

Padma Bridge opens new door to tourism in Bangladesh

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Dhaka : Even in such off-peak season, Kuakata, Sundarbans, Bagerhat and country's other promising tourism destinations in the south-western side previously untapped due to poor connectivity are gearing for an influx of tourists as the long-awaited dream of the nation Padma Bridge opened its door to travel on June 25.

The recent inauguration of the country's largest bridge, by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, has paved way for domestic travel to broaden its horizon as people can now easily opt for weekend tourism and visit attractive destinations in the south and south-west, only 5-6 hours away.

The south boasts Bangladesh's beautiful second largest beach Kuakata, world's largest mangrove forest and home to the Royal Bengal Tiger Sundarbans and the southern district of historic sites, world heritage and white gold Bagerhat, among many significant others.

Earlier, these destinations were 10-12 hours away from the capital and now, thanks to the mighty Padma Bridge, travel time is reducing by 4-6 hours to the 21 administrative districts in the south and south-western from Dhaka.

The development promises to boost weekend tourism, as visitors can now plan to make a quick getaway to Kuakata, Bagerhat, or Sundarbans.

Tour Operators and hoteliers said that with the reduced travel time the two already

popular tourist spots Kuakata and Sundarbans are expected to see huge influx starting from the upcoming Eid al-Adha, likely to be celebrated on July 10.

Weekend tourism to Kuakata

Foreseeing tourism growth specially in weekends, several newly built hotels and resorts are about to make a debut in Kuakata.

Many have already started enhancing their facilities and services in anticipation of an onrush of tourists, said Motaleb Sharif, General Secretary, Kuakata Hotel-Motel Owners Association.

Also, to mark the celebration of Padma Bridge's inauguration, several residential hotels and motels are giving 50 per cent discounts to attract tourists.

"We are giving special discounts to share the joy of opening Padma bridge," expressed Shafiqur Rahman Chan, president of the Hotel-Motel Owners Association.

The bus operator Green Line Paribahan had planned to operate 30 luxurious buses to Kuakata from Dhaka via Barishal city and Satkhira via Khulna city from June 26 using the Padma Bridge, said its Mana-ger Abdus Sattar.

The company launched the Dhaka-Kala-para-Kuakata bus service for the first time to attract tourists after the opening of the Padma Bridge, he further said.

Sundarbans

Tour organisers to the famous mangrove Sundarbans are also ready to welcome the significant rise in tourist arrivals.

They often opted for taking the air route to either Jashore or Barishal to avoid the interruptions at the ferry terminals, said Masud Hossain, Managing Director of Bengal Tours.

"Due to the bridge, we can now reduce our costs significantly if our tourists take the road or train. This will allow us to attract more domestic travellers," he claimed.

Around 2.5 to 3 lac tourists visit the world's largest mangrove forest Sundarbans - every year, generating BDT 3 crore in revenue for the government.

Thus, the forest department is building four tourist centres in advance in Sundarbans, said Chief Conservator of Forests Mihir Kumar Doe, according to reports.

"Currently there are seven ecotourism centres in the Sundarbans. We expect more tourists now since the Padma Bridge inauguration," he added.

Bagerhat

Padma Bridge will bring immense growth to the tourism of Bagerhat, home to two world heritage sites - Sha? Gambuj Mosque and part of the Sundarbans.

According to reports, Bagerhat Deputy Commissioner Mohammad Azizur Rahman said, the tourism industry based on Mongla Port, EPZ, the Sundarbans, and Sixty Dome Mosque will be boosted in the district. Fifty tour guides have already been trained for the smooth movement of the tourists. The road communication system has been developed in the south and south-western regions centering on the Padma Bridge.

About the tourism sector in the district, Md Jayed, custodian of Sixty Dome Mosque, Bagerhat, said, around five lac tourists had visited the historic mosque in 2021 from where the mosque received BDT 57 lac as revenue.

The number of the tourists and earnings will boost as the much-anticipated Padma Bridge has opened to the public now.

Sheikh Nazrul Islam Montu, President of Bagerhat Inter-district Bus Owner's Association, said, they have already taken the initiative to run luxurious buses on Bagerhat-Dhaka route.

Not only will the number of tourists interested to see the mosque go up, but other

archaeological sites in Khulna will also see a rise in the number of visitors, he noted.

Day trip to Padma Bridge

When Padma Bridge opened to traffic on June 25, millions came down to see the longest bridge of the country.

Some travel groups and companies have already announced packages for those interested in travelling. These day-long packages include the Padma Bridge tour as well as the opportunity to visit other nearby tourist spots.

The package includes breakfast, a variety of delicious curries including fresh hilsa of Padma, lunch with bharta and various dishes including sweets of Bikrampur in the afternoon.

An agency called Travel Source BD Limited has such a day-long package for Padma Bridge travel. Under the package, Padma Bridge will be brought around Mawa with travellers from different points of Dhaka. They will get to see the scenic view of Bhangar in Faridpur and will also be able to visit the picnic spot at Kanthalbari Ferry Ghat.

This trip costs BDT 1,000 per person. There are attractive discounts for booking with family.

Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation, the national tourism organisation, is also offering premium day tour at budget price since July 1.

With the new Toyota AC Tourist Coaster of BPC, travellers can have a day tour Padma Bridge and Tungipara.

The package is priced at BDT 3570 and includes breakfast and snacks two times, lunch at Tungipara's Parjatan Motel Madhumoti, visit to the Padma Bridge, Bangabandhu's Majar Complex, and Madhumati River bank.

Steps to tap potential

Currently, the tour operators and administrators of the south are concerned whether they have the capacity and infrastructure required to handle a surge in the flow of tourists.

Places to stay in Kuakata are limited, said Ruman Imtiaz, President of Tour Operators' Association of Kuakata. Existing hotels and resorts can only host a maximum of 15,000 people at a time, he added.

Hence, they are preparing to launch "homestay" services in nearby homes to cope with the added pressure of tourists, he said, adding, "To this end, we have already trained about 500 homeowners on tourist services and there are plans to do more.

Nazrul Islam Bachchu, Proprietor of Pugmark Tours and Travels, which organise trips to Sundarbans, shared, he is concerned about the existing infrastructure.

"There is hardly any pier [in Khulna's Mongla] for tourists to board our ships properly. Not only would we not find a hotel or resort to keep at least 50 tourists but also there are no restaurants where you can make arrangements for 40 people at a time. I'm not sure what will happen when the number of tourists increases," he said.

He expressed his belief that private operators do not have such deep pockets to build necessary infrastructure by themselves. He asked the government to take essential steps in this regard.

The government is aware of the limitations to manage an increased flow of tourists, said Abu Taher Mohammad Jaber, CEO of Bangladesh Tourism Board, according to reports.

"A lack of infrastructure is still a major concern. I'm sure the government is going to make a significant investment to develop tourism in Khulna and Barishal, but BTB is more geared towards luring in private investors."

He further mentioned that a new government plan to develop new spots for tourism in Bangladesh's southwestern region.

"We are working on a master plan by surveying 64 districts across Bangladesh. In the plan, Sha? Gamberj Mosque and the Sundarbans have been prioritised," said BTB CEO, adding that multiple domestic and foreign companies are interested in investing in tourism.

"Apart from established tourist hotspots, which we believe are at maximum capacity as of now, we're attempting to develop new areas as tourist attractions. A project is underway at Sonarchar in Patuakhali's Rangabali Upazila right now," he claimed.

Also, the master plan to rejuvenate the tourism sector of the country entirely will be finished by December 2022 to attract local and foreign investment, Taher noted.

According to the plan, 1,100 tourist hotspots in the country will be revamped and the government will build new infrastructure there. The spots in Khulna and Barishal will get "special attention" due to the Padma Bridge, Taher promised.

Owing to the mighty Padma Bridge, not only Kuakata, Bagerhat and Sundarbans but also many other tourist spots like char islands in the Barishal region would see a larger influx of tourists and take domestic tourism to new heights.