

# BANGLADESH

The only place where poverty  
should be is in museums.

MUHAMMAD YUNUS, NOBEL PEACE LAUREATE

**Bangladesh battered** my travel plans but broadened my perspective. Before I left for a week's visit there was some student unrest, but with no official travel warning I pressed on.

Tensions in Dhaka were outweighed by curious friendliness. Shopkeepers didn't hassle me, families invited me to dinner, although I declined, and a young man from a phone kiosk guided me through the rain under his umbrella to an Uber. Flooded roads forced the driver to take a detour – which might've worried me if not for Uber's tracking feature. Only on two occasions was I truly concerned, when children no older than fourteen approached with plastic bags of shoe polish, clearly inhaling to escape their harsh reality. Their hollow eyes were haunting, and I later learnt that addiction was rampant.

Old Dhaka's rickshaws and vibrant streets pulsed with vivid colour and life, despite the natural and political storms. Our driver pedalled dangerously close to electrical wires dangling at shoulder height, skilfully avoiding pedestrians. My guide's reassurance did little

to ease my worry. I later discovered that Bangladesh had recorded over 5,000 road deaths the previous year. Air quality was also poor, with respiratory problems a leading cause of death.

Moto-rickshaws – vehicles like tuk-tuks – had been fortified with iron bars to prevent attacks since what he explained as “our small problem time” during the 1971 War of Independence. With estimates of up to three million dead, “small” hardly seemed the word.

A river taxi offered relief from the traffic. Our “captain” dipped his long oar into the murky river as if he was paddle-boarding a large wooden vessel, while my guide and I huddled under an umbrella and snacked on fresh chapati and mango. When I learnt Shihab was recovering from hepatitis A and left hospital only two days earlier, I insisted we skip the Liberation War Museum and return to the hotel's air-conditioned comfort.

I already knew that Bangladesh, once known as East Pakistan, had a turbulent history since its separation from India and Pakistan in 1947.

At independence, in 1971, it was the world's second-poorest country, but it had since made remarkable strides.

On a brighter note, I was impressed by Nobel Peace Prize winner Muhammad Yunus, who pioneered microfinance for the poor; 96 per cent of the loan recipients were women. We'd met briefly years earlier in Sydney, though by now he had fallen out of favour with his government.

I never made it to Cox's Bazar, home to the world's longest beach and nearly a million Rohingya refugees, but found myself more acutely aware of how privileged I was to have a safe and clean home on Sydney's northern beaches.

Most eventfully, a first-hand view of the deadly August 2024 riots, which saw hundreds killed, hadn't been on my itinerary. After three days, I decided to leave early, when – near my hotel – parliament was stormed and looted. The decision was hastened when my phone was stolen. With no SIM card and communication shut down, a helpful hotel staffer let me access a VPN. I contacted three trusted friends on Facebook to help: one with the bank, one with the phone company and one to book the last flight out before the airport closed. I had several credit and debit cards but only one worked, since others required two-step phone verification. During earlier revolutions in Argentina and Bolivia, cash stashed in different places, had been enough. Reliance on technology made this seem more daunting, perhaps because I was alone or because of the sharper awareness that comes with age.

Reporting my stolen phone, the police station didn't seem the safest place to be given several police had been killed the day before. Surrounded by tanks and machine guns, the report took two hours to lodge, and my patience wore thin as officers requested my father's name, blood type, and other bureaucratic details. I somehow managed a grimaced smile when they inexplicably asked for a selfie. Tears fell when

back in my room as I've learnt not to show vulnerability in public.

I winced at the police brutality on the news broadcast in the hotel lobby, though some locals supported the crackdown, calling protesters “fake freedom fighters”. There are always two sides to every story.

Despite the chaos, the hotel staff were calm and supportive, and even arranged a guard to escort me to the airport. The newly built Chinese freeway had been closed after demonstrators torched toll gates. Militia lined the route with machine guns – a stark contrast to the smiling crowds I'd seen days earlier at the airport, returning from overseas with luggage piled high. Travelling light with only a backpack was one of my better decisions, as I scooted through security hands-free.

From Bangkok, I watched the situation worsen. A day after I left, the prime minister fled into exile and Muhammad Yunus was appointed interim prime minister – no doubt a daunting task, especially given he was eighty-four.

Back home in Sydney I read about the worst floods in three decades, which killed fifty-nine and displaced millions in Bangladesh. A group of Rohingya refugees from Cox's Bazar took it upon themselves to distribute relief packages – rice, lentils, oil, and basic medical kits – to over 3,000 Bangladeshi families. “When we came to Bangladesh in 2017,” one refugee said, “our brothers and sisters welcomed us with kindness. We may not have much, but we have big hearts and deep humanity. If a friend doesn't show up in times of need, they're not a true friend.” In a country battling poverty, their generosity stood out. One displaced community helping another.

Amid upheaval in one of the world's poorest countries, I left Bangladesh with no phone, but an invaluable glimpse of the richness of humanity.