Bangladesh

Country Facts
Population: 156,050,883
Languages: Bengali (Bangla), some English
Predominant Religions: Islam, Hindu, Buddhist
Time Zone: Six hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time
Voltage Requirements: 220 volts
Telephone Codes: 880, country code; 2, city code for Dhaka; 31, city code for Chittagong

Introduction:
Ibn Battuta, a 14th-century Moroccan traveler, wrote that the Bangladeshis referred to their homeland as “a hell crammed with blessings.” Most travelers today would have to look hard to find the blessings. Nearly every year, Bangladesh, one of the most heavily populated countries in the world, is afflicted with catastrophes.

Famine and disease visit the land, but it is flooding that makes Bangladesh one of the most disaster-prone places on Earth. Storm clouds and hurricanes travel up the Bay of Bengal, hit the Himalayas along the nation’s northern border, and stop, pouring water on the land. When the rains come, villagers head for large concrete platforms scattered throughout the coastal areas to wait out the high waters. When the flooding recedes, villagers sometimes find that the local river has changed its course: it now flows around their bridge and through the center of town.

A visit to Bangladesh, however, offers the opportunity to see a resilient people untouched by mass tourism and unconquered by nature. All the water makes Bangladesh a lush country with mangrove swamps and a large expanse of rain forest. It has two pleasant hilly areas, large expanses of rolling hills covered with verdant tea estates and tropical forests.

Compassion in Bangladesh:
Compassion International’s work in Bangladesh began in 2004. As of 2010 more than 15,000 children participate in more than 90 child development centers. Compassion partners with churches to help them provide Bangladeshi children with the opportunity to rise above their circumstances and become all God has created them to be.

Cultural Information:
- Bangladesh is the most densely populated country in the world; about 150 million people live in a country that’s about the same size as the state of Iowa. Ninety-nine percent of the population are Bangladeshi and speak Bengali, while the remaining 1 percent comprises different tribal groups located in the southeast and northeast.
- Bangladesh has the fourth largest Muslim population in the world; 87 percent of Bangladeshis are Muslim and 12 percent are Hindu, leaving Christians and Buddhists to make up the remaining 1 percent. Religion is very important to Bangladeshis, and they do not look favorably on atheists. Religion, whatever the religion may be, is what makes a person tick in the eyes of Bangladeshis.
• Appearance is very important to Bangladeshis. If you go out of the house, you dress up. For men, this means nice pants and a buttoned shirt (no shorts or T-shirts). Bangladeshi women wear either a salwar (loose-fitting pants) with a salwar kameez (a dress-like tunic) or a sari. Women should dress modestly — wear loose-fitting pants with baggy tops and, if possible, buy traditional clothes once in country.
• A typical meal would include a spicy hot curry made with chicken, fish or beef, and vegetables, served with dahl (cooked lentils) and rice. Rice is eaten with every meal and is very important to the culture. There are at least seven different ways to say rice! Breakfast is usually chapati (flat bread) with dahl. Bangladeshis have a sweet tooth and love to eat misti (round, sugar-soaked fried flour and milk). All meals are eaten with your right hand and most places do not have utensils. The milky sweet tea is known as cha and will be offered to you everywhere. **Drink only bottled or boiled water — never drink tap water.**
• It is courteous to use only the right hand to receive or give things. This is especially important when it comes to food. The left hand is considered unclean, and is used for hygiene below the waist; the right hand is used for activities above the waist. It is best to stay away from any food that is not cooked and hot to the touch. Always wash your hands before you eat; it might be helpful to keep hand sanitizer with you.
• Greetings vary by religion in Bangladesh. A Muslim greeting is Asalam Walekum ("Peace be on you"). The response is Walekum Asalam ("Unto you, also peace"). Hindus and Christians say Nomashkar ("I worship the God in you") when greeting and saying goodbye. This is said while bringing your hands in front of your chest in a prayer posture.
• Bangladeshis like to stare, be it a road accident, protest, building construction or a foreigner. It is common to have 10 to 50 people watching you when you walk in the rural areas. Bangladesh is a very homogenous country, and anyone who is obviously different is stared at, including foreigners.
• Other than staring, Bangladeshis like to ask foreigners questions. First they’ll ask the name of your native country, followed by — in rapid succession — your name, your qualification (meaning your education), how much do you earn, whether you are married, and if you like Bangladesh; they may end with a geopolitical question. Bangladeshis are opinionated and keep up with world news.
• Hold on and be prepared for a ride of your life! Traffic is chaotic at best. Most roads are not wide enough for two cars to pass without pulling off the road. Then add buses (lots of them), trucks, rickshaws, baby taxis, tractors, motorbikes, bicycles, and people, and don’t forget the oxen carts plus animals. There are at least 100,000 rickshaws in the country’s capital city of Dhaka alone. Boats are quieter, and there are more miles of waterway than roadways.
• Dhaka is a good place to purchase either inexpensive ready-made garments (overruns from the Bangladesh export market) or quality handicrafts. Bangladesh is known for bronze work, leather work, handbags, handicrafts, and pink pearls. Be prepared to bargain or haggle at most shops; shop-owners price goods up by at least two-thirds. For convenience, change money at the airport. Most shops in Bangladesh do not take debit or credit cards. However, the bigger handicraft shops will take credit cards, and banks do have ATM machines.
• Thirty-six percent of Bangladeshis survive on less than US$1 per day, and 20 percent of the country’s children are involved in child labor. Eighty-eight percent of children living here are malnourished, and the adult literacy rate is only 37 percent. Bangladesh is home to more non-governmental organizations (NGOs) than any other country in the world. One-quarter of all government resources come from external aid, including foreign governments and development agencies.

• Beggars asking for baksheesh [gift] is part of life in Bangladesh. Beggars are at every street corner and along highways. It is part of Islamic belief for rich people to give part of their income directly to the less fortunate.

• It is inappropriate for men and women to touch in Bangladesh — this includes shaking hands or hugs, even between a husband and wife. However, it is socially acceptable for two men to hold hands, hug or shake hands. Women can also hold hands, hug or shake hands with other women.

• There are two types of commodes in Bangladesh, western and Asian (squat). Most hotels in Dhaka have western toilets, but in the rest of Bangladesh most toilets are Asian (squat). Remember the left hand usage—below the belt; use your left hand and water to clean yourself. Toilet paper is available if you don’t want to use water, but you need to carry it with you. There are very few public facilities in the country, so plan accordingly.

Dos and Don’ts:
• Do be prepared for hartals [protests]. These strikes happen at least once a month, and everything shuts down during them, including public transportation. Hartals are usually announced in local newspapers several days before they occur.
• Don’t use the thumbs-up sign to show approval. It’s a vulgar insult in Bangladesh and other parts of Asia.
• Don’t be surprised if you draw a crowd of onlookers while doing the simplest of things. Bangladeshis do not share the Western conception of private space, nor do they regard stares as rude. Although it may be disconcerting to you, the practice is harmless, and just shows that many people, especially in rural areas, don’t have much contact with foreigners.
• Don’t wear shoes into a mosque, and don’t be surprised that many mosques don’t allow women to enter.
• Do ask before you take photographs of people, particularly women.
• Don’t change more money than you think you’ll spend. You can reconvert up to 500 TK or 25 percent of the total converted, whichever is less.

Travel Tips

Personal Safety:
Exercise caution and be aware that the September 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States and subsequent military actions in Afghanistan and Iraq have increased the possibility of hostility aimed at foreigners. Avoid proximity to street demonstrations, which occur frequently in Bangladesh and have turned violent in the past. Also avoid the border areas, where refugee
problems have caused tension. Petty crime occurs in major cities — be aware of your surroundings and take care with your belongings.

Leave at home all unnecessary credit cards, social security card, library cards and similar items you may routinely carry in your wallet. Do not take more cash than you reasonably require for that day. Use the room safe or hotel safe to secure valuables as well as additional cash. Secure cash in multiple locations — wallet, various pockets, money belts. Carry items in front pockets, not back pockets. Do not display large sums of money in public; only make visible the amount of money that approximates your purchase. Maintain a close awareness of your purse, wallet, backpack, etc. as well as the people around you. It’s a good idea to keep one hand or arm in constant contact with these items especially in areas of high people traffic. Never leave items with cash in them [purse, wallet, backpack, etc.] on a bus, car, or any other location, even if the vehicle is being watched by Compassion staff or Compassion-hired contractors. Stay alert and be cautious at all times. Don’t take safety & security for granted.

**Health:**
Sanitary conditions even in most restaurants in Bangladesh can pose problems for travelers. Most hot, freshly cooked food should be safe, but peel fresh fruit and raw vegetables before eating, choose meat that is cooked thoroughly, avoid local dairy products, and assume the water is unsafe [stick with prepackaged or boiled drinks].

Another reason not to drink the water: More than 25 years ago, the aid organization UNICEF joined the Bangladeshi government in a program to provide clean drinking water to residents. Wells were dug in every village to tap into the clean water contained in underground aquifers. It now appears that the water in those aquifers contains dangerously high levels of arsenic, and as many as 18 million people may eventually die from causes related to the poisoned water.

Bring all prescription medicine needed for the trip. Skin infections are common: Even the smallest wound should be disinfected and covered with a bandage. The sun can be very strong, so use sunscreen liberally and wear a hat. While adequate medical facilities and clinics are in the larger cities, any serious medical health problem should be treated in Bangkok, Thailand.

We strongly advise you to contact the CDC [www.cdc.gov] or check with your personal physician for more information about your specific health needs while traveling, including any recommendations for immunizations. Ask your doctor about obtaining malaria suppressants if you’re going outside Dhaka, and take along plenty of insect repellent. Also ask your doctor about vaccinations for typhoid and hepatitis.

**Weather:**
The driest and coolest season is October through March; otherwise, it’s almost always hot and humid. The “cool” season technically runs from mid-November through February (temperatures actually drop below 50 F / 10 C at night during December and January). The monsoon season runs from mid-June through October — temperatures are cooler then, but humidity remains
high. And while it doesn’t rain all the time during the monsoon season, flooding does make overland travel difficult.

Dress:
Don’t wear shorts, no matter how hot it is. Also, women should wear shirts with sleeves and long pants or long dresses.

*All information taken from Weissmann Reports, the World Factbook and Compassion International.*