

Marine Tourism Expansion in Bangladesh: Challenges and Preparedness in the 'Tourism Capital'

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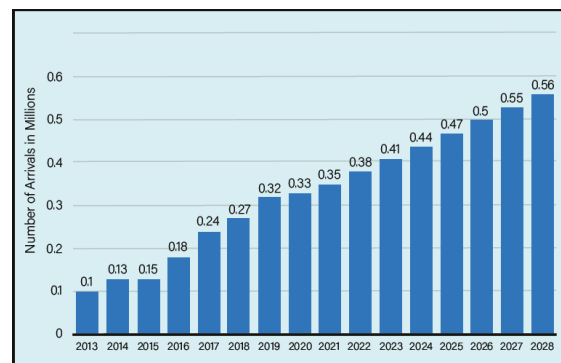
Marine tourism is becoming increasingly popular worldwide, drawing tourists to enjoy various activities in the sea. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) recognizes the significance of marine tourism, accounting for 5% of the global GDP and providing 6% to 7% of jobs worldwide (UNWTO, 2019). Bangladesh possesses extensive maritime areas covering 118,813 square kilometers in the Bay of Bengal. Within this vast coastal and sea region lies a treasure trove of resources that make Bangladesh stand out as a unique destination for marine and coastal tourism. Cox's Bazar, known as the tourism capital of

Bangladesh, boasts the world's longest unbroken sea beach, stretching around 120 kilometers, gently sloping into the mesmerizing waters of the Bay of Bengal. What makes it even more special is its blend of marine and mountain attractions, offering visitors a truly unique experience. This area holds numerous captivating tourist spots, including beautiful beaches, islands, and forested areas. Some of the notable tourist destinations in Cox's Bazar district include Innani, Ramu, Himchori, Sonadia, Moheshkhali Island, Teknaf, Kutubdia, and Saint Martin Island. All in all, Bangladesh's coastal and marine riches offer a

delightful experience for tourists seeking natural beauty and a wide array of activities.

Cox's Bazar, a significant place in South Asia, holds tremendous potential for marine tourism and investment. Even though it boasts the world's longest sea beach, the majority of its tourists are locals. Less than 5% of visitors are international due to insufficient planning and limited tourism facilities. However, there's newfound hope for the tourism industry in Cox's Bazar. The Government of Bangladesh recognizes the area's potential and aims to develop its marine and coastal tourism, contributing to the country's economic growth. To make this vision a reality, the government is working on several projects in the region. They are establishing eco-tourism parks on islands, constructing railway lines from Dohazari to Cox's Bazar and Ramu to Ghumdhum, developing a modern international airport, setting up a high-tech park in Ramu, and creating economic zones in Sabrang and Jallia Island, among other initiatives. The master plan for the district's tourism and investment potential has been in action since 2009. Bangladesh is also part of the Trans-Asian Railway Network, aiming to enhance trade, commerce, and tourism connections with neighboring countries. The Chattogram-Cox's Bazar-Ghumdhum rail line is part of this network, and its construction is in full swing, soon to be completed. This rail route will connect with Myanmar through Ghumdhum and will eventually extend to China, Malaysia, and Thailand, further boosting connectivity and opportunities for the region.

The modernization of Cox's Bazar international airport is almost finished, and the government is keen on promoting it to international standards. Once completed, the airport's runway will be 10,700 feet long, even longer than Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport. This upgradation will allow bigger planes like the Boeing 777 to land here, making international flights more accessible. With this improved airport, tourists, traders, and investors from different countries can directly reach Cox's Bazar. It will also serve as a refueling hub for airlines on international routes and a transit point for passengers from various countries. Furthermore, three eco-tourism parks at Sabrang, Naf, and Sonadia are being developed to attract foreign investment and cater to the needs of foreign tourists. Additionally, projects for Naf Tourism Park in Teknaf and Sonadia Eco Tourism Park in Moheshkhali Upazila are also underway. All these initiatives will bring significant changes to the entire region from Sabrang to Matarbari in the next five years, attracting substantial investments. Successful implementation of these mega projects will create exciting opportunities in Bangladesh's tourism sector.



Cox's Bazar, despite its wealth of natural resources, presently, is facing

challenges in attracting foreign tourists. The area lacks adequate tourist facilities beyond some hotels, and there are limited entertainment options for tourists in the evenings. One major hindrance to tourism development in Cox's Bazar is the unplanned construction that damages the environment, harming its natural beauty. To preserve its allure, strict measures should be taken to prevent such irregularities. The government should also play an active role in overseeing the tourism facilities in this prominent tourist destination. It is important to involve local communities in the planning and implementation of various initiatives. At the moment, only a small portion of the 120 kilometers of beaches in Cox's Bazar is being utilized for tourism. However, there are promising plans to create a dedicated zone for foreign visitors, which could significantly boost tourism in the area. In addition to this, efforts should be made to showcase the region's unique art and culture to tourists, enhancing their overall experience. By addressing these issues and promoting responsible tourism, Cox's Bazar can become an even more attractive and popular destination for travelers from around the world.

Marine Tourism Spots in & Near Cox's Bazar	Possible Tourism Activities in & Near Cox's Bazar
Inani Beach, Ramu, St. Martin Island, Mohekhali Island, Sonadia Island, Himchori, Sandwip Island, Nijhum Dwip, Kutubdia, Teknaf.	Sightseeing, surfing, fishing, trekking, hiking, parasailing, swimming, festivals, local handicrafts, shopping, seafood, SCUBA diving, snorkeling, boat/ship cruising, etc.

Before the mega projects in Cox's Bazar and surrounding areas are completed, Bangladesh should conduct a technical analysis to explore new opportunities for marine and coastal tourism development. Here are some potential measures to expand marine tourism in Cox's Bazar, Saint

Martin's Island, and the nearby regions:

Short-Term Measures

- Focus and invest in innovative research and capacity enhancement to build skilled human resources.
- Facilitate IT-based and tailored approach tourism, with a greater emphasis on hygiene issues and healthy living.
- Planning, facilitating, and developing community-based marine eco-tourism.
- Facilitation of budget and family-friendly standard accommodations in significant tourist spots.
- Expansion of beach activities and facilitation of cultural events/competitions, beach carnivals, seafood festivals, sports tournaments, evening camping, kite flying festivals, live concerts, awareness campaign, the celebration of national days, Bengali New Year, etc.
- Tourist-friendly immigration and customs services, port facilities and assurance of tourists' safety and security.
- Continuous policy dialogues among stakeholders at the local and national levels. Successful coordination among the ministries, administrative bodies at the central, regional, and local levels, and stakeholders affiliated with marine tourism must be ensured.

Mid and Long-Term Measures

- Guided trekking of small troops of domestic and international tourists at beaches and islands.
- Declaration of some areas exclusively for foreign visitors ensuring adequate arrangements and safety measures.
- Adoption of an arrival visa system at the Cox's Bazar International Airport, a one-stop service, and updating easy visa policy with the inclusion of a seaport.
- Various customized entertainment facilities, including five-star hotels, eco-tourism, marine aquarium, special arrangements for traveling to St. Martin and other islands, floating jetty, children's park, eco cottage, oceanarium, underwater restaurant, floating restaurant, multi-cuisine restaurants, etc, near the marine drive and at the tourism park.
- Ensure women-friendly and child-friendly facilities at the beach area, marine drive, and islands, such as restrooms, breastfeeding zone, availability of medicines, toiletries, baby foods etc.
- Introduction or expansion of exciting beach sports and recreational activities, such as boating, snorkeling, sport-fishing, jet-skiing, scuba diving, and hang-gliding, following proper safety measures.
- Plan and develop eco-friendly underwater exploration facility near Saint Martin's Island and Cheradwip.
- Establishment of the Marine Park, Heritage Park, large aquatic museum, golf field, exhibition center, mega mall, cineplex, and theme parks along the marine drive. Besides, an international standard conference center can be built so that international conferences can be organized in Cox's Bazar frequently.
- Expansion of affordable and safe cruise shipping from Chittagong to Saint Martin's Island via Cox's Bazar & Teknaf and another route from Chittagong/Cox's Bazar to the Sundarbans and Kuakata can be envisaged (Figure 3).
- Facilitation of cruise shipping from Teknaf to Swatch of No Ground, maintaining Govt. rules and regulations.
- Networking with international cruise ships authorities, travel agencies & tour operators and developing joint itineraries and route maps.
- Public and private joint investments through well-timed actions enacting specific rules, regulations, health and safety measures.
- Facilitate regional cooperation for marine tourism diplomacy and the development of a comprehensive maritime tourism strategy.

Despite facing various global crises, marine tourism in Bangladesh has shown progress. However, it now requires time and supportive policies to regain its momentum. To invigorate the progress in this sector, a comprehensive tourism industry must

be developed around Cox's Bazar, the nation's tourism capital. With proper management and planning, Cox's Bazar can achieve social and economic prosperity in the near future. This calls for the formulation of various future plans involving relevant ministries, public and private agencies, as well as research and academic institutions, all working together. Bangladesh can learn from the successful initiatives of developed countries and seek their support and cooperation in establishing modern, IT-based responsible marine and coastal tourism in Cox's Bazar, especially when the mega projects are completed and an influx of tourists is expected. Key roles should be played by the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism to ensure coordination among other ministries, administrative bodies, and stakeholders associated with tourism.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Bangladesh Tourism Board can play a promotional role, while the Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation can focus on providing facilities and services to brand the country as a marine tourism hub. Above all, marine tourism must be developed sustainably, taking care not to harm the environment, biodiversity, and ecosystem. With careful planning and cooperation, Cox's Bazar can become a thriving and responsible marine tourism destination.

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