

Travellers'
World

NEIL in Nutshell

by Tania Banerjee

My eyes adjust slowly to the blue haze. Sunbeams refracting underwater have lit up pockets of the ocean floor. From there, branching acropora corals stretch their arms, as if trying to embrace me. However, I know better -- corals are not to be touched. I pull gentle turtle strokes in the water wearing a snorkel. I am floating somewhere in the Bay of Bengal, off the coast of Neil Island (now known as Shaheed Dweep).

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Neil Island is a part of Andaman and Nicobar union territory of India. It is a tiny island 18.9 square kilometres wide and lies 40 kilometres northeast of Port Blair, the capital of Andaman and Nicobar Islands. 95 families who arrived in India as refugees from erstwhile East Pakistan were given shelter in Neil Island. This is how a tiny speck of wild land existing mid ocean became inhabited. The inhabitants brought with them their culture, knowledge, cuisine, and language.

As a Bengali speaker in the predominantly Bengali speaking island, I am having my way very easily. "I am a very responsible swimmer. Can I please take the unused snorkel mask and go into the water just by myself without the floaters?" This was all it took to have my moment with the corals. First the guides gave me the usual guided tour where I was wrapped in a floater that was tied to a rope. Then at my request I am allowed a grace period of 15 minutes to float in the lagoon on my own.

Back in the coast—Bharatpur beach—it is a place that hums with tourists. Bharatpur is on the north side of Neil. Here the white sand is caressed by the cyan waters of the lagoon. At the horizon, the ocean is a band of Prussian blue. The change in shade clearly demarcates the end of the patch reefs and the advent of deep ocean. Being a hub of water sports, it draws many adventurists.

After grabbing a quick bite in Bharatpur I set off to see the famous 'Howrah Bridge'. It is a natural rock arch made of corals in the southwestern side of Neil. The low tide has just set in making the place accessible through a walking trail. The intertidal pools here are a reserve of marine fauna.

Giant clams hide in niches, beautiful algae blossom from the crevices of rock, crabs scuttle by. The journey on foot is more precious than the destination.

The shadows have changed direction. It is time for me to visit Laxmanpur, the westernmost beach of the island, famous for its dramatic sunsets. The Sun blazing beyond the hovering clouds cast floating shadows on the water. However, contrary to the crowd in the beach, I fix my gaze to the opposite direction—the forests.

Towering Sea Mahua trees with thick trunks and rich foliage hem the shore. The jungle looks mysterious and magical—fragments of what remain of the original forest. Since human habitation started, forest cover in Neil Island has been reduced greatly. Lush fields of paddy, swaying coconut palms, thickets of banana trees and groves of areca nuts announce it loud and clear—much of the natural vegetation in Neil was cleared to make way for agriculture. No wonder Neil Island is called "the food bowl of Andaman."

In Neil, the sun rises at 5 AM even in November. At 6 AM sharp I unlock my bicycle. I had rented it for 24 hours for INR 200. "You can criss-cross Neil in 2 hours on a bicycle," the maach-bhaja(fried fish) seller at Laxmanpur had told me. That is exactly my plan. The prebooked boat that would ferry me back to Port Blair would set off at 11.15 AM. "I have plenty of time," I think to myself.

The plan is to go farthest first, a place 6.6 kms east of my accommodation. Sitapur is the easternmost beach, it is also called the sunrise beach and this is my first destination. I roll the bicycle through farmlands, neighbourhoods, village squares, uphill slopes and negotiate with a few potholes. I reach the beach after 25 minutes.

Fallen trees on the rocky coast stand as witnesses of the Tsunami of 2004. Remnants of the old growth forests of Neil populate the north of Sitapur beach.

A canopy of coconut leaves fan over my head blocking the sky. Sunlight is dappled. Just 100 metres ahead through gaps in coconut foliage I see shining blue water. I hear a buzz near my right ear. Overwhelmed by the desire to reach the beach I ignore the noise. The buzz becomes louder. I withdraw my focus from the water and readjust my eyes to look at things nearby. Shockwaves go down my spine—I am surrounded by a swarm of honeybees. Of course a place known as "food bowl" would have an abundance of pollinators!

Panic-stricken, I drop the bicycle, use my cap as a shield for my face and run for my life. At the house of the women who had greeted me just a while ago I find refuge. They take me in even as I bring in tens of honeybees into their house. They apply slacked lime paste on the bee stings, feed me, and even retrieve my bicycle. If not for them I cannot imagine being alive.

Neil Island for me will always be a place where the warmth of people saved my life.

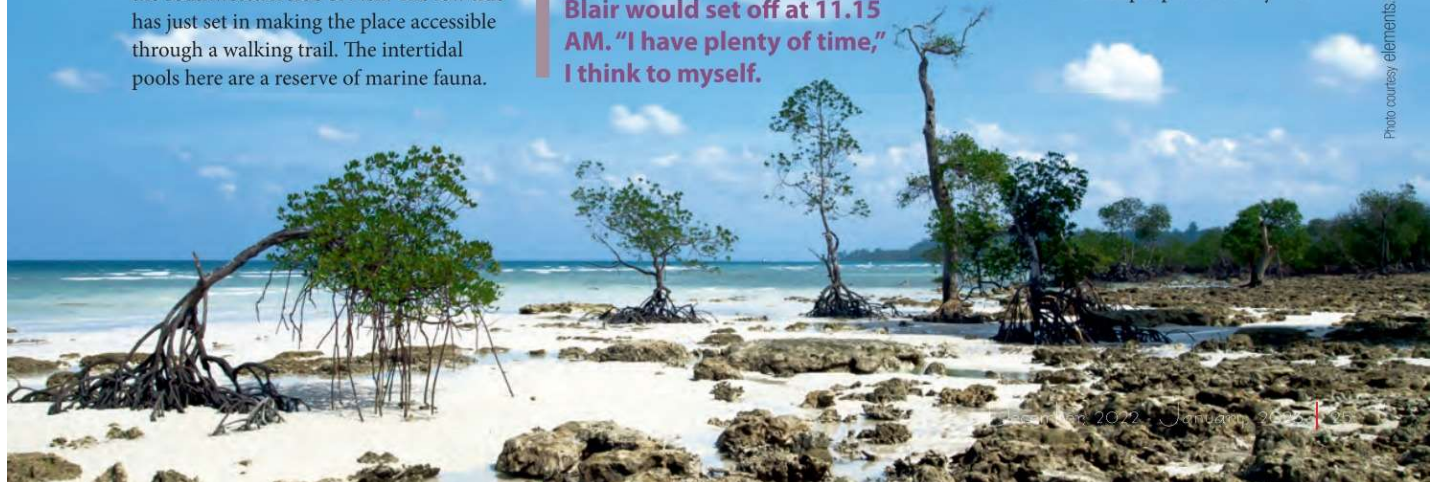


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