

# DHAKA

## THE CAPTIVATING CITY

Dhaka doesn't make frequent appearances on most travellers' weekend escapes or summer holidays bucket lists, but give Bangladesh's colourful capital a few days to beguile you with its captivating chaos and some of the friendliest residents on the planet, and you might end up staying longer than planned.

Words: Dave Stamboulis.



Intricately decorated rickshaws are an ideal way to navigate through Puran Dhaka.



Lalbagh Fort, built in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, houses the white marble tomb of Bibi Pari.



The porcelain tiles of Mount Fuji at Star Mosque were imported from Japan.



The Armenian Church of the Holy Resurrection dates back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Dhaka is the world's most densely populated city, but the maelstrom is precisely part of the appeal. Head into Puran Dhaka (the old city), and you will be submerged in a medley of colours, from saris and textiles bargained for in Shankhari Bazaar, to famed bangles made from conch shells by the artisan Shankhari people, along with the pungent smells of freshly ground spices and tandoori oven-baked *naan* bread and mutton kebabs. It's best to travel by bicycle rickshaws, that have plied the streets since the 1940s.

Since independence from Pakistan, Dhaka's rickshaws have been world-renowned for their superb artwork, with seats, hoods, and even wheels ornately painted with bright colours, along with the faces

of movie stars, religious idols, and political preferences and satire. With Government regulations becoming more stringent on the longstanding three-wheelers, get to Dhaka now to check out its paintings-on-wheels.

Old Dhaka is home to most of the city's top attractions. Visit Lalbagh Fort, a magnificent and incomplete 17<sup>th</sup> century Mughal fort and mausoleum. The adjoining Bibi Pari's tomb was finished and the white marble tomb is one of the fort's highlights.

The Ahsan Manzil, also known as the Pink Palace, towers above the docks at Sadarghat, a former residence of the Nawab of Dhaka built in 1872 in Neoclassical-Oriental style. Originally the home of a French trading company, the palace

was reconstructed in 1888 after a tornado destroyed much of it, but has withstood all of Dhaka's annual deluges since then. Other spots to visit in Puran Dhaka include the old Armenian Church of the Holy Resurrection, which dates from 1781, and the Mughal-style Star Mosque, which has porcelain tiles decorated with images of Mount Fuji, installed by a residential businessman who purchased art tiles from Japan!

Wander in the narrow lanes and endless numbers of residents will invite you for tea or Indian *pani puri*, known here as *phuchka*, small crispy dough shells filled with tamarind chutney, mint water, chickpeas, onions, and spiced potatoes.

Take your snack and wander over to Sadarghat, where the Buriganga, or

"Old Ganges," remains the lifeline of Dhaka. Hundreds of small rowboats take commuters back and forth across the river each day. For a more regal experience, book a passage on a large steamer and make your way slowly down the river to the UNESCO Heritage Site of Bagerhat. If the heat and traffic should wear you down, make sure to retreat to Gulshan, the upscale sector of Dhaka. There are elegant restaurants, cafes and hotels in this area.

To refresh yourself, make a beeline for the river and rickshaws, and drink a cup of *lal cha* at a corner stall, tea infused with spices like ginger or cardamom. You will be surrounded by warm smiles, wondering why you didn't come here ages ago. ☺



The pink hued Ahsan Manzil soars over the docks of Sadarghat.



Visitors can sail down Buriganga to reach Bagerhat – a UNESCO Heritage Site.



While in Dhaka, sample its mouthwatering street food such as *phuchka* (Indian *pani puri*).