

# Myanmar

19 December 2012



Apparently Yangon airport is not equipped for instrument landing. Another hour was added to the flight from Doha as the plane floated in lazy circles waiting for the sun to rise high enough to burn off the mists rising from the green Irrawaddy delta. Still we arrived too early for the bank kiosks in the airport to be open. This was one of those inconveniences no amount of pre-planning can expunge from your journey. It was a question of exchange rates. Lonely Planet's latest guide book, published just this year, was adamant; you should never change money in a bank because you would get only a tenth of the black market street traders' rate. But things are changing in a rush. Recent travellers' reports on the Internet aver that the two airport banks now give rates comparable to the street traders, and moreover will now change euros, not just dollars. Another change: at the airport we saw an ATM, the first and only one in the country. By the time we arrived at our hotel, things had changed some more; now it seemed any bank will give a favourable rate. And so it proved. The black market differential is only a few kyats, less than 5%, so hardly worth the risk of being short changed or slipped dodgy notes in a street transaction. What fate awaits the slim men clustered around markets and temples, clutching wads of bills in their fists, or even stuffed into the backs of their longyis?

Myanmar is surfing down a wave of rapid change set off just 18 months ago by the release of Aung San Suu Khi and the legalisation of her party which immediately won a substantial presence in parliament. Economically Myanmar used to be virtually a closed country, trading largely with the Chinese. A couple of years ago a clapped-out car imported from the west would cost many thousands of dollars - well beyond the reach of the middle classes. Now import duties have been slashed, new cars have appeared on the roads and Yangon's traffic is beginning to rival Bangkok's persistent gridlock and pollution.

NGOs such as Merlin, a UK agency which provides medical services, have long been regarded with suspicion by the government, but in the past year Merlin has been asked to

join the government in developing health policy. Six months ago demand for office space stimulated redevelopment. Old colonial buildings are too costly to renovate so are being pulled down and replaced by modern high-rises. Tourists are pouring into the country. There are two or three times as many as last year. This is the peak season and it seems that the Burmese, as well as westerners, have a traditional Christmas holiday break. So we have had some anxious moments - many of the hotels we've called have been fully booked. We still can't confirm a lodging in Mandalay for Christmas Eve, and may have to juggle our route. Everything is still quite cheap - food, transport, and accommodation, apart from a few insanely priced luxury hotels. But prices are escalating and ATMs, credit cards, Macdonalds and Starbucks will not be far away. Like the influx of cars, this will be a mixed blessing.

Our Yangon hotel, the small Classique, was a lucky choice. It nestles in a quiet suburb of dusty lanes dotted with colonial villas converted into embassies, art galleries, hotels and restaurants. The constantly smiling staff helped us make arrangements for our onward journey. The Internet travelling community divides into two groups: those who say it's better to fly because trains waste time, are uncomfortable and unreliable, and those like us who feel it is better to travel than to arrive. It isn't easy. Rail tickets don't go on sale until a day or two before your departure and you have to go to the ticket office yourself to have your passport checked. The Yangon ticket office, we found, is not at the railway station but in a large shed nearby. Dark and low-ceilinged, and fitted with crowd controlled railings, it looks like a stockyard. There was a long bank of ticket windows and a face or two behind each. But we were the only customers. The transaction took 20 minutes, producing eventually a meticulously handwritten ticket. The 'ordinary' seating is wooden benches so we joined the 'upper class'.

Yangon is a bit like India, but with much less rubbish and plenty of Buddhist monks and nuns who are ferried about in minibuses and dumped out to patrol the shops for handouts. In Yangon everyone is a trader. There are more food stalls on the streets than anywhere else we have been, including China. Each street has its speciality, be it gold or computer equipment or kitchen utensils. The enormous covered Aung San market, named for Aung San Suu Kyi's father, is stuffed with fabrics and housewares of every description. It is so jammed it is hard to sidle through it. The food market spills out into the narrow perimeter streets where women lay out baskets of vegetables, fish and bloody chicken parts in the middle of the road. When cars inch forward the women move but leave their wares and return to tidy up after the cars have driven over.

Suffering from severe jet lag the day we arrived, we set out to find the travel agent who promised to book a boat for us from Mandalay to Bagan. On the street corner where a colonial building was being replaced we spied a twisted sign: Mahabandoola Garden Street. Eureka! We turned down this busy street looking for number 27. Few of the shops were numbered, and those erratically. 435 was followed by 387 and then 474. We prowled fruitlessly back and forth, enquiring in shops, but getting nowhere. Along the way we stumbled across the synagogue, still serving Yangon's dwindling Jewish population. We were about to give up and decided the only answer was a noodle lunch. Fortified, we sallied forth again and eventually discovered that we were on Mahandaboola Road. Mahandaboola Garden Street actually intersected where we had seen the twisted sign, which was pointing the wrong way. A happy ending, somewhat tarnished when we discovered an unambiguous map of the location in our email files back at the hotel.

The spiritual heart of Burma is the Shwedagon Pagoda. And it is an amazing conglomeration of temples covering a hillside in what is now central Yangon. The central stupa is covered with tons of gold leaf and gleams in the sun. Everyone goes there, including Aung San Suu Kyi, to make religious observances and to renew their faith in

their country. You could say it is Disneyland without the corn, but you cannot help be fascinated and impressed.

When the train heaved out of Yangon two days later at 6 am, it carried only four westerners including ourselves. A genial burly chap opposite us, wearing the kind of cowboy hat the Burmese favour, arrived with a retinue of porters. He was saluted by every ticket inspector and constantly fussed over by the carriage attendant. He told us that he had studied transport in Europe and we concluded that he must be a retired railway official. Or a general.

The train lurched and rocked and yawed so that it was impossible to sip your tea from the half-pint mugs and, for a gentleman, perilous to try to use the toilet. But the tracks improved, we learned how to balance on the pitching seats rescued from some defunct airline and loosely bolted to the floor. The train trundled majestically through the Burmese plain for 16 hours to Mandalay. You can actually open the windows, and we saw local life at close hand. It is a landscape of rice paddies, villages of bamboo houses on stilts, men ploughing with ox-drawn wooden ploughs (we saw two tractors during the whole journey), ox carts with wooden wheels, families threshing the rice harvest, and golden stupas rising in the distance.

Our worries about food and drink were misplaced. Young lads roamed through the carriages offering menus of rice and noodle dishes. Your order was delivered to your seat in a few minutes, or at a specified time. And it is the custom in this country for someone of 'inferior' position never to rise above a 'superior'. So when the lad delivers your noodles or your tea or your beer to your seat, he kneels on the floor and offers it up to you with both hands, an innovation which would be highly welcome on British trains. Richard Branson please take note.



23 December 2012



Forget Kipling. Mandalay is not on a bay, there is no view of China and the dawn comes up like everywhere else - too early. It's not an exotic city, it's a sprawling concrete Eastern entrepôt rebuilt since it was reduced to rubble in the Second World War. But it's on the Ayeyarwady, and the river is magnificent. We drifted downstream all day soaking up the views from the open deck - stupas rising out of the greenery in the distance, tugs pushing massive pontoons piled with teak logs, fishing villages perched on the crumbling banks and temporary fishing camps set up on the shifting sandbanks. It's a shallow river and the twisting channel is only occasionally marked by stakes. Once the boat closed with a twin going the other way and pilots were exchanged. A few hours later the boat nosed right into the bank and a plank was lowered for a second pilot exchange. Otherwise we saw no towns and there were no stops until we reached Bagan after nightfall. It was so peaceful, yet interesting, that we decided to return to Mandalay the same way. Two days of travelling in blissful indolence.

'Temple-Free Tours', isn't an enterprise but a philosophical perspective invented by our friends the Mossops. Bagan would not be in their notional travel brochure. It comprises 4400 temples or pagodas scattered over a few square miles of scrub and farmland bordering the river, a day's river journey southwest of Mandalay. The structures date from 1000 to 1200 AD when there was a great city here. The teak houses disappeared, the brick and stucco pagodas remain, and many have been restored after they were shattered by a big earthquake in 1975. In three days, by car and by bicycle, we visited about 40 pagodas, some grand and glorious and still used for religious observance, others isolated stupas crumbling romantically into the dusty fields. They all house Buddhas, a single one, or dozens, or hundreds. Every structure is different. Many can be climbed two or three storeys for a view over a magic kingdom of gleaming gold cupolas and steeples emerging from the bush and piercing the blue sky. The sun has shone every day since we arrived in Myanmar.

Every time we arrive at a new destination we are surprised by a different kind of conveyance available to take us to our hotel. In Yangon there are conventional motor cars, old and new. Arriving late at night at Mandalay train station we were led to a small pickup

truck and were obliged to clamber over the tailgate into the back. Arriving back in Mandalay by river boat, a horde of men swarmed on board as it docked. They held up a bamboo pole as a handrail to help us negotiate the plank in the dark, then seized our arms and pushed us up the slippery bank. Along the way we appeared to have agreed to hiring three or four different taxis, but they were neither cars nor pickup trucks. They were trishaws, a kind of two-person side car powered by a bicyclist. We sat back to back holding our backpacks on our laps. We knew the route to the River View Hotel lay directly along the esplanade, but the cyclist plunged into the maw of the city. It was a nightmare ride in the dark with vehicle lights oncoming in all directions, honking horns and swerving motor bikes. The rickshaw changed direction several times and it became clear that our driver was not only very tired but quite lost. We kept saying 'River View Hotel' and pointing to where we thought the river might be, and he kept trying to repeat 'River View Hotel' which is difficult in a language which contains no 'r'. We didn't dare jump ship; we were in the middle of the bazaar area and not one of the many signs was in anything other than Burmese. After half an hour the driver found the hotel, triumphantly grinning and totally exhausted, so we had to grant him a good tip for getting lost.

At Pyin Oo Lwin train station we were met by a tiny stage-coach, gaily painted and drawn by a single horse. In Hsipaw the vehicle was a motorised three wheeler tuk-tuk, pulling a roofed cart. We had to get out to help push it across the ridge of the railway track.

You can't travel in Myanmar without a trustworthy alarm clock. We mentioned that the Mandalay train leaves Yangon at six a.m. Which meant waking at 04.45 to reach the station at 05.30. For the boat to Bagan we had to be on the river shore by 06.30, when it's still dark. The return journey is against the current, so we were on the jetty at 05.30. We discovered that there is now only one train a day from Mandalay up to the mountain towns of Pyin Oo Lwin and Hsipaw and it leaves at 04.00. We almost baulked at this, but decided it would be preferable to the bus. We were advised to leave extra time to find the platform, which seemed unnecessarily prudent: huge though Mandalay station is, it appears to have only two trains. But the station seems to have been designed by Escher: we could see the train but we couldn't reach it. Eventually we were led directly to our carriage by a young man in a track suit carrying an automatic rifle over each shoulder. All this meant setting the alarm clock for 02.45.

About Burmese food: the best meal we've had was in the home of a middle class family, prepared by one servant while another waved a wicker paddle over the table to deflect the occasional fly. A spicy vegetable-based soup accompanies every meal and is always delicious. It is served with a curry and with lots of little bowls of crunchy, sour and spicy bits to sprinkle over it, including brittle fried beans and fermented tealeaves. The chicken curry our hosts served us was marvellous, but restaurants usually plonk down several curries at once: chicken, mutton, pork, beef, and maybe fish as well, with mounds of rice.

The meat is always tough and overcooked so we soon became fish-eating vegetarians. In most restaurants the cuisine blurs into Thai and Chinese, with some interesting fusions such as Chinese barbecued okra with a spicy baste and served with pungent tamarind sauce.

A bit of acculturation: the Palaung people are dirty because they live high in the mountains where water is scarce. The Shan people like to live by running streams and wash every day. This was confirmed by the bathers we saw in every Shan village around Hsipaw. We refrained from photographing three naked little boys frolicking in a shallow, tree-shaded pool at a bend in a stream, but it was a scene from Eden. The Shan people are not just clean, they are peaceful and brotherly. The Myanmar people and the Chinese are bad because they make their own law and Myanmar people are governed by soldiers. Myanmar soldiers have heavy weapons and they move like buffaloes. Shan soldiers are

lightly armed and move like tigers. In most of Shan state the peace-loving Shan live happily with their Myanmar neighbours, but on the eastern border they do not like Myanmar people and so there is war. (We found this account confusing because we thought the reason Burma had changed its name was that Myanmar is an inclusive term which includes all the tribal people, not just the Burmese.)

All of this cultural information came to us from Win, a Shan who guided us on a walk to a Palaung hill village where they still wear traditional costumes. The outward leg took five hours and climbed 800 meters. We never got there. When we got tired enough to start asking how much further it was, Win told us it would be another hour and a half. Half an hour later he told us it would be an hour and three quarters. We'd had a late start and it began to look doubtful that we could get back before dark. Chuck resolved the issue by running completely out of puff and refusing to make another upward step. We retraced our steps and enjoyed a thoroughly delightful afternoon wandering through the Shan villages, visiting local families and sipping green tea, eating restorative noodle soup at a table in the ground floor of a house while nine grubby kids aged two to six sat enthralled by a TV showing a Thai soap dubbed into Shan. We watched people splitting and weaving bamboo for baskets, and learned about their farming methods.

Win's conversation was earnest but surreal as he confused winter and summer and frequently referred to water from snow. We conjectured that this might be the chilling mist that shrouds the countryside until around 10 a.m., and introduced him to the word 'dew' which he accepted doubtfully. Another of Win's favourite words was 'kill'. We told him you don't kill trees, you chop them down. But Win is an ex-forester, and yes, you do. He showed us how to kill a teak tree; the leaves droop within half an hour and a year later you chop it down. Win got us back across the paddy fields to Mr Charles Guest House too late to watch the sunset but in time for a contemplative beer on the verandah before dinner.

Pyin Oo Lwin was a Victorian Hill Station. It's cold at night and its feature attraction is an extensive botanical garden set about a lake. It's a beguiling mixture of colourful regimented planting, displays of orchids and petrified wood, and huge extraordinarily kitsch floral displays such as a blooming Christmas snowman. It's a placid peaceful park with a cracking collection of amazing butterflies and beetles from all over the world.

Hsipaw, another high hill town, seems like one sprawling market. Lonely Planet said the Shan Palace where the last Shan prince had lived was closed, but we heard that a member of the family had maintained the palace through the years of repression and was now in the habit of receiving visitors around tea time. So we called by. The palace is a large English lodge because it was built by the British for the prince. Fern, the delightful lady in residence, is from a noble Shan family. She married the last prince's nephew, and she told us the story of the royal family. When the prince was imprisoned and killed, the princess, an Austrian, moved to Cheshire. Her daughters live in the USA. Will they now return to claim the estate their cousin has so conscientiously maintained throughout the difficult decades? A suitable plot for an upper class soap opera.

For those who expressed concern, we have managed to book a room for Christmas Eve by changing our plans and stopping off again in Pyin Oo Lwin. There is only one train a day from there to Mandalay and the timing won't work out so we'll take a shared taxi to Mandalay on Christmas Day. By road it's a two hour journey to cover the 35 miles; the train takes six hours.

We've told you that trains can be booked three days in advance. Unfortunately this appears to apply only to trains leaving Yangon. And you can only buy your ticket at the station from which you plan to travel. We've had to book other trains an hour before

departure. We hope that when we get to Mandalay we will be able to buy tickets for the sleeper to Bago on Christmas Day. Otherwise it will be a long Christmas night on the jolting seats.



30 December 2012



The train was already late arriving in Hsipaw. Then, just an hour into the seven hour journey to Pyin Oo Lwin, there was a great clatter beneath us and the train juddered to a halt. We knew immediately what it was. On the upward journey three days ago, we encountered the down train running several hours late because of a derailment. This time it was our carriage that jumped the track. After a while some women came through the carriage bearing slabs of teak. Men followed, dragging heavy iron equipment. It took two hours to jack up our carriage and restore it to the track. The train moved on slowly; butterflies kept pace with us. At the next station repairs were attempted but then abandoned, and we were decanted to the wooden benches of 'ordinary class'. We reckoned our ETA for Pyin Oo Lwin was now five hours in arrears, or about nine pm, which is the general closing time for Myanmar restaurants.

They go to bed early because they are early risers. On the morning of Christmas Eve we had risen before six to visit the morning market, where trade is conducted by candle and torch light. On the way we passed a school on the market street already filled with pupils wearing bulky jackets and woollen hats against the cold, chanting in rote to the barked commands of their teacher.

We ran into Win, who had picked up some vegetables and dried fish for the family. He took us to see the little shop which he runs as a sideline. Actually it seemed to be a couple of cabinets on the porch of another small shop. Win proudly showed us the fretsaw he uses to cut letters for signage and the tiny screwdrivers and jeweller's loupe he uses to repair watches, though sadly trade is down since the digital revolution.



At the train station a genial clerk told us he could not sell us tickets till 08.30, but he came out and fetched us well before then. We could only provide a \$10 and a \$5 note for the \$12 fare. There followed a complex game of money passing with the later customers until eventually he was able to refund us \$3.

The reason this journey attracts tourists is the Gokteik Viaduct. When it was built in 1901 it was the second-highest railway bridge in the world and it hasn't seen much maintenance since. Resuming our journey in ordinary class, we reached the viaduct at dusk. The train crawled along the top of the rickety metal structure while we sat in the open doorway dangling our feet over the 100 metre drop. There is no intervening railing.

The last time we arrived at Pyin Oo Lwin we were met by a miniature stagecoach. This time we stepped into darkness filled by earsplitting oriental pop music, flashing lights and a multitude of people milling in the station forecourt and several streets beyond. It was the Christmas Eve fair, and there was no transport. At the far edge of this racket we met a man who offered to provide a taxi. He set about haggling prices. Apart from the jacket he wore emblazoned with the word 'taxi', there was no visible evidence of any form of transport. Also, he was drunk. So we abandoned him, trudged a little further into the dark and located a motorised cart.

On Christmas Day we shared a taxi down from the mountains to Mandalay with a Dutch couple. A swift and comfortable way to travel. We were keen to reach the train station early to book on the sleeper departing that afternoon for Bago and Yangon. You can reserve the sleeper from three days in advance, but the catch is that you have to book it in person at the station of departure. So it was fully booked. We sighed and bought sit-up-all-night seats in upper class and went off to find lunch.

Sprawling on our packs in the back of a pickup truck we drove out of town to a local beauty spot: a long teak footbridge crossing a lake to a monastery. It was heaving with holidaymakers. We carried our packs across the bridge and out of the crowds to a quiet beach shack on the edge of the lake where we tucked into a freshly prepared Christmas feast: fried prawns and corn fritters with chilli sauce, with milk sipped from a fresh coconut.

And we got a Christmas present. When we asked the guard if he had a sleeper available he installed us in a comfortable four-berther with just one other passenger. When he came in later to retrieve his belongings from a cabinet we realised that he had sold us his own berth.

We lay back to watch the changing landscape through the large open window. The afternoon shadows lengthened over rice paddies, banana plantations and fields of gourds and golden maize. The oxcarts plodded home in single file as dusk descended.

The berth was wide and comfortable, and at this stage of the journey, like two lost children, we didn't want to let go of each other's hands, so we both lay down in our clothes on the lower berth. Astonishingly, we were able to sleep for several hours. The train had three gaits. The general rollicking clackety-clack was lulling. From time to time there would be a huge vertical bounce levitating us clean off the bunk. Occasionally there was a sideways shiggle which rolled your shoulders from side to side, flipping your head too if it wasn't secure. It was like sleeping in a washing machine.

Have you ever had that frustrating dream about not being able to collect your belongings in time to alight at a railway station? This is a persistent nightmare of Chuck's. So although the ticket seller had written down five a.m. as the time of arrival at Bago, we took the precaution of setting one alarm for 04.30 and another for 04.40. Bago represented the

black hole of our planning. It is a major rail junction. We could catch a train east from here at seven a.m., but it would take all day and much of the evening to reach Mawlamyine. We preferred to take one of the three buses which reportedly passed through Bago at seven, eight and nine a.m. after originating in Yangon. There were two bus stations. We didn't know which was the correct one and we were apprehensive that all of the seats would have been booked in Yangon. With these anxieties on his mind Chuck awoke at 04.15. The train was pulling into a large deserted station. Our fellow passenger had closed the steel shutter over the window. When Chuck got it open the train was coming to a halt. There was no station sign and no one on the platform. He went out into the corridor. No-one was stirring in the adjacent sit-up-all-night carriage. A man came past.

"Bago?" asked Chuck.

"Bago."

Burmese is a tonal language. For all Chuck knew, he and the stranger might have been saying "Have a nice day" to each other.

Not wanting to believe that the train was 45 minutes early, Chuck returned to the compartment, woke Judith and started pulling on his boots. Burmese trains sometimes stay in stations for 20 minutes so there might be time to confirm where we were. We gathered our clobber and hurried down the corridor. Judith had trouble opening the carriage door. Chuck went past and managed to open the next one. The train started moving. A station sign came into view: Bago. The guard appeared, rubbing his eyes. Waves of emotions crossed his face - anxiety, embarrassment and shame.

"Can you stop the train?" asked Chuck.

No he couldn't, not even for a representative of a former colonial master. The next stop would be Yangon, two hours in the wrong direction.

Happy Boxing Day!

30 December 2012



While the train trundled through the darkness, we reviewed the situation. We would arrive in Yangon around six o'clock. The bus station lies on the perimeter of the city, a 45 minute taxi ride. The two earlier buses for Mawlamyine would already have left. We would have perhaps a quarter of an hour to catch the last bus, assuming that the schedule in our guide book was correct and that we would be able to get tickets. Two very big 'ifs'. So far we had been travelling very cheaply. It was time to dip into that great wad of US\$ banknotes which was disfiguring Chuck's belly profile. We would go down the taxi rank at the train station until we found someone who fancied a six hour drive to Mawlamyine, the teak port where George Orwell lived for three years and where Kipling is said to have composed 'On the Road to Mandalay' during a three day stay. If that failed, the travel agents would open around eight and we could ask one of them to find us a car and driver.

No worries. Burmese taxi ranks seem to be controlled by two or three 'taximeisters'. They select a driver to fulfil the role. We knocked 40% off the initial asking price, and settled into the plush back seat of a four-door air conditioned Toyota which was so new it still bore the imported registration plate.

Apart from a stretch of dual carriageway leaving Yangon, the road was two lanes with unsealed roads branching off. It's not just a throughway but a place where people gather and do business. It's cluttered with conveyances of all kinds: trucks, buses, oxcarts, rickshaws, bicycles and motorbikes carrying loads up to six feet wide. Everyone relies on honking to overtake. In 1970 the government decided to change to driving on the right. However all the old vehicles are right hand drive and so are almost all of the newer ones because they are cheap imports from Japan which still drives on the left. So Zin Min, our driver, had to keep pulling out to see what was coming when he wanted to overtake.

And so we arrived at our destination hours before any of the three morning buses. We shall never know what would have happened had we got off the train that morning at Bago, but an Australian family told us they had got the last tickets on the last bus from Yangon.

Along the way we renegotiated with Zin Min to hire him for five days to explore Mon State and Kayan State and to drive us back to Yangon. Crossing the river into Mon State we were handed an official notice in Burmese which informed us that the war with the Mon rebels was now over and we would have a nice stay. Zin Min remarked that it was not the government but Aung San Suu Kyi who had resolved the rebellion. We saw her likeness frequently throughout Myanmar, not on huge posters but discreetly in the personal space used by people; around their desks, on cabinets, on notice boards.

Mon State was different. Hotter, humid, jungle vegetation. There were fewer bamboo shacks and many teak houses, old and new, all with a small small projecting chamber on the side with an oriel window of coloured glass containing the family shrine.

We arrived early enough to include an afternoon visit to Nwa-la-bo pagoda, reached by a jolting 40 minute truck ride up a mountain track. The stupa perches on three gold boulders piled precariously atop one another, and seems to have arisen from the fairy tale world of Middle Earth. Afterwards Zin Min deposited us at the Cinderella Hotel in Mawlamyine. Sumptuously appointed and staffed by squads of gracious boys and girls it cost only \$30 a night.

The decision to hire the car was a good move. Next day we drove 50 miles down the coast, Buddha-hunting along the way. Surely, one begins to think, we don't want to see yet another Buddha. And then you see one that truly merits the cliché 'jaw-dropping'. The lane entering Win Sein Taw Ya is guarded by a line of 500 Buddhas. Then, rising above the trees on the hillside, you see the face of a gigantic reclining Buddha which is 560 feet long. Paid for by popular subscription and built without engineering guidance, it houses several levels of chambers crammed with statues depicting religious scenes, many of them horrific. It is still unfinished and the framework of an even larger companion piece is rising on the facing hill. We made a 500 kyat (40p) compulsory donation to this noble project which entitled us to make an offering of a red tile which will form part of Buddha's robe. Our driver Zin Min who had begun to relax as he realised he was on a fully paid five day holiday, was delighted to have his photograph taken in front of this amazing structure.

The cemetery at the terminus of the Burma Railway is maintained by the War Graves Commission and is a melancholy oasis where thousands of British, Dutch, Australian, Indian and soldiers from the Malay States are interred. Their neat tombstones are shaded by small flowering plants and identified with tiny national flags. It is a humbling and moving experience to contemplate not only the death but the torture these men endured. We spoke to the caretaker and asked him about the American casualties. There were more than 300 and they were airlifted back to the USA. Additionally in the building of this infamous railway line, many more Asian labourers were killed. The Japanese estimate 80,000; the Burmese figures is 130,000. Their final resting places are unknown. The original terminus lies a short distance away in the jungle, unmarked and unkempt. The rail track is still there, and a decrepit steam locomotive sits on it. In the undergrowth lie the scattered remains of statuary which must have once been a memorial. There are the legs of a Japanese soldier, identified by his high boots, and fragments of huddled shapes of agonised prisoners. The fact that time and the jungle growth have obliterated even the memorial to this tragedy made it somehow yet more poignant.

We rested on Setse Beach, where the local lads take their girlfriends for rides on their motorbikes on the expanse of hard-packed brown sand. We had a warm dip in the Andaman Sea and found a squid stir fry for lunch in a beach shack.

In Mawlamyine the perfect place to watch the sun set over the estuary is the balcony of the Help Grandfather and Mother Restaurant which is a charity doing exactly what its name



says. Our sun-downer was lime juice because they don't serve alcohol. For that we repaired to a street stall along the promenade. We chose ten different skewers of fish moulded in various forms. They looked colourful and attractive but they all tasted bland and merely served as blotters for the chilli sauce.

The accommodation problem continued to hang over us. Our next destination was Hpa An. We called every hotel listed in the guide book. All those that answered their phone were fully booked. The others, we were told, do not accept phone reservations. Why not? Maybe they cater exclusively to groups. Chuck managed to extract a promise from the elderly gentleman at the Soe Brothers Guest House who said he wouldn't know if he had a room but if we came along after noon on the day he might have something. Meanwhile, some good news. Judith emailed the Classique Inn in Yangon and secured a room for our last two nights in Myanmar.

So we set out by boat for Hpa An, not knowing where we would rest our heads, while Zin Min drove ahead with instructions to meet us at the jetty at 11.30. We took our packs with us in case we never saw him again. We boarded a long shallow draught fishing boat with a thumping engine like many others we passed along the way up the river delta. The price is determined by the number of passengers and as we formed a party of nine it was quite affordable. It was a delightful languorous voyage through the marshlands and then the karst mountains rose like dragons' teeth. Temples dotted the landscape everywhere. We made slow progress and didn't arrive in Hpa An till 1.30, fearing that Mr Soe might have let the promised room, and seeing no sign of Zin Mini in his white shirt and black trousers on the embankment. However, there was a Zin Min in a longyi and a gaudy red tasselled shirt typical of Kayin State. He was obviously entering the holiday spirit aided by the infusions of cash we gave him each evening. We raced off for Mr Soe's guesthouse, but because Zin Min was a stranger to Hpa An we arrived at the door just as a tuk-tuk loaded with our fellow boat passengers pulled up. Chuck leapt out of the car and pounded up the steep stairs in the wake of a young man also seeking a room. Fortunately Mr Soe did remember our name and his promise and we bagged the last room available for two nights. End of accommodation problem.

The Soe Brothers Guest House is a classic backpackers' joint. Toilets and showers are communal and there is no hot water or breakfast, but a gang of young workers keep it clean and for \$12 per night we had a double room with two windows. It was so warm that we welcomed a cool shower. The place was packed; two guys were sleeping on the floor. But we saw very little of our fellow guests. Perhaps because we were several times their age we worked to a different time clock.

The next day more Buddhas. Again we were expecting to be bored but were enthralled. In one cave there were thousands of Buddha images. A short but dizzying climb offered a great view of the karst mountains jutting out of the paddy fields. In another cave we slithered across wet soil - or was it bat shit - by torchlight - in bare feet because the whole cave is a temple. We emerged at a sylvan pool where a woman was waiting in a punt. She paddled us back through an overhanging rock cavern and along a graceful passage through the the rice paddies.

The Burmese people are world class smilers and take a friendly interest in foreigners. Crossing a street can be a nightmare. Once, as we were hesitating, clinging to each other on a Yangon kerb, a young man came up on Judith's other side, quietly took her free hand and shepherded us through the onrushing traffic. At Setse beach another young man struck up another conversation with Chuck with the salutation "Are you happy?". In the bowels of the giant reclining Buddha, Chuck lowered his camera after videoing a lesser Buddha to feel the dank breath passing over the brown teeth of a stern middle aged monk a few inches from his face. No smile this time. "Where are you from?" he asked gruffly.

“England”. The monk frowned, screwed up his face in thought, and said “Happy Christmas”.

The first thing that strikes you in Myanmar is something that the guide books don't mention. Almost all the women and children and many men walk about with yellow smears on their faces. Some look as wan as corpses. We thought it might be a religious ritual. However it is simply a cosmetic. They want to protect their cheeks from the sun and this has evolved into a decorative adornment. Finding out how the paste is made solved another mystery: why so many market stalls sell lengths of tree branches. Thanakha is ground from the bark by rubbing it with water on a stone.

You don't see many English signs in Myanmar, except outside police and military establishments, in every town and village on the red poster announcing the offices of the National League for Democracy, and on the ubiquitous Sunsilk shampoo ads. Apart from those involved in the tourist trade few people speak much English. A few phrases helped us get by:

“Mingalaba” usefully means hello at any time of day. Everybody says it all the time except in Shan State where they say “Mai saung ka”. Another useful phrase is “Ma lo che boo”, which means “thank you very much, but I do not want (a T-shirt, a sand painting, or a ride on the back of your motor bike without a helmet)”. “Kaun day” means “it's very good” and “la tay” means “it's beautiful”. “Ta ta” is goodbye.

Our plane leaves early tomorrow morning and if we make our connection at Doha we shall be home on the first night of January. Happy New Year!

Ta ta,