

A Day in the Old Dhaka, Bangladesh

by Ivan Stanic

My hands were shaking while I was trying to get the firm hold on anything that will help me stay inside the rickshaw, man powered three-wheeler, the most popular taxi service in Bangladesh. Skinny rickshaw rider was pedaling furiously through the narrow bumpy streets, making it very hard to sit firmly in shiny and colorful, but painfully uncomfortable seat. The little relief came as we suddenly and unexpectedly entered the main street, but quickly the pain was replaced with the sheer fear for life as we started to zigzag through busy main street chaos of all kind of big and small vehicles, horning their way through, and people moving in all directions.

Armies of street food sellers, with their improvised mobile stores, were busy serving customers. The latter were having their favorite meals sitting on the street, making the crowd even more crowded. Very well organized groups of beggars were waiting on every corner, carefully piloting the trolleys with their crippled cousins and friends among the rows of slow moving cars and busses. Young educated people with their hands full of latest business and finance books and magazines were just another part of the bloodstream of this crawling, pulsing, boiling collective organism simply called Dhaka, the capital of the Peoples Republic of Bangladesh.

Heavy monsoon rain in the most of the afternoon and evening managed to dilute the crowds on the streets, but it did not seem to affect rickshaw riders a bit. They were still tenaciously pedaling, with soaking wet shirts and traditional skirts, taking passengers all over the city. I even had the feeling that they were enjoying much needed refreshment that rain brought.

After a short but thorough research, I picked up the oldest part of town, so called Old Dhaka, for my photography session. This is also the densest and poorest part of Dhaka. Although my local guide Sharif insisted that I should visit the modern Parliament Building or The Presidential Palace, he shrugged his shoulders and agreed to take a walk through the narrow and overcrowded streets of the old town.

I decided first to take a quick ride along these narrow streets to spot the most interesting places and, after all, to gain some confidence. To me, born and raised in an environment where everybody, more or less, mind their own business, entering the society where curiosity is totally open, at least about foreigners, can be a little bit intimidating. On the other hand, I knew that this would also give me a unique opportunity to look deep into the lives of these friendly people. So I took a deep breath and, armed with good spirits, patience and my faithful camera, I made a step into their world.

My pale complexion and bulky figure, quite unusual for this part of the world, didn't pass unnoticed for too long. And, as I hoped, my desire to see, know and feel was unselfishly rewarded. Workers, vendors, shop owners, kids, people that were just passing by were all rushing to shake hands, to ask where I was from, what I was doing there. They were all willing to pose in front of the camera, smiling, yelling, showing off their merchandise and skills.

The noise of car horns, quite rare in these narrow and busy streets, was replaced by the sound of numerous bicycle bells ringing from the ever present colorful rickshaws. Sometimes a stray car or a supply truck will cause a holdup on the streets. A line of rickshaws will form in both directions, and in minutes, somehow everybody will walk and ride their way through. The traffic "Gordian knot" will be eventually untied by the magic of the bicycle bells, a lot of gesturing, few words and no yelling or arguing,

My attention was drawn form the stacks of colorful sari in the improvised street shop and the group of equally colorful ladies with the silver jars waiting in the line for their share of water, to the snake charmer with his cobra, and the street workers, bodies covered in sweat and mud, skillfully carrying baskets full of bricks, sand and other materials on the top of the head.

Even though for most of the time I managed to ignore strong odor coming from all sides, I really had to quickly pass through the part of the street with shops specialized in tanning goat skin.

The Old Dhaka is also well known for its interesting architecture and historical buildings, many of them still used, as every square inch is important in this overcrowded city. Looking up through the hundreds of power cables, equally messed up as the life bellow, with the little imagination, which was helpful in filling the gaps in

ruined, but once obviously carefully designed facades, balconies and arched windows, I was able to sense the past times, realizing that it was probably not very much different from what I was seeing at this very moment. Amazingly enough, life on the upper floors was just as vibrant and busy as the life on the street level.

One of the most prominent structures and monuments, and also a peaceful oasis, is the Lalbagh Fort, or Red Fort, so called because of the color of the outside walls and all the buildings inside. This 17th century monument from the time of the Mughal Empire, and the scene of bloody battle during the first war for independence in 1850's, today is park and the museum, and a good place to run away from the everyday life.

It is a perfect place for the young couples to enjoy their innocent relationship. This is still the world where the young man would try to reach the heart of the lady by reciting the words of the famous Bangla poets, and very often, their own poetry.

Two young ladies, dressed in black abaya (traditional Muslim dress) and faces covered with black scarves were obviously very much amused seeing the foreigner with the camera in his hands. I have carefully asked for the permission to take the picture, and was a little bit surprised as the permission was unexpectedly granted when one of the young ladies quickly removed the scarf and smiled. After the shot or two she gently covered her face again, hinting that this short meeting is about to end.

After a two hours' walk we found ourselves at the gates of Buriganga River piers. We paid the small fee and entered Sadar Ghat, overcrowded pier which was also, as any other street in the Old Dhaka, serving as open market, full of live chicken and goats and colorful fruits and vegetables. Obviously, the life on the river was no different from the one inside the town. Still I was amazed. For some time, I was just standing and watching, hypnotized by what was in front of me: chaotic river traffic of countless boats with their pilots skillfully rowing and maneuvering among each other.

Large boats, docked and tightly packed were waiting just enough to unload and load goods and board new passengers. Arrivals and departures were proudly announced with loud sirens, making them the river "Lords of Sound", in the absence of cars and rickshaws. The army of workers and carriers were browsing the boats and docks in hurry, loading the goods, doing quick maintenance and cleaning the ships.

When I came to my senses again, after a while, I noticed a group of men gathered around me, offering a really good deal for one hour ride on the river, or at least that was what they said. Of course, I couldn't resist. I picked up the most persistent one, and the next thing I knew, I was in the middle of a super busy, floating crowd. My "Gondolier" was effortlessly propelling his elongated wooden boat with single, long oar, mounted on the back, while I was dangerously disturbing balance moving from one side to another, trying to find the best angle to take a photo. We were passing many other similar boats loaded with people and goods. As elsewhere, they were happy and very excited to see and greet the foreigner. Men and kids would smile and wave while charmingly shy ladies will giggle and hide their faces behind the scarf or the umbrella.

After the several near misses with the other boats, I seriously started to question my decision to take this ride at all. But Sharif, Yusof and the oarsman were perfectly calm, so I decided to stay quiet and enjoy the ride. Yusof was the guy who spotted me as soon as I stepped on the pier, presented him self as the boat owner, offered the adventure on the water and decided not to let me go no matter what. Since I was hesitating and the others came with the similar offer, the final price was five times less then the initial one, but he was still obviously very happy.

A large river cruiser was brought to our attention by the loud siren, warning the small boats of its presence and speed. Our small nut shell was on its way and the oarsman was working hard to get us out. As this maneuver was exercised several times a day, all the nearby boats, including us, quickly positioned themselves in the way that they were least affected by the approaching waves. Rowing must never stop as the river current and waves will easily send you in the wrong direction.

As the last meters of the long, overused river cruiser passed, the other bank of the river showed in front of us. The group of man on a wide staircase, which was leading down directly into the river, was taking the refreshing bath in the murky Buriganga waters. More on the right, on the same staircase, the group of ladies was washing the clothes in the river. For the group of kids, that were splashing their way toward our boat, the water was nothing but the place to have fun.

The pure magic of simple but yet exciting and vibrant life and poor but friendly and smiling faces made me come back to this amazing place, several times during my visit to Bangladesh.