

My friends,

In January 2013 we went on a 12-day group tour to Myanmar. This is the story, might not be so interesting as my past stories though. Hope you are a little bit more educated about this Asean neighbour after reading this. This is no April Fool.

Hon (1-4-2013)

***1* Why Myanmar**

Why go Myanmar? There is a story. The old name of Myanmar as used by the colonial master was Burma. One day in early 2012, our 6-month-old granddaughter came to visit. This cutie has little hair, so the Hokkien grandma seated her in her lap and was teasing her with, "bo moh, bo moh". At the exact moment my friend Peter called and heard the teasing words. Either Peter's hearing was not good, or his latest i-Phone was of low fidelity, he heard it was "Burma" and said, "Going to Burma eh?". Mmmm, why not? So we booked the Myanmar trip.

***2* Myanmar - an introduction**

Myanmar is about twice the size of Malaysia and 5 times the size of Peninsular Malaysia. So it is quite a big place to explore. It has some 60 million people, about twice that of Malaysia. The biggest city is Yangon with some 4.3 million people and the capital is Naypyidaw, a city specifically completed in 2006 to be the new capital. The country started its civilisation in the 2nd century. Powerful kingdoms started to emerge in the 9th century. It was colonized by the British, in various stages, in the 1800s. It gained independence in 1948. In economy, agriculture still dominates. But one thing it produces is World famous: precious stones like jade and rubies and sapphires. Now you know why my wife also went on this tour.

***3* People of Myanmar**

About 68% of the people are the Bamars but there are many recognised minority tribes, like Shan (9%), Karen (7%), and Rakhine (4%). Most of the bigger minority tribes live in the region named after them, e.g. most Shans live in the State of Shan. Religion wise, most are Buddhists, the Theravada branch, but the Karens are mostly Christians and the Rohingyas (in the State of Rakhine) are Muslims. Women of the minority tribes wear different types of headgear.



***4* Language of Myanmar**

The official language is Burmese, originally used by the majority tribe, the Bamars. The Burmese scripts are shown below. Mostly circles and rings. Looks very difficult to learn for we seniors. We couldn't even read the registration number of our tour bus. But they do offer good calligraphic practice. After the trip I showed the photos of these Burmese scripts to my grand-daughter, now 16 months old, she "shivered" and jumped off my lap. She thought her grandpa wanted to scare her with "cacing". The right photo: safe deposit boxes? Yes, safe deposit boxes for shoes (tourists go bare-foot into the temples) but the objective to include the photo is to show the numbers written in Burmese.



***5* The flower girls**

One thing truly unique in Myanmar is the application of this powder made from the bark of the thanaka tree on the cheeks of the Burmese women, young and old. Some men and boys use it too. This yellow-whitish cosmetic cream has been used for 2,000 years. The merits include cooling sensation, protection from sunburn, smooth skin, and it is mildly fragrant. Supposed to be anti-fungal too. Could challenge your RM 120 a bottle Estee Lauder for sure. The common method of application is to make some simple pattern on the cheeks. Look at the patterns on the 3 girls below. The first two are flower girls, selling flowers at a temple site. The last one sells the "flowers" on her cheeks. Had to tip her lah after taking her photo for such time-consuming job to create the beautiful face.



6 Theravada Buddhism and the monks

Theravada Buddhism is the oldest of the several branches of Buddhism, popular in Sri Lanka and South-east Asia. Most Burmese follow this branch. In Sanskrit it means "the Way of the Elders". The other main branch is Mahayana Buddhism, popular in China, Korea and Japan. In Theravada Buddhism, only Buddha counts. In Mahayana Buddhism there is this concept of Bodhisattva, the enlightened being just before reaching Buddhahood. The Bodhisattvas have delayed their Buddhahood to help the complete enlightenment of others. The most celebrated Bodhisattva in China is Guan Yin 观音菩萨. So we won't see images of Bodhisattvas in temples in Myanmar.

In Theravada Buddhism, leading a monastic life is considered a superior method to achieve nirvana. So most ordinary lay men will choose to become temporary "monks" for short periods in their lives, usually once before reaching adulthood and once after. So there are many "temporary" monks, and nuns. The monk eats once one meal a day. Think about that for a growing teenager. Shown 3 praying monks, 2 worrying monks and 1 studying monk.



***7* Buddha-making industry**

With every temple and shrine and home displaying images of Buddha, the making of Buddha statues is an industry. We visited one such factory: showing an unfinished terracotta Buddha (still under enlightenment), a fully enlightened polished wooden one and a nearly-enlightened bronze Jet Lee lookalike.



***8* In Gold we trust**

In Myanmar many Buddha statues are gilded or pasted with super-thin gold leaves. One of the most heavily gold-decorated Buddha statues is the 3.8-meter high seated Buddha at the Mahamuni Paya in Mandalay. The pure gold cover layer on the body is now 15 cm thick, according to Lonely Planet. Shown this Buddha image, and pilgrims sticking gold leaves onto another gold-famous Buddha image, that at the Phang Daw Oo Paya at Lake Inle. Even the coconut offering is coated with gold paint. In English "god" and "gold" are nearly the same, not sure how "god" and "gold" are related in the Burmese script.



***9* In Spirit we also trust**

Most Burmese believe in the endless cycles of reincarnation. In practical life, they also pray to some specific spirits for specific needs. These spirits are called "nats". The most famous nat shrine is located at Mt Popa in central Myanmar. There are 37 "official" nats worshiped there, including one for gamblers. Shown some of them. And being in a practical World, offering the spirits with money is practical. There is a RM 10 note stuck to the nat on the right. Might have come from our group. Is he the nat for 4D?



***10* Some traditional industries**

We visited various workshops and factories on traditional industries, outfits set up for the tourists, like weaving, silver works, etc. The one worth mentioning is the making of palm spirit, like our coconut toddy. Shown a worker demonstrating the harvesting of palm sap and the brewing of the silvery spirit. And also the making of some dark soya paste. This last one real production, dirty place, not for show.



***11* Tough living for a Burmese**

The per capita GDP is only US\$ 850 a year. A waitress in Bagan probably earns around RM 150 a month. It is a tough life out there. No work because of no FDI. Shown some unusual jobs: "arthritis-inducingly" wading in waist-depth water in the Ayeyarwady River to sell a bunch of bananas, "brain-damagingly" carrying the whole supermarket on her head and "back-breakingly" transporting tobacco leaves.



***12* Local wet markets**

Visited a few of their local markets. Nothing special, except the sale of some field rats and the funny way to cut open a fish to be dried and sold.



***13* Shopping and souvenirs**

Many members bought the Burmese sarong called longyi. Shown some craft items: coconut monkeys, umbrellas and the latest branded LV 4-in-1.



***14* Sunsets in Myanmar**

We were led to view sunsets 3 times on this trip. I don't understand what is so special about sunsets in Myanmar. The sun in Malaysia don't set meh? Or we seniors (many in the group) must treasure sunsets more? Shown a sunset view taken from the upper tier of the Shwesandaw Paya in Bagan, and one at U Bein Bridge in Amarapura. For the second one, photo credit goes to Yazmi Bakar, the only East Malaysian in our group. The sunset at this U Bein Bridge is the best because it is the favourite place of the Moon. You didn't know the Sun and the Moon are that friendly eh? Well, Moon is the name of our local tour guide.



(photo credit: Yazmi Bakar)

**** On this tour we went to the main city of Yangon, the central region of Mandalay and Bagan, and further east to Lake Inle. In between we stopped/stayed at smaller towns like Amarapura, Inwa, Kalaw, Mt Popa, etc. Will highlight some famous sights.****

***15* Yangon - the Shwedagon Paya**

This is the largest and most important Buddhist temple in Myanmar. The main stupa is 99 m high, most part of it solid, standing over a platform 12 acres in size, surrounded by many more smaller stupas, shrines, pavilions and images. It was first constructed between the 6th to 10th centuries. The present layout dated back to 1769. Shown the main stupa, devotees praying in one of the many halls with Buddha images, and washing a Buddha image. The other 2 photos show the other shrines and pavilions.



***16* Yangon - Chaukhtatgyi Paya**

A small temple with a giant reclining Buddha, 72 m long. The most unusual feature is the 108 glass mosaic marks on his soles, said to be related to his reincarnation in the 3 world levels before reaching Buddhahood.



***17* Mandalay**

Mandalay is the main city and economic hub in Upper Myanmar, population about 1.4 millions. It was a former capital in the mid-1800s. It became famous because in 1890, Rudyard Kipling wrote a poem named "Mandalay" and the phrases were later adopted in a song called "Road to Mandalay". The main tourist attractions include the Old Palace and several temples. The most important temple is the Mahamuni Paya where the Buddha statue is considered a "living image". There is a morning ritual of the "washing" of the face of the Buddha. Shown the Old Palace wall, the Mahamuni Paya in the morning and some of the 729 stupas of the Kuthodaw Paya. Each of these 729 stupas houses a stone slab inscribed with Buddhist scriptures. The whole place is known as the World's Biggest Book.



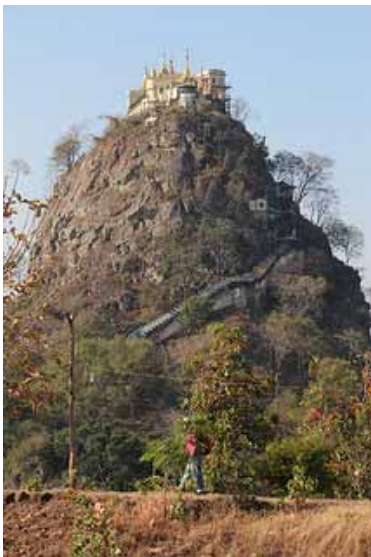
***18* Inwa**

Inwa, a small town in the Mandalay region, was a former capital of the Burmese kingdoms for 360 years over a period from 1365 to 1842. We had a morning tour of the old ruins in 2-seater horse carts over country roads. Shown the 27-m high "Leaning Tower of Nabmyin", and part of the vast Maha Aungmye Bronza Monastery, built in 1822 and famous for its many forms of Burmese architecture.



***19* Mt Popa**

Mt Popa is an old volcano in central Myanmar, 1518 m above sea level. Nearby is a volcanic plug outcrop called Mt Taung Kalat, (Pedestal Hill) 737 m above sea level. For tourism purpose this Pedestal Hill is sometimes called Mt Popa too. On top of this outcrop is the Popa Taungkalat Monastery. It is a Buddhist monastery but at the lower terraces of the shrine are housed the famous 37 nats (spirits) in Burmese folklore, which make the place famous. There are 777 steps in covered terrace to reach the top. A few members, including my wife, were frightened by the number 777 and chose not to go up. Anyway nothing to shop up there. Smart girls! Shown this Pedestal Hill from a distance, a monkey up there and the Tibetan-style stupas at the edge of the rock outcrop.



***20* Bagan - Land of Thousand Temples**

Bagan is an area in the Mandalay region. From the 9th to 13th century, it was the capital city of the Kingdom of Bagan, the first kingdom to unite the regions which later became modern Myanmar. A very historical place. Today it is the name of an area about 26 sq miles administratively called the "Bagan Archeological Zone". The main town is Nyaung U. During its glory days more than 10,000 temples, shrines and monasteries were constructed in the Bagan plains. Today about 2,200 temples remain. These constitute the main driver of tourism in Bagan and Myanmar. This is a place really befitting the name of "Land of Thousand Temples". Shown views of the land and the temples taken from the upper terrace of the Shwesandaw Paya.



***21* Bagan - the Temples**

We had a full day touring the temples. Shown some sample photos: the main stupa of the multi-tier Shwesandaw Paya (founded 1070), the gilded bell-shaped main stupa of the Shwezigon Paya (founded 1102) with a guardian lion in camouflage, and one of the four 9.5 m tall standing Buddha images at the Ananda Pahto (founded 1105).



***22* Lake Inle**

Lake Inle is a fresh-water lake in the State of Shan. It is the 2nd largest lake in Myanmar, with a surface area of about 116 sq km, about half the size of Kuala Lumpur. The average depth of water is only about 2.1 m in dry season and 3.5 m in wet season. About 70,000 people (called the Intha) live in towns and villages bordering the lake. Many live on simple stilt houses of timber or bamboo. It supports a thriving tourism because of the way of life there. An attraction is the floating garden. Farmers gather lake-bottom weeds to form the floating beds of their gardens topped with soil, and anchored by bamboo poles. These gardens would rise and fall with the water level, so no flooding problem. Vegetables are planted on these islands of floating gardens. Shown a floating garden and typical houses.



***23* Lake Inle - the fishermen**

Another touristic attraction at Lake Inle is the unique way the fishermen paddled their boats. They use a single leg to paddle the blade of the oar in a snake like motion. And fishing is an important industry. The common fishes are carps. Nevertheless we did enjoy the BBQ tilapia on consecutive nights.





***24* Lake Inle - what else to see**

Of course more things to see, like sea gulls that may bomb you, or speed boats for tourist to splash you.



(photo credit: Yong Lee Min)

***25* Lake Inle - temples**

More temples to see, what else? The Shwe Inn Thein Paya near the town of Indein is an old temple complex with more than 1,030 ruined stupas. Many are in the process of being restored by individual donors. Shown some old and some new stupas.



***26* The last photos**

Just a few interesting photos to conclude the story: a field of jars in a village near Bagan, a water-melon

seller in a temple in Bagan, and the mobile non-LED "flight information board" at the small Heho Airport at Lake Inle. We took a local flight from Lake Inle to Yangon.



Note - The tour is promoted by YonGo (www.yongo.biz)

Apology: I might have used inappropriate words to talk about Buddha, or monks or stupas. Just a way to make the story more interesting. Nothing disrespectful. My apologies if anyone feel offended.

Thank you for reading to the end.