

# Myanmar/Burma: A Journal

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Even though it's quite bizarre,  
The generals called it Myanmar.  
But when your feet touch terra firma  
In your bones you know its Burma.

Burma-save

Wednesday, Jan. 20, 2010

The bus taking us from Rangoon Airport to our hotel has to pass through the center of town. It's odd what one notices on this first glimpse of a new world. Almost every downtown street corner has its share of large, largely beat up metal containers. At first I think they must be trash receptacles. Then I see a man with a funnel and a jerry can approaching one. Maybe they are miniature gas stations. Our guide sets me straight. They are gasoline-powered generators. The supply of electricity to Rangoon is unreliable. To stay open and in business, all of the shops need to be ready to supply their own, he says. That is very resourceful. It might even be emblematic. The population can't rely on the government. So it relies on itself. Burma is said to be one of the poorest nations in the world with a per capita income of less than \$290 a year. It didn't look that way on the drive in.



The roads were mostly pothole free, the traffic heavy. Stoplights blinked out the time remaining until the light changed in red and green. Everyone paid attention.

Along the roadside on the outskirts of town you could see makeshift shopping stalls. They sold everything from dry goods to bottled drinks. The wares were displayed on rickety wooden carts



that looked as if they were about to collapse. Those that had them were called names like Happiness or Fantastic. There were billboards with pictures of smiling couples, the girl in Marc Chagall attitude floating beside her handsome partner like a scarf in a high wind. The legend read “Happy World.” It’s the name of an amusement park.

Rangoon is not Sydney, Australia. But I’ve seen worse cities in Java or Tanzania. So what’s behind the poverty label? According to our guide, whom I call Q for his own protection, judging the poverty level of Burma is not so simple. Q says he will answer all our questions about the government frankly and truthfully, only not in public. He suggests the confines of our bus where he is will be

overheard only by the driver and the driver's assistant. Apparently, he trusts them. He is quite serious about this. There are government informants everywhere, he says. Were he to talk about the dictatorial character of the regime while we are standing outside in Victoria Square, there is a strong likelihood he would be overheard by a government snitch and made to pay for it.

On the bus Q says the reason why the economy is better than the numbers suggest is that his countrymen lie about their income. If four people in a household each makes \$100 a month, the reported income is \$100 not \$400. If a family has a lot of money, it surely won't bank it. The reason is drive by demonetization. The government can do it anytime without warning and BLAM, half your savings are gone. He says it is impossible to get credit in Burma because the banks are afraid to take the risk. That sounds familiar. He says that if you want a car, even an old one, you have to be prepared to pay \$20,000 up front. A cell phone costs \$1,000 not because its worth \$1,000 but because one of the members of the junta owns the phone company. \$20 goes to the phone company. \$980 goes to the phone company's owner. In other words the economy is stuck in a larcenous rut brought on by a corruption at the top that licenses corruption everywhere. So nobody really knows what the per capita income of Burma is.

Here are some signs that economically the country is better off than the figures suggest. There are virtually no beggars on the streets. This morning a couple of kids dressed as monks begged for money, but that was it. One old lady with a pan full of tiny birds wanted us to pay for the privilege of freeing them, a gesture designed to build up credit in the *Karma Merit and Trust Company*. The birds are trained to return to the little old lady after they have been freed. Freedom is just another name for wanting you. Most conspicuously, Q says no one in Burma starves. The country is able to feed itself.

Our van speeds by a military base. A lone soldier is sitting disconsolately behind its barred gates watching the traffic go by. Suddenly, on our left, the decrepit campus of Yangon University fills the van's window. Its buildings are set way back from the street. They look dusty and dirty, as if they had just come in from a long hike through the desert. This was where a government-imposed curfew was the straw that broke the camel's back and brought thousands of students out into the street. The date was July 7, 1962. I was exactly 27 years old, so wet behind the ears I needed a towel to comb my hair. The next day, July 8, the army blew up the Student Union Building. 15 students were killed. The order had been given to shoot into the crowd. A foretaste of Tiananmen Square! General Ne Win, by then head of a revolutionary government as a result of a military coup on March 2, 1962, denied he had given the order. If you are a general with a gun and are willing to use it, then dealing with student demonstrations is no more troublesome than swatting a mosquito.

Burma entered a period of isolation that was truly remarkable. In a 1996 article in the *New Yorker* magazine, Amitav Ghosh described it as slamming the shutters and turning out the lights. It was astonishing, he said, how successful the ruling junta was in its campaign of isolation. It was as if the generals wanted to bury an entire nation's head in the sand. And they were able to do it for a quarter of a century and a year. Every major industry and all 24 foreign banks were nationalized by the end of the summer of 1962. The professional bureaucracy was ousted. A wave of anti-intellectualism broke over the country like the 2005 tsunami.

In those early days visitors were allowed into the country for one day only. Since Ne Win's death, things have been easing. Now you can stay in Burma for 30 days. If you overstay your visit, you have to pay a \$5 fine for each day you transgress as if you were an overdue library book.

The ambiguity of Q's position is a reflection of the country itself. He doesn't hold back his criticism, but only when it can be safely delivered; namely, to a bunch of foreigners in the privacy of their tour bus. In Emma Larkin's book *In Search of George Orwell* she describes a visit just a few years ago in which she was constantly being stalked by government agents, watched by strangers who followed her into tea shops, asked by her innkeeper to explain why she was here and where she was going. Q's behavior suggests nothing has changed.

Today, then, we have a country in the hands of a brutal, larcenous and well-armed military junta whose behavior licenses larceny throughout the society. On the other hand Q tells me he is doing well enough in Rangoon to raise two children and support himself and his wife. He says Rangoon is all right as a place to live. This doesn't sound like Nazi Germany. It sounds like a neighborhood run by the Mafia.

If so, it is a run down neighborhood. You catch sight of colonial buildings that must have been quite grand in their time. Now their facades look like the walls in a public toilet. Windows are broken; families live in tents in the front yard.

Real poverty brings indolence. But when we drive to the bank of the Irrawaddy River, passing as we do the soiled white marble head-quarters of the old Irrawaddy Flotilla Company, Ltd, a company that in the roaring twenties had created the largest riverboat fleet the world had ever seen—it had 650 steamships plying the waters of the Irrawaddy and its delta as well as the upper reaches of the Chindwin River—some of the same bustle of activity as in the heyday of the flotilla bubbles up around us.



Here the dock workers are not your prototypical International Longshoreman Association members, big and beef, like the goons in *On the Waterfront*. Along the Irrawaddy they are stick figure men who are capable of carrying their body weight on their shoulders. Like an army of ants they march from the hold of a boat beached on the riverbank. With 100 pound bags of delta rice on



their shoulders, they tight-rope along a thin gangplank and up an embankment hoisting the bag into the back of a waiting truck that looks as if it won't make it up Fraser Street, let alone to the next town. But of course it does.

This is not the paralysis of poverty. It is the ingenuity of an energetic people

forced to do things the hard way because a gun is being held to their heads. The remarkable thing is that, hard way or not, they are doing things. The tragedy is that they have to.

Who knows how long this situation can last. Another 50 years? Possibly, but I doubt it. The world around them is moving much too quickly. Sooner or later Burma will be caught up in the slipstream. History teaches us that if you are going to oppress then you had better repress 24/7. There is no such thing as letting up a little.

One of the most remarkable safety nets of a country whose government doesn't give a damn about its people are its monasteries and nunneries. We visited one such establishment with 1200 monks and 300 nuns, all of them the children of families too poor to raise them on their own. Get thee to a nunnery, in the West an imprecation of a prince to his sister, is in Burma a call for an education.

In Mandalay in a couple of days we will see troops of monks roaming the side streets of the neighborhood around the Hotel of the Red Canal. Burmese women will be standing outside their houses with pots of cooked rice and curried vegetables. The monks will come and offer their bowls; the women will fill them up. There is a regular schedule. A monk will know to come to this house on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays and to that one on Tuesdays and Thursdays. He will know this even if he is only seven years old. Is this a racket as the woman sitting next to Nancy on the plane back home declared?

I don't think so. Families too poor to support and educate their children send them to monasteries. That doesn't come free. The food is the cost. It is an ingenious way of paying a school tax.

The National Museum in Rangoon houses a remarkable object. It

is the throne of Thibaw who became king in 1878, shortly after dysentery put an end to his far more sensible father, King Mindon. When we are in Mandalay, we will visit the very temple in which Mindon died. When Thibaw became king, his shrewish wife, Supayalat, wanted him to destroy it.

“You have to distinguish yourself,” she might have said.

Thibaw couldn't bring himself to do it. Instead he moved it outside the palace grounds where it exists to this day. He built his own in its place. Fat lot of good it did him.

Thibaw's throne is a thirty-foot high gold painted wooden platform. It can be taken apart and reassembled like an erector set. The king could hold court anywhere he chose in Upper Burma. Wherever he did, he sat on a huge cushion high up above his supplicants, his legs crossed in Buddha fashion, looking a golden apple in a golden bowl.

Relations between British dominated lower Burma and Upper Burma had gone relatively well for most of King Mindon's reign, largely because the king was sensitive to the firepower of the colonialists in the Empire to the south and across the Bay of Bengal. For most of his reign King Mindon was friendly, and cooperative.

Then the British did something that, on the face of it, was incredibly stupid. It had been the custom of the Burmese court that an audience with the king required the removal of one's shoes; an act of respect still practiced today whenever we enter a Buddhist temple in Burma. In 1875 the British government in India decreed that its representatives at the Mandalay court must no longer remove their shoes during a royal audience. King Mindon did what any self-respecting king would have done. He deprived the British of the opportunity to insult him by no longer granting them

audiences. One historian suggests that the reason for this blatant example of a government having a broom up its behind was a visit to the Prince of Wales in 1875 in India when envoys from the Burmese court were allowed to come into the presence of the Prince fully shod.

The principle “when in Rome do as the Romans do” was apparently beyond the British government; that is, if you believe the British were stupid. I am not a student of colonial history but I’ll bet dollars to doughnuts the discourtesy to King Mindon had nothing to do with shoes, but everything to do with British frustration with King Mindon’s good sense. My guess is that, like George Bush in Iraq, the British were spoiling for an opportunity to annex Upper Burma to their Lower Burma and thereby double their prospects for exploitation of Burma’s considerable natural resources.

When King Mindon died and Thibaw mounted his golden throne, things went from bad to worse and the desired outcome, at least from the British point of view, came to pass. In 1885 by order of Randolph Churchill and her Majesty’s government, Major-General Sir Harry Prendergast arrived in Rangoon with 10,000 soldiers, 7,000 camp followers, 500 mules and two mountain batteries of artillery. The Irrawaddy Flotilla Company put its vessels at the Major-General’s disposal. It was only a matter of days before King Thibaw, his forces having offered virtually no resistance, was forced to come down off his golden throne—now on exhibit in the National Museum—and go into exile with Supayalat. Of the less than 200 casualties suffered by the British forces, 150 were due to death by cholera contracted on the voyage from Rangoon to Mandalay.

If, after a day, I had to sum up Burma in a phrase, that phrase would be “mixed messages.” This struck me most vividly after a visit to the Schwedagon Pagoda. The present pagoda is over five



hundred years old. It was built atop a much older structure on a hill that overlooks Rangoon proper. Over the years the pagoda complex has grown and spread until now the central pagoda, covered in sixty tons of gold and over three hundred feet high, is surrounded by sixty-four satellite pagodas, all of them, big and small, resting on a marble platform that is kept immaculately clean by a cadre of women volunteers. Every evening the women arrange themselves into formation like a human windshield wiper and sweep the apron clean.



The legend behind Schwedagon is that two Burmese merchants, Tapussa and Ballika, met the Buddha. They fed him. They asked him for a remembrance. He gave them eight hairs from his head. Those hairs are enshrined deep within the Schwedagon Pagoda along with a treasury of jewels. There are four entrances around the pagoda platform that lead to tunnels beneath. They have never been explored.

When I first entered the pagoda complex, I glanced up at the peak 300 feet above me. Every now and then I would see a flash of light, sometimes red, sometimes green, sometimes like a white beacon. Apparently, I was seeing the sun reflected off the surface of a 76-carat diamond embedded at the very top. I wonder what the idea behind that kind of hidden opulence is; an offering to Buddha? But Buddha is not a god. And, in fact, ensconced as he is in Nirvana, a glittering diamond is the last thing he would or could be distracted by. I suppose it is an over the top attempt to gather merit on the part of the builders.

The pagoda grounds are filled with people, some alone, some with a single child, some in families. Sooner or later they find there way

to a favorite satellite pagoda. They kneel to pray. They drape a statue of the Buddha in flowers. With a cup provided for the purpose, they empty cup after cup of water from a nearby fount over his image.

I see a line of people coming toward me. It is a family processional, a celebration. One of their children is entering a monastery. Soon he will be out and about in Rangoon or Mandalay with a beggar bowl and an itinerary. A little farther on a group of monks surround a senior monk in a wheelchair. He looks around at the bustle of cameras and onlookers with the senile innocence of an infant. The monks assemble for a group picture. A row of mostly women squat down in front. Perhaps they are members of the monks' family. Nearby in a lesser pagoda is a stature of the Buddha. A circle of tiny electric lights like an artificial halo shimmer behind the Buddha's head, the blue, red and green lights constantly radiating outward and changing pattern. It is as if the Buddha were part of a giant pinball machine and some lucky player has struck a direct hit.

These electrified statues are everywhere. They lend a festive air to the pagodas as if we were in an amusement park and not a place of worship. The nervousness of the halos against the serenity of the Buddhas is disconcerting to me. The atmosphere of the pagodas changes. They are no longer places of meditation. They have become penny arcades. But only for me. The worshippers are as serious as any I've seen in Bhutan or Bali.

I find my experience of Burma so far very much colored by my second hand knowledge of the country as a military dictatorship, and a ruthless one at that. I am not sure what I expected to see; a population walking around in chains? That is certainly not what I am seeing at the Schwedagon Pagoda. And yet it was here on August 26, 1988 that Aung Sung Suu Kyi delivered a speech to thousands of her countrymen in which she announced her intention

of joining the national movement of independence. She said, “I cannot, as my father’s daughter, remain indifferent to all that is going on. This national crisis could, in fact, be called the second struggle for national independence.” The first was in 1948 when Burma was declared a free and independent country.

Perhaps the presence of all these people at Schwedagon Pagoda is their way of keeping faith with Aung Sang Suu Kyi under house arrest just a mile or so away in her two story, slightly ramshackle bungalow on University Avenue by the shores of Inya Lake. Perhaps not. That is the problem with trying to read the surface of a country in the grips of fascism. Nothing is on the surface. Everything is buried.

In an article in the New Yorker magazine in 1996 Amitav Ghosh observed that the central problem facing a dictatorship is social control. It is a central weakness of failed fascist states. Burma, he said, has mastered the art of surveillance with half the people spying on the other half. He gave an example. If you want to visit a neighbor or a relative for an overnight stay, you must seek permission from the local ward chairman.. He cited one instance in which a woman was still required to seek permission to spend time with her husband in his apartment even though they had been married for three years. That was thirteen years ago. I asked Q if he needed to seek permission to spend an evening at a friend’s house. He laughed. Apparently, the ward chairman has gone the way of the five-cent cigar.

Q says the society is much more open than it was back then. When I ask him why, he says, “It is the media.”

I suppose as a tourist I could see myself as an agent of change. After all, I am a kind of news media. I bring my own kind of news to the people I encounter. I look at them through strange objects, cameras, iphones, video cameras. I wear strange clothes. I walk in

strange shoes. I have peculiar facial expressions and demonstrate an interest in them that they cannot possibly fathom. I can think of myself as a kind of animate magazine bringing news from the outside world.

But that works both ways. The longest rebellion in the world is still going on in the northwestern regions of Burma where the Karenni are still fighting the Burmese. Of all the minorities they have perfectly good reason to fight. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century they were granted independence from Burma by the British. Why should they be annexed by Burma now? In 1996 they were hidden in the hills around Mae Hong Son, a tiny frontier town on the border with Thailand. Because of the insurgency, many Karenni women ended up in refugee camps. As it happens, Karenni women elongate their necks with brass rings. Because of that they have become a tourist attraction. Trips advertising hill-tribe trekking to see the “giraffe women” were on the books in 1996. So tourism has managed to make lemonade out of a lemon, in this case, a sight-seeing venue out of a half century of oppression.

Am I doing this now?

Thursday, January 21, 2010

Moving seventeen of us from Rangoon to Mandalay took four hours. The flight itself was barely 47 minutes. Everything went off without a hitch. Good for Gordon. Good for Q. Once in Mandalay we boarded a bus that took us to Maymyo, a town in the hills that was to the British what Martha’s Vineyard is to Wall Street. At 4,000 feet above sea level it was pleasant during the hot Rangoon summers and offered the British respite from the fatigue of shouldering the white man’s burden.

On our drive to Maymyo we stopped at Paleik, the Snake Temple, so named because three pythons, each larger than the other were wrapped around the statue of the Buddha, one intertwined in the



grillwork above his head and two on either side at his feet. A care-taker stood guard. If you gave him an offering, he would say a prayer for your health and prosperity, all the while rubbing the 1,000 kyat note over the body of the nearest snake as if he were dusting a piece of furniture.

The story behind the snake temple is that one day the snakes approached the temple. The villagers shooed them away. The next day they returned. The villagers loaded them into of a truck bed, drove several miles away and freed them. Back they

came. That's when it occurred to the villagers that perhaps these snakes were reincarnations of dead ancestors. The villagers let the snakes stay.

Obviously there is a touch of animism in all this, a mixture of Buddhism and the belief that spirits inhabit everything, snakes as well as images of the Buddha. As I watch worshippers prostrate themselves before this particular quartet, a needle gauge inside my mind bounces wildly between mystifying and mind-boggling.

George Orwell spent a year in Mandalay as a police officer and some time in Maymyo training with the Burmese army. According to Emma Larkin in her book, *Finding George Orwell in Burma*, he was seen as a bad “mixer,” someone who was both standoffish and bookish; in fact, just like the hero in *Burmese Days*. Oddly, in the book there is no mention of Maymyo. The only mention, a brief one, is in *Homage to Catalonia* where he said:

Mentally you are still in Mandalay when the train stops at Maymyo, four thousand feet above sea level. But in stepping out of the carriage you step into a different hemisphere. Suddenly you are breathing cool sweet air that might be that of England, and all round you are green grass, bracken, fir-trees, and hill-women with pink cheeks selling baskets of strawberries.

Maymyo was to be the British home away from home. You can see this when we visit the Maymyo Botanical Garden. It is both lovely and pathetic. It is beautifully laid out and is surely a pleasure to walk through on a Sunday afternoon. The pathos lies in its having been created on the advice of a Kew Gardens landscaper brought over from England for the express purpose of making Maymyo more like home. It never quite works, of course; hence, the overwhelming sense of loss that hangs over such places. It is like spending your adult life in a waxwork museum.



Since Orwell's time in Maymyo, the words have changed, but the melody remains the same. This is from Larkin's book:

Much of the opium used in heroin production is grown in Wa State, in the rugged north-eastern mountains beyond Maymyo. The business is run by the United Wa State Army (UWSA), a group described by the US State Department as the world's 'most heavily armed narco-traffickers'.

Q tells us that these Wa are not real Wa, whose language is very difficult, and who are both headhunters and cannibals. These Wa are ethnic Chinese. Generals and drug lords from Wa State are now buying up land in Maymyo just the way the British did a hundred years earlier. As the French say, *Tous ça change. Tous c'est la meme chose*. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

A brief visit to the Candacraig Hotel, once bachelor digs for Brits working for the Bombay Burmah Trading Company, the lumbering company that exploited the country's teak reserves, is followed by a drive in horse drawn hackneys into Maymyo proper.

We get off at Maymyo's local market and are transported, in five minutes, from a glimpse at the staid, stiff-upper-lip world of the colonialists into the cauldron of daily 21<sup>st</sup> century Maymyo life. Nancy is a great lover of markets. She sees them as a cornucopia of photo-ops. I, on the other hand, find marketplaces high on my list of places I don't want to be at, like villages under quarantine. There isn't anything in a market that I could possibly want to buy and I don't trust the food as far as I can projectile vomit. Everyone else seems to love it. So I walk through with a frozen smile as if I were in the early stages off rigor mortis. As I take one interminable step after the other following Nancy through her photo-op heaven, I keep saying to myself, "This, too, shall pass."

Friday, January 23, 2010



Most of this day is spent on a train that takes us from Maymyo to Naung Hkio, just far enough to cross a 109-year-old bridge, the so-called Gokteik Viaduct, just outside of town. When it was completed in 1901, it was the largest bridge of its kind in the world. Sir Arthur Rendel, an engineer with the Burma Railway Company, supervised the construction. The Pennsylvania Steel Company in the U.S. manufactured the parts. The point of the train ride is to

cross this ancient trestle, all 2,260 feet long and 1,200 feet high of it. When the train reaches the bridge, you can stand at the end of the car and with the outer doors open look down into the gorge. You could never do that on an American train. This is the train that Paul Theroux wrote about in *The Great Railway Bazaar*. Composed of fifty-year old Japanese rolling stock, its accoutrements are old, worn out and for the most part non-functional. That lends it color.

At every stop vendors walk up and down selling things to eat and drink; noodles, bananas, sweet cakes, even cups of water. Over the years the window ledges have become encrusted with the detritus of these transactions. This has its attractions for, for example, a cockroach the size of a baby's thumb. The cockroach somehow found itself on the back of Nancy's hand. She responded by sending it sailing through the air toward the couple in the seat opposite. It scuttled into the darkness beneath their seats, then suddenly thought better of it and came out into the open. Q, in a totally unBuddhist-like gesture, crushed it with his foot.

The cockroach gave way to a mouse that scampered up and down the carriage like a cartoon conductor. Someone asked if it was a trained mouse.

“Well, of course, it is,” I thought to myself. “After all, we're not on a bus.”

Saturday, January 23, 2010

The morning was spent in the drive back down out of the mountains and into Mandalay. Just a few minutes out of town we pass an ominous installation, the women's prison. A brick wall surrounds the prison. From the bus we can see over it. What we see are women dressed in long, brown skirts and white blouses. Baskets filled with gravel are balanced on their heads. Like creatures trapped in the first circle of hell they cart the gravel from a pile higher up in the work yard to an ever-growing pile close to the prison wall. Others are squatting, hammers in hand, breaking larger rocks into smaller ones.

I suspect a good many of these women are here on trumped up charges. Perhaps they were caught trying to smuggle drugs into Thailand or China. Since there is a high probability they are illiterate, it isn't likely they knew what they were carting. Seeing

the women behind prison walls has caused the villainy of Burma's government to snap into focus.

We stopped briefly at a clearing along the roadside where flowers were ostensibly being sold, but the real business was social. It was more of a meeting place than a marketplace. Even so, several of us bought flowers in anticipation of our visit to Burma's most famous shrine, Bahaman Paya. The image itself may go back as far as the

1<sup>st</sup> century AD. What gives the image its special pizzazz is that it is coated with over 6 inches of gold leaf that has been laid on for more



than a century now by visitors like us. Well, almost like us. Women aren't allowed to enter the Buddha's sanctum. The best they can do is view it from ten feet away.

Like the Schwedagon Pagoda, the Mahamuni Paya where the Buddha sits is more than a place of worship. It is a meeting place and beyond that a marketplace. The approach to the image is a shop-lined corridor selling a wide variety of Buddha images. The place is bustling and the crowd is tuned into the bustle.

Here is another instance where what I've been led to expect about Burma doesn't match what I've been able to see. My expectations were precisely like those of a young man standing beside me the

day before yesterday. We were on the bus taking us from the Rangoon terminal to the airplane. Under my arm I had a book, Thant Myint-U's *River of Lost Footsteps*.

When the young man saw it, he said, "I'm reading that book, too. But I was afraid to bring it with me."

Yesterday, on the train ride from Maymyo, we were advised to bring a book for the uneventful parts of the trip. Nancy reached for Aung San Suu Kyi's *Letters*, but thought better of it.

This is really odd, this business of being careful what books you carry in public or what questions you might ask outside the privacy of the tour bus. Even so everyone honors this unspoken rule of etiquette, in spite of the fact that on the surface Rangoon looks like Saigon without motorbikes. So far absolutely no one has even asked about the books.

When Burma became independent after World War II—the year was 1948—a parliamentary democracy was introduced headed by a rather gentle, strongly Buddhist and politically unsavvy U Nu. Civilian government lasted until 1962 when a military coup cast the country into a 26-year long black hole thanks to the dictator Ne Win. The subsequent coup in 1988 introduced another military dictatorship, a thirty three-person junta with an inner circle of generals led by Than Shwe. Now elections have been called for this year. Q believes there is no question but that they will be held. He also thinks that some of the major stumbling blocks of Burma's past, namely, its large and largely unruly ethnic minorities are not the problem they once were. He thinks there will be even more opening up of the country.

What all this makes me think of is the fundamental instability of democracies in general. I don't think it is remarkable that most countries in the world are not democratic. Rather, I think it is

remarkable that so many are.

After World War I there were 22 new democracies in Western Europe according to one count. By the beginning of World War II there were something like three. My guess is that a big part of the reason why democracy failed to take hold in so many places, for example, Burma, is that democratically minded leaders are sitting ducks for duck hunters. U Nu is a perfect example. So, apparently, is Barack Obama.

En route to U-bein Teakwood Bridge in Amarapura, a town 7 miles south of Mandalay, we stop at a block long city street devoted to carving statues of the Buddha. The rock for the statues is quarried nearby. Buddha carving seems to be a young man's business. I'm not surprised. The carvers are covered in dust from grinders that scrape away at the statues, swirling tiny white clouds of stone into their eyes and nostrils. One young man looks prematurely gray, his hair frosted by the dust, his face white as a geisha's.

I watch another young man hacking away at the neck of a statue with hammer and chisel and not a goggle in sight. Nary a facemask in the lot. This is dangerous work. It will destroy your lungs, blind you, lose you a digit. I wonder why they aren't more concerned. Certainly, we in America have become socialized hypochondriacs. We are daily bombarded with messages warning us against germ infested kitchens, disease harboring toilet bowls, embarrassing rings around the collar. But these stone carvers are courting disaster.



One of the most photographed bridges in the world is the 4,000 foot long U-bein Teakwood Bridge that spans Taungthaman Lake. It rests on 1,060 teak poles just as it has done for the past two hundred years. At sundown it turns into an Italian passagiata with villagers returning home on the other side of the lake. The idea is to get up on the bridge and watch the sun go down.

I did. I was rewarded by seeing an optimistic sign of a Burmese awakening, a transvestite walking hand in hand with his/her partner toward Taungthaman village.

Sunday, January 24, 2010

At 6 am Nancy and I are up and out of the Hotel by the Red Canal in search of the monks seeking alms. In Luang Prabhang several years ago we watched as a long thin line of monks made their way up the main street passing women who filled their bowls as they went. It was all very orderly. At first the monks appeared as a single saffron dot way in the distance. As the dot got bigger it turned into a human being. Monks fed themselves into this single-file parade so that it got longer as it got closer. Everything was conducted in silence.

Here in Burma the experience was quite different. Monks appear to have been bussed into the neighborhood. They spread out in all

directions with specific targets in mind. Outside a pharmacy four monks are lined up waiting for food. A young woman, perhaps thirty years old, is doling it out. She is very slightly built with a thin face and a pleasant smile. She is wearing a gray coat that reaches almost to the ground. She looks a bit like a matron in a Catholic hospital.

I get in line behind the monks and wait my turn. The monks leave and I am standing there looking down into the two large pots that she has filled with curried vegetables and rice. They are almost empty. We begin to talk.



“Everything is done in silence,” I say to her. She doesn’t understand.

“You’re giving the monks food,” I explain. “No one says thank you.”

To my eyes it was even worse than that. Not even eye contact. Just monks

making a beeline for the pot and this young woman filling their bowls.

“No problem,” she responds. “We could speak. We just don’t.”

“But the monks don’t even say thank you,” I repeat.

“No need to say thank you,” she replies.

“Why not?” I ask.

“This is my job,” she explains.

I learn that her father runs the pharmacy and that she is living here with her son while her husband is in Dubai working as a sous-chef. She says it is their way of making a better life for themselves. This, along with the transvestite, suggests a society a lot looser than its advance publicity suggests. Apparently, a number of men are able to leave the country to find work either in China or the Middle East. They return once a year to be with their families, but to return more often would defeat the purpose.

Nancy and I have been saying hello to everyone we see outside their houses as the street wakes up. Grim-faced men working at opening a shop suddenly break into broad grins when we wave. On the way back they wave first as if we were their neighbors.

I have felt threatened by people I’ve met in other places. I’m thinking specifically of France and New Jersey. But I do not feel threatened by the Burmese. Even the street vendors, the aggressive ones, are not threatening. At one of the Paya’s earlier in the day, one particular vendor just wouldn’t take no for an answer. But in the end she didn’t bare her teeth at me as some have done. She said, “I’m not happy.” Who can blame her?

At the Mandalay Moat, looking up at Mandalay Hill, Nancy has some bad luck. She drops her favorite camera lens. It takes a bad bounce and ends up at the bottom of the moat. Gordon and Q ask the local militia if they can retrieve it. They give it a try. Two hours later they report that they thought they had found it. It was a false alarm, a can of condensed milk that felt like a lens in all that bottom muck. I wonder how a can of condensed milk got there. Did it take a bad bounce? Perhaps the bridge ought to be renamed the Bridge of Bad Bounces.

Kothodaw Pagoda is famous for housing the 15 books of the Tripitaka inscribed on 729 tablets, each tablet in its own stupa. The stupas are white-washed and are neatly arrayed outside the main shrine like so many tombstones in a military cemetery.



Then we went up to Mandalay Hill. There's a 360<sup>0</sup> view of the city, including two universities and a major prison that the Burmese call "The University of Life." Q tells me that it houses a number of political prisoners. Unlike the women at the prison outside of Maymyo, here political prisoners are not subjected to hard labor. Rather they are put into isolation. Q says the idea is that the best way to hurt them is to diminish their mental capacities and the best way to do that is isolation. That's probably right. I read recently that isolation is the worst possible torture for human beings.

George Gordon Lord Byron once said, "I can't remember the night. I can't remember her name. I can't even remember the color of her hair. But I can remember the wine. It was Chambertain."

I feel a bit like Byron. I can't remember the Buddha. I can't even remember the temple. But I remember the color. It was gold.

I am suffering temple overload. I think it may be that after Schwedagon Pagoda, everything else is vanilla. I'm looking forward to our stint on the RV Paukan.

The drive to the Irrawaddy River takes us through Ava, a 14<sup>th</sup> century city and for four hundred years the capital of Burma. Now it is a pile (or rather several) piles of crumbling brick towers sticking up out of a tangled mass of unkempt brush. Even here in this ancient corridor of Burma's history, there are more pagodas to visit. In Bali there are 35,000 pagodas. In Burma I wouldn't be surprised if there were twice that number.

If I didn't know better, I would say that Burma is a country that doesn't value its past judging from the current state of the ruins at of the Ava court. Think what this site would look like if this were Egypt, for example.

Ava was a great civilization in Burmese history. It cut a huge swath out of Burmese past time. Surely these ruins should have been restored by now, the tangled brush that clogs them cut back, the paths manicured, the snakes driven out of the towers. There should be signage telling us who did what where and when. Instead, it is an afterthought of an historical site swallowed up by nearby villages just off a dusty road with a handful of vendors. Perhaps the Burmese don't want to remember Ava. Its end marked the end of Burmese independence in 1823.

The Irrawaddy River is just up the road. We transfer from a smaller boat to the RV Paukan for a couple of days on one of the world's great rivers, a thousand miles from its source at the so-called "Confluence" twenty miles north of Myitkyina in northern Burma to its delta at the Bay of Bengal where it splinters into a labyrinth of waters adding another thousand miles to its length.

Most blessings are also banes. The Irrawaddy is no exception. It turned the Irrawaddy Valley into a place where empires could rise. It was the way in for the colonialists to rob those empires blind. In 1823 Sir Archibald Campbell conquered the kingdom of Ava. The treaty signed at Yandabo essentially enabled the British to empty the king's coffers of two billion in today's dollars. I suppose it was one robber stealing from another. In any case just forty years later the British government decided to privatize the tiny military fleet on the Irrawaddy. The Irrawaddy Flotilla was born. Its peak years from 1920 to 1925 coincided with the years George Orwell spent as a policeman in Burma. When Orwell was there, the fleet numbered 622 units, 267 powered vessels and 355 flats and barges, floating rafts tied to both sides of the powered vessels to increase the cargo capacity.

In the twenty's the Flotilla was carrying nine million passengers and 11/4 millions tons of cargo. Even though the Flotilla would reach its peak of 650 vessels in 1941, it never matched the volume of the twenties when it had become "the greatest inland water transport enterprise the world has ever known," according to McCrae and Prenlise in their history *Irrawaddy Flotilla* (1978). They go on to say, "No doubt there was, and still is, a much greater volume of traffic moving on the Mississippi, and possibly elsewhere, but we know of no other single commercial operator or fleet of this size."



The RV Paukan is modeled after the steamers designed by the Scots engineers and built in the shipyards of Glasgow. The trick is to produce as big a boat as possible with as shallow a draft as possible. The Paukan draws 1.5 meters, or a tad under five feet of water. There are boats as big on the Irrawaddy now with even shallower drafts.

The height of the river shifts dramatically with the seasons. Now, in winter, the water is low. On our own two-day voyage we have been stuck twice. The smaller boats that brought passengers to the Paukan yesterday were stuck. Two nights ago the musicians and dancers were late because their even smaller boat was stuck.

The ships of the Flotilla were used in the British invasion of Upper Burma. King Thibaw and Queen Supayalat were escorted into their exile in India on the Flotilla steamer *Thooreah*. They arrived in Rangoon on December 10, 1885. Almost immediately after their departure Prendergast commandeered six other Flotilla steamers and sailed north to secure the upper borders against the Chinese.

Less than sixty years later engineers aboard the Flotilla were drilling holes in the steel bottoms and scuttling the ships to slow

the Japanese advance into Burma.

John Morton was the eleventh and last manager of the Flotilla Company. Here is an entry from his diary of April 28, 1942:

Mandalay was evacuated yesterday, the I.F. being the last to go. The Army is retreating up the Chindwin. Our men won't be many days at Monywa and I expect them to retire up river and so through to Manipur....

We are being chased out even quicker now than was expected and I have orders for more sinkings here at Kyaukmyaung. There are over two hundred of our fleet sunk at Mandalay. Imagine how I felt drilling holes in their bottoms with a Bren gun.

Navigational engineering history was made on this river in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. We are sailing in an echo of that time, a more luxurious echo, but an echo nonetheless.

Monday, January 25, 2010

The shallow draft of the Paukan makes it possible for the ship to



dock anywhere along the river simply by pulling over, ramming a pole into the ground and a mooring line around the pole. We did this when we sailed to Sagaing, a Buddhist community with 500 stupas, as many monasteries and nunneries and a population of 6000 monks. We visited Kaunghmudaw with its 150 foot high stupa looking like a size 40D cup, at least according to a local joke. It was, in fact, modeled after the Mahaceti in Sri Lanka. We drove to the top of Sagaing Hill to see Umin Thounzeh with its 45 statues of Buddha, each one apparently alike but with subtle differences in each face thanks to the artisans who made them.

The Paukan performed the same shallow water trick this evening when we docked at Naga Pauk, a farming village just 80 miles upriver from Mandalay. The name means “Dragon Hole.” The legend is that a dragon has the magical ability to disappear into the tiniest of holes for protection or ambush. Our visit was unexpected. The plan to visit the pottery village at Yandabbo had to be scuttled because of too many groundings earlier in the day.



The ship comes to within two feet of the riverbank. We walk off and up into the village. From the river you would never know that a village of over a thousand people is just beyond the trees. Even now, when the villagers, mostly children, have come to watch the big boat dock, their numbers are in the twenties, not the hundreds.

There is a monastery here. It has a generator and the village is able to buy electricity from 7pm to 10pm at night. That is when the villagers watch television or listen to Burmese rock. Otherwise, they are planting, mostly corn and peanuts. Walking along the main path from the river, we pass thatched houses on stilts with cattle moored outside. Q tells us that at market the cattle sell for \$300 apiece. If you see three in a yard, you're looking at a wealthy family. Many of the yards are three cattle yards.

Once when I was in Africa, I met with a group of Maasai warriors. I asked them if there was anything they would like to ask me. They thought long and hard. Finally, one warrior asked, "How do you make corrugated iron?" Clearly, this warrior hadn't the slightest interest in me, where I came from, what I did.

Last night I asked Q to ask the villagers if there was anything they wanted to know about us. Same reaction. Not a single question. When you think about it, why should they have any interest in us? That would imply a sense of a world larger than a village. For these people the world stops at the banks of the Irrawaddy. Unlike Kipling's poem, here no roads lead to Mandalay. The only way there is the river. But if you were to ask the villagers if they would like to go to there, Q says they will surely shake their heads no.

Here they grow their own food. They fish the river. As far as they are concerned Than Schwe might as well be Mickey Mouse.

It is sobering to think that such tiny little worlds still exist. As the boat drew closer to the embankment, I stood watching the children

gather on the river's edge. I wondered if they would ever know about Michaelangelo. Now I wonder if they need to. Now that I think of it tourism is a kind of colonialism, a benign echo of it, but a colonial impulse nevertheless, bigger worlds coming to acquire smaller ones. It all depends on the size of your horizon.

Tuesday, January 26, 2010

We spent most of the morning reaching Pagan. We managed it around 10am and drove immediately to see three pagodas in as many minutes, well, almost.



The first was the Shwezigon paya with its gilded tower and four 13ft high bronze Buddhas cast in 1102. The paya is linked to the 37 nat, the Burmese equivalent of the Roman *Lares*, or household gods. A case displays low-rent models of the 37 nat. According to the *Lonely Planet* the originals of the 12<sup>th</sup> century nat figures were stolen by a collector and are now thought to be hidden somewhere in Italy.

Q has taken us to two more temples, one with steps up so that we can have a birds-eye view of the old Pagan, the Tayokpyae

Temple, and one, Thounezu Paya with its unique three lateral chambers, a Buddha in each one. The artisans who worked on the temple were imported from southern India. The walls of the first two chambers are completely covered with fresco buono depictions of Buddha and scenes from his life. The third is untouched. The reason is the invasion of Pagan by the Mongol hordes in the 13<sup>th</sup> century by Kublai Khan, grandson of Genghis Khan. The workers were forced to flee before the temple could be finished. As it happens, the first mention of Burma in western writings is by Marco Polo. He describes accounts of this Mongol invasion of Burma.

It is amazing how much of history begins with a warlord subduing a group of warring tribes and then launching a campaign against the rest of the world. That's how Genghis Khan did it in Mongolia and China. That's how Skanderbeg did it in Albania. That's how Saddam Hussein did it in Iraq. That's how the present day junta is doing it in Burma. That's how Nanzhao did it, the precursor of the Pagan Empire. Here is what Thant Myint-U says about the founding of the Pagan Empire:

Somehow, two hundred years of the Nanzhao Empire had washed up on the banks of the Irrawaddy and would find a new life, fused with an existing and ancient culture, to produce one of the most impressive little kingdoms of the medieval world. From this fusion would result the Burmese people and the foundations of modern Burmese Culture.

Q expressed concern in the bus coming into Pagan this morning that we might be suffering from temple overload. It is a real concern. There are so many temples and with so little time in each they begin to merge one into the other. I've decided not to fight it. I'll let them fight it out for a place in my memory on their own.

Why should there be so many temples? I suspect it is for the same

reason that in a country like America there are so many banks. The temples, shrines and stupas are banks for people with no money. The currency they deposit is psychic rather than hard. People come to these holy places to build a psychic nest egg that will buy their way out of this vale of tears forever.

Religion is basically for the poor. If you find yourself with nothing and have to work your fingers to the bone, don't worry. There's a different set of books being kept. Most of the world's great religions focus the devotee's attention not on where one is in this world but on where one will end up in the next world.

But even so, that doesn't explain why there should be so many temples and pagodas? This, I suspect, is a form of wealth distribution on the part of the rich to keep the poor at bay. Someone has to build all those stupas and someone has to pay for it. The wealthy gain credit for building the stupas. The workers get paid and then, like Henry Ford's workers, they have access to the product for the psychic income that will erase the disparity between themselves and their employers. It is a pretty neat system. It obviously works, has done for over twenty-five hundred years.

Buddhism is absolutely everywhere in Burma. Hardly an acre goes by without another stupa popping up like a rabbit in a garden patch. So what's missing? The military. Where are they? I heard them singing cadences behind the Defense Institute walls in Maymyo one morning. But aside from the occasional soldier or two, the force that rules this country with a bloody iron hand is virtually invisible.

In fact, it is ironic that the one place where the military is in plain sight is in a Buddhist temple. At Mandalay Hill we see pictures of Than Schwe and his entourage praying, genuflecting, gesturing, conferring before one Buddhist image or another. The general and his staff are photographed smartly uniformed in blouse and pants.

The creases are sharp enough to cut butter. And they are barefoot. They all look very wise, very much a part of the moment. But not a single one cracks a smile.

Burma is surely a country waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Wednesday, January 27, 2010

The Kingdom of Pagan flourished in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. Its most famous king, Aniruddha, extended his empire from Pagan to within hailing distance of Phuket Island off the coast of southern Thailand. The Burmese language took root here and spread throughout the country. During the 12<sup>th</sup> century pagodas, stupas and temples sprang up like dragon-teeth soldiers. Here was the beginning, I suspect, of Burma's version of the military industrial complex only it was pagodas and not payloads that the complex churned out.



You get some sense of the success of this model from a hot air balloon 1,200 feet above the Pagan plain. Eleven of us took that

ride this morning. We could see from one end to the other of the 26 square acres that made up the ancient capital city of Pagan though, of course, it must have extended much farther than that. The estimate is that within these 26 square acres are the remnants of 4,000 religious structures. That's a lot of psychic income.

It is amazing how clarifying and falsifying it is to look at a country from 1,200 feet. All of the litter disappears. The ragged edges suddenly seem straight. The scabrous masonry on pagodas fades into a satisfying uniformity. Everything looks so neat, so clean, so well defined. It would be wonderful if we could all live at 1,200 feet, not have to keep our feet on the ground.

Up here one can easily see the most central pagoda, the one the *Lonely Planet* calls the *Sunset Pagoda*, the most beautiful, *Ananda*, the highest, *Thabinyu* and *Thamayangi*, the most massive. This is the one that looks like a Mayan temple. It is the pilot's favorite. Our pilot's name is Crispin Williams. His wife, Sara, will come along to balance the basket.

Before he was hot air ballooning, Crispin was a navigator in the British air force. When they retired, he and his wife flew small aircraft as well, planes like the Auster J/1N. Now he has a house in Bristol, England with an address that comes straight out of a Minette Walters detective novel, Kingfisher House, Yew Tree Close. He comes to Burma to fly people like us for three months out of the year. The rest of the time he and Sara follow hot air balloon competitions around the world.

*Balloons Over Bagan* is run by a Burmese lady, its her money, and her Australian husband. He's the company guru. They are apparently doing extremely well. They are thinking of expanding into Italy. That would include shipping over two of the trucks they use to bring paying customers to and from the soccer field/cum aero port.

The trucks are especially interesting. The truck we came out in was, like my wife, Nancy, born in 1944. It is hard to see which of the two is in better condition. In the case of the truck a Burmese engineer, *TintTint*, is responsible for its good health. He is the fellow who helped us into the truck this morning. General Motors, built the truck. The Perkins Diesel engine was manufactured in Canada. It was one of many such trucks used in the military push that drove the Japanese back out across Burma in 1944. That they still run some 66 years later is due to *TintTint*, the company's engineer. He is a very skillful fellow. He rebuilt the cab of the Japanese trucks used to cart the balloon hardware last year. Now it resembles the 1944 vintage troop movers. He did it just to spruce up the company look.

Crispin, like Q, believes Burma will continue to open up. I ask him why he is so sure. He says wealthy Burmese businessmen and women are putting money into tourism in a big way. We've seen that in the hotel we are staying at today, the *Thiripyitsaya*. We will see it again tomorrow in the ultra-luxurious Popa Mountain Resort Hotel. We will see it in spades at the Inle Princess Resort. We rode in it 1,200 feet above the Pagan plain in a hot air balloon. These wealthy businessmen are friends of the generals. They put pressure on the junta to open the country so that they can become even wealthier. The junta is more than willing to cooperate because they, no doubt, are stockholders in the enterprises run by the wealthy businessmen.

What about the government? The democrats? The political parties? The elections? Crispin thinks a deal with the junta will be struck before the elections so that everyone's ducks will be in a row. He says that a mid-level general has already announced that Aung Sung Suu Kyi will be released in October. Her second in command will be released in April. One point that suggests Crispin is right is that Aung Sung Suu Kyi has already begun to

make statements in her weekly meetings from the porch of her house in Rangoon that suggests compromise. Another more telling is that two weeks after we returned the junta released Tin Oo, Aung San Suu Kyi's second in command, a month and a half ahead of Crispin's schedule.

In David I. Steinberg's 2010 book *Burma/Myanmar. What Everyone Needs to Know*, Steinberg says:

A crisis of the minorities, comprising one-third of the population. This is likely to be the most difficult and enduring issue facing any Burmese administration: how in some manner and degree acceptable to the diverse Burmese peoples are power and resources to be shared equitably and fairly in Burmese terms among the various ethnic groups among that state?

Q thinks the minority question is much less severe than it used to be. Crispin says that if the junta were to disappear Burma would be plunged into a brutal civil war.

So the picture that emerges is this. The wealthy are investing in, among other things, tourism. The junta is cooperating by opening up the country while keeping the minorities from one another's throats. What is missing from the picture? The people.

What will they do? I imagine many, like those in *Naga Pauk*, will continue to live their lives without let or hindrance from the government or anyone else. They have no sense of the great wheel of commerce that is spinning above their heads nor do they care. They are doing just fine, thank you. The rub will come from the big cities, Rangoon and Mandalay. Here is where the students and the monks live. They won't take a little bit of an opening for an answer. The point is that if you're going to repress you had better be prepared to repress 100%. The junta might want to, but the

businessmen won't let them and that is the chink in the armor of a military dictatorship.

We'll see.

This morning we visited the market at Naung U. The chieftain of this village claims direct descent from Manuha, the king of Thaton who was conquered by Anuriddha and brought back to Pagan. Q is not impressed. He says chieftains everyone claim descent from some one or other.

The market in Naung U does not strike me as friendly as the one in Maymyo. Here the people aren't smiling a lot as we weave our way through the aisles. I get the feeling they'll be glad when we clear out so they can get on with business. Maybe that's my paranoia and my built-in antipathy to markets speaking. But if it is not, I can easily imagine that the market in Naung U has seen one too many tourists unlike its Maymyo counterpart. Maymyo is a far sleepier town than Pagan.

We strolled through another village, Damaga Saga Village. Just inside the entrance on the porch of the first house is a toothless woman turning a spinning wheel. She has a constant grin on her face and her lips flap as she murmurs "mingalaba" over and over again. Another woman, also ancient, comes near. She tells Q that the woman at the spinning wheel is 87 years old. She says she is 85. The gestures of the woman at the wheel are slow and graceful. When the thread breaks, she finds the two ends, binds them together as if it were part of the dance. She never stops her "mingalaba" mantra. I suppose she has been doing this for sixty or seventy years, a lifetime turning a spinning wheel. When Nancy stops to take her picture, she responds with a laugh and then a warm smile that would do anyone's grandmother proud. I wish I had some sense of the milestones of this woman's life. A husband, perhaps. Children. Seeing them married and prospering. I simply

can't relate to life in this village, miles away from what I call civilization. This smiling grandmother and her contemporary friends are mysteries to me.



We climb to the top of *Lakwa Theik Pan* temple to watch the sunset. It is just a short way away from *The Sunset Pagoda*. Thanks to the *Lonely Planet* we can see people crawling all over it like ants on a drop of honey. It is good to be here. Well, almost. The vendors are ubiquitous. Many are little kids; most of them, adorable. Kenneth tells one child who is hawking postcards—he can't be more than seven—to be quiet and allow us to watch the sun set in peace. This little boy moves to the edge of the pagoda and sits down. He looks back at me and begins to make sly gestures. He puts his finger over his mouth as if to tell me to be sure to be quiet. Then, he steals a glance in Q's direction. Q is looking away. He holds up one finger, points to me, to his postcards, crosses his lips with his fingers and pretends to be watching the sunset.

On the way down another little girl, a few years older and with the voice of a shrew, starts calling me by name as I walk back toward the bus. How did she know my name? No vendor in any of the forty odd countries I've been in ever called me by name.

“Jay,” she yells. “I saw you in the marketplace yesterday. You said you would ask your wife. You went away and never came

back. Jay, Jay.”

Oh, my god. She’s keeping tabs on me. I feel as if I have a credit rating among the vendors and I’ve only been here two days.

This little girl is very smart. Why is she out here hawking tamarind candy? She ought to be in school learning her to make this country better. But she won’t be. What a tragedy that is.

It was Gray in his poem *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* who spoke of the graves hiding “a mute and inglorious Milton.” He meant the geniuses unable to exercise their genius because of the exigencies of just keeping body and soul together.

I can’t imagine that to be truer than among these children vendors.

Thursday, January 28, 2010

Ananda Temple with its incredible standing Buddha, the one with a smile on its face as you first enter the temple but changes its expression to one of great seriousness the closer you get suggests another function of the temples that I left out of the equation. The temples provide a source of beauty for people whose lives consist of

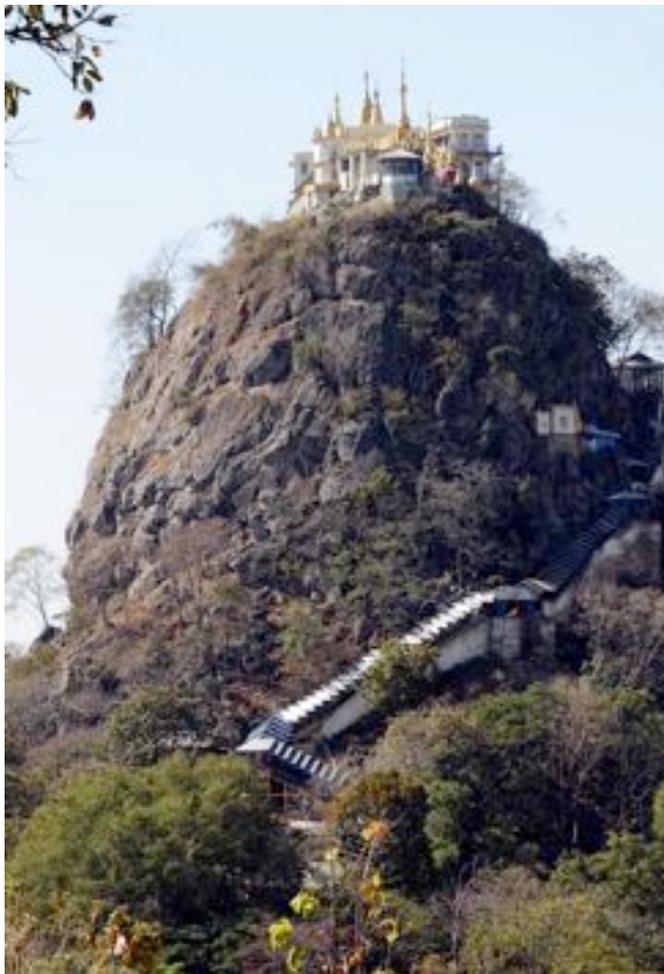


backbreaking labor and little else. But it isn't beauty alone that the temples provide.

In Rome just opposite the Circus Maximus is the Jewish cemetery. The fascists moved it to the outskirts during the World War II. When the war was over, the Roman city council offered to bring the graves back. The Jews proposed, instead, that the old cemetery become a rose garden. Every year people from all over the world enter their hybrids in competition for the year's best rose. You can walk through the garden seeing the work of gardeners from Scandinavia, Europe, Japan. If you were to use Google Earth to locate the cemetery, looking at it from a height of 1,000 feet you will see that the paths of the garden are laid out in the shape of a Menorah. Here, again, things become clear at a distance.

In the center of the rose garden there is a sign that notes that by far the majority of roses are odorless. The writer says that such roses are "bella senza anima." Beauty without soul. I think of this because I think it is what makes these temples so important to the Burmese. They are like sweet-smelling roses, beauty with a soul. I have to keep that in mind as I wander from one look alike temple to another. For me the temples are like odorless roses. For the Burmese they are "bella con anima."

This morning we climb to the Popa Hill Top Temple, 700 steps above the dusty city street of the town. Monkeys inhabit the mountain and scavenge those who have come to pray. As I go up, I see one man, part of a group of four, carrying a thin blue plastic bag of candies. Suddenly, a monkey rushes out of nowhere, tears the bag open and the candies spill out along the steps. Now a rush of monkeys comes into to fight over the candies. I look at the man. I expected him to be angry. Instead, he is laughing hard, sharing the joke with his companions. Obviously, this guy knows something I don't.



It is a hard climb to the top, but not that hard. Once there the view is not spectacular. The 360<sup>0</sup> panorama is of a hot and dusty Popa Mountainside, pock-marked with pagodas here and there.

The pagoda is crowded at the top. A large number of people have come here. I suspect it is a special place just because it takes an effort to reach. Were it 700 feet lower down, it would have a lot of competition. This one strikes me as a country

fair pagoda, low on artistic sophistication, high on quaintness, like, for example, the monkeys that plague the visitors as they climb up and down.

The best thing about the Hill Top Pagoda, in fact, is the view one gets of it from Sunset Garden where we stop for lunch. The pagoda is only 2,418 feet high. The Popa Mountains tower another 1,600 feet over it. The restaurant is somewhere around 3,000 feet. On the terrace you can look out across a valley to the isolated hill that rises up from the valley floor like a shark's fin out of the ocean. The pagoda is laid out across the flat of that fin. From the terrace it looks romantic, exotic, mystical. Up close it is crowded, flaking, stained with monkey droppings; another example of the how distance erases the shoddy details.

This evening we are treated to a puppet show at the Nandar Restaurant. I like puppets. I think Jim Henson was incredibly creative. The Broadway show, Avenue Q, was based on puppets. I thought it was terrific. So why do I find these puppets so ho-hum? The answer is that I don't know the back story. You know that feeling when you tell a story and it goes flat and you say, "Well, you had to be there to appreciate it."

That's how I feel about Burma's puppets. I had to be there. And I never was.

Friday, January 29, 2010

We leave Pagan at 7:15am and arrive in Heho an hour and a half later, luggage and all. Gordon and Q have reduced moving people and their baggage to a fine art.

We bus to a jetty and are settled in long Indian cigar shaped boats with automobile engines retrofitted at the back. There are four boats, three with four passengers, one with five. We are assigned to the boats by numbers and will stay with our boats for the next two days.

The boats are going to take us all over Inle Lake for the next two days. Well, not all over. The lake is 13.8 miles long and eight miles wide at its widest part. About two thirds of the way down the lake becomes what is called black country, country where the military are fighting insurgents who want no part of Burma. We will stay clear of that, of course. Even so, it is a bit off-putting to think that while we are tooling around the monasteries, lake villages and pagodas of Inle Lake, we are within a half-day's journey of warfare. Maybe that is the lot of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

As we push off from the jetty and settle into this new form of

transportation, what life on the lake means begins to take shape. We glide along a narrow inlet, land on one side with warehouses sitting on solid ground. On the other side, houses high on teak stilts. They are rickety affairs. There are no straight lines anywhere. Every structure seems to sag to the left as if it were heading into a high wind.



The channel quickly opens out into the lake itself. Now the shorelines recede into the distance and my focus shifts to the small fishing boats that bob on the lake like pieces of driftwood. They are barely twelve feet long and carry no more than two people, one usually a child. But more often a lone fisherman squats on the flat portion of the stern, a net in one hand and pole in the other. He probes the lake bottom as if he were testing its depth. Every now and then we come upon a boat with a cone shaped sieve made of wicker that looks like a gigantic dunce cap. It is a fish basket. Sometimes it sits on its side in the boat, sometimes upright. I've never seen a single fish in one.

These glimpses of lone fisherman squatting at the very end of their boats are indelible. The early morning light has turned them into lake silhouettes. They are Inle Lake's icons.

Our first stop is the Ngaphechaung Mon-astery, the so-called Jumping Cat Monastery, because the monks—there are only five in residence now—have taught stray cats to jump through hoops for bits of dried shrimp. It is an oddity. They must have done it for fun to relieve the boredom of living in a monastery in the middle of a lake with four other monks.



In the background while the cats are performing, several Buddhas sit on a stage behind. They are in various styles, the Shan, the Pagan, the Tibetan and the Ava. One is unique, a Buddha with the face of a young man. Q calls it a masterpiece. I agree.



The next temple we visit is the Phaung Daw Oo Paya, famous for the yearly festival when four of its five Buddhas are placed on a gold-leafed covered boat and paraded around the lake. Otherwise the Buddhas sit in the center of the temple looking like frozen moments in the life of a lava lamp. This is because they have been plastered with gold leaf for so long they have lost their outward shape. They are obese, literally gorged on gold.



At the foot of the altar is a sign that says *Ladies Are Prohibited*. I tell Nancy that in solidarity with the sisterhood I will not approach the Buddhas.

“You have my permission,” she says.

But I don’t. These Neanderthal displays of misogyny make me very uncomfortable. So I loiter at the foot of the altar along with the other women. I made my statement. No one was listening.

I am glad to be leaving this temple, not because of its woman-hating strictures, but because it marks the last time I will have to take off my shoes and socks before entering. What a pain that has been. I am astonished that there isn’t an epidemic of athlete’s foot in Burma. In that regard the irony of our next stop isn’t lost on me. We have lunch at Mr. Toe’s restaurant.

En route to our hotel we pass through Yamma Village, one of the many floating villages that are strewn about Inle Lake. These villages remind me of a poor man’s Venice. They are bonafide towns with channels instead of streets. All the buildings rest on posts driven into the lake bottom. There seem to be neighborhoods, tiny side channels that lead off toward this house

or that. Larger channels go through the downtown section where shop fronts, warehouses and temples, all atop their own set of posts, sit high off the water. All traffic is by boat, even to one's next-door neighbor. What a nuisance I think that must be. But I supposed if you're used to it. It must surely slow down the pace of life. You might expect to hear a lot of shouting between houses, but no, we might as well be in a hospital zone.

I'm told that this lake culture goes back 400 years and maybe farther, though pre-17<sup>th</sup> century evidence peters out. It is an interesting way of life. For example, it has produced craftsmen whose job it is to build floating gardens. They don't farm these gardens; they make them to order for farmers who do the actual growing. Apparently, you can order a tomato garden or a flower garden or a vegetable garden and someone will tow it up to your house and rent it to you for as long as three years.

Our hotel for the next two nights is the Inle Princess Resort. It is very posh. That is not a surprise. Typically, tours like this build to a crescendo of living arrangements, saving the best for last the way the final measures of a symphony are the loudest. That is fine with me. At this end of the trip I am beginning to fray and can use all the pampering I can get.

Saturday, January 30, 2010

This is our final day before the long trek home. For Nancy and me that will mean 24 hours of constant flying. I don't want to think about it. Instead I focus on Indein, the site of hundreds of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Shan pagodas. Now in various stages of decrepitude, the crumbling complex is threatened with restoration. I say threatened because the ruins fall under the aegis of the local village and their attempts at restoration are horrendous. They are painted in garish orangy bronze tones that look like clown make-up. Here and there, as we walk through them, we see workman

mixing cement and reshaping the stupas that have been eaten away by time. It is honest work and it is certainly good that these men are employed. But the end product will be more like a Disney theme park than the site at Pagan.

Indein is also the site of a five-day market. Vendors come here from the hill country beyond to display what they've woven or harvested. Recently, however, the stalls have begun to show a subtle shift toward carved Buddhas and jewelry, sea-pearls, and shawls, all undoubtedly from China.

The vendors have found it more profitable to sell wares imported from beyond Burma's borders than homegrown farmer's market produce. This is what tourism does. Just as a chameleon takes on the coloration of its environment, so, too, do these vendors take on the coloration of their customers. That process has only just begun in Burma. We are lucky to be here now before it has fully taken hold.

We putt putt through a tangle of channels leading from Indein to our next stop, a village with a weaver's factory and a trio of "giraffe women" on display, Pa Daung women who elongate their necks with brass rings from the time they are 5 years old. En route we pass water buffalo immersed in water up to their heads while their owners have tethered them to a nearby tree. Low-lying dams have been built across the channel with openings just wide enough to allow our boats to pass through. These curious structures turn out to be the lake's version of speed bumps.

The Pa Daung women remind me of the sign at the Phaung Daw Oo Paya: *Ladies are Prohibited*. This is Burma's version of Chinese foot binding, another way to mark women for subordination. The rings, actually a single brass coil, weigh 11 pounds around the neck of an adult woman. The elongated neck is an illusion. The rings press down on the clavicle and rib cage,



compressing both and making the neck appear long.

No one seems to know why this practice was initiated, though it is interesting that it is found among the Ndebele tribe of southern Africa as well. The bottom line is that a woman's body is found wanting and in need of alteration. I suppose that isn't so different from make-up.

Our farewell dinner takes place in a grotto-shaped dining room set well off from the main buildings. It is meant to be a surprise

venue. It is. When the doors open, a St. Bernard, a beautifully well-mannered dog, greets us. He acts as if we were expected. The centerpiece of the private dining room is a table in the shape of the long boats we have been riding in for the last two days. It is an extraordinary design, black laquered from stem to stern with a gold-filigreed pattern that runs the whole length of the boat. The tabletop is plexi-glass, red, gold speckled and under lit. It is kitsch at its very best.

At dinner Gordon asks us to recall a memorable incident and share it with everyone. Three stick in my mind. Jim Watson spoke of

the seemingly inexhaustible energy of the Burmese. He mentions seeing two Burmese men, almost stick figures of men, standing in their twelve-foot long sliver of a boat shoveling lake bottom mud from the boat to a garden plot behind them. It's backbreaking work. They are indefatigable.



His comment calls to mind my own memory of two men standing knee deep in lake water doing the same thing. I remember thinking how hard it must be to have to pull that weight up to the water's surface and then over your shoulder onto the land over and over again.

An image suddenly comes into my head. At the Damaga Saga we watched two women running spinning wheels at a great clip. Over in the corner, two men lolled on an elevated bed doing nothing.



Steve Blank spoke about how welcoming the Burmese seemed to be. As he put it, their “smile and wave” index was high. I agree. Except for that morning in the market at Naung U, everywhere we went people were genuinely glad to see us.

I had had misgivings about coming to Burma. I didn't want to spend a penny to support what I took to be a regime intent on the genocide of its own people, a snake swallowing its own tail. I'm sure I ended up sending some money the snake's way. Some of

the cost of the trip went for tolls, permits and entrance fees. I have no doubt these fees ended up in the hands of the government. But most of what I spent went into the pockets of merchants and hot air balloonists. Some of that trickled down to the workers.

Burma strikes me as a country where a little bit of money goes a long way. The wages of the balloon wranglers, for example, was \$25 a month, of the staff in the Inle Princess Resort, \$13 a month, of the boatmen who ferried us around Inle Lake, \$20 for three days of labor. Giving someone an extra \$1.00 was no small thing. I have always thought that tourism was a way of redistributing income, never more so than in Burma.



The third remark that I remember came from Susan Chandler. Don't think for a minute, she admonished, that we have acquired an understanding of Burma in two protected, pampered weeks.

She is absolutely right about that. But it is probably true that, despite the ignorance that we came and went with, we also had acquired a bit of truth. Burmese culture is worth knowing and that is, in no small measure, because of the Burmese

people who carry that culture on their shoulders.

Samuel Jay Keyser  
Cambridge, MA  
February 7, 2010