

Burma - A Final Summary

Pre-trip ---- A few days in Bangkok

I love my driver Rat! If you ever need a good driver, contact her (www.ratservice.com). Both she, her husband Nik and her son are drivers and between all of them they can get you to where ever you want to go even if its hours away from Bangkok. The family also owns a B&B in a residential area and I elected to stay there. It was a good decision as I didn't need extensive hotel services. The B&B is walking distance from Asiatique (a wonderful indoor night market with great restaurants) and also a nearby temple where you can have a 1 hour massage (considered medicinal here) for 100 baht (about \$3.25). Also the price is right at the B&B - \$40 a night for a comfortable room (there are 6) with flat-screen TV, about a hundred cable stations, a nice bathroom, a great buffet breakfast and good company.

The day before I left for Burma, Rat took me to the Damnoen Saduak floating market on the way to the famous Tiger Monastery where monks have tamed tigers and you can pet them as well as have your photo taken. It is a huge property with other animals, but tigers are the main event. I thought the animals must be drugged, but everyone says no - even the American volunteers who life there and help care for them. It was a full days outing.

A little background on Burma

I visited in 1993 just after the first "democratic" election and when Aung San Soo Kyi was already under house arrest. I was on sabbatical that year and traveling extensively in Southeast Asia as our schools were beginning to receive students from this area. It was a difficult decision to visit as all services, hotels, guides, etc. were connected to the government and that meant I was supporting the military regime. But I tried my best to spend money with locals. Now I was anxious to see the changes 20 years makes.



Entrance to Aung San Soo Kyi's home in Yangon. The photo above the gate is her father, Aung San who orchestrated independence from British colonial rule in 1946.

The Trip

I knew Explores' (UK) "Burma in Depth" 21 day program would be good, with high and low points. There were long drives and it was very hot in places. This is what you put up with in order to see the things you want to see. Fellow group members were well traveled, interesting and with 16 people a wide range of personalities leading to a wide range of discussions throughout the trip. As usual, there are myriad personalities - some more pleasant than others. But each very interesting. From our youngest who turned 51 on this trip, to a great-grandmother (who looked about 45), to a retired technology teacher who can't stand computers - each contributed to my enjoyment of the trip.

Haymar -our wonder-woman guide

"We're here for the Sticky Rice Festival" Haymar (our guide) told us on our first day. We would soon learn the Burma has lots of festivals -- Full Moon Festival, Robe Offering Festival (where monks are given new robes), Bo Tree Watering Festival, the Nat (animistic spirit) Festival and numerous others throughout the year.

She is well-experienced having guided for Explore and OAT for many years. She could handle just about anything and when we had a blip on a flight (plane returned to Mandalay due to technical problems) she was on the phone ordering a bus for our return to Yangon (Rangoon) which thankfully was not needed as it would have been a nine hour overnight ride! When airport officials came to the transit lounge, they did not inform everyone of the situation by a general announcement, but went straight to Haymar with explanations and apologies. Things often don't go as you expect in Burma - you need to have someone looking out for you always.

I always wonder where Explore finds these wonderful people to be our guides. Haymar is cute as a button, well organized, multitasks 20 hours a day and made each of us feel special and glad we were on the trip.

Our Transportation

I loved our huge busses - most often 46 passenger, but sometimes 55 passengers. Some had frilly curtains and chandeliers and came complete with resident mosquitoes. From the front it is like looking into infinity to see that last row. Some busses were new, most not so, but they were big and comfortable and everyone who wanted had at least two seats to themselves. We soon found our favorite seats or who we wanted to sit near. I like the back. People who sit here are usually very quiet and like me, enjoy looking out the window.



Youngsters are sent to monasteries and convents for their education. Buddhist nuns (even the young ones) wear pink; while men (and boys) wear the traditional orange and maroon robes.

Moola

The Burmese kyat has stabilized at 850 to \$1 USD. No more Black Market as in 1993 when I did most of my money exchange in a broom closet. The only problem is that the biggest note is the 5000 kyat note (about \$6.20) so you end up carrying a lot of paper. Once nice thing - you can generally get new money from the exchange bureaus. Not dirty old cruddy notes, but crisp, clean bills. Of course what they want is new, crisp, uncirculated USD, which functions as their parallel currency. Not British sterling, not Euro, but good old greenbacks. The most prized in the \$100 bill with good old Ben Franklin staring out.

Hey -- Where's my Internet?????

Lets deal with it right now -- there is censorship in Burma which rears its ugly head in myriad ways. Internet is purposely kept painfully slow, hotmail is almost inaccessible (though often internet cafe boys know how to get around it by messing with IP numbers and accessing servers in other countries); it is very difficult to download, satellite TV is available, and you can receive international news stations, for example the BBC, but there is no sound. They have cell phone service, but the cost of a sim card for local calls only is \$100; for a sim card to make international calls, the sim is \$1500. This in a country where the per-capita income is \$1300. Haymar would talk politics with us, but generally on the bus or when we were in controlled situations.

Food

I mentioned this in the earlier email - our food was good, but not for every palate as the Burmese use a lot of sauces and oils and like spicy (though it is not as hot as Thai food). All of which is difficult for me. But the saving grace is they also like Chinese food -- so chicken and vegetables, fried rice and vegetable spring rolls became my staples. I also got to like Shan Noodles - especially for breakfast. To eat Burmese-style -- you order your main dish (usually a curry) and about 10 other dishes automatically accompany it. This is the best value ever and I wish I could have partaken.

Fifty Shades of Green

The countryside is magnificent and since this is a rice culture, the terraces are expansive and spectacular. I have never seen so many shades of green in my life from emerald green, to forest green to a lime green depending on the rice plants' state of growth. It looks idyllic, farmers use oxcarts to carry goods to market, women thresh by the roadside, children help with picking vegetables and fruits. But life is hard here and it is generally understood that Burma is the least developed country in Southeast Asia.

So Many Buddhas!



Temples are the main event here -- big Buddhas, small Buddhas, reclining Buddhas, standing Buddhas, Buddhas in caves, Buddhas on rocks, etc. And at each temple and holy site you go barefoot - no shoes or socks allowed, and we sometimes visited 3 or 4 religious sites a day.

The Burmese are so devout and visiting a temple can be a humbling experience. They embrace the teachings of Buddha, live by his philosophy and are not afraid to show it.

However, it is easy to get templated out. There is a religious site, monastery, temple, stupa, chorten or holy rock about every 100 feet and I feel we visited every single one. Buddhism is not only a philosophy for daily life, but is also the state religion. This sect has a few quirks. They are not vegetarian; they believe during the 17 "lost years" where there is no mention in the bible, Jesus traveled to Tibet, studied with the lamas and became a Boddhisatva -- one who has attained enlightenment and entitled to Nirvana, but elects to stay on earth and help others. He then traveled back to Jerusalem and began to preach -- compassion, kindness, respect -- all Buddhist tenets. It was the

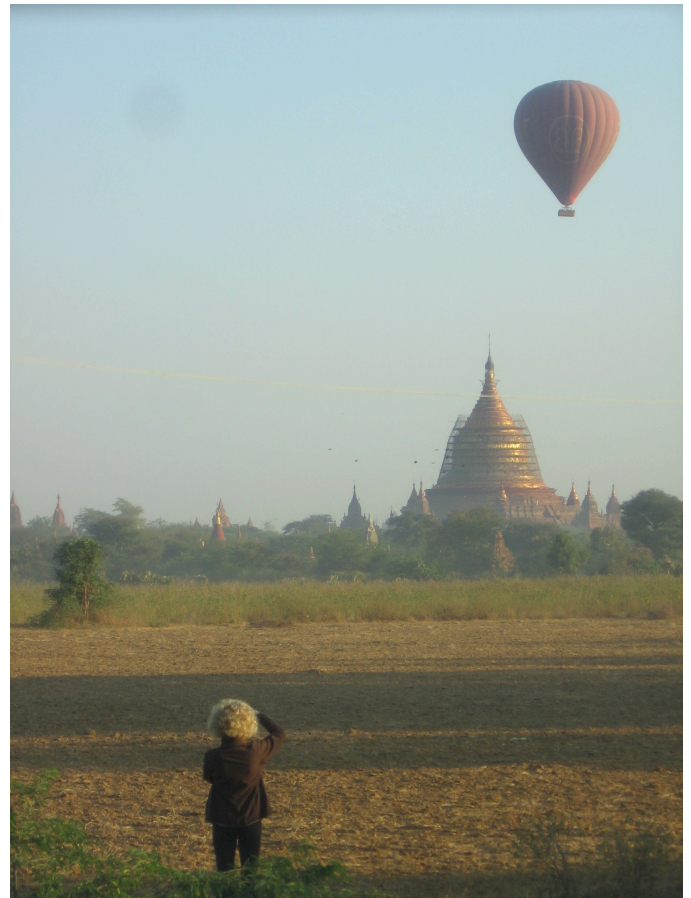
Council of Nicea in the 3rd century which codified the religion and switched from honoring the philosophy to honoring the man. Somehow this makes total sense to me.

Bagan (now called Pagan)

Like Pu Yi, the last emperor of China when he returned to the Forbidden City as an old man and saw it overrun with hawkers, tourists and garbage strewn around, I too was saddened to see how disneylandish Bagan has become.

This is one of the most touristed spots in the country as it has over 10,000 ancient temples spread across several miles. I remember sightseeing by horsecart and often having the temples all to myself. Well --- things have changed. It is over-run with aggressive hawkers, tourists, cars, motorbikes, snack bars and souvenir shops - did I mention hawkers? One booth even had a "long neck" woman from the Kayan Tribe on display!

Bagan has over 2000 temples, some very ancient. One of the delights of a visit is a early morning balloon ride.



How much did THAT cost?????

I still have mixed emotions about visiting the Golden Rock. You've seen the photo -- a pagoda perched on an almost-round gold covered rock) precariously perched at the side of a mountain. It is one of the holiest places for Buddhists and is a long, steep slog up to get there. The bus can take you only so far, then you take a truck for about 45 minutes. Then you walk - up, up, up. You can hire porters to carry your luggage and others to carry you in a sort of home-made palanquin. If you don't hire them where the truck leaves you, they follow like vultures waiting for you to drop. And unless you are very fit, you will. The cost up, down, with stops for soft drinks all around, plus a porter for luggage, plus I hired a young girl to carry my backpack (no one hired her and I felt sorry for her), the total cost for this entourage came to just over \$100. And to be honest, the temple was not that great an experience. It is one of the dirtiest we visited (ever heard of hookworm???) and because people picnic there, there is food all around and lots of mosquitoes.

A Few Changes

Due to fighting in Rahine Province (near town of Sittue) or the government taking over the hotel we were to use in Malwamyine and one other reason that I can't remember, our itinerary changed substantially. My biggest regret is that Mraurk U, a remote and beautiful archaeological site was dropped and a visit to an elephant farm and a stay at an elegant resort was substituted. Though I love elephants, it was a poor substitution in my eyes. They say Mraurk U is what Bagan was like 50 years ago. I hope to get there someday!

Unbelievably Friendly People

What is it with these people? They have been through so much and many have so little. They are a kind, compassionate people and do not deserve the hand they have been dealt. Even though they have been through a lot, they are forward thinking, rather than dwelling in the past. I admire this. The government doesn't seem to care about them and for such a rich country, it is poorly developed. Burma is flush with gold, diamond, silver and mines filled with precious stones. They have oil too.

Crime -- there just isn't any

You could probably wear gold and diamonds and walk Burma from one end to the other and no one would bother you. In fact, if you dropped your diamond bracelet, someone would come running after you to return it. I'm not sure about "crimes of opportunity" but this is the safest I've ever felt in a foreign country.



Up in the Air on the Flying Elephant!

Explore's local agent (EPG Travel in Yangon (Rangoon)) makes a great effort not to use services that support the oppressive Government. Instead of Mayama Airlines or Asian Wings owned by (now very rich) generals and politicians, we had four internal flights on Yangon Airlines which is privately owned. I loved its Flying Elephant Logo!!!!

Yangon Airways uses ATR 72's, twin-engine French made planes that seat about 70 people. Seating is tight with luggage stored in where first class would be on any other airline.

The planes do a daily circuit around the country leaving Yangon (Rangoon) in the early morning, dropping off and picking up passengers in six or seven cities before returning to Yangon by 7pm. Seating is open. Flight attendants are porcelain dolls and young, pretty and ever-helpful trying to stuff

your carry-ons in the small overhead bins. If there are empty seats (rare), you can just strap your carry-on in one. Even on the shortest flights you get a snack box and a drink. Nothing to write home about here, but their efforts need to be noted. When you can, take the Flying Elephant - you won't be disappointed.

And The Winner Is.....Inle Lake

My favorite stop of the trip was the three days we spent at Inle Lake. We had wonderful boat rides (four to a long-tail boat), great shopping -- silver! silks! products made from lotus plants! Ate fabulous lake fish and enjoyed beautiful weather. We were able to visit a "5 Day Market" where in addition to produce and household items, people from the hill tribes come to sell things they have made.

And in conclusion.....

Did I enjoy the trip and am glad I went? I think so. Maybe its true that you can't go home again and you shouldn't return to countries you have visited before as it is never the same. The dropping of Mrauk U from the itinerary was the biggest disappointment as it is a stellar, rarely visited archaeological site. But the people were wonderful, the shopping was good and was interesting to see the changes 20 years made in the cities (a lot) and in the countryside (not much).

I returned to Bangkok in time for my all-day physical at Bumrungrad Hospital and will report on this later. It was quite an experience!

Now, on to Laos!

