



SMILING FACES, PAGODAS, MONKS, LAKES & the Unexpected

Mike Smith boycotted Myanmar for years in line with Aung Sun Suu Kyi's wishes. However, The National League for Democracy has reversed course and opted for a policy to welcome visitors. Thus, his dream of visiting Myanmar became a reality when he joined a photographic tour visiting the key tourist spots of Yangon, Bagan, Mandalay and Inle Lake.

What a surprise. Myanmar (Burma) is a lovely, safe country for tourists and it is full of smiling people who want to get on with their lives. There are ancient pagodas, monks everywhere, peaceful lakes with long teak bridges and one leg rowers.

Don't Rag on Yangon

It was only a three hour flight from Singapore to Yangon on Myanmar Air. Clearing immigration was a breeze, but the drive to the hotel was uninspiring, with Yangon seeming like any congested Asian city with nondescript buildings. After checking in we headed to Shwedagon Pagoda.

My first impressions of Yangon were wrong! Folklore says this gold draped stupa has a history going back 2,500 years. Whenever it was built it ranks, in my opinion, on a par with the Taj Mahal, Angkor Wat, Bangkok's Grand Palace, Indonesia's Borobudur and the Great Wall of China as one of the most spectacular man made complexes in Asia.

Surreally the colours change by the hour as the sun moves. People meditate, stand in awe or giggle excitedly as they pose for photos in front of Myanmar's most sacred Buddhist site. Barefoot, as is the custom, I walked round in a clockwise direction watching the mix of families, tourists, monks and religious devotees mingle freely and happily.

Many Burmese were wearing thanaka face paint, made from tree bark, to give protection from the sun and improve their complexion. The dramatic complex of spires, Buddha statues and intricate details in the numerous structures makes one forget the turbulent history.

Dinner and a cultural show at the beautiful Karaweik Palace, a concrete shaped royal barge, completed our hectic first day. String puppets, Myanmar dancers, singers and musicians entertained us as we feasted on international dishes and very spicy local cuisine including fish, chicken and prawns, washed down with a cold, refreshing Myanmar beer.

Big on Bagan

I am not a morning person but was advised that 6:30am would be considered a lie in on this trip! As promised, the wakeup call came at 5:30am. A packed breakfast was handed out and we were soon on the bus heading for the airport. After a short hop on a twin propeller plane we arrived at Bagan, the hot, dry rural land of 2000 pagodas and temples. Bagan is very spread out and is best explored by vehicle, but the primitive roads are flat and empty so biking is a much cheaper option for those with the time and energy.

Bagan has too much to see on a two day trip so we had to be selective. We started at Shwezigon Paya, a wonderful large golden monument built around 1100AD to enshrine a replica of the Buddha's tooth that is in Kandy, Sri Lanka. There are large bronze standing Buddhas, tablets depicting Buddha's life and numerous monks and tourists

hanging around. Hawkers tout souvenirs from the stalls leading to the pagoda, but the low pressure selling and smiling painted faces make spending a pleasure.

Continuing on dusty rural roads observing buffalos, horse and cart taxis and weary cyclists we arrived at Ananda Temple, one of the largest and best preserved in Bagan. Built around 1100 AD in the shape of a cross it contains four large teak Buddha statues and high outer walls. For me it lacked the grandeur of Shwezigon. Children playing, birds nesting and young monks arranged by our guide to pose by the Buddhas were more attention grabbing than the building.

Shwe San Daw Sunset

Shwe San Daw Pagoda is the place to see the sunset in Bagan. A short, steep and energy sapping climb up the side of the pagoda offers views over the plains. I feared the sunset would be dull and so descended early. I bargained, but not very hard, with the children selling post cards, soft drinks and lacquer ware. I was wrong again. Gradually the colours deepened and the rays shone over the silhouetted pagodas making a very pleasant scene.

Bagan goes to bed early which is just as well as we were up by 6.00am for sunrise at Myengon Pagoda. Again we had a tricky

climb to our viewing platform, this time by torchlight, up a narrow staircase with an extremely low roof. The mist that was clinging to the surrounding pagodas slowly faded as the air warmed with the rising sun. The dull blue cast disappeared to give another clear day with gleaming pagodas in the distance.

Processions & Village Life

Returning to the hotel we were surprised to see a large and quite extravagant procession. Young children, some less than five years old and extremely elegantly dressed, as if for a prom, were being transported on decorated horses or in carts pulled by buffalos. Women carried offerings of fruit on their heads, bands played along with a portable music system and dancers pranced along the dusty track.

Our plans changed – we wanted to find out what was happening. It turned out to be a monks' initiation ceremony. We were invited to follow the parade to the village chief's house where each potential monk posed on horseback for a formal portrait before entering to eat, drink and be entertained by the dancers. Food was cooked in enormous pots on charcoal fires behind the house. We enjoyed the friendship and were encouraged to take photos. Unfortunately time was limited so we had to wave goodbye before





the head shaving ceremony and presentation of traditional maroon robes.

Wandering through that village gave us a taste of true Burmese rural life. The wooden houses were quite large but simple. Young women transported pails and pails of water from the river to the village on yokes across their shoulders. Clearly there was no running water and no central electricity, but on the other hand, no signs of malnourishment or poverty.

On the Banks of the Irrawaddy

Outside our hotel were several horse and cart 'taxis'. My young driver explained that he slept outside the hotel to be first in the queue for tourists. He charged what the market would tolerate, which was typically \$2.00 an hour. From this he maintained the cart, fed the two horses, helped support his family and save a little as he hoped to study at university. Hours worked varied from zero in the hot seasons to four or five a day in peak season.

A few hundred metres from our luxurious river view hotel was a simple fishing village. Quite a contrast! As we wandered through the village the children erupted with excitement as candy, notebooks and pens were given to the village chief for distribution. Enthusiastically they charged around hoping to get more candy as they followed

us down to the bank of the wide Irrawaddy River where fishermen were casting their nets to catch small fish before dusk set in.

Bagan is the centre of lacquer making. It thrives as a cottage industry after many centuries because of strong foreign demand for quality items. The bamboo used as a base for the lacquer ware is readily available and the lacquer itself is made from the sap from the thitsi tree which grows wild. The work was interesting to study. It is labour intensive and involves using manual lathes for shaping articles, carving and 'painting' using sharp knives and natural colours on the many layers of lacquer.

Mahagandayon & Mandalay

Immortalized in literature by Kipling et al, Mandalay was something of a disappointment, but there were three must-see attractions: the U-bein Bridge, Sagaing Hill and

Mahagandayon Temple.

Mahagandayon temple and monastery is a unique 'tourist attraction'. Actually it is somewhat of a 'human zoo' as hundreds of monks live there and bus loads of tourists turn up to watch them queue with their alms bowl to collect a simple lunch and sit at wooden benches and tables to eat it. You can wander the area chatting with the monks and observing their daily rituals of reciting, cleaning, washing etc. They are devoted to their simple lives, very open with their views on Myanmar and thirsty for knowledge of the outside world. I found it somewhat bizarre but very satisfying after spending time chatting with a former salesman who became a monk.

Sagaing Hill temple and pagodas are 20km from Mandalay and reached by a long, steep, winding ride in a small tuk tuk bus where you literally hang onto your seat. The reward is worth it. The main temple has a beautiful curved and colourful façade with many Buddha statues inside. Children and monks were happy to pose for pictures. Exploring the complex I found the views over the surrounding pagodas lovely, but the hot, stoned walkways made walk barefooted very uncomfortable.

Longest & Most Photographed Teak Bridge

The U-bein Bridge which crosses the shallow Lake Taungthaman is 1.2 km long. It is the longest teak bridge in the world and definitely the most photographed bridge in Myanmar. Built in the mid 19th century this narrow pedestrian bridge still plays an important role for locals.

It now generates income from visiting tourists who buy souvenirs, eat in the restaurants and rent boats to see the sunset. Sitting in a boat on the lake watching the sun go down was relaxing and a privilege.

One Leg in Lake Inle

One night was enough in Mandalay and so on to my favourite destination of Lake Inle, Myanmar's second largest at 45sqm. Driving towards the lake from Heho airport we stopped at Shwe Yan Pyay monastery. This fascinating teak building is over 150 years old and stands on stilts. Young novice monks stand and chat in the oval windows making a picture post card scene. We then



photographed the cheerful monks eating, cleaning up and finally relaxing and praying in the cooler inner areas.

At Nyaung Shwe we boarded narrow long-tail boats and roared off down a five mile channel to the lake and with water spraying everywhere arrived at our superb resort hotel. Inle Lake is a water bird's haven and we spotted herons, egrets, cormorants and kingfishers on the half hour ride.

The outdoor stilted seafood restaurants on the lake were superb and served the freshest fish, prawns and vegetables. The picturesque stilted villages were attractive and the jumping cats at a monastery a quirky diversion, but the stars of the lake were the unique 'leg rowers'. Fishermen of the Intha tribe row small canoes by standing on one leg with the oar wrapped around the other. Standing gives them a better view of floating reeds and gardens growing tomatoes and gourds which could entangle the boats. It also allows them to keep both hands free to fish using fishing nets enclosed in large conical baskets. Watching their skilled performance was highly enjoyable.

One Long Neck

The tranquillity of the lake was only broken by the noise of the long boat engines and the occasional 'compulsory' stop at tourist shops. At one, several of the long-necked Padaung tribe women were weaving and selling souvenirs. Interestingly, a child was having the first brass ring applied to her neck. It looks strange, but as our guide explained in an obviously well-rehearsed manner – other people wear tattoos and piercings!

We were all too soon at HeHo airport to transfer back to Yangon. The trip finished



with a photo shoot with a beautiful lady in traditional clothes and a visit to the bustling Bogyoke Aung San market to buy snacks and sandalwood carvings.

The days had rushed past and all too soon I was on the plane back to Singapore. I have fond memories of the friendly people, robed novice monks, ancient pagodas and Lake Inle. I want to go back! 

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INFORMATION BOX

Air Myanmar Flies Daily from Singapore to Yangon return
Air Mandalay was used for domestic flights

Hotels

Yangon, Traders Hotel
223 Sule Pagoda Road
T: (95 1) 242828
www.shangri-la.com

Bagan River View Hotel
Old Bagan, Nyaung Oo District
Bagan
T: +95 6270145

Mandalay City Hotel
26th Street
between 82nd & 83rd
St Chanayetharzan Township
Mandalay
T: (951) -61700
www.mandalaycityhotel.com

Inle Resort
Inlay Lake, Southern Shan State, Myanmar
T: (951) 81209361, 81209362
www.inleresort.com

