

We have been in Myanmar for 2 days now. It is obviously a third world country but is beginning to show signs of the growth of tourism. In some places – airports and shrines – we have seen lots of obvious tourists like ourselves. The cars are mostly new(ish) but the trucks and buses have seen better days. We are fortunate to have some locals to show us around – Myo Win, a colleague Graham met at a conference 22 years ago, and his wife, Mie Mie.

Yangon – our first stop – is like most Asian cities except that it has banned motor bikes and tuktuks; this has resulted in a lot more cars and serious traffic jams. Our hosts have been delightful taking us around Yangon, to the market etc in the morning and then to the Shwedagon Pagoda in the late afternoon. The reason for the late visit is that you are required to walk around the huge complex in bare feet and the ground can get very hot during the day. There is one massive dome surrounded by hundreds of smaller ones and thousands of Buddhas. There were **lots** of people there, some eating their evening meal in one of the shrines.



People on the streets are generally well dressed and more wear traditional local dress than western dress. Both women and men wear a “skirt”, like a sarong, known as a longyi. Women have beautifully patterned longyis with matching tops. This delightful young lady was happy to have her photo taken and the other photo of material is taken in the market.



We are having trouble limiting the amount of food we eat as our hosts like to eat out each day for lunch and dinner. There is also the problem that in many Asian cultures if you have an empty plate you could still be hungry so more food is ordered. As they are doing the ordering we keep finding that extra dishes come that we did not expect. As polite guests we must at least try them. We will need to work this out somehow. The food is great, mixture of Chinese, Thai and Malaysian; rice, soup and curry being the staples. We have tried a few items of street food, including a bunch of herbs (looked like parsley but wasn't) which was dipped in a thin batter and deep fried briefly – it was surprisingly good; also had a snack of spicy battered and deep fried chick peas. Fortunately our

hosts have family that live in the states and know that we westerners need to have food that is carefully prepared so we don't get stomach problems, so we only eat in certified restaurants. Our host is also a GP which could help if needed – hopefully it won't be necessary.

This morning we caught a flight (medium size propeller plane called an ATR72) north to the capital Nay Pyi Taw (Na-pi-tor). Built 10 years ago with the idea of attracting people to the area but it has huge 6 lane highways with 2 cars and 6 motorbikes. Unfortunately nobody told us that the museums were all closed on Mondays so we missed the national, the gem and the military museums.



We spent time in another pagoda – this time with hardly anyone else around and we were able to go inside. This one is all marble and was not hot to walk on. The amount of money spent on pagodas bothers me, given this is a such a poor country, but about 80% of the population are Buddhists and it is important to them to donate to the monks and the buildings to ensure their next life. The next life is more important than the current one.

I also find the notices saying that only “gents” can pray in the inner section of a pagoda bothersome; although our hosts tell me that daughters are just as likely to get educated as sons. This photo shows a modern day monk texting on his phone!

Next went to an area known as the “National Landmark Gardens”. A massive complex which is supposed to show each of the different areas of Myanmar, the type of housing and key features / buildings but it is run down, not finished, not all open and generally looks a bit deserted. Our hosts seemed





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to take this in their stride as this is what happens....just move on.

It is obvious that its only locals that go to the national landmark, we were a bit of a novelty and someone asked to have their photo taken with me. I tried to tell them I was from Australia but I don't think they understood.

Tuesday 9 Feb

This morning we are driving north to Pyin Oo Lwin. I am attempting to write this on the 330km / 5 hour drive; we have a driver and the 4 of us are quite comfortable in a 7 seater van.

We started out at about 7.30 and after some debate about exactly where we were going and which road to take we set off, driving through some outlying villages as children were going to school. Many of them walked 2 or 3 miles (miles and kms seems to be used interchangeably) but some went in a "bus" – actually a small truck with seating at the sides, and a few rode bikes or were taken on a motor bike. Most of them carried a billy can containing their lunch. In the country children go to school from 9.30 to 3.30 but in Yangon they go to either morning or afternoon school. Most wore a uniform of a white shirt and a plain longyi.



The houses in the villages vary in construction, being made from woven bamboo, timber or brick. In the country they are mostly bamboo, a few have tin roofs, but they are mainly thatched. We have passed many bullock wagons with loads of hay, sticks and sometimes people, and a few farmers with a plough being pulled by 2 bullocks. It is strange to be driving along a very long concrete highway with people, including some monks, walking along the edge of the road and sometimes casually crossing the highway. There is also the occasional farmer with a herd of cattle, pigs or goats feeding on the verge.

We have just had a stop for some nice green tea and a bowl of local noodle soup. I was pleased that the conveniences were not squat toilets this time, my knees have trouble coping with them and it's also difficult to make sure your trousers don't get wet! The roadside stop consisted of a fairly conventional western restaurant but also rows of stalls selling fruit and snacks, the most unusual were the bikes with a small burner in a box on the back where they steamed corn or peanuts. Fresh peanuts are very soft and squishy, not hard like we get in Australia.

We now have the smell of jasmin wafting through the car as one of the things on sale was jasmine flowers stung together to hang on the rear vision mirror for good luck.

The country side is getting dryer and less fertile as we go north; many of the trees are barren, not sure if they are dead or deciduous - it is winter here, this means no rain and slightly cooler temperature up to about 30.



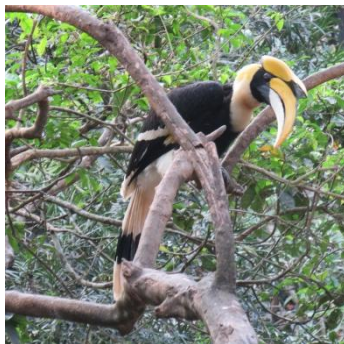
At this point we turned onto a back road that had a really bad surface so I had to give up writing in the car. There was some attempt to fill in some of the holes on the road = this was done by filling the hole with gravel then adding bitumen which had been heated over an open fire on the side of the road. Unfortunately I didn't get a photo of this unique activity.

For a while we travelled along the main road to China which was extremely busy, with lots of trucks, the most interesting was the very loud small trucks from China run by a 1 cylinder petrol engine nicknamed a Chinese buffalo.



Pyin Oo Lwin was used by the British to get away from the heat and bustle of the cities, in particular Mandalay. It has some grand old houses – referred to as the chimney houses – no one but the British would put a fireplace inside a house here in late 1800s.

We were taken around in small horse drawn carriages to see the town, as only 2 can sit inside I chose to sit up top while Graham talked to our delightful guide, July. I figured we are already pretty obvious being the only Anglo Saxons around so I may as well make a real fool of myself. It was a bit tricky getting up and down, not very comfortable, but I had a great view. (There are lots of European tourists in the major tourist areas, but not in all of the places that we are going).



We finished our ride at a large park and garden area, originally established by the British. It was very large so I selected to visit the aviary and the orchid house. This turned out to be a really good choice. The aviary housed a toucan-like bird called a Horn Bill and a peacock that put on a beautiful display for us. The orchids were spectacular in full bloom. The gardens were also home to both white and black swans, some of whom were nesting and had chicks.

This morning we rose early (again!) and drove out of the city to see a cave – not to see the stalagmites and stalactites but to see hundreds of statues of Buddha, monks, animals etc that have been built in the 600m long tunnel into the cave. The tunnel follows a rapidly flowing creek where a path has been built in a strange mix of concrete, brick and tile. A few sections are covered in tin roofing to protect the statues or the worshipers from the dripping water. Like most pagodas in the area you are required to remove your shoes before entering and with no handrails it was surprising that no one fell. Our hosts chose not to enter the cave and Graham does not really like walking barefoot so it was just a lovely young guide, July, and me.





While we were walking in the cave the others were snacking on some fresh strawberries, cherries and macadamias bought from the stalls in the area.

The next stop was a strawberry farm but due to a heavy downpour 2 weeks ago there were not many ripe fruit. This was followed by a visit to the University of Medicine in Mandalay so that Myo Win could meet briefly with his colleagues and Graham could be shown around as the honoured guest. Their facilities are very basic to say the least. I was also somewhat concerned when I went to the toilet there as there was no soap and a shared hand towel. Not a very good example for budding doctors.

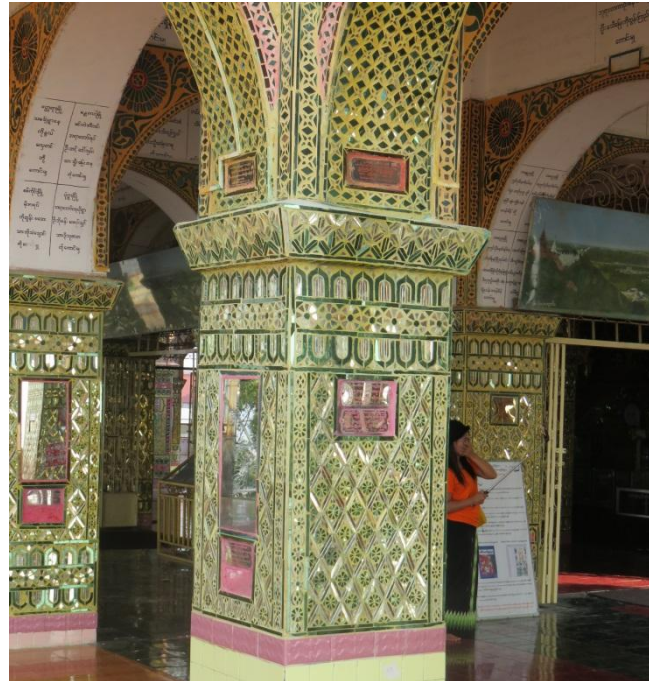
In the afternoon we drove to the top of Mandalay Hill to yet another pagoda, this one slightly different as the walls are decorated with small pieces of glass and there would be a



really good view of the city if it wasn't for the heavy smoke covering the area. The next stop was to see silk

being woven to make longyis. It takes 2 women a month to make one of the intricate patterns and for that they earn \$25US.

There was of course a shop attached to the factory where many European tourists were paying way too much for the goods. I probably paid less than most as I was accompanied by Mei Mei who negotiated the price for my longyis (skirt). It's not really the traditional style as it is a wrap around with a tie waist but at least the material is genuine.



Meanwhile Graham and Myo Win snacked on more deep fried goodies – prawn cracker; veg mix and tofu. I think their tofu is much nicer than we get in Australia as it is made of chick peas. After a visit to an old wooden bridge to see a sunset that got washed out by the smoke we had dinner in a local BBQ café – select the meat that you want and they cook it while you wait. Graham enjoyed a whole baked fish. Myanmar food is generally a bit too spicy and bitter for me, but there is plenty of choice and often the spices are in a side dish to be added to individual taste.



Thursday started with a flight to Heho. Once we had boarded we found that it was not a direct flight, it landed in Bagan after only about 15 minutes, we waited on board while some passengers disembarked and lots more got on. Most of the tourist was have seen have been European –Italian, German, French and British, plus a few Americans; we have not met any other Australians.



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In Heho we were greeted by another delightful guide, Ye. We drove through the country side where we saw the primitive farming methods still used here. We stopped for cows on the road and saw farmers with bullocks ploughing fields. Crops include lima beans, mangos, wheat, rice, cheroot, garlic, potatoes, corn, sugar cane, water melon, tea, strawberries and dragon fruit.

In the villages we saw women doing the washing in the local lake and a ceremony to escort a young boy entering the monastery to train as a monk. And of course lots and lots of temples.



Our destination was Pindaya town where we went to another cave high in the mountain. This one has over 9,000 statues of Buddha inside, most are donated by people and have their name attached. The first section is like a congested maze of statues but it opens up to a larger space scattered with more statues.



After another drive through more villages and countryside, we were suddenly told we had arrived ...it was time to transfer into a long boat. Suit cases were stowed at the front and seats were provided for the soft tourists and off we sped down a canal and out into the magic of Inla Lake. For an hour we watched fishermen and others dragging up weeds to



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build the “floating gardens” at the edge of the lake where they grow vegetables.

The next day was spent on the lake seeing the way people live and visiting silver smiths, weaving looms, umbrella making, another pagoda with market and some ancient temples.

Unfortunately that night both Mei Mei and I came down with severe gastro, so our last day was a quiet one just making our way to the airport to return to Yangon. We were grateful to be travelling with our kind friend who is also a GP and carried with him a number of suitable medications (antibiotics and more) to help Di recover.

This refection seems inadequate in many ways as there were so many other things we saw and did; the variety of transport – from hand carts, pony carts to trucks used as buses, people and goods piled high on the top, bicycles with a side car for 2 passengers; different styles of housing and dress in different locations; interesting food; many helpful people who explained their ways and beliefs. This was truly a trip to remember.

