

# Happy Feet Through Golden Myanmar

*February 21 – March 4, 2007*



**Lai**

Except that its people are extremely friendly and hospitable, whatever else the media and guidebooks say about Myanmar should be taken with a grain of salt. Myanmar is a country of great many smiles and an equal amount of surprises.

### **Mandalay**

One, two, three... eight passengers and crew were strategically buckled in the tiny plane bound for Mandalay, a city that bears the same name as “Last night, I dreamt of Mandalay...”

After landing at the sparse terminal, it was more like a nightmare to learn that the airport had been relocated two years ago and city proper was one hour of solid driving away rather than a quick hop on the bus. Dripping from intense afternoon heat and fuming from early setback, there was not a shred of civilization in sight. Touts started to hover in circles until a local Chinese family took pity and packed us at the back of their pickup truck.

Shaken but not stirred, journey began with visiting the three ancient capitals around Mandalay, Sagaing, Inwa and Amarapura.



Reclined on a hill overlooking lush fields, Sagaing offers a peaceful religious sanctuary. Its many canine dwellers claim strategic strongholds to catch the rare cool breeze that rustles the leaves. Across the Areyarwady River from Sagaing, 267 teak posts support the incredibly ornate Bagaya Monastery in Inwa. Playful children and novice monks study by the low tables in the main hall, which houses an immense Buddha statue and the resident monks.

Also constructed entirely of teak wood, the 1.2km long U Bein's bridge in Amarapura is more of a scenic site. Locals from villages at both ends plow through here, frequently determined women with flat-bottomed wicker baskets containing anywhere from colourful fresh produce and fruits to a make-shift food stall balanced on their heads. As the sun sinks west, the bridge turns into a golden path against the ruby river underneath.

### **Bagan**

If motion sickness is a concern, the 9 hour float between Mandalay and Bagan is both kinder to the rump and more enjoyable than taking the country road. Such a shame that the boat ride does not offer interaction with locals, only foreigners are shuttled on this express boat. Fortunately, there are many bamboo huts along the sandy banks and pasty tourists always manage to receive a few sympathetic



and amused waves.

The atmosphere changes gradually with the approach of Bagan. Life is unhurried, punctuated only with the rise and fall of loose slippers. Horse carts occasionally tap dance through paved streets with riders dangling their feet in the back. Radiant blossoms never seem to tire from sharing their beauty. It is here that thousands of pagodas were built over the last eight centuries to become what is probably one of the areas with the highest concentration of religious buildings in the world.



As a reward for climbing up claustrophobic stairs, squeezing through minuscule passages and enduring burning feet against baking bricks, Bagan unveils itself. It is quite a sensory overload to see that in all directions within sight, infinite red, gold and grey structures weave together with a blanket of green treetops. If seeing the pagodas in sunshine is extraordinary, the experience can only be described as emotional to behold the same view in sunset.



Leaning against a wall, with birds' calling in the ears, different layers of silhouette darken in the distance. The meaning of life is so simple and obvious, to release and appreciate beauty, to seek and enjoy harmony.

### **Nywe Saung**

Nywe Saung is still a relatively remote and off-the-beaten-path beach where free spirits roam, so much so that the travel agents in Bagan blundered on where buses leave from in Yangon. This mistake resulted in a 7 hour snail ride that felt more like an excruciating simmer in a sauna and an overnight stay in Patheingyi.



The express bus that runs between Patheingyi and Nywe Saung turned out to be a rusty vehicle in the shape of a loaf of bread. Before the bursting bus could wobble on its way, the 60 passengers inside and 10 squatters on the roof were entertained with a cat fight between the seat checker and the wife of a passenger. After the entire village got involved and settled the

dispute, the 59 anxious passengers inside and 10 impatient squatters on the roof were driven off with a ticket seller draping from the railing as the door.

Landscape becomes hillier before it suddenly flattens out into a sapphire ocean. A sturdy wind from the Bay of Bengal helps blow the mainstream sun worshippers away but the small fishes in. There is not much to do other than tossing stranded seaweeds back into the water and watching them roll under waves. On fine afternoons, fishermen and women would cast curvy nets to catch fish for making salty paste.



A cheerful Cyclops trishaw driver named Dana became our friend and self-appointed Burmese teacher. Whiling biking back from town, Dana would repeat simple words in both languages followed by a shy giggle. He was honest, hard-working and never failed to point out that the bright moonlight is to thank for guiding him every night.

## Yangon

What makes Shwedagon Pagoda the icon of Yangon? To some, it might be the religious significance; to others, it might be the architectural design; to women, it has to be the 76 carat crowning jewel that perches a mere 98 meters up. At around 6:30pm, the diamond reflects a beam of brilliant light, which can be seen standing at certain spots marked on the ground.



Unlike Mount Popa, visitors can chant, pray and move about without the annoyance of curious monkeys. The pagoda compound is packed with monks in meditation and worshippers dowsing statues with holy water and flowers. There are people constantly streaming in and out, giving Shwedagon almost a bazaar-like intimate feel.

Buddhists believe that everything comes in a full circle, which is certainly true with trips. Rather than breadcrumb though, we left happy footprints.