

MEANDERING THROUGH MAGICAL MYANMAR

WHEN MIKE SMITH TOLD FRIENDS HE WAS GOING TO MYANMAR HE GOT AT LEAST ONE OF THESE THREE REACTIONS: 1) "WOW AMAZING!" 2) "IS IT SAFE?" 3) "WHAT ABOUT THE HUMANITARIAN ISSUES?" NOW HE ANSWERS THESE QUESTIONS AND MORE.

I did find Myanmar amazing and safety was no issue as the problems are in a remote area near the Bangladesh border that is off limits for tourists. The displaced people in North Rakhine State need safe conditions to live in, but tourism usually benefits people from all backgrounds so I made the decision to go.

YANGON CITY HIGHLIGHTS

At Yangon airport, clearing immigration and exchanging money at a competitive rate was a breeze. My guide, Mr John from Myanmar Shalom Travel, was waiting with car and driver.

Traffic in Yangon is a nightmare, but eventually our city tour started at Strand Road a street full of classic colonial buildings from the British era. Mahabandula Park, a short walk away, is a refuge of peace and quiet with the lovely white City Hall dominating one side. You can buy almost any souvenir at the 2,000 stalls in Bogyoke Aung San Market. It specialises in Burmese handicrafts, jade, rubies, gold, art and clothes, but is also great for people watching.

TIME WARP

I stepped back in time at Yangon Railway Station where I watched coolies loading and unloading heavy sacks as trains waited at the platform.

No trip to Yangon is complete without a visit to Shwedagon Pagoda where, for the first, but certainly not the last time, before entering I took off my shoes and socks, as is customary at all temples and pagodas in Myanmar. The glittering stupa, rumoured to be covered with 50 tons of gold and thousands of diamonds, is the

most sacred Buddhist pagoda in Myanmar. It is undergoing a face lift, but still looks stunning.

ON THE ROAD

Leaving Yangon for Bago next morning we were soon clear of traffic and into the countryside. Monks were collecting alms and roadside stalls sold fruit and ceramics. Women and girls covered their faces in thanaka, a natural, environmentally friendly cosmetic made from roots or branches of the thanaka tree, to protect the skin from sunlight.

We made several photo stops including at the four-sided, Kyaik Pun Pagoda, where a young couple with a 45-day old baby happily passed time. Rubber plantations dotted the landscape, road works were a constant irritant and fishing villages provided a welcome distraction.

IT'S A QUESTION OF BALANCE

We finally reached Golden Rock base camp and transferred to a truck where we were crammed in like cattle for an hour long, uncomfortable, ride to the peak and Kyaiktiyo Pagoda. Famous for its





MONKS COLLECTING ALMS



precarious position and religious importance, the huge boulder is covered by gold leaf and delicately balanced on the edge of a cliff. As the sun set it started to get cool. Many devotees rent bamboo mats and woollen blankets and sleep overnight to absorb the good karma, but I stayed at Mountain Top Hotel, perfectly situated a short walk from the pagoda.

At 7:00am we descended, crushed together in another truck stopping at strategic passing points, where stall holders sold food and bamboo items. We met our driver and headed for Mawlamyaine.

RECLINING BUDDHA AND HELL

En route I saw more evidence that religion can make one do crazy stuff! The approach to Win Sein Taw Ya is truly fascinating with hundreds of monk statues lining the road. The shadows are surreal, as is the uncompleted world’s largest reclining Buddha despite ongoing construction over 17 years. The inside of the Buddha contains dioramas of Chinese traditions, folklore and the gruesome depictions of Hell.

After a night at the Cinderella Hotel in Mawlamyaine we boarded a small long tailed

boat for a five-hour ride to Hpa-An, the picturesque capital of Kayin State. Fishermen went about their work and sand collecting boats keep the river navigable. Mountains appeared as we neared our destination.

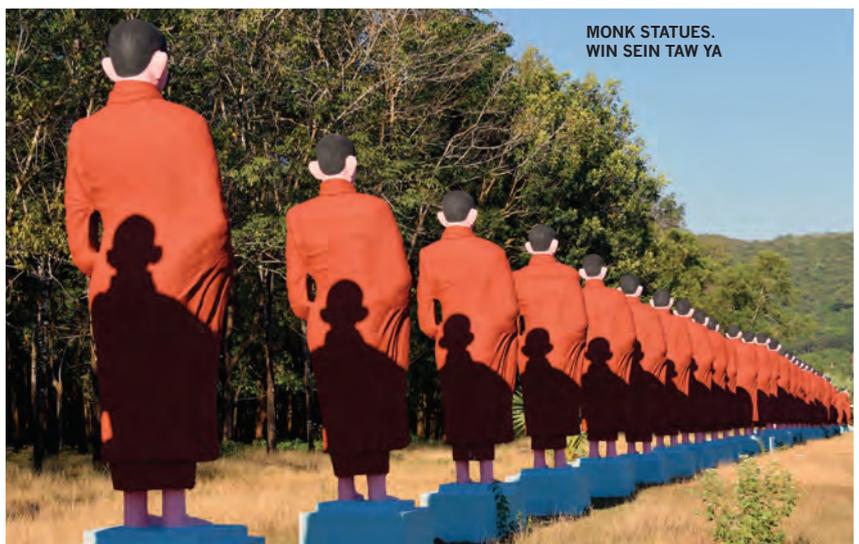
UNIQUE SIGHTS

We made a quick visit to Lumbini Gardens in Hpa an, home to hundreds of neatly lined up Buddha images at the foot of Zwegabin Mountain before admiring the sunset at Kyauk Kalap Pagoda where a large family started smiling, staring and wanting to touch me. It turned out they were from a remote area and had only seen Caucasians in movies previously – photo time!

We spent two nights at the excellent Zwegabin



KYAUK PUN PAGODA



MONK STATUES. WIN SEIN TAW YA



Hotel as we toured Hpa-an. Caves are the main attraction and the bat cave inspired me most. Millions of bats streamed from their cave flying low above my head as the sun was setting. A dozen black hawks had a feeding frenzy on unlucky stragglers.

Next day we returned to Yangon for dinner at the excellent Prime Grill restaurant and a night at the Inya Lake Hotel.

THE ROAD TO MANDALAY

There was no “road to Mandalay” from Rangoon when Kipling immortalized the city in his famous poem. There is a road now, but still I opted to fly. Mandalay is a rather pleasant laid-back city and is the centre of culture and trade. It has some notable attractions including U Bein Bridge and Mingun.

My first stop was at Mahamuni Temple, an important pilgrimage site as it houses the Mahamuni Buddha image, the most highly revered in the country. It is covered in gold leaf foil. Young boys offered gold leaf in preparation for

their monk initiation ceremony. Outside the temple is a whole street where stonemasons can be found toiling away on stone statues of Buddha. The working conditions are atrocious, with little respect for the health of the workers. Many of the statues are incomplete, awaiting specialist carvers to sculpture the face.

U BEIN BRIDGE

U Bein Bridge is the oldest and longest teak wood bridge in the world; 1.2km in length it crosses Taungthaman Lake. In the late

afternoon it is chaotic, but a great experience. Take a brief walk on the bridge, but do be careful. It will be crowded. There are no handrails. People stop without warning for selfies.

It can be nerve wracking, but mingle with local tourists, foreigners and monks on the bridge before shopping at the souvenir stands. Half an hour before sunset rent a boat, relax and enjoy the bridge from the lake as the sun sets behind it. Birds of prey and herons dive for fish. I took dozens of photos. Retreating from the bridge I checked into the superb Magic Hotel and had a cold beer.

MINGUN MEMORIAL

Mingun, located about 11 km upriver from Mandalay on the opposite bank of the Irrawaddy River, was our destination next morning. We took a private boat, but not until I had explored the village set up on the banks of the river. Women carry sand, in baskets balanced on their heads, from the river to collection points, wash their clothes and bathe in the river.

BATS! HPA-AN BAT CAVE





Pigs and dogs roam aimlessly. Getting onto our boat was challenging! It was the fourth boat out, so we had to walk along gang planks from one boat to the next. The journey to Mingun took one hour and on arrival we rented a tuk tuk taxi.

WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN

Mingun was established at the end of the 18th century when King Bodawpaya commissioned a new capital. He had big ideas and in 1790 set about building Mingun Pahtodawgyi Pagoda. It would have been the world's largest pagoda, but only a third of the pagoda was built before a prophecy that the completion of the pagoda would result in the destruction of the country put a dampener on construction. Damage from earthquakes ensured it would never be completed.

Hsinbyume Paya, a spectacular dazzling white monument, was commissioned in 1816 by the grandson of King Bodawpaya, King Bagyidaw to commemorate his favourite wife who died in childbirth. The design, with its seven terraces,

represents Mount Meru, the sacred mountain in Buddhist mythology.

BOAT TO BAGAN

At 6:00am the next morning I began a six-hour bus journey and then spent three hours on a boat to Bagan. In retrospect I should have gone by car, but I was amply compensated when I checked into the Tharabar Hotel that evening.

Old pagodas and temples are the main attractions in Bagan with the majority dating from the 11th

to the 13th centuries. The best time to visit is early morning or late afternoon as the light is best and the temperature is cooler. There are close to 4,000 pagodas and temples so it is essential to be selective.

STUPAS SHRINES & SCULPTURES

Shwezigon is a beautiful 11th century pagoda with a gilded stupa surrounded by smaller temples, shrines and intricate carvings. Ananda is a huge, well preserved 12th century temple with wonderful architecture. With four standing Buddha's sculptures and incredible architecture it is a must see. I took a one-hour horse carriage ride from the car park and loved the dusty trail and views over the river from an elevated path.

On the second day I explored a couple of villages. Minnanthu is an agricultural village with the population of 1,500 living in simple wooden houses. I was the only visitor and had no pressure to buy anything or give tips. Women smoked cheroots containing a mix of tobacco and wood

BULLOCK CARTS. MINGUN



shavings. Bullocks lazed around, a blacksmith was working on a cart wheel and women prepared sesame and peanut oil or sieved rice while others wove or worked on silver and bamboo artefacts.

VINTAGE LUXURY

That evening I flew back to Yangon and spent my final night in Myanmar on a cruise ship moored on the Yangon River. The Vintage Luxury Yacht Hotel with its classic 1920's, retro layout and great location is rebranding itself to appeal to a larger market that fully appreciates its themed, stylish decor.

Myanmar certainly didn't disappoint – it is an amazing place for tourism. It was safe and there were many “wow” moments. And the contribution to the economy was more than just to the hotels listed in the Pocket Guide, but to restaurants, transporters and retailers. ❖



CHEROOT SMOOTHING. MINNANTHU VILLAGE



VINTAGE LUXURY YACHT HOTEL



LONG NECK GIRL WEAVING. BAGAN

Packet Guide



Hotel Yangon
Inya Lake Hotel
www.inyalakehotel.com

Hotel Yangon
Vintage Luxury Yacht Hotel
www.vintageluxuryhotel.com

Hotel Golden Rock
Mountain Top Hotel
www.mountaintop-hotel.com

Hotel Mawlamyain
Cinderella Hotel
www.cinderellahotel.com

Hotel Hpa An
Zwekabin Hotel
hotelzwekabin.zkb@gmail.com

Hotel Mandalay
Hotel Magic
magicmandalayhotel.com

Hotel Bagan
Tharabar Gate
www.tharabargate.com

Travel Agent
Myanmar Shalom Travels
www.myanmarshalom.com