

Summary:

If you ask the Burmese, which country they don't like, they say Myanmar.

If you ask Tourists which country in Asia they like best, it's Myanmar.

Myanmar Travels

2014/2015

Yangon: Steaming hot streets, fumes evaporating from every building and taxis too many to count.

Everything pushes its way through the old narrow streets of Yangon's Chinatown. Walking past some cycle rickshaws that carry their human load one forward and the other backward facing. Chinese style rickshaws maybe, narrow, efficient and the perfect vehicle for the old roads, lined with parked trucks and garbage deposits. The smell and the fumes create a polluted brain; there is no escape from the intensity of people and their creations.

The houses are decorated with growing mold patterns; the sewers are open adding to smell invasions which can be as diverse as the quarters of this town. There are streets dedicated to professions, certain ethnic markets and tourists. Some of the buildings have been renovated but the humidity and exhaust fumes are again chewing on their façades. Small and big temples everywhere, people carrying their offerings to them day and night. There is no pardon, everyone squeezes through and past - in the stores, temples and certainly on the streets. Big bus beats truck, taxi beats motorcycle, motorcycle beats rickshaw - and

everything and everyone on their feet has to dissolve itself to get where they want to go - alive.

In the morning, the fog - mostly created by burned garbage - is lifting slowly, dissolved by the morning breeze and the sun. The curtain opens for another day in this new melting pot of foreign interest and opportunity.

Meanwhile the other side of the **Hlaing River** is pure countryside: ox carts and small little shacks, village life all slow paced just a mile away. The small town of **Dalah** is the entry port to another Burma - the opposite of Yangon's sudden [leap into?] [start in] the 21st century. After you have made it past the harassing taxis and rickshaws at the port, you are on your potholed way to the Stone Age. The snake temple, home of twenty lovely and friendly python snakes - in the care of pink dressed nuns - is something like a live horror movie. Local visitors and tourists are very frightened of the snakes but still they go close, take pictures and make offerings: it's about beating your inner fear. A huge pond surrounds the snake temple where you can fatten the gigantic fishes with a bowl of holy popcorn, sold by nuns - who would certainly kill you, if you forget to take your shoes off.

In one of these villages on the other side of the river, boys played a soccer match - it seemed to be an important game between bunches of 12-year olds. They blocked the whole intersection, occupied the whole market space, fancying bamboo made goals with fishing nets and had an important looking referee. The whole village came to watch and cheer. It was touching to see the importance of this game for everyone living here. In Germany no village would

block their roads to have boys carry out a soccer match at the main market square.

Pottery is done everywhere. There are huge huts made from palm leaves and straw with big ovens for the pottery works. They produce small kitchen items like bowls and tea pots – but also the huge buckets that will contain the daily ration of water for the household. An interesting feature in this country is the earthenware water pots left outside of the houses, for passersby or thirsty spirits to refresh themselves. I have seen that many years ago in Thailand; I am not sure if they still have it. Such a nice gesture to the living things around you – sometimes they also have bowl with water on the ground, for animals passing by.

The villages have different styles of houses, some of them very old and built from hard wood. These structures last, because in the countryside mold is not such a problem: the air does not stand between the buildings like in the city. I was invited into one such house. Inside was an old lady sitting like a Buddha on a plastic chair, folded up like a bony puppet without eyes. The lady just had her 104th birthday and was happy to hear visitors in her home. She suddenly stood up and walked towards me, sitting down quickly on the wooden floor right in front of me. She cannot see a thing anymore, but she was listening and liked to have her hand held. Their family was so proud to have her. She was the most precious person of the household.

Heading back to the city of Yangon, crossing the river at dawn and listening to the announcement of the many different mobile sellers on board of the

ferry, was a nice introduction back into the Burmese interpretation of civilization.

Yangon Harbor now has a couple of cool hangouts for expats and tourists. The sheds were used for storage in former times, and some of them are still in use. One guy took a bundle of dollars and started to transform a couple of sheds, one into an art gallery and another one into a bistro and restaurant. The roughness of the structures was kept, so it still looks like an old shed, and all the life around it makes you feel you are a harbor worker just having a cappuccino and a burger. Rickshaw drivers pick up their customers from there, charging them 2 dollars to go anywhere in Rangoon - people who have just spent 6 dollars for a cocktail here. The clashes between new world and old world are going well - so far. People in general are not happy with the development of their country, they want to go forward faster, more new roads, tearing down the old buildings, opening up media and business with the rest of the world. For them things go too slow. Even though every rickshaw driver has a cellphone as big as tray - they do not have internet access, but they want it. Restrictions apply; access to information is limited.

The world is watching Burma and Burma is watching the world. The 2015 elections will probably create some stir. The surface looks nice, tourists travel in droves to this place. If you ask the Burmese, which country they don't like, they say Myanmar. If you ask Tourists which country in Asia they like best, it's Myanmar.

I arrived in **Bagan** - prepared for tourist crowds like in Angkor Wat, but it was surprisingly empty. The area is vast and accessible by e-bike, bicycles and

horse carts. Locals try to make some business in front of the main temples, selling lacquerware, paintings and long pants for tourists who wear indecent clothing for the temples.

The whole experience is very pleasant, the e-bikes are a bit cheap and most of them run out of steam after 3 hours and leave you in the ditches of Bagan's archaeological site. The dirt roads best version is "dirt" - the nastier ones are sand roads, impossible to navigate with a bicycle and difficult for e-bikes. You can feel the horse cart drivers laughing at you.

As soon as you climb up one of the taller structures, you will see pagodas, temples, sadis as far as you can see, all plopped into the landscape without a certain pattern. The structures have been built hundreds of years apart and most of them have gotten a makeover, from whoever thought they needed one. Most of the Buddhas inside are still intact, replicated or restored, some of them badly. I read that some Indian archaeologists used acid to "clean" the walls of the "old paint" - leaving sad leftovers from the past. Almost like the cleaning lady in Germany who removed Joseph Beuys Fat and Felt installations.

In-between the temples are small farms, where people live in the simplest huts made from palm leaves. They have access to wells but have to carry the water quite far, or buy it from water dealers who deliver by ox cart. The farmers grow peanuts and palm sap for toddy and palm sugar. There are some goats and cows and the whole area seems to have looked like this thousands of years ago. Off the main roads it is quiet, peaceful and pure enjoyable. If you like shade

in the heat, you can nap on one of the pagodas – which I did – or you can soak in the sun. In Rangoon it was hot, in Bagan it gets really cold in the night, about 5 to 10 degrees Celsius. Locals wear woolen hats and gloves, tourists a sweater. I spent 6 days in Bagan, never getting tired looking at the pagodas and landscape, the light is changing the whole scenery, taking photographs was such a pleasure.

There is a Pagoda called “Sunset Pagoda” (yes, keep it simple!). This is the main spot for watching and photographing the sunset. Like a magnet, this huge white Pagoda, where you climb up very high to get the best spot, attracts ALL the tourists at 5pm. You hear a chorus of people saying “Wow” and then the clicks of probably 2,000 cameras going off continuously until the sun is gone behind the hills, the Irrawaddy and the Bagan Temples.

After witnessing something as marvelous as a sunset in a field of temples – the run down starts, all the tourists, many of them very old, have to climb down the small stairs, each step hammered for thousands of years, before the invention of DIN norms, with individual height and width – perfect for fit young monks, and not so pleasant for big fat tourists with shoe size 46.

Bagan's population was forced to relocate in 1990. There are now two “Bagans”, one called “old” and one called “new”. The two parts are a 15 minute drive apart and have developed into substantial tourist towns; many first class resorts with prices of more than 300 dollars a night are booked. The good old backpacker with filthy hair and smelly clothes seemed to be a thing of the past, the youngsters come with

more money in their pockets than the old ones and they impress the local youth. Burmese children imitating western kids attitude and speech is probably the most annoying thing I have witnessed here.

And the presence of military police in full combat gear, with weapons and shields who are positioned on every major intersection. Most of them are playing on their cellphones like the rest of their gadget mad countrymen. I saw them on a mission, all going into a village. The road was blocked immediately for everyone to pass, for sure you will not read in the papers about it. This is all happening while tourists worry about which SPF level they should put on their nose. Freaky.

Food is another worry, it is not the noble cuisine of Cambodia. The curry is pretty nice, if you are lucky, you get good lentil soup, which is more like a chickpea soup. Breakfast is a concept as foreign as drinking MILK and having Honey on your exotic toast. People speak just the smallest fragments of English, this is for me the worst part.

Myitkyina, once a battleground for the colonialists and now won over by the missionaries, mostly American Baptist churches and Catholics, has a strong following of Kachin Nationals and other ethnic minorities. Wikipedia says that Myitkyina is the heroin capital of Asia.

Heroin is locally known as "Number 4". I could not find out what numbers 1,2 or 3 are though.

There are some shady characters running around and I make sure to be back before dark. The hotel I am

staying in is one of the best in the area; still, Wi-Fi and hot water come by the drop and Jesus greets me in the entrance hall. Tourists are a rare sight. Christmas here got me a bit paranoid, people really geared up for it and I missed the Catholic Church invitation from my noodle soup food stall for the midnight prayer service. I wanted to go and take photographs, but I was too lazy and a bit scared to walk through the town on my own past midnight.

The main reason for tourists to come to Myitkyina is the *confluence of the two rivers* who then form the famous **Irrawaddy**. I shared a taxi with a young couple honeymooning from Shanghai. The fare was 60,000 Kyat – so it should have been 20,000 each. But the Shanghainese saw themselves as 1 – and I ended up paying 30,000. I learned that the Chinese version of a fair deal means 2:1.

We also shared for a boat ride on the Irrawaddy – going up each river for two minutes and down the first waves of the Irrawaddy. After that, we were done with the tourist thing and we headed back to the restaurant-lined shore of this natural spectacle. I tried grilled river fish, I took one piece and almost choked on the fish bones. My new temporary Shanghainese friends took over my pre-owned fish, including all bones, with great appetite, fish for free they liked as well. In China, they taught me, people eat the fish bones, because they don't drink milk, it is their source of calcium. A fairytale I know from Japan, seems to stick into people's brains, also in mine.

So we were enjoying the *confluence of the two rivers* as much as a human being can and then drove back and ran with our car over a cute puppy.

I will probably forget the confluence of the rivers in Burma – but never ever in my life the sound of crushing a life under a pair of wheels.

Back in **Myitkyina** I got rid of the Shanghainese Yuppies and ventured out the next morning by foot, back roads only and hoping not to run into a heroin neighborhood. Instead – thanks to the help of Google offline maps – I managed to find the local market and I went crazy with my camera. What a nice place! Directly located at the Irrawaddy, people arrive with their produce at the shore and dissolve into the never-ending stream of people and voices and colors. A feast for my eyes. Yes, there is stinky meat and fish and yes it is crowded – but the north of Burma has won over my heart. The local people interact in such a lovely open way – it was fun to watch how business was done.

The north of Burma is heavily deforested now, it must have been dense jungle before that. The famous **Ledo a.k.a. Stilwell Road** just sliced through. Today some very sturdy iron bridges have been built. I assume this is not to benefit just the locals, but to assure transport of wood and military into and through the area which is still a source for conflict. I just read there were clashes in the northeastern part of India, bordering Burma.

People complain about their government wherever there is a chance, they say the government sells Burma and its fortunes in oil, wood, precious stones, gold and culture to China. I drove past the dam the Chinese are building to get energy from the Irrawaddy. That dam sits right on the top of major tectonic plates and it knowingly dries up the landmark river of

Burma, jeopardizing the lives of locals. It is said that all the energy generated by the dam will be exported to China. China takes over Myanmar and people are very upset about it. The old WWII Stilwell road gets rebuilt and will get ready for business with India and China. No one is happy here that the road gets back to life again. The way this is portrayed in international news is a lot different from what is actually happening here.

Mandalay, one night stopover in this beautiful sounding city. Hoping it would be a little bit like what I thought it was.

I drove one hour from the airport into this gigantic Asian city, with a reconstructed King's Palace in the middle of it and all things around could have been a smaller sized city in China as well.

My hotel was run by Chinese, which gave me mushy carpeted floors and real cheesy interiors.

I saw an amazing sunset and sunrise through my top to bottom windows in the top floor of the "River Pearl" hotel - and my room had a giant bathtub, perfect for girl maintenance after four weeks of travelling.

After Myitkyina I was aiming for some relaxing time at the Inle Lake.

I flew for 30 minutes from Mandalay to Heho and then one hour with the slowest taxi driver the world has ever seen, to Nyaungshwe.

The taxi man was tiny and skinny and he drove this very old shitty car chewing his betel nut with drooling pleasures while he peeled oranges with one hand during his slow drive.

He spoke English very well, he probably still remembers WWII.

I arrived at Inle Lake, paid the government enforced tourist tax at the city entrance of 10 USD – and landed in the middle of a small town, which looked like a Cowboy Saloon shoot out location.

Simple wooden barracks with shops lining the dusty road, filled with traffic of all imaginable kinds and tourists.

The kind of tourists who really feel like they need a really good vacation and they deserve the best time of their lives here.

Couples mostly, from everywhere, women in hot pants and mini tops, guys in shorts and sometimes shirtless and locals all well-dressed are mixing.

Souvenir stalls with locals' handmade fabrics, clothes, bags, pottery and God knows what mixed with hardware stores and money changers.

Another example of things changing too fast and I am sure a lot of the locals do not like what is happening with their hometown, but were never asked.

Inle Lake tourists need to explore things by boat, with each person or couple in their individual motorboat. Tourist happily pollute the air and the lake with fumes and oil from the engines. Literally hundreds of boats leave the jetty every morning to transport foreigners, all bundled up and with straw hats on – into the beauty of Inle Lake. The reality of it: unbearable noise of hundreds of boats on the lake, the *posing for a dollar* Inle fisherman who paddles his boat standing, with legs and arms free dangling – the boatpeople rude and just eager to bring you from one store with local handcrafts to

another so they can get their commissions - this is impressive. It's all part of the deal, all part of the hype for travelling to Burma "as long it's still authentic".

Very authentic was a quiet moment at night where I could visit the installation of the first traffic light ever in **Nyaungshwe** - the main hub for everyone around the Inle Lake. It was all dark, just a couple of men and police officers playing with a freshly installed fuse box at the "main intersection". The red traffic light was illuminating the whole village for at least 50 seconds, before turning successfully to yellow and green. For sure, the next day no one even noticed that the future had arrived. People and their vehicles crossing the main intersection from all sides at the same time, like they did before - and the local police man sitting right at the crossroads enjoying his dark coffee with sweetened milk together with the locals and the world's most lovely fried cookies. They were proud to have a traffic light - and rightly so.

I took a taxi to visit the hill town of Kalaw - some leftover of former colonialism, with British Hill stations...sounded like a good excursion.

First I missed the hills, secondly I missed the colonial flair.

But I enjoyed something which was not on my tourist schedule: the local market in Heho, a couple of kilometers from Nyaungshwe.

It was main market day, the whole place was flooded with people and local goods, noise and fun and colors and tastes and smells.

Ethnic minorities, wrapped in the most stylish costumes, beautiful people beaming with joy and energy.

That is what I missed amongst my fellow tourists at Inle Lake.

Here it was.

I got presents, offers to sit down or smoke local cigarettes with the ladies and drink darkest teas with the traders.

Local people buy and sell gold and precious stone, there are bundles of money laying openly on counters - the concept of stealing is not known here.

Women loaded with produce on their backs breast feed their babies, while chewing betel nuts and looking so cool.

The men sitting at the market stall restaurants, or they also go shopping together.

A rare site in my country, men buying clothes together, considering together which is the nicest belt to wear, enjoying time together while their women run the real businesses.

But I was on the Lonely Planet/Stefan Lose race course: Kalaw.

This is the main destination for people who like to trek from Inle Lake through the countryside - a peaceful walk on the tourist highway.

Thank God I missed that one. Kalaw also has a market, yeah, kind of interesting.

But after feeling a bit sick and shaky I wanted to go back to my little home in the city with the traffic light.

I got a room with a balcony, so morning tea could be enjoyed in the sunshine – covered in blankets, because it is cold in the morning.

Again I took a flight to **Mandalay**, to connect the next day to the main town in the Golden Triangle, Kyaing Tong.

Kyaing Tong (or **Kengtung**) is a strange little town. The Golden Triangle is well known for its opium business, it feels more like a gold digger, border town, and lawless business area with things happening you will never read in the international news. This is the hub for tourists to prove their nerves and stamina with foreignness. Mine weren't so good.

The first hotel I wanted to check in was a brothel, located right at the foot of the main market. The next hotel I checked had bad karma, because the government built it on top of a torn down palace of the former king. The hotel staff were the only ones staying there, it was spooky. Finally hotel number three was livable, the room was mold free and the chickens enjoyed sitting on my gated windows. It also had a nice breakfast room with neon light, bright green curtains and long tables for a communal breakfast in the basement of the house. No tourist under 50 – probably all either retired teachers or insurance brokers. Entering the communal tourist breakfast areas in Myanmar – in general – do not expect anyone to look up or to greet you. Besides my trip to Bhutan, this is another destination where you should **not go** to meet people. The average Myanmar tourist wants to be alone and nasty.

The reason for coming to **Kyaing Tong** are the tribes, the ethnic minorities who live in mountain areas. You can visit them with a local guide - good luck by finding a good one. Mine couldn't tell a deadly poisonous cobra from a blindworm and sounded like a robot with implemented software from the Myanmar Tourist Board. On one of the excursions into the wilderness I took a photograph of a very pretty cobra which was just coming out of the bushes two meters away from my bony ankles. I walked past it, getting my camera settings ready and peacefully and impressed by her beauty took two pictures. In the second shot you can see how her body proportion is already changing - she was building the "hood" - the cobras USP.

Besides that I met some very poor people from the **Eng Tribe** in **Pin Tawuk**, people who live life as in the 12th century and I said Hello to some people from the Akha Tribe in **Wan Pin**. There was a celebration for the rice spirits, a local version of a Harvest Festival going on. These ethnic minorities have nothing and would sell you whatever they have, selling out their personal jewelry, their costumes and instruments ... and I am sure tourists buy it. It was another Myanmar Disney Experience, the guide called Saihtung was contributing to the experience. He was a Shan man, one of the main ethnic groups in Myanmar, his arrogant attitude toward the people we met may have also added to the feeling of a zoo visit. He handed out single wrapped painkillers, soap and shampoo to the locals - gifts for the tribes. They will have shiny hair and clean hands - but probably no use for the pain killers, since they know how to grow "other" medicines. It was a sad experience. Great pictures though.

Back in Mandalay I wanted to do the tourist thing: running up Mandalay Hill, visit the famous Mahamuni Pagoda and do some tourist shopping – buying gold leaves for example.

Luckily I met Mr. Fatty and Mr. Fatty saved my belief in human kind.

Mr. Fatty is a motorcycle driver, a fat one. Most tourists use car taxis – but taking photographs it is much easier to hop on and off motorcycles.

Mr. Fatty and I spend 3 days zooming around Mandalay, talking about politics, tourists, the Chinese and fellow Burmese people.

He showed me his city, he walked with me everywhere and translated.

It was so interesting to see Myanmar from his perspective. He had a shopping bag with Aung Suu Kyi's face on it, his heart stopped every time we got pulled over by traffic police for license checks. He introduced me to some really good restaurants and the community of motorbike taxi drivers of Mandalay. They all stick together, know each other and hope for a better Myanmar after the elections.