's worth seeking out the formal-looking **town hall**, built with all the pomp the Brits could muster. The small garden fronting it contains a **statue** unusual for Bangladesh in that it's based on Classical Greek design.



## Sleeping

The accommodation scene in Dinajpur is dire indeed. We filtered out the real dives and were left with the following.

**Hotel Al-Rashid** (☎ 65658; s/d Tk 180/370) The small rooms on offer here are enough to keep jolly budget travellers happy. The rooms, though small, are well-maintained and come with mosquito nets, attached bathrooms and small alcoves with a desk. Staff will be utterly mystified by your presence, but happy to have you. To find it, look for the large pink building with the green Bengali sign.

**Hotel Diamond** (☎ 64629; s with/without air-con Tk 600/250, d with/without air-con Tk 850/350; 🚻) Split between two separate buildings (opposite one and other) the Hotel Diamond is the best

place in the city centre in which to stay. The large rooms are nice and inviting but the constant ring, ring of a thousand rickshaw bells on the street below will keep you up all night unless you have the air-con on full noise eruption. The budget rooms in the Hotel Diamond B are not all enjoyable, but they are pink, so that's nice.

**Parjatan Motel** (☎ 64718; Fulbari Rd; r from Tk 1380) Three kilometres out of town, this is one of the worst value Parjatan's in the country. The bland rooms, stained bed sheets and less than helpful management make the asking prices fairly ludicrous. Even so, it's the best place to sleep in Dinajpur.

There are a few cheaper places to stay though its highly unlikely that they will ac-

cept a foreign tourist. Still, if you're counting taka it might be worth hustling for a room at either the down-at-heel **New Hotel** or the marginally nicer **Hotel Nobeena**.

### Eating

There is a range of small local restaurants, including some ultra-cheap choices (where hygiene is but a word) around the train station.

**New Hotel** (☎ 64155; Station Rd; meals Tk 40) The best Bangladeshi restaurant in the town centre by far, New Hotel's restaurant is very popular and open almost till midnight. There are vegetarian dishes here, too.

**Food Garden** (☎ 51899; Station Rd; mains Tk 130) A bright and cheerful new Chinese establishment that is popular at both lunch and dinnertime. It's a great respite from the searing intensity of the streets, and the clientele, who are generally better off Bangladeshis, won't overpower you with stares. It offers sensible half-portions and, should you feel like eating out on the dirty streets, take-away.

**Martin Chinese Restaurant** (☎ 64074; Station Rd; ☎ midday-9pm; mains Tk 130) The brightly coloured exterior of this restaurant sits in contrast to the gloomy interior, but even so the fussy waiters will bring forth a passable array of Chinese food. Expect to be dining alone.

### Getting There & Away

#### BUS

The **bus station** (Rangpur Bypass Rd) is northeast of town. Buses go to Saidpur (Tk 40 to Tk 50, one hour), Thakurgaon (Tk 75, 1¼ hours) and Bogra ('luxury' bus Tk 200, 3½ hours). There are some direct luxury buses to Rajshahi (Tk 300, five hours), or a cheaper combination of local buses can be used with a change in Bogra.

Chair coaches to Dhaka (Tk 300, 7½ hours) depart between 5pm and 7pm. Some companies have offices in town.

For information on buses to Kantanagar Temple see p112.

#### TRAIN

A number of trains serve Dinajpur, though nobody ever really uses the train service as bus travel is so much quicker. There are two IC trains from Dinajpur to Parbatipur (30 minutes, depart 6.15am and 5.30pm). From here, going on to Dhaka (1st/sulob class Tk 510/230, 14 hours) is a long haul.

If you are headed for Khulna (1st/sulob class Tk 510/200) or Rajshahi (1st/sulob class Tk 175/60), you will need to go first to Parbatipur.

### KANTANAGAR TEMPLE

Set in the graceful heart of gorgeous countryside, the rouge sandcastle of **Kantanagar Temple** (off Map p110; admission Tk 10; ☎ 7.30am-5.30pm) is a stunning block of religious artwork, and is surely one of the most impressive Hindu monuments in Bangladesh.

Built in 1752 by Pran Nath, a renowned maharaja from Dinajpur, it is the country's finest example of brick and terracotta style. Its most remarkable feature, typical of late-Mughal-era temples, is its superb surface decoration, with infinite panels of sculpted terracotta plaques depicting both figural and floral motifs.

The folk artists did not lack imagination or sense of humour. One demon is depicted swallowing monkeys, which promptly reappear from his ear. Other scenes are more domestic, such as a wife massaging her husband's legs and a lady combing lice from another's hair. Amorous scenes are often placed in obscure corners. These intricate, harmonious scenes are like a richly embroidered carpet.

This 15-sq-metre, three-storey edifice was originally crowned with nine ornamental two-storey towers, which collapsed during the great earthquake of 1897 and were never replaced. The building sits in a courtyard surrounded by offices and pilgrims' quarters (now occupied by several Hindu families), all protected by a stout wall. Visitors can no longer go inside the temple, which houses a Krishna shrine, but the intricate detail of its exterior will keep you engaged. A popular Hindu festival takes place here each November and would certainly be a colourful time to pop by.

Almost as much of an attraction is the utter peace and tranquillity of the site; after you've finished fawning over the temple take a stroll through the fields down to the nearby river. In the dry season the sandbanks exposed by the dropping water levels make a handy cricket pitch for local children.

It might be possible to stay at the **CDA training centre** at Proshikhan Kendra, 3km from the temple in the village of Mukundapur. It's a large complex and all rooms have an attached bathroom. Food is also available.

## Getting There & Away

You can get a bus from Dinajpur to Kantanagar (Tk 14, 45 minutes, 26km). It's on the route to Thakurgaon but request Kantanagar, otherwise you may end up paying more and/or missing your stop.

From the main road where the bus drops you to the temple is 3km and a Tk 15 rickshaw ride for locals, but you would be lucky to get away with paying less than Tk 50. Ask the rickshaw to wait at the temple for you as there is no transport back again. The ride is along a pleasant, winding trail through a rural bliss of mustard, banana, rice and chilli fields, and little mud-and-wattle villages.

## THAKURGAON

☎ 0561

Thakurgaon is one of the more pleasant towns in northern Bangladesh, with beautiful scenery and few motor vehicles. Very few foreign tourists visit as there are no attractions as such, but for some this very dearth of visitors will be the attraction.

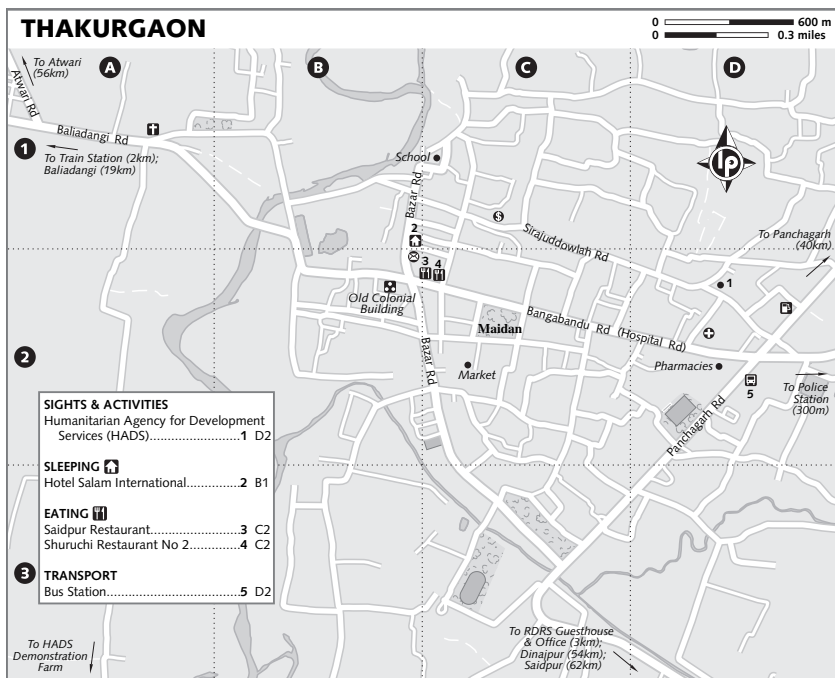
If you're interested in seeing what local NGOs are doing, visit the office of the

**Humanitarian Agency for Development Services (HADS)** and its farm on the southwestern edge of town. To arrange a visit drop by the HADS Guesthouse (which we don't recommend you stay in). There's also a **Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Services Project (RDRS)** office here.

## Sleeping & Eating

**RDRS Guesthouse** (☎ 52032; s/d Tk 699/1099) Located a couple of kilometres south of town, this place is much less frequented by foreign tourists than the excellent branch in Rangpur. The staff here will take some time to recover from the shock of your arrival, but after this you will be presented with simple, but exceptionally clean and cool, rooms sheltered from all noise but that of twittering birds. There is a restaurant in which advance orders are essential (meals Tk 150), and plenty of English-speaking Bangladeshis keen for a chat work here. Altogether it represents superb value.

**Hotel Salam International** (☎ 53486; Howladar Market shopping centre, Bazar Rd; r Tk 700) As a foreigner, you are only likely to be allowed to stay in the vast, green 'deluxe' room. It's far from deluxe, but it does sleep three people



and the bathroom is even bigger than the sprawling room.

The **Saidpur Restaurant** (Hospital Rd) and the next door **Shuruchi Restaurant No 2** (Hospital Rd; mains Tk 50) are both equally decent places to stuff your gullet with all manner of meat and veg curries. Both attract the normal hordes of locals and starers.

### Getting There & Away

All buses listed here depart from the bus station on the Dinajpur–Panchagarh Hwy, 500m south of Hospital Rd. Buses go south to Dinajpur (Tk 75, 1¾ hours, daily between 7am and 7.30pm), Saidpur (Tk 55, 1¾ hours, daily between 6.30am and 5.30pm) and Bogra (Tk 160, five hours, daily between 6.30am and 5.30pm).

### BURIMARI

Burimari is a major crossing point into India, though it's hardly busy.

The customs office at the border is open from 8am to 6pm. It should take about 20 minutes to have your passport processed, but all the socialising and cha-drinking will slow you down.

There is nowhere to change money on the Bangladeshi side of the border, so make sure that before you leave India you grab enough taka to get you to your next destination.

If you arrive late at night at Burimari, you can stay at **Mahoroma Hotel** (s/d Tk 150/250), around the corner from the customs office. It has small but clean rooms with attached bathroom.

### Getting There & Away

Getting to Burimari is a slow process. First take a bus from Rangpur to the dusty town of Lalmonirhat (Tk 45, every hour) on the other side of the Tista River and from there take another to Burimari (Tk 40). Once you arrive in Burimari, catch a three-wheeler to the customs office (Tk 10). Start early in the day if you are hoping to get to anywhere of significance in India before nightfall.

On the Indian side, at the town of Chengrabandha, there are no direct buses to Siliguri so you will have to go first to Jalpaiguri and then onto Siliguri (Rs 40). From Siliguri you can travel to Nepal, Darjeeling and Sikkim. There are also taxis and minibuses milling about in Chengrabandha.

If you're coming from India, you can arrange a coach to Dhaka (Tk 250 to Tk 400, 10 hours) directly from Burimari. The scenery

is a typical introduction to the varying landscapes of Bangladesh.

### RAJSHAHI

☎ 0721

Built on the northern bank of the Padma River, Rajshahi is a frantic and fun university town with enough colour and attractions to entertain for a few days. It also makes an excellent base from which to dig through the layers of history in Gaud, Puthia and Natore.

The river bank by the Padma River affords one of the best river views in the country and, in the late afternoon, a carnival-like atmosphere pervades with people strolling and chatting, children playing and vendors selling ice cream and other snack food.

Looking across the vast flood plain to the opposite bank you'll see India, where the river is called the Ganges. In the dry season it is sometimes possible to walk across the river bed, which aids the thriving smuggling trade along the border. The local trade in smuggled goods is most evident in Saheb Bazar.

### Information

There are quite a few bookshops in New Market and to the north of Saheb Bazar. Rajshahi being a university town, the bookshops sell mainly academic texts, but the odd novel is available. There are several ATMs about the town centre which give cash advances on foreign cards.

**Agrani Bank** (Greater Rd) The best place to change money and travellers cheques.

**Chartered Cyber Café** (Saheb Bazar Rd; per hr Tk 20)

**Syenthiya Computer** (Saheb Bazar Rd; per hr Tk 20;

☎ to 8pm) The best internet café, with broadband access.

### Sights

#### VARENDRA RESEARCH MUSEUM

Founded in 1910 with the support of the maharaja of Dighapatia, the **Varendra Research Museum** (admission free; ☎ 10am–5pm Sat–Wed, 2.30–5pm Fri) is managed by Rajshahi University (RU), and is the oldest museum in the country. The predominantly British-style building has some interesting Hindu-Buddhist features, including a trefoil arch over the doorways and windows. A small *rekha* temple forms the roof.

Inside, artefacts from all over the subcontinent are on display, including some rare examples from the ancient city of Mohenjodaro in Pakistan, and a superb collection of local Hindu sculpture.

RAJSHAHI



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  - 9 Varendra Research Museum..... C3
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To Martyrs Memorial  
Museum (30km)  
Dhaka Rd (30km)  
Puthia (23km)  
Natore (39km)  
Bogra (196km)  
Dhaka (236km)

To Mohampur  
(12km)

Greater Rd (Railway Station Rd)

Emaduddin Rd (Medical Rd)

Sadeb Bazar Rd

Wings Rd

Madrassa Rd

Simla Park

To Said  
(80km)

Station Rd

New Market Rd

Apkort Rd

Train Station

Malopura

Sadeb Bazar

Main Mosque

Fire Station

Dargahara Mosque

University Campus

Courts

Rajshahi City Church

Christian Mission Hospital

Greater Rd (Railway Station Rd)

## THE INFAMOUS INDIGO KUTHIS

In the 18th and early-19th centuries the trade in indigo – the plant that yields the indigo hue for dye – was highly profitable. By the mid-1800s the Rajshahi region alone had more than 150 indigo *kuthis*. The local zamindars (landowners) even loaned money to peasants so they could plant more indigo. Indeed, trade was so lucrative and the *kuthis* so numerous that factory labourers had to be imported.

The farmers, however, didn't profit at all and began changing crops. Using oppression and torture to keep the peasants growing indigo, angry zamindars sometimes went as far as committing murder and burning whole villages. An adage at the time held that 'no indigo box was despatched to England without being smeared in human blood'.

In 1859 the peasants revolted. The Indigo Revolt lasted two years and brought the cultivation of indigo to a halt. Eventually the government had no choice but to decree that the peasants could no longer be forced to plant indigo. As a result, by the end of the century the indigo trade had completely disappeared. Some of the *kuthis* were converted into silk factories but most simply fell into ruin.

## MARTYRS' MEMORIAL MUSEUM

The collection of Liberation War mementos at the **Martyrs' Memorial Museum** (Shaheed Smriti Sangrahashala) at RU is a reminder of the dreadful days of the 1971 war. Unfortunately, the dilapidated state of the museum, with its dusty collection of war artefacts, is more likely to make one feel that the country has forgotten its heroes. Among the exhibits are blood-stained uniforms, a pen used by a fighter to write his last love letter, the deed papers of surrender by the Pakistani forces, and remains recovered from a mass grave of victims, among whom were intellectuals from RU.

## BUILDINGS OF THE BRITISH RAJ

Near the centre of Rajshahi are some Rajera buildings. **Rajshahi Government College**, which dates from 1873 when several maharajas donated money for its establishment, is an elegant two-storey edifice with beautiful semicircular arched windows. Others nearby include **Collegiate School** (1836), which consists of two single-storey structures east of the college, with verandas along the façades; and **Fuller House** (1909), a large two-storey red-brick building that is similar in appearance to the college.

## BARO KUTHI

A block southeast of Rajshahi Government College, on a high bank of the Padma River, is a historic structure known as **Baro Kuthi**. It's one of the last remaining examples of the indigo *kuthis* (factories) that once flourished in the region. The simple buildings are of little architectural interest but their history is fascinating.

In the early-19th century Baro Kuthi was built by the Dutch for the silk trade, and served as a fort in times of emergency. Some rooms were probably used as a prison and for mounting cannons. After 1833, when Baro Kuthi was taken over by the British East India Company, it was used for the indigo trade (see above), which lasted about 25 years. It is reputed to have been the scene of countless crimes during that period.

## NEW MARKET

If the town centre isn't bewildering enough then check out the cube of chaos that is the **New Market**, on the way to the train station. It is most active in the morning, and is a photographer's paradise.

## Sleeping BUDGET

**Hotel Rajmahal** (☎ 774 399; s/d from Tk 125/230) You can't grumble at the price and the rooms are reasonable, though ask to see a few first as some (the better rooms) have old sacks as carpets – novel, we'll grant you, but possibly not the most desirable of floor coverings. It's not certain that such temptations as a woman will be allowed to stay in this purely male environment. And to be honest you may not want to anyway.

**Hotel Midtown** (s/d Tk 200/400) When we passed by the receptionist was a 10-year old boy. Even so, he knew his stuff and treated us better than many an adult receptionist! This is a decent budget buy and as well as clean rooms they throw in an attached bathroom as well – can't really knock it can you?



**MIDRANGE**

**Hotel Dalas International** (☎ 773 839; Station Rd; s from Tk 300, d with/without air-con 800/500; 🏠) Quite possibly the best central hotel and with a price that can't be faulted. Rooms are universally spacious and well-equipped with TV, chairs and big beds. It's handy for both the town centre and the bus and train stations. The English-speaking management loves a good old chin-wag.

**Hotel Nice International** (☎ 776 188; s with/without air-con Tk 500/200, d with/without air-con Tk 800/300; 🏠) Rooms aren't as nice as the reception (and name) would suggest. Some smell like old carpet and old dahl, but then again so do many of the town's other cheap hotels and this place is no worse than them. If it's not too hot then opt for a non-air-con room as they are actually better value. It's located on a quiet side street.

**Haq's Inn** (☎ 810 420; Station Rd; s with/without air-con Tk 600/250, d with/without air-con Tk 950/500; 🏠) A neat and tidy midrange option within easy stumbling distance of the train and bus station, which makes it ideal if you are just passing through. It's big enough to ensure that there are always shiny, clean rooms available.

**Hotel Mukta** (☎ 771 100; s with/without air-con Tk 650/120, d Tk 220; 🏠) Locals will tell you that this is the top address in the city centre yet, for some bizarre reason, only the single rooms come with air-con. The rooms without air-con are minuscule and very hot, while those with air-con are much larger and airier and have better bathrooms. Even if it's not hot, you will want the air-con on full blast to drown out the sound of the road below. It's a friendly place, though becoming a little frayed around the edges.

**Hotel Sukarna** (☎ 770 670; s with/without air-con Tk 700/250, d with/without air-con Tk 700/400; 🏠) The kindly English-speaking owner ensures that this hotel has a good vibe. There is a wide array of rooms from small depressing cheapies to comfortable and ample doubles with air-con. It's clean, well-maintained and good value.

**Parjatan Hotel** (☎ 770 247; just off Nawabganj Rd; s with/without air-con Tk 1000/450, d with/without air-con Tk 1200/700; 🏠 (P)) Try and ignore the grotesque '70s disaster architecture because this Parjatan establishment, situated in a quiet residential area out of town, is one of the better offerings in the chain. Even the cheaper rooms aren't half bad (though they do get steamy hot). If

you want a more luxurious room it's a good idea to book ahead as it's a very popular hotel. It contains all the standard Parjatan services including a quick-to-please restaurant. Add an extra 15% tax to room rates quoted. A rickshaw from the centre shouldn't cost more than Tk 15.

**Eating**

You can devour some of the best food in north Bangladesh in Rajshahi. For super cheap, super reliable restaurants open every hour, look no further than the flurry of places next to the Hotel Mukta. The best of this bunch is the Rahmania Hotel, which is Bangladesh through and through for around Tk 50 a meal.

**Chili's** (☎ 774 513; Saheb Bazar Rd; Chinese mains Tk 200) The Chili's emporium has a flurry of restaurants in the centre. The main tiger-stripe building gives you the chance to get flirty with a tasty Thai or Chinese meal upstairs, while downstairs you will discover a kebab joint and a 'fast food' restaurant (though exactly what the difference between kebabs and fast food is, isn't made clear).

**ourpick Aristocrat Coffee Shop & Restaurant** (Saheb Bazar Rd; ☎ 11.45am-10.30pm; mains Tk 150-200, cakes Tk 50) Locals dress sharp to come to this new restaurant and coffee shop situated above the Mercantile Bank. One half is a relaxed coffee shop with filter coffee, tempting cakes and a distinctly non-Bangladeshi vibe. The other half is the last word in Rajshahi sophistication and offers some of the best Indian and Chinese food you'll find in north Bangladesh – the chicken tikka masala is spot on as is the service.

Further fast food is available from the basement level **Meatloaf** (Saheb Bazar Rd; snacks Tk 70) – just pray that they don't play any while you're eating!

**Rajshahi Misty Bari** (Saheb Bazar Rd; ☎ 9am-8pm) is one of the better of the many Bengali sweet shops that clutter the centre.

You could also take a picnic to Simla Park, just beyond the circuit house on C&B Rd, overlooking the Padma River.

**Getting There & Away**  
**BUS**

Most of the bus companies have their offices on Station Rd, next to the train and bus stations. Greenline has air-con buses to Dhaka (Tk 400, five hours, departing 8am, 3.15pm and 11.30pm).

You can also get ordinary buses to Bogra (Tk 60 to Tk 70, two hours, every 15 minutes between 6.15am and 5.45pm), Natore (Tk 30, one hour, every 20 minutes between 5am and 9.30pm), Jessore (ordinary/luxury Tk 140/180, 5½ hours, every 30 minutes between 6am and 6.30pm) and Rangpur (ordinary/luxury Tk 180/220, 4½ hours, every 45 minutes between 6am and 5pm).

## CAR

Hire cars can be arranged through the Parjatan. The cost for a day drive to Gaud, Puthia and Natore (about 10 hours) should be around Tk 2400, including petrol.

## TRAIN

IC trains depart from the **train station** (☎ 774 040) for Dhaka (1st/*subob* class/air-con berth Tk 290/145/630, 6½ hours, 7am daily except Sunday).

There's a daily express to Jessore (1st/*subob* class Tk 215/75, five hours) and Khulna (1st/*subob* class Tk 260/90, seven hours), departing at 2pm.

## PUTHIA

The delightful little village of Puthia (*pou-tee-ah*) is positively bursting at the seams with dilapidated palaces and bewitching temples, and is one of the shining highlights of Bangladesh. If Puthia were in almost any other country the ruins here would be seething in camera-snapping tourists, but lost as it is in the remote paddly fields of Bangladesh, you'll have it all to yourself.

The vegetation-choked village centres on a cheerful bazaar and a number of lily covered ponds in which people fish, swim and wash both themselves and their buffalo.

Only 23km east of Rajshahi (16km west of Natore) and 1km south of the highway, the village is very accessible, which means that the scarcity of decent places to sleep poses no problem.

## Information

Mr Bishwana, the caretaker of the temples and a gentleman in the truest sense of the word, works directly for the archaeology department and makes a charming guide. If he is not hanging around the Shiva Temple someone will quickly ferret him out for you. Even if you don't want a guide, he is the man with the keys to many of the sights so you will have to

find him anyway. He can normally arrange for some lunch to be prepared at his house.

## Sights

### PALACES

The stately two-storey **Puthia Palace** was built in 1895 by Rani Hemanta Kumari Devi in honour of his illustrious mother-in-law, Maharani Sharat Sundari Devi. She was a major benefactor in the Rajshahi region, having built a boarding house for college students and a Sanskrit college, for which she was given the title 'maharani' in 1877. The building is in just good enough condition to serve as a college today. Though you probably won't be allowed inside, it's enough just to marvel at how grand the exterior is and how perfect the setting, with a large grassy maidan in front (which hosts regular afternoon cricket matches) and a frog-filled pond behind. In many ways the whole structure of this side of the village is similar to a medieval European village with its manor house, common ground and, further away, workers' houses.

**Tahirpur Palace**, 18km due north of Puthia, is up a back road along the Baralai River in Tahirpur. Rebuilt after the great earthquake of 1897, it's an imposing two-storey structure that, despite the collapse of its roof, remains largely intact.

### TEMPLES

The most startling monument in Puthia village is the **Govinda Temple**, on the left-hand side of the rajbari's inner courtyard. Erected between 1823 and 1895 by one of the maharanis of the Puthia estate, it's a large, square structure with intricate terracotta designs embellishing the surface. In this sense, it's very similar in inspiration to the Kantanagar Temple (see p111), which is about a century older. Most of the terracotta panels depict scenes from the love affair between Radha and Krishna as told in the Hindu epics. The temple now contains a Krishna shrine and is visited by many of the local Hindu population.

There is a second, smaller **Govinda Temple** complex on the opposite side of the main pond. The couple of temples here have a beautiful domed, egg-shell roof and carvings that come close to rivalling that of the main Govinda Temple.

Built in 1823, the towering **Shiva Temple** sits at the entrance to Puthia, overlooking a pond.

It's an excellent example of the *pancha-ratna* (five-spire) Hindu style common in northern India. Unfortunately, many of the stone carvings and sculptures were disfigured during the 1971 Liberation War. The inside contains a huge black-stone phallic representation of Shiva. Many Hindus come to make *puja* here early in the morning or late evening and, with the mist rising off the pond and the light setting everything aflame, this is a beautiful time to come. An even more rewarding time to visit is during one of the two major pilgrimages that take place here – one in March/April and the other during the final week of August.

One of Bangladesh's finest examples of the hut-shaped temple is the **Jagannath Temple**, about 150m to the right (west) of the rajbari. This nicely restored 16th-century temple, measuring only about 5m on each side, features a single tapering tower that rises to about 10m. The temple's western facade is finely adorned with terracotta panels of mostly geometric design. Nearby are two much smaller rajbaris that are in a serious state of decay, despite now being government buildings. Even so, the atmosphere is out of this world.

### Getting There & Away

There are numerous buses between Rajshahi and Natore (Tk 20, 30 minutes) throughout the day that pass through Puthia. On leaving Puthia, you can easily hail a bus travelling between the two towns on the main highway.

### NATORE

☎ 0771

The small town of Natore is a place of split personality. On the one hand you've got the town centre itself; a dreary, noisy and depressing place. On the other hand you have elegant Natore Rajbari with its fanciful gardens and temple-hemmed ponds which, when combined with nearby Puthia, makes for an enchanting day trip from either Rajshahi or even Bogra.

### Sights

#### NATORE RAJBARI

One of the oldest rajbaris in Bangladesh (dating from around the mid-1700s), the magnificent but dilapidated **Natore Rajbari** is actually a series of seven rajbaris, four of

which remain largely intact. The main block, called Baro Taraf, is approached via a long avenue lined with impressively tall bottle palms, the white trunks of which resemble temple columns.

To the rear of Baro Taraf is a second block called Chhota-Taraf, consisting of two rajbaris. The principal one faces a pond and is one of the most beautifully proportioned buildings in Bangladesh.

The peaceful and idyllic gardens around the rajbari are as much an attraction as the building itself; bring a picnic to eat in the shade of a gnarled old tree. There are several large ponds here which form an interesting centre piece, around which are a couple of interesting Hindu temples, one dedicated to Kali and one to Shiva. Both are still used by the many Hindus in the area and attract the odd sadhu, making Natore about the only place in Bangladesh where you might bump into one of these wandering Hindu holy men. The beautiful complex attracts many locals in the evening who come to relax by the ponds and pass the time of day.

Natore Rajbari is at the northern edge of town, but to avoid getting lost it is easier to take the Natore–Bogra Rd and, 1km before the turn-off for Dighapatia Palace, take a left turn on an unmarked paved road that leads west towards the complex. It's 1.5km down that road, just beyond a school on your right.

### UTTARA GANO-GHABAN

The building was once the palace of the Dighapatia Maharaja, the region's governor. It's now a government building called **Uttara Gano-Ghaban** (Dighapatia Palace) and serves as one of the president's official residences. Situated 3km north of town, off the road to Bogra, the beautifully maintained complex occupies about 15 hectares of land. It's enclosed within a moat and a high boundary wall, and is approached from the east through an imposing four-storey arched gateway. Unfortunately foreigners are not allowed to enter the complex.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel Raj** (☎ 66660; s/d Tk 60/120) Stay in a dark-green cell in this multistorey job opposite the bus stand (sign in Bengali only). It's very friendly, shockingly clean and as cheap as Bangladesh gets, which is very cheap indeed.

**VIP Guest House** (☎ 66097; s/d Tk 200/400) Nobody will argue with you when you say that this is the best place to stay in Natore and equally nobody will argue with you when you say that the sickeningly tacky bathroom doors aren't worth the price of admission. Away from the Snow White bathrooms, the large rooms are the cleanest and most comfortable for miles around and the attached restaurant the best place to eat (meals Tk 150). It's on the southern road into town.

The main drag is the best place for finding street food and a couple of restaurants.

## Getting There & Away

Buses headed north and east leave from the intersection at the eastern end of town, while those headed for Rajshahi (Tk 30, one hour) leave from the west. There's a bus to Pabna (Tk 35, 1½ hours) and Bogra (Tk 40, 1½ hours).

## PABNA

☎ 01731

Between Rajshahi and Dhaka, Pabna, which dates from medieval times, might be old but you'll be hard pressed to see its attractive side through the clouds of exhaust fumes and dust kicked up by throngs of passing trucks and buses. Despite this, the town has a couple of fine old buildings, a unique Hindu temple and two well-known rajbaris that make a quick stop well worthwhile.

## Sights

### JOR BANGLA TEMPLE

Built in the 18th century in the form of two traditional village huts intertwined and standing on a platform, the structure of this **temple**, 2km east of the town centre, is the best remaining example of the *gor bangla* (twin hut) style. However, the once clearly beautiful terracotta plaques carved with scenes of daily life are badly weathered and only of appeal to serious history buffs. Before construction was completed something sacrilegious occurred on the site, so the temple was never used.

A rickshaw from the centre will set you back around Tk 15.

### RAJBARIS

The **Taras Rajbari**, viewed from the street through an unusually impressive archway, is a few hundred metres south of the town centre on the main road. Dating from the late 19th century, this grand red and white building

with a crazy coat of arms was evidently once an elegant palace, but it's now all too obviously the drab home of government offices.

Very close-by is a fairground-style **mosque** that is as bright and gaudy as you'll find in Bangladesh.

East of town, on the banks of the Padma River, **Sittai Palace**, dating from 1900, is a grand rajbari that's fairly well preserved. Today it's occupied by a drug company, so you can't see the 30-room interior. The exterior is interesting however, with a broad staircase flagged with white marble, leading to a second-storey arched portico.

### SHAHZADPUR MOSQUE

Just outside of Pabna is this splendid 15-dome pre-Mughal **mosque**, built in 1528 in traditional *bangla* (Pre-Mauryan and Mauryan) style with thick walls and various arched entrances.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel Shilton** (☎ 62006; s with/without air-con Tk 500/200, d with/without air-con Tk 600/250; ☞) Easily the best place to stay in town, the spacious rooms are comfortable and offer what is, for Bangladesh, peace and quiet. It's clean, friendly and the staff speak English. Located at the southern end of town.

**Hotel Park** (☎ 64096; s with/without air-con Tk 600/220 d with/without air-con Tk 800/500; ☞) On the main street, and the hotel everyone will point you towards. This is unfortunate because though the rooms themselves are okay, the bed sheets are far and away the most stained and grimy we've seen anywhere in Bangladesh. All rooms come with a bath, though of the sort that makes you feel dirtier *after* you've used it.

**Sagotom Restaurant** (Main Rd; mains Tk 80) This is the most popular restaurant in town on account of its delicious curries, biryanis and Chinese meals.

There are several other dirt-cheap hole-in-the-wall restaurants along the main road where a meal won't cost more than Tk 40.

## Getting There & Away

Most buses leave from the main road just south of the town centre. There are buses to Dhaka via Aricha, although the expresses that originate in Rajshahi will probably be full. An ordinary bus to Dhaka costs Tk 200 to Tk 250, while the daily luxury bus (departing 9am) costs Tk 300.

Buses run to Rajshahi (Tk 150 to Tk 170, 2½ hours), Bogra (Tk 120 to Tk 150, 1½ hours) and Kushtia (Tk 60 to Tk 70, one hour).

## GAUD

A site of great historical importance, Gaud (or Gaur) has more historic mosques than any area in Bangladesh, except Bagerhat. It's over 100km west of Rajshahi, right on Bangladesh's western border – some of its sights are in India, some in Bangladesh.

The Hindu Senas established their capital here, after which the Khiljis from Turkistan took control for three centuries, to be followed in the late 15th century by the Afghans. Under the Afghans, Gaud became a prosperous city, surrounded by fortified ramparts and a moat, and spread over 32 sq km. Replete with temples, mosques and palaces, the city was visited by traders and merchants from all over Central Asia, Arabia, Persia and China. A number of mosques are still standing today, and some have been restored. None of the buildings from the earlier Hindu kingdoms remain.

Today there is something of a strange air lying over the town and it doesn't seem quite Bangladeshi. At first you can't work out what it is that's missing, but then you realise that nobody is responding to your greetings and, even more strangely, the streets are almost deathly quiet. No people, no cars, no trucks and, most weird of all, no rickshaws.

## Sights

### MOSQUES

Built between 1493 and 1526, the well-preserved **Chhota Sona Masjid** (Small Golden Mosque) is oddly named given that it's actually jet black with just patches of terracotta brickwork. Despite its misleading name, it's still a fine specimen of pre-Mughal architecture. The chief attraction here is the superb decoration carved on the black-stone walls. On both the inner and outer walls, ornate stonework in shallow relief covers the surface. It also features an ornate women's gallery, arched gateways and lavishly decorated mihrabs (niches). This living mosque draws in large crowds for Friday prayers, but outside prayer time its fine for foreigners to enter.

The gorgeous single-domed **Khania Dighi Mosque** (also known as Rajbibi Mosque), built in 1490, is in Chapara village and is in excellent condition. Though it also has some ornately decorated walls, embellished

primarily with terracotta floral designs, it's the domed roof that is the attraction. Built of thousands of miniscule Lego-like bricks, it's one of the more arresting mosques in the country. Like the **Chhota Sona Masjid** it's a working mosque, in which Friday prayers are especially animated. It's fine for women to enter outside of prayer time but they must be respectfully dressed. The mosque's position, crouching under the mango trees beside a large lily- and duck-covered pond, only helps to enhance its beauty.

Built around 1470, the palace-like **Darasbari Mosque** is in poorer condition than the other two. Its domed roof long since gave up the ghost and collapsed and vanished into the rich soils. Talking of ghosts, what remains of this whimsical and secluded red-brick ruin seems like the perfect spot for spirits to float silently between the pillars.

### MONUMENTS IN FIROZPUR

At nearby Firozpur you'll find several interesting structures that are all fairly well preserved and close to one another. One is the picturesque **Shah Niamatullah Mosque**, a three-domed mosque built in 1560 which overlooks a large pond. About 100m away is the **Mausoleum of Shah Niamatullah Wali**; it has three domes and four squat towers. The third structure, north of the mausoleum, is **Takhana Palace**, built by Shah Shuja in the early 17th century and the area's major Mughal-era building. A large two-storey brick edifice, it has a flat roof, which in those times was virtually unheard of in Bangladesh.

## Sleeping & Eating

It's best to visit Gaud as a day trip from Rajshahi as there is little in the way of tourist facilities.

The **Archaeology Department Rest House** (Tk 250) has fairly basic but decent rooms. If you just show up, chances are excellent that you'll be allowed to stay because there is no other accommodation in Gaud, barring some extremely basic rooms above an equally basic **restaurant** where the bus stops near the Bangladeshi border post.

## Getting There & Away

Getting to Gaud can take so damn long that you'll forget how close you are to Rajshahi. From the main bus terminal in Rajshahi, take a bus to Nawabganj (Tk 40, two hours) from

where it should be possible to get a bus directly to Gaud (Tk 30) every hour or so. If you get blank looks when you ask for 'Gaud', (which you will!) try 'India' or 'border' instead.

The consolation of all of this messing about is that the scenery on the journey is quite unusual. There are fascinating expanses where village life takes place amid enormous expanses of trees with foot-worn pathways meandering between them. There are mud-

brick huts interspersed throughout, mustard fields so bright you almost have to squint, and thousands of stumpy mango trees (May-June is the mango season).

On arrival in Gaud it is a good idea to call on the friendly soldiers at the border post. They can advise you where not to go; the strip of no-man's-land between the two countries is just as intensively farmed as surrounding areas, so it's easy to make a mistake.