

Hilly community tourism could be key driver in CHT region

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Dhaka : Lush green forests, cloud-piercing hills, scenic natural beauties and exciting adventures are what await travellers in the country's Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). Not only that but also diverse lifestyles-across language, food and culture-of 11 indigenous communities there have long been attracting visitors, foreign and local alike, all year round.

In the country's tourism master plan, Bangladesh Tourism Board (BTB) has identified at least 85 tourist spots in three hill districts of the country-29 in Rangamati, 41 in Bandarban and 15 in Khagrachari. BTB has also identified a dozen prospects in the hilly regions of CHT such as community tourism, eco-tourism, adventure tourism, riverine tourism, sustainable tourism and experiential tourism.

Rangamati-one of the key destinations for tourists in CHT-is home to the lake hills. The destination provides tourists with an unparalleled

opportunity to enjoy a magnificent combination of lakes and hills. A planned trip to this green riverine city surely rewards tourists with a memorable experience. Kaptai Lake, Hanging Bridge, Shuvolong Waterfalls, DC Bungalow Park, Police Polwel Park, Rajban Bihar Pagoda, Kaptai National Park and Sajek Valley are some of popular spots in Rangamati that welcome crowds of tourists all year long.

Bandarban is also blessed with unique natural beauty. There are over 16 tourist spots in Bandarban, including Nilgiri, Nilachal, Nafakhum, Shailopropat, Rijuk waterfall and Chimbuk hill. All these locations feature exciting adventure and unique natural beauty of hills, waterfall, river, lake and mountain. Those seeking adventure tourism will find paradise on earth in Bandarban as the sites there are famous for trekking. While trekking, travellers can make stops to stay with the indigenous communities and learn their ways of living to enjoy an exciting and original one-of-a-kind experience.

Khagrachari, another popular destination, boasts pristine tourist spots like Alutila Cave, Mayung Kopal, Matai Hakor, Horticulture Heritage Park, Haja Chora Waterfall and others.

There are plenty of hotels all over Rangamati, Bandarban and Khagrachari, from high end to affordable ones. However, the true fun lies with the indigenous communities where guests can enjoy cheap stays at their homes, eat delicious hilly food and learn the exciting ways of their living.

For instance, in the hilly district Bandarban that remains filled with tourists round the year, travellers now seem to prefer more travelling to the communities where indigenous people live, rather than the artificially made tourist hotspots in the area.

Recently, the Darjeeling Para in Ruma upazila of Bandarban, where the Bom community lives, has gained much popularity among tourists as the cost of food and lodging there is comparatively low. The community members have raised bamboo and wooden cottages and houses on elevated platforms for the incoming tourists who can make themselves familiar with local culture and traditions by staying in close contact with the local people. Sunrise and sunset are the finest moments in the hills at Darjeeling Para which should not be missed.

Scenic Rangamati, another popular spot in CHT

The Darjeeling Para is located in the foothills of Keokradong. Most of the tourists stay in the village cottages on their way to Keokradong. As per reports, there are 35 Bom families in the village, which was set up in 1965. Local people clean their yards once a day. There are dustbins and containers for garbage so that no one litters.

The cottages and houses on elevated platforms have been constructed for the accommodation of tourists visiting Keokradong hill. There is an arrangement for 300 tourists to stay here. In the small cottages and elevated houses, as many as 150 tourists can stay. However, during peak season, people also stay in tents in open fields. Local people have constructed these small cottages maintaining their traditions which attract visitors the most.

Untapped hilly community tourism

However, the true potential of hilly community tourism in Bangladesh still remains untapped. Behind lie the reasons: lack of adequate infrastructure, security, transportation facilities and coordination among concerned authorities; unplanned development; limited access to exploration; and bureaucratic issues.

To prevent any harassment of tourists by any terrorist group, security is a high priority. Also, tourists cannot come to CHT from each and every part of the country due to lack of transportation facilities.

For further growth

According to industry insiders, what tourists prefer the most while making any trip is security. Therefore, government initiatives to ensure security are key.

Furthermore, for any tourism development initiative, the government must consult with the local stakeholders. In CHT's case, the government must involve indigenous communities in their efforts to drive tourism growth in the region.

Hilly community tourism in master plan

The government has prioritised tapping the true potential of hilly communities in its master plan to help achieve the country sustainable

tourism.

The master plan reportedly aims to divide the hilly regions into two zones-Bandarban's Thanchi and Rangamati-to cover the hill tracks. At the same time, the plan focuses on Kaptai Lake to develop floating cottages, restaurants and market following the style of Korea, Singapore and Finland.

Development of leisure, adventure, eco, river, community, hilly and sustainable tourism in CHT is being prioritised.

However, involving local stakeholders to develop sustainable tourism in the region while protecting its environment is crucial.