(Opposite) Sophia Culhane, captured on Kodak UltraMax 400 film stock
The background is an image of the coconut palm trees found in Waikiki. The coconut palm is another of the "canoe plants" brought to Hawaii in the canoes of the first Polynesian settlers. Although not indigenous to Hawaii, the coconut palm has become synonymous with the islands.

SUMI

BY LUCY SMALL

Sumi got into uni a few months ago. She risked everything to do it. Just as she risked everything to learn to surf in her home city of Cox's Bazar on the southeastern edge of Bangladesh.

I met Sumi a couple of years ago when I travelled to the area with a friend. Dragging a log through the dense city of Dhaka, watching rikshaw drivers ride through thigh-deep water as the wet season heavens broke the sweltering morning air and dumped each afternoon. We ate different flavours of dahl and curry and watched men with bright henna beards linger by their shopfronts. The city was jammed up as students protested, blocking traffic and checking paperwork, calling for transport reform after a teenager was killed in a crash involving a bus driven by someone without a licence. After a few damp days we skirted the city to the airport and flew to the coast.

Cox's Bazar might be a name you find vaguely familiar if you recall the more than a million Rohingya people who fled violence in northern Myanmar to form what is now the world's biggest refugee camp just outside of the city. The coastal city was in the process of rapid transformation as the economic crisis hit and hotels sprung up throughout the area for foreigners pouring in with their respective aid agencies. But we weren't there for the Rohingya crisis; we were there to meet a cluster of teenage girls who were surfing and skating despite the design of a society that told them that they shouldn't.

Sumi was one of these girls. She was part of a surf club set up in a garage by a guy called Rashed, who had picked up surfing from an American who travelled to the area years ago. Rashed taught local kids water safety, gave them access to surfboards and encouraged girls to be involved, despite the usual exclusion of women from sports in the area. Many of the girls had faced flak from their communities, including from some of the teenage boys who were part of the club, as well as their parents and brothers because swimming and surfing weren't generally considered appropriate activities for girls.

Sumi spoke fast. Her voice was weighted with the pace and intonation of Bangla language as she invited us to her house. As we rode with her in a rickshaw past the tiny restaurants selling a myriad of spiced dishes for under a dollar and the hospital with its half-flooded garden, the streets drew narrower and the girls lifted their scarves over their heads:

"Why do you cover your hair when we come to this area?" I asked.

"People are talking, always talking," Sumi said of the neighbours who watched as they travelled back and forth to the beach.

We rode with Johandara too. She was quieter than Sumi. She glanced at me intermittently, not as confident in her English.

Sumi invited us inside her house. It was two rooms with a television playing a slightly blurry image in the corner. Her mum sat rolling beetlenut on the floor, her mouth stained red. She looked up as we walked in, offering us some.

"She is rolling rolling, eating eating," Sumi explained. Her dad smiled at us. He looked proud.

Sumi took us to the other room to show us her books. They were stacked on the shelf above the bed. She told us she loved reading.

"Will you take a family photo?" she asked.

She appeared from the room swathed in burgundy. I watched her young niece chase a chicken in the yard. Johandara was eating lunch next door. They posed for a photo and Sumi threw a shaka as her parents looked stoically on.

It was a tiny glimpse into the home of a Bangladeshi teenager. We were told that her parents were unusually supportive of Sumi's education and sporting life. They didn't join in with the neighbours who talked. The way society is arranged in Bangladesh is pretty asymmetrical. Like anywhere, most of the power is in the hands of the men and this is made to seem natural by the rhetoric and institutions that support it. Those neighbours who tell Sumi and Johandara to lift their scarves as they pass by are the same voices that say women shouldn't go to college and that survivors of sexual violence should bear the shame of said violence. It's difficult to comment with authority on the experience of Bangladeshi women as an outsider, especially as the word "woman" is redefined as lines of class are crossed and my vision is clouded by my western context. I could tell though, as Sumi took us to a stretch of smooth road to skate without hesitation between the NGO vans that now raced along the previously quiet highway, that the pressure from Sumi's older brothers for her to stay home and to act a certain way weighed heavy on her shoulders.

We spent a week with the girls, stacking boards on a tuk-tuk and going down the coast looking for waves. We skated with them on the flat bricks on the beachfront in the afternoons and they laughed at me as I struggled to eat curry the proper Bangla way. The lukewarm muddy water of the Bay of Bengal sent us some chop and Sumi and Johandara didn't look at the thin crowd that gathered on the shoreline when we surfed.

For Sumi it was a risk to walk the long walk to the beach from her house each day to surf with the boys in the surf club and it was a risk for her to read the books she loved, to pass her final exams with top marks and now it's a risk for her to go to college. Sumi, however, is doing it anyway.