My Trip to Myanmar (formally Burma)

After Burma gained its independence from Great Britain in 1948, the loosely-knit ethnic coalition that made independence possible quickly unraveled, plunging this Southeast Asian country – consisting of 135 different ethnic tribes – into a seemingly endless succession of civil wars and conflicts, as a myriad of minority groups clamored to establish sub-national autonomies within the newly minted nation. In 1962, using broad civil unrest as an excuse to intercede, the armed forces staged a coup d'etat, forming the first of several military juntas that have controlled the government either directly or indirectly ever since. In May of 2008, bowing to pressure from the international community, the military government made an announcement declaring that a new constitution had been created following a referendum most observers felt was strongly manipulated by the armed forces. This new constitution, among other things, changed the name of the country to the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, and paved the way for multi-party elections. And while the military would still wield considerable power within the country, there was hope nonetheless that long overdue democratic reforms were finally underway.

In 2015, the opposition party known as the National League for Democracy (NLD) won the majority seats in the national elections – the first openly contested elections in three decades – further proof that a 'new day' was apparently dawning in Myanmar. By March of 2016, Htin Kyaw became the first civilian to be sworn in as president in more than fifty years. Aung San Suu Kyi, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate and pro-democracy leader who had been placed under house arrest by the military for nearly fifteen years, became the new state counsellor (a position akin to a prime minister). Internationally, optimism was growing that the military's grip on Burmese society would soon loosen. Surely, further democratic reforms were on the horizon.

Well, not so fast…

When the military decided to hand over control of the government it didn't do so for any altruistic desires to introduce real democracy to

Myanmar. In 2008, the country was reeling economically from an international economic boycott designed to force the isolationist military government to change its course. In order to safeguard their political power the new constitution was wrought with stipulations that favored the armed forces, including guaranteed seats in the new legislature and veto power over future constitutional amendments. In addition, the Ministry of Home Affairs was placed squarely in the hands of the military. Internal security matters – and this includes the administration of the national police forces and intelligence agencies – became the sole domain of the armed forces. At any time, under the guise of *national security*, the military could do as it sees fit.

A very stark 'case in point' is the apparent genocide underway in the Rakhine State. According to the United Nations, since August of 2017 hundreds of thousands of minority Rohingya Muslims have been forced to flee into neighboring Bangladesh following a systematic ethnic cleansing campaign being conducted by the military together with a well-organized group of nationalistic Buddhist supporters. Ironically, the government of Aung San Suu Kyi is being criticized internationally for not doing anything about the genocide, when in reality the military not only initiated this action, but also used a deceptive online campaign on Facebook intended to stir up national hatred towards the Rohingya, undermining the civilian government in the process. Short of inviting another coup d'etat, the civilian government seems to have its hands tied. *So, it begs asking, what the hell has really changed in Myanmar*? This is one of the things I wanted to find out, if possible.

As far back as the early nineties, the military government expressed an interest in encouraging tourism, but due to its authoritarian policies (and continuing ethnic strife) traveling within the country was heavily regulated and restricted. Following the country's recent 'democratic reforms' a new emphasis has been placed on tourism despite lingering military campaigns, and specific regions of Myanmar have been developed for international visitors; these included all the places I visited.

My companion on this trip was Debbie Benson, a fellow Floridian I met on a previous tour of Morocco. Debbie, who lives in Tampa, works as a claims data analyst for a health insurance company. For years we'd been discussing the possibility of taking another trip together but couldn't decide on a location. Finally, we agreed to visit Southeast Asia and compromised on Myanmar. The travel company we chose was Overseas Adventure Travel

(also known as OAT). Besides offering an excellent itinerary, OAT limits the number of travelers on their tours to only sixteen. We found the smaller group size *very* appealing. In fact, there were only ten of us on this tour and we bonded almost immediately.

When we booked the trip the incident in the Rahkine State hadn't yet escalated and news about the extent of the military campaign against the Royingha Muslims was only beginning to trickle out. I'll admit, I was a bit conflicted about going, but I wanted to give the government of Aung San Suu Kyi the benefit of the doubt. I mean, the woman was a champion of the oppressed, having been a prisoner of conscience and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, I couldn't believe for a moment that she would have sanctioned such a brutal act against her own people. In addition, there were conflicting reports of a Royingha terrorist group attacking and killing policemen, which preceded (and supposedly necessitated) the military response. But, in the end, it was my overall curiosity about this exotic, beautiful country – isolated for so many years – that appealed to me. I would be lying if I said I wasn't excited about going. Myanmar seemed like a true adventure, in almost every sense of the word.

Debbie and I were able to purchase our airfare separately through Emirates Airline, saving us roughly $500 apiece on the travel fare. We needed to apply for a visa, as well, which cost an additional $90 with a visa agency recommended by OAT. I was up-to-date on my travel vaccinations but visited my doctor for a preventive flu shot and a prescription for Xanax (to combat my airplane claustrophobia). My only other prep for this tour was to register online with the State Department's STEP program (once enrolled, the US government will be aware of your impending travels in case something goes awry, and will send you updates about your destination via email…*a free service I highly recommend to all my readers*). My only real concern was the weather. We would be arriving in Myanmar at the tail end of the monsoon (or rainy) season and I was hopeful the weather would be nice by the time we got there. And for the most part, it was. A bigger concern, though, was the weather in Miami. September is a very active part of the hurricane season down here and I prayed my flights would not be affected by inclement weather. Last year, Hurricane Irma struck South Florida just three days before my trip to Russia and I almost missed the tour.

In the very early hours of September 26, 2018, I took an Uber service to Ft. Lauderdale International Airport to begin my exhausting 27-hour journey

to Myanmar. I would be meeting up with Debbie later that morning at New York's JFK International Airport for our Emirate flights to Yangon.

Days One and Two

My Jetblue flight arrived in New York City at 8:15am. I was able to check my luggage with JetBlue from South Florida all the way through to Yangon (due to the airline's affiliation with Emirates). My checked bag would need to be handled by two separate airlines and having experienced the nightmare of losing my luggage after a connecting flight I was more than just a tad concerned. I kept my fingers crossed. Fortunately, every bad traveling experience has proven to be a valuable learning curve. For this tour I had purchased a rather expensive backpack that unzipped on the side like a regular piece of luggage and was roomy enough for me to comfortably secure up to seven days worth of clothing and all my technical gizmos. If my luggage was lost I could forego it and live out of my backpack for the rest of the trip. *Live and learn*.

At JFK I transferred to a new terminal building, picking up my boarding pass at the Emirate Airlines counter before proceeding through the incredibly long security checkpoint. While waiting on line I got a text message from Debbie telling me she was already going through security. She had recently applied for the TSA Pre-check (at a cost of $85 for five years) allowing her to by-pass the regular – and heavily congested – screening procedure most American travelers are subjected to. I looked around for her but was unable to spot Debbie in such a large crowd. We caught up with one another near our departure gate. It was a wonderful reunion. Although we'd been communicating for several years now, we hadn't actually seen each other since our tour of Morocco back in 2013. After a big hug we sat down to wait for our flight to Dubai, catching up on both new and old times.

We departed at noon, about half an hour behind schedule. The flight lasted nearly 13 hours but was quite comfortable, overall. The seat next to me was empty so I was able to stretch out. Emirate is a wonderful airline; their Airbus planes have roomier seats in coach than other carriers, with an excellent food service and video entertainment system to keep one preoccupied. I watched one movie (the latest *Star Wars* flick) and a series of television episodes, read a little bit and managed to sleep on and off throughout the trip. The flight passed *relatively* quickly. When we reached Dubai, Debbie and I had to quickly maneuver the terminal buildings to reach our connecting gate. We arrived just as they were preparing to board. The five-hour flight to Yangon was on a smaller Boeing jet, but the plane was half-empty so once again I was able to stretch out comfortably and relax. I saw a hilarious movie (*Stalin is Dead*) and slept some more. We finally touched down at Yangon International Airport at 5:10pm (their time) on Day Two of our tour.

Yangon International Airport is the largest and busiest international airport in Myanmar, servicing approximately 30 international carriers and all of the country's domestic airlines (which number 10 at the moment). Originally a British RAF airstrip, the airport was expanded and in recent years modernized to accommodate the growing demand in travel to Myanmar. Debbie and I arrived at the very beginning of the peak tourist season (October to March) and had to wait an exceptionally long time at the luggage carousel to retrieve our bags. The flight we arrived on was continuing to Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and perhaps that added to the delay.

Finally, with luggage in tow, we proceeded through the immigration gates and were met by our trip leader, Bunny, and an accompanying OAT assistant. As is customary with OAT tours we had received a stateside welcoming email from the trip leader (and a follow-up phone call), giving us details about what to expect upon arrival and inquiring if we had any questions about the upcoming tour. Bunny was in her late twenties, very fluent in English and was primarily the reason this trip turned out to be one of the best guided tours I have ever taken. At first, her adorable youthful appearance and diminutive size (I don't think she was quite five feet tall) made me somewhat skeptical about her expertise, but throughout the tour she exhibited the seasoned skill of a much older, and wiser, tour guide. She took it upon herself to ensure that we were culturally 'engaged' while in Myanmar, to an extent I have never experienced before. But I am getting ahead of myself here.

Bunny told us we were waiting for several tour members who were arriving from a pre-trip extension to Laos. Debbie and I took this time to exchange some dollars into *kyats* (the local currency). The exchange rate was 1,530 kyats for one dollar. I had no idea how much I would be spending on this tour and opted to cash $200(US) for starters. I received a wad of cash totaling more than 300,000 kyats. I felt rich. As it turned out, the cost of everyday life in Myanmar was relatively inexpensive (at least for tourists) and I never had to change any more dollars during the trip. After waiting for roughly 20 minutes or so, Bunny informed us there was some kind of delay with the other tour members so she led Debbie and me outside the terminal building and put us in a taxi van and told the Burmese driver to take us to our hotel.

Yangon International Airport is located in the township of Mingaladon some 15 kilometers (or roughly nine miles) north of central Yangon. It was already dark outside when we left the airport, so the drive into the city didn't offer a good view of our surroundings. We traveled south along what I believe was Pyay Road for most of the trip. Traffic was very heavy; I assumed because it was rush hour. As we entered central Yangon's city limits the streets reminded me of what the Philippines looked like back in the mid-1980s when I was serving in the Peace Corps. At one point we veered to the left, getting off Pyay Road, and crossed in front of the famous Shwedagon Pagoda, which was beautifully illuminated against the night sky. We would be visiting this site the following morning. The taxi drive took just over an hour to reach the Chatrium Hotel Royal Lake on Natmauk Road, and we were surprised to discover Bunny and the other tour members arriving at the same time (their driver must have taken a short-cut).

Bunny collected our passports in the lobby for the hotel registration and within a few minutes she was handing out our room card keys and the itinerary for the following day with instructions on breakfast times and where to meet for our orientation meeting. She made it brief because she knew we were all exhausted from our long flights. The group split up for the night. My room – like all the lodgings on this tour – was very comfortable, with a sizeable modern bathroom and a nice view overlooking the hotel's large pool area and Kandawgyi Lake just further south beyond Natmauk Road. I busied myself for an hour, sorting out my luggage and the clothes I would be wearing over the next few days. Before going to bed I took a nice hot shower and popped a Xanax. I was sound asleep by 9:30pm…

Day Three

Myanmar is 11.5 hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time, so I was plagued by lingering jet lag throughout the trip. But on this particularly morning I awoke at 5:00am feeling fully rested after nearly eight solid hours of sleep. Chalk it up to the Xanax, I suppose. As per my usual morning routine when traveling, I quickly made (instant) coffee and sat down to write in my journal, intermittingly watching the BBC international news broadcast on TV. I later shaved, showered and got dressed, meeting Debbie in the hotel restaurant for a delicious breakfast buffet at 7:00am. I have a tendency to go light on breakfast my first day in-country, hoping not to shock my system by introducing new foods right away. I ordered a veggie omelet and helped myself to some fruit and yogurt and a slice of French bread.

After breakfast, I returned to my room to use the bathroom and brush my teeth. I prepared my small backpack, a separate one that I stow in my luggage for the day's sightseeing events. I packed my camera and batteries, a street map of the current locale, a pen and pad for note-taking, a bottle of water, a bandana, chewing gum and a small supply of Advil and anti-diarrhea medication…oh, and a roll of toilet paper. *Live and learn*! At 9:00am I went down to the lobby to meet up with the rest of the group. I could tell right off the bat this was a seasoned bunch of world travelers: *nobody was late*. Bunny led us to an upstairs conference room within the hotel where we had our welcome orientation meeting. Accompanying Bunny was her boss, Frankie, who served as the Country Manager in Myanmar for OAT. He would be traveling with us for the next several days. In addition to helping out any way he could, I think Frankie was primarily there to observe Bunny in her role as trip leader.

We sat around a conference table. Bunny began the meeting by welcoming us to her country and formally introducing herself and Frankie. She told us she'd been with OAT since 2014, but had worked in the travel business prior to that. She had a college degree and was also fluent in

German and Korean. Bunny currently lived in Yangon with her younger brother. We then took turns going around the room introducing ourselves and telling the group why we had chosen OAT as our tour company.

Besides Debbie and I, the other tour members consisted of Carol (from California), Carleen (from Missouri), Theresa (from Pennsylvania), Nancilu (from Texas), Mark and Merle (from Illinois) and Bill and Sandra (from New Mexico). As I mentioned earlier, this was a well-traveled and friendly bunch, and we bonded almost from the git-go. The reasons given for why we had selected Overseas Adventure Travel varied, but the key things seemed to be the small group size, the unique cultural experience OAT tries to provide on each trip, and the fact that OAT is one of the few guided tour companies not charging a single supplement fee, which really saves the solo traveler a lot of money.

Bunny mentioned that tourism in Myanmar was a fairly new industry, officially encouraged when the country opened up in 2010 following the adoption of the new constitution. Sadly, though, the recent troubles with the Royingha Muslims in the Rahkine State was having a negative impact on tourism overall. She also went over the itinerary with us, explaining in some detail what we could expect in certain parts of the country and preparing us for our very early morning wake-up calls on the days we needed to go to the airport (this tour included four in-country flights). She said we would be utilizing a number of local transportation methods throughout the tour, from buses to trains to boats. Bunny also talked about our visits to the pagodas. Myanmar has thousands of pagodas…(and by the end of the trip it felt as if we'd seen every last one of them!)… and there is a specific dress code one must observe when entering these religious sites: no shoes, no socks and no bare shoulders or knees. In Myanmar, pagoda dress code observance is not simply a rule of etiquette: *it is the law*. This is why it is often recommended to wear sandals or flip-flops (and avoid shorts) if traveling through Myanmar. I'm almost ashamed to admit this, but the frequent taking off of our shoes and socks proved to be an irritating little chore by the end of the tour.

Bunny wrapped up the orientation meeting by discussing where we could safely exchange dollars or use ATM machines and a heads-up on the WiFi situation within the country (the best reception seemed to be in Yangon and Mandalay). She also mentioned that most of our meals would consist of traditional local foods, which would vary depending on what part of the

country we were in. I will discuss Myanmar cuisine later in this journal. Before ending the meeting, she had us write down our expectations for the tour and collected them for further review. OAT does this on all of its guided tours and I think it aids the trip leaders in organizing specific outings that might be of interest to the individual group members. Bunny definitely succeeded in this regard.

By 10:00pm we boarded an awaiting tour bus for our only 'scheduled' sightseeing visit of the day: the Shwedagon Pagoda. This was the first guided tour I've taken that included large blocks of free time. Most of our afternoons or early evenings were open, but Bunny always had suggestions and/or optional activities planned. This is what made the trip so special in my book. Originally, when OAT began doing tours in Myanmar they packed each day with numerous sightseeing stops, creating a hectic pace that apparently proved too taxing for the average OAT traveler – (who, based on my limited experience, appears to be a retired American between the ages of 65 and 80) – so the tours were scaled back to include more free time, but this space is often filled with suggested activities, providing for some very unique (and unscripted) cultural experiences.

All of the air-conditioned buses used on this trip were big and comfortable. Since there were only ten of us (and the guide) we had plenty of room to spread out. I am just over six feet tall and need a lot of legroom, so I was particularly grateful. In addition to the driver, each bus had an assistant who handed out bottled water, helped tend to the luggage and was generally useful in assisting us on and off the coach and keeping an eye out for us during our scheduled stops. At times, the driver and assistant were utilized to take us to the places or activities that Bunny suggested for our free time. We left the hotel shortly after 10:00am and slowly made our way into the never-ending flow of vehicular traffic along central Yangon's city streets. It didn't seem to matter what time of the day it was, traffic was *always* heavy. Luckily, the Shwedagon Pagoda was a relatively short distance away. During the drive, Bunny taught us one very useful Burmese word: *mingalaba*. It means a combination of 'hello', 'goodbye' and 'auspicious wishes'…the perfect word/greeting for any occasion. The group quickly memorized it and we spent the next two weeks *mingalaba*-ing everybody, and getting *mingalaba*-ed in return. Burmese people are extremely friendly, and nothing brought a smile to their face faster than a foreigner exclaiming: "*Mingalaba*!"

As we inched our way through traffic, Bunny took this opportunity to give us a brief history of Yangon:

The city's origins date back to the 11th century when it was a small fishing village called Dagon, beginning as a small settlement centered around the original Shwedagon Pagoda. The inhabitants were the Mon people (one of the earliest ethnic groups to inhabit Southeast Asia). In 1755, King Alaungpaya, founder of the Konbaung Dynasty that united all of Burma, conquered Dagon and renamed it Yangon, greatly extending the city. Eventually, the British would take control of Yangon during the Second-Anglo Burmese War in 1852. Renamed *Rangoon*, the city was converted into a colonial capital, becoming the political and commercial hub of British Burma. Following independence, an active campaign by the military government (at times bordering on xenophobia) tried to erase all vestiges of Anglo-Burmese culture, and many British-named places reverted back to more traditional names. In 1989, the city became Yangon once again. Despite the military government's efforts, though, the city's original colonial center has remained incredibly intact. Yangon has the largest number of colonial-era structures in all of Southeast Asia.

The city is situated in the southern part of the country, at the convergence of the Yangon and Bago Rivers, roughly 19 miles (30 km) west of the Gulf of Mottama, which opens into the Andaman Sea. It is the largest city in Myanmar, with an estimated population hovering close to 8 million people living within the city limits and its surrounding urban and rural areas. Since independence, about a half dozen or so satellite towns have sprung up around the city's outskirts, increasing the territory of Greater Yangon to nearly 230 square miles (or 600 km). But outside the city center itself, the current infrastructure in many of these towns is woefully inadequate. Over the past twenty years a serious effort has been initiated not only to modernize Yangon, but also to preserve its past. The city's skyline is a curious mix of gilded Buddhist pagodas, hundreds of British colonial structures (many still in need of major renovating) and a growing collection of newer high-rise apartment buildings and condos. This is not a chic, cosmopolitan town – there are no skyscrapers or ultra modern business centers (yet) – but Yangon has its own charm and appeal.

Although the city has been slowly modernizing, many parts of Yangon still lack basic municipal services like regular garbage collection and uninterrupted 24-hour electrical service. All of our hotel rooms came

equipped with emergency flashlights in case of power outages (when this happened, power was usually restored by generators within minutes). Most tourists – this included us – usually stay within the city center area, not too far from the downtown commercial center, in the more affluent sections of Yangon. The streets here are well maintained and clean, and you will see rows of modern eight-story apartment dwellings or even taller condo buildings.

Yangon served as the capital of Myanmar until 2005, when the military government decided to move the country's administrative offices to the newly planned city of Naypyidaw some 199 miles (320 km) north of Yangon. Initially, the military gave no reason why they chose to move the capital, but foreign newspapers have speculated that Naypyidaw is more centrally located than Yangon, with a better transportation hub to surrounding states, including those with lingering ethnic strife and civil disturbances, which allows for a more rapid military response time. Another factor could have been climate change; Yangon is vulnerable to fierce storms like Cyclone Nargis that struck in 2008, killing over 100,000 Burmese. Later, the official military explanation for the capital change was due to Yangon's congestion (and to be honest, they had a legitimate point). But despite losing its title as the capital of Myanmar, Yangon is still the country's intellectual heart and soul (boasting more than two dozen colleges and universities) and the economic hub of the nation.

After exiting the hotel grounds our driver turned right onto Nat Mauk Street and we traveled west along the perimeter of Kandawgyi Lake, one of the two major lakes in Yangon. Actually, the lake is a man-made fresh water reservoir constructed during British colonial times, filled by pipes that channel water from Inya Lake (the largest in the city and also built by the British) just to the north. Kandawgyi Lake is not very deep but it covers 150 acres (60 hectares). The water had a greenish hue that reminded me of split-pea soup. Surrounding the lake is the Yangon Zoological Gardens, various nature trails and an amusement park. On the eastern shoreline of the lake is a beautiful concrete replica of a Burmese royal barge called the Karaweik, which houses a buffet restaurant. We rounded the lake on its western side and made another right onto U Htaung Bo Road, following the morning traffic until we reached the Shwedagon Pagoda a few minutes later. We would spend the next hour and fifteen minutes exploring the grounds of this amazing complex.

The Shwedagon Pagoda is Yangon's most famous landmark and a national icon. Built atop Singuttara Hill just west of Kandawgyi Lake, this 326-foot tall (99 meters), beautifully gilded pagoda dominates the city's skyline. It belongs to the Theravada Buddhism sect, the oldest branch of extant Buddhism, and is considered to be the most sacred pagoda in all of Myanmar (not a small boast when you consider the number of pagodas in this country). The term 'pagoda', in this case, is a bit misleading. The Shwedagon Pagoda is actually a massive stupa covered in gold; an impressive site from whatever angle or distance you see it from. The difference between a stupa and a pagoda is that stupas are sealed burial or reliquary monuments, while pagodas can be *entered* and serve as both shrines and temples. Inside the enormous Shwedagon Pagoda are believed to be relics of four different Buddhas – (there are 28 Buddhas in the Theravada tradition) – which is why this is such a sacred and venerated site. I have seen large stupas before, primarily in Nepal, but this one was quite exceptional. Scaffolding equipment surrounded the bell section of the stupa and as we got closer the maintenance workers clinging to those scaffolds appeared almost ant-sized against the background.

Buddhist legend dates the Shwedagon Pagoda back more than 2600 years, when two merchant brothers met the Gautama Buddha (the one the world is most familiar with) and were given eight of his hairs to take back to Burma. The Burmese king at the time enshrined the hairs inside a golden temple with the relics of the other three Buddhas. But this legend differs greatly from hard core facts; archaeologists and historians agree that the Mon people – who dominated southern Myanmar for centuries and were responsible for the spread of Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia – probably built the original Shwedagon Pagoda on Singuttara Hill some time between the 6th and 10th centuries. The actual date is difficult to pinpoint because fires and earthquakes have damaged the stupa, causing it to be rebuilt (or renovated) numerous times over the past millennium.

Beginning in the 13th century, Mon rulers began increasing the height of the stupa until it reached 131 feet tall (or 40 meters). In 1768, following a massive earthquake that collapsed the top portion of the structure, it was reconstructed to its current height. The tradition of *gilding* the Shwedagon Pagoda began in the 15th century. The whole thing is estimated to be covered in 27 metric tons of gold leaf. All of this gold has been donated by the faithful over the centuries. Even today, the act of donating gold leaf to

maintain the stupa – and many other religious structures nationwide – is a common practice in Myanmar.

The uppermost top of the structure, known as the *hti*, is nothing short of remarkable, covered by 1,065 golden bells and encrusted with over 5,400 diamonds and thousands of rubies, sapphires and other precious gems. Resting at the tippy top is a sparkling 76-carat diamond. *Wow*. Bunny joked that Burmese people are fond of shiny things; well, let me tell you, this was one *huge* shiny thing. The Shwedagon Pagoda rests on a plinth (or pedestal) of bricks covered by gold plates. Above this are a series of terraces that only males and monks are permitted to climb, and above that is the bell-shaped part of the stupa which slowly tapers upwardly and is decorated with carvings of a turban band, inverted alms bowls and lotus petals. The stupa continues to rise, narrowing in the process to a section known as the *banana bud*, upon which rests the umbrella crown, followed by the vane and finally the very peak of the structure called the *diamond bud* (where the 76-carat diamond sits). And every inch of what I just described is covered in layers of gilded gold or gold plates. Again, *wow*.

Equally impressive for me was the large complex surrounding the entire structure, the area where visitors are allowed to walk. The Shwedagon Pagoda sits atop a 114-acre (46 hectare) platform on Singuttara Hill. On all four sides of the complex are shaded entrances that lead up to this platform, each one guarded by a pair of giant *chinthe* statues (lion-like creatures). The main terrace, or platform, is covered in white marble tiles. Along this terrace, which wraps around the golden Shwedagon Pagoda, are a dizzying collection of multi-shaped pavilions and worship halls filled with Buddha images, both small and very large, decorated in a kaleidoscope of colors and gold. I don't recall which of the four entrances we took, but upon reaching the main terrace the visual impact of it all was quite spectacular.

As soon as we entered the main terrace, Bunny had us gather near a bodhi tree (supposedly grown from seedlings of the original bodhi tree where the Gautama Buddha received Enlightenment). She gave us some historical perspective on the site and explained the general layout. We were then given over an hour to either roam on our own or follow her as she circumnavigated the Shwedagon Pagoda in a clockwise direction (the customary pathway) while filling us in on the various structures and stations surrounding the massive stupa. Earlier, before we could even take the entrance ramp up to the main terrace, we had to remove our shoes and socks,

and I now understood why tour companies scheduled their visits to the Shwedagon Pagoda for early in the morning: the glaring sun causes the marble tiles to heat up and maneuvering the main platform becomes an exercise in trying to find the shadiest pathway available. Luckily, there were many temples and pavilions to duck into when our feet needed to cool off.

We walked clockwise around the entire Shwedagon Pagoda, taking in what can only be described as the sheer visual cacophony of the complex. In the intricately decorated worship halls surrounding the stupa, people were kneeling in prayer in front of enormous Buddha statues. Around the base of the Shwedagon Pagoda itself, which rises on a platform 21 feet above the main terrace, are a continuous series of smaller stupas and other structures lined with Buddha images. Most of these smaller structures are also gilded. There are four directional shrines, as well, each with a statue of four different Buddhas (Kakusandha, Konagamana, Kassapa and the most well-known Buddha, Gautama).

In addition, we encountered 12 planetary posts surrounding the base of the Shwedagon Pagoda. The vast majority of Burmese people are Buddhist with a good smattering of Hindu astrology thrown into the mix. Myanmar astrology recognizes nine planets: the Sun, the Moon, Mars, Jupiter, Mercury, Venus, Saturn and two Hindu shadowy planets known as Rahu and Ketu. Eight of the planetary posts surrounding the Shwedagon Pagoda symbolize the astrological signs of the seven-day week (there is a different astrological sign for each day of the week with Wednesday divided into morning and evening). It is important for Burmese people to know what day of the week they were born so they can go to that particular post to worship and/or make offerings or ask for blessings. Each of these ‘week day’ signs has a designated animal or mythical creature attached to it. I was born on a Friday, so my planet would be Venus and my animal sign the fearsome, *um*, guinea pig.

Before leaving the site, Bunny took us to the small museum located on the western side of the platform which details the history of the Shwedagon Pagoda and displays enlarged photographs of the magnificent jewels that decorate the top of the stupa. I’m pretty sure I can speak for the rest of the group when I say this morning’s excursion was definitely one of the many highlights of the tour, and if you travel to Myanmar you should definitely

put the Shwedagon Pagoda on your must-see list. It is a truly an amazing place.

By 11:30am we were back on the bus heading south towards the downtown area for an informal cultural stop at a local mosque near Bo Aung Kyaw Street. The military crackdown on the Royingha Muslims in the Rahkine State was having a devastating affect on the tourism industry, and I think Bunny wanted us to get a better understanding of the Muslim community in the country by setting up a question and answer session with the elders of this particular mosque. It wasn't a spectacular temple – like many that I have seen worldwide – a rather nondescript building situated between commercial and residential structures on a busy street, but the attendees were very warm and inviting. We were allowed to enter and take pictures of the modest prayer hall and *mihrab* (the ornately decorated, semi-circular wall indentation that faces Mecca) and the adjoining *minbar* (the raised platform from where sermons and speeches are given). Red rugs with the woven image of a large domed mosque covered the floor. When we arrived we found several men prostrated in front of the mihrab in prayer while others sat reading from what I assumed was the Koran. It must have been close to midday prayer because the hall was beginning to fill up.

The elder members of the mosque arranged several chairs for our group around a long table in the lobby in front of the prayer hall, and before long a growing crowd of curious worshippers and on-lookers surrounded us. With Bunny serving as interpreter, the imam and others fielded questions from us. This was one of those unscripted moments throughout the tour that made the trip truly unique. In this highly militarized country, accused of committing genocide against one of its Muslim tribes, here we were sitting down with local Muslims and being allowed to ask them how they felt about it. In fact, I think we were a bit hesitant to start the session not knowing what were the appropriate questions to ask. I mean, was it possible that government security agents were in the crowd taking down notes? But after a round of awkward introductions, our group began asking hard and fast questions. Basically, we wanted to know how Burmese Muslims felt about the situation in the Rahkine State? Did Muslims feel threatened throughout the rest of the country? What did they think was necessary to resolve the current crisis? And as shocked as I was that we'd been allowed to even ask these questions, I was more amazed by their honest and passionate responses.

The imam of the mosque (I believe he was the imam, anyway) gave us a brief historical accounting of Islam in Myanmar. Almost 5 percent of the country's entire population is Muslim. Arab traders who entered the Irrawaddy River delta on their way to China around the 8th or 9th century first introduced Islam to the area. The Arab merchant seaman who either settled or got shipwrecked in the region ended up marrying into local ethnic tribes and propagated the religion. In addition, other groups of Muslims from areas like the Indian sub-continent, Persia, Turkey and China also settled in Myanmar. There were brief moments in Burmese history when Muslims controlled the Arakan coastal region (what is now the Rahkine State), but Islam has essentially been a minority religion in this overwhelmingly Buddhist country. Under British rule, large numbers of Indian Muslims were allowed to immigrate into Burma, a practice that was quickly stopped following independence.

According to the imam, while there might have been some skirmishes in the past in terms of early history, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists within the country have pretty much gotten along. The trouble, he explained – and the growing crowd enthusiastically agreed – centered on the military leaders who have their own personal agenda for Myanmar. The constitution allows for only one government, but in reality there are two: the civilian government, and the shadowy military one that actually controls the state of affairs within the country. Because the constitution permits military intervention during times of civil chaos or unrest (real or imagined) – another man explained – then this crisis can *only* be resolved by the military, which has been largely blamed for the genocide in the first place. It was made clear to us the military has conjured up false stories about the so-called 'Muslim threat' to stir up nationalistic hatred against Muslims in an attempt to create the exact instability to justify their continued meddling in the country's affairs. A real Catch-22 situation if ever there was one. When asked if they felt threatened themselves that the anti-Muslim hysteria gripping the Rahkine State might spread to other areas of the country, the crowd was more guarded in their replies. Muslim communities, they insisted, exist peacefully throughout the country with their Buddhist counterparts. But one could almost *feel* their anxiety. In the end, the members of this mosque believed that only continued international pressure on the military would bring about a peaceful resolution to the crisis in the Rahkine State.

After thirty minutes or so our session ended due to the mid-day call to prayer, and we thanked them for meeting with us. They seemed genuinely pleased to have had this opportunity to speak to a group of foreigners about their growing concerns. We returned to the hotel where I had a quick lunch with Debbie, Bill and Sandy in the hotel's café. Our afternoon was free and we had asked Bunny if she could arrange transportation for us to visit two local Buddhist temples that were highlighted in our guidebooks. At 2:00pm most of the group boarded the bus and we were taken first to the Chaukhtatgyi Paya and then to the Ngahtatgyi Paya, both situated off Shwegondine Road in the Bahan Township just to the north of our hotel.

The Chaukhtatgyi Paya – *paya* means temple – is the site of one of the country's largest statues, a 213 foot-long (66 meters) image of the Buddha in a reclining position, housed in a gigantic metal-roofed shed. This is the part of the year when the Buddhist images in the city get a face-lift, and the entire statue was covered in scaffolding equipment as monks and volunteers worked diligently to clean, maintain and repair the resting Buddha. Even through the scaffolding, though, this intricately detailed Buddha was astonishing. It was like staring at a mythical giant lying on its side. Consecrated in 1973, after an older image was demolished and this one built in its place, the crown on the Buddha's head was encrusted with diamonds and other precious gemstones; the eyes made of specially crafted glass. The enormous feet sported a reddish-pink pedicure and the soles had the symbols of the Buddha's legendary 'footprints'. Locals kept arriving to pray, meditate and leave flower offerings in front of the statue. We made our way up and down the reclining Buddha taking photographs, trying to capture the entire image in one single shot (which was a challenge due to its size).

Next, we visited the nearby Nagahtatgyi Paya, located just across the street on the other side of Shwegondine Road. This was another large, beautiful image of the Buddha built in 1900. The statue is often referred to as the 'five story Buddha' because it measures 46-feet tall (or 14 meters). The Buddha is depicted in a calm sitting repose, his left palm upright in his lap and his right hand touching the earth; an iconic image known as the "earth witness" Buddha, representing the moment he received enlightenment. Decorated in royal regalia and wearing a golden robe, the Buddha is seated on a pedestal with his back towards an ornately carved wooden backdrop, the entire image housed in a large iron pavilion topped by a multi-tiered golden dome with an ornamental spire shaped like an umbrella. To reach the temple you have to climb a flight of stairs; along the

walkway you encounter murals depicting the torments of Buddhist Hell (to encourage unrepentant sinners, I imagine). A large bell hanging down from the pavilion's ceiling is held in place by the image of a Naga snake, a divine mythical creature (half human, half cobra) that protects Buddhists from evil. Once again, we found the Buddha image covered in scaffolding, but this did not take away from either its beauty or solemness. While we were visiting a group of monks arrived and began praying in front of the statue.

We returned to the hotel shortly after 3:00pm. Thirty minutes later, Carleen, Nancilu, Merle, Mark, Debbie and I joined Bunny in the lobby for a walk around the neighborhood. We crossed the heavily congested Nat Mauk Street – at this hour, traffic along this busy roadway was at a standstill – and made our way east along the sidewalk encircling Kandawgyi Lake. During our walk we came across several bodhi trees with small statues or images of the Buddha attached to them. Bunny told us this was one method of preserving the city's natural habitat since most Burmese would be hard-pressed to cut down a tree with the image of the Buddha on it, especially a sacred bodhi tree.

On the opposite side of Nat Mauk Street, facing the lake, we passed a row of nearly identical seven-storey apartment buildings. According to Bunny, these apartment buildings – and the larger and more expensive condominium structures citywide – were primarily the domain of Yangon's middle-class, the monthly rents (equivalent to about $500 US or higher) far beyond the reach of the average city dweller. What differentiates an apartment building from a condominium building in Yangon? *Elevators*. City codes require that anything taller than eight stories must have an elevator(s), which is why the typical apartment building only goes six-to-eight floors. Condominium units – which are built higher and are costlier – invest in expensive generators to keep the lifts running during power outages, making renting or owning a condominium very pricey. I stared up at the seventh floor of one the apartment structures and felt pity for the poor souls who had to take the stairs everyday, but Bunny told us most Yangonites would be delighted to live on the top floor of an elevator-less building in this particular part of the city, especially with a 'lakeside view'. Apparently, this was a step up the economic ladder. When someone in our group mentioned how difficult it must be for the tenants on the top floors to get their groceries upstairs, Bunny replied that many of these apartments do not have kitchens. For the majority of people who live in apartment units it's cheaper to just buy cooked meals on the street from vendors. She also pointed out the lines of

rope draped over the balconies, telling us street vendors use them to hoist products up to their customers on the top floors.

We continued walking east along Kandawgyi Lake, passing the gated United Nations compound, and turned left onto Kyaik Ka San Road, a wide commercial street lined with businesses, including the more modern United Living Mall complex. After a few blocks we turned left again and strolled through a small neighborhood consisting of three and four storey apartment buildings and detached single homes. The mom-and-pop storefronts here opened up to the sidewalk or streets and locals were sitting in plastic chairs in front of many of them. On one corner, Bunny acquired the services of a group of trishaw drivers to take us back to the hotel. A trishaw is a rickshaw with a bicycle attached to it. Trishaws are a cheap, convenient means of local transportation, especially useful if bringing home items from the market or on very hot, humid days when walking becomes an annoying task. We divided ourselves into groups of two, but because I weighed nearly 250 pounds I had to ride alone. *Oh, the humility*! My driver, who was covered in sweat by the time we reached the hotel, definitely earned the extra tip I gave him.

We got back to the hotel by 5:00pm. I went up to my room to wash up, make instant coffee and write the day's events in my journal. At 6:30pm we boarded our bus again and drove about twenty minutes to a local restaurant called Padonmar for our official welcome dinner. On the drive over, Bunny spoke briefly about traditional Burmese cuisine, telling us that a typical meal usually contained rice, a soup, two meat dishes (one of them usually made with very spicy curry or chili), and pickled salad (normally a national dish known as the green tea leaf salad). When we arrived at the restaurant we were seated at a long table and served what was described as a 'traditional meal'. For most of our included meals we never saw a menu; dishes were just placed in the center of the table and we served ourselves to our liking. The welcome dinner consisted of tempura veggies (eggplant, onions and squash), a salad made from the morning glory plant (a kind of river spinach), cooked tomatoes, fish in spicy tomato sauce, a chicken and potato dish in brown sauce…*and plenty of rice*. Dessert was fried banana with syrup. This was officially my first Burmese meal, and while I ate my fill and found most of it interesting, the verdict – for me, anyway – was still out. I love Chinese and Thai food, and thought that perhaps Burmese cuisine would be a mix of the two. But it tasted altogether different – not in a bad way, mind you – just different. It took my palate a few days to adjust before I began to really

enjoy the local food. We returned to the hotel by 9:00pm. Most of us were dog-tired from the jetlag. I tried to write some more in my journal but soon fell asleep.

Day Four

I awoke briefly at 5:30am but hit the snooze on my cell phone alarm so many times I didn't get out of bed until an hour later. I showered quickly, dressed and met Debbie for breakfast at 7:30am. She told me she was not feeling well – something intestinal, I think – and didn't eat much. I, on the other hand, consumed a hearty breakfast. By 9:00am we boarded the bus for a morning tour of the historic city center. We traveled south on Nat Mauk Street until it turned into Set Yone Road. At one point we made a left, heading in a southwesterly direction near the Pazundaung Creek, a wide meandering stream that empties into the Yangon River. We reached the heart of the city center – known today as Yangon's Central Business District (CBD) – in about thirty minutes and got off the bus along a wide, heavily trafficked boulevard in front of the Yangon City Hall building. We began our walking tour from there.

Located near the geographic center of Yangon, the historic center is the main business district of the city and houses many of its major art institutions. After the British took over the country – following the Second Anglo-Burmese War of 1852 – they decided to build an entirely new city center further south of the Shwedagon Pagoda near the Yangon River. British engineers initially laid out the streets in a simple east-west grid pattern and later, as the newly renamed Rangoon morphed into the capital of the British Empire in Southeast Asia, the downtown area was expanded and developed, becoming a thriving port city by the early 1900's. Today, dozens of turn-of-the-20th century British colonial buildings are still standing and many of these buildings have been classified as Heritage Sites by the city government and are being preserved. In fact, the CBD has more colonial structures than any other place in Southeast Asia, and walking the leafy avenues and wide streets here is like taking a step back in history.

At the heart of the CBD – incredibly situated on a main traffic circle – is the Sule Pagoda, another magnificently gilded bell-shaped stupa. We got off the bus facing the eastern side of this shrine. The legend of the Sule Pagoda makes it even older than the Shwedagon Pagoda. It supposedly contains a hair relic of the Buddha and was built while he was still alive, which would make it some 2600 years old; or at least the site, anyway, not the actual stupa, since it has been rebuilt and renovated many times throughout its history. The ancient Mon people gave the stupa its Burmese name – *Kyaik Athok Zedi* ("the stupa where a Sacred Hair relic is enshrined") – so I'm going to assume, legend aside, that the original stupa that once stood on this site probably just dates back to them, as well. At roughly 148 feet (or 45 meters) high, it isn't a particularly large stupa (like the Shwedagon Pagoda), but its striking gold color and unusual octagonal shape, standing in the middle of a main avenue, is quite the eye-catcher. Surrounding the exterior base of the Sule Pagoda are small shops.

The British engineers who designed the original street layouts for the downtown area used the Sule Pagoda to mark the center of Rangoon (or Yangon) and it has remained an important part of the city's economic and public life ever since. On several occasions, most notably the *8888 Uprising* (1988) and the *Saffron Revolution* (2007), the temple became a rallying point for massive public demonstrations against the military government. Sadly, in both cases, the military crackdown was very harsh and the area saw much bloodshed. Today, the temple remains the symbolic center of Yangon, playing a sacred and honored role not only in the city's history but also in the country's changing political landscape.

Our group gathered on the sidewalk along Sule Pagoda Road. Bunny began pointing out the local landmarks. To our left, on the traffic circle that divided the road, was the Sule Pagoda, and directly in front of us on the opposite side of the street was the Yangon City Hall building, the first of many colonial-era structures we would see that day. A famous Burmese architect, U Tin, designed the City Hall building in the 1930s fusing indigenous elements such as the tiered roof (called a *pyatthat*) with traditional Western design in a style known as syncretic Burmese architecture. Next to City Hall, on the adjoining corner, was another iconic colonial structure that was once home to the Rowe & Company Department Store, a grand emporium once touted as the 'Harrods of the East' and frequented by wealthy European and Burmese patrons. It was a spectacular

building when it was completed in 1910, a true modern marvel constructed with a steel frame and utilizing new technologies like ceiling fans and elevators. Following the military coup of 1962, the increasingly xenophobic attitude of the military rulers saw many of these British buildings being abandoned, which is why so many of them are in dire need of repair and maintenance today. In the case of the former Rowe & Company Department Store, the building has been renovated and now houses the headquarters of the AYA Bank.

Just behind us was the Maha Bandula Garden; a block-long public park established by the British in 1857 on what was once a swampy parcel of land. Originally called Fytche Square (in honor of a former chief commissioner of British Burma), it was renamed Maha Bandula in 1935 in a nod to growing nationalistic sentiments within the country. Maha Bandula was the Burmese general who fought the British during the First Anglo-Burmese War. Following independence, the white marble Queen Victoria statue that once occupied the center of this park was replaced with the obelisk-shaped Independence Monument we see today. We walked east to the corner and then headed south along Maha Bandula Garden Street. On the opposite side of this street was the Immanuel Baptist Church, one of the oldest Baptist Churches in the nation, built by an American missionary in 1885. The original was destroyed during World War II and rebuilt in 1952. Next to the church was the Yangon Regional Court, which was completed in 1911 and served as the British High Court building. Constructed in an English Baroque architectural style known as Queen Anne Revival, this large, redbrick elegant building is another iconic landmark in the CBD, featuring a spacious courtyard and a clock tower that faces the Maha Bandula Garden.

We walked south towards Merchant Road and turned left, continuing eastbound for several blocks – passing the Indian Embassy building built in 1914 – before turning south again on Pansodan Street. Here we encountered many notable colonial-era structures, like the Rander House (built in 1932), an imposing five-story building designed with geometric forms, subtle Art Deco features and a tightly spaced grid-like window pattern. It was commissioned by a group of merchants from the town of Rander in the Indian state of Gujarat. Today it houses a branch of the Internal Revenue Department that collects taxes from ‘medium tax payers’, or, as Bunny put it, the middle class. This was the very building where she goes each year to pay *her* taxes and she joked that many clever Yangonites wear their rattiest

clothing and polish off their yearly receipts and bad-luck stories before entering the Internal Revenue offices to negotiate a lower tax bill. Across the street was the four-story Sofaer & Company commercial building designed and commissioned by the Sofaer family in 1906, a wealthy and prominent Jewish family from Baghdad. No expense was spared in its construction and when it opened it was a showcase of elegance and artistry, taking up an entire city block, offering a variety of legendary tenants like the Bank of Burma, China Mutual Life Insurance Company and Reuter's Telegram Company. The building has changed hands and businesses many times since its heyday, and today the renovated building contains an art gallery and a popular Asian restaurant.

A bit further south we came across another large renovated colonial structure (from 1933) that now houses the Inland Water Transport (IWT) agency, a state-owned enterprise providing transportation services along Myanmar's rivers. It was just before ten in the morning and a group of local fish soup vendors were setting up shop on the sidewalk in front of the IWT building, selling their soup out of a pushcart. The customers were primarily the nearby office workers who stopped for a quick, cheap and nourishing bowl before starting their shifts. Bunny purchased a soup under the pretense of showing us its contents, but I think she was just hungry. Rarely did we pass a food vendor she didn't like…and I found myself marveling how someone so tiny could have such an appetite!

Just a few yards further down the sidewalk was a female street vendor selling and making betel nut chew. Betel nut is not actually a nut, but rather the fruit of the areca palm that grows abundantly in Southeast Asia. The fruit hardens like wood when it is harvested and is cut into strips and mixed with calcium hydroxide (slaked lime) and sometimes spices like cardamom, cloves or cinnamon for flavor. It is then wrapped in a leaf and slowly chewed, providing a mild amphetamine-like stimulant for some people. The vasoconstrictor chemicals in the areca fruit mimic those found in nicotine, so chewing betel nut can be quite addictive. Most of those who chew the substance are people who need to stay awake or alert, like truck and taxi drivers. It is a particularly disgusting habit because betel nut chewing produces excessive saliva that must be spit out. Not only does it cause a host of serious health issues from cancers to hypertension, but it also turns a disturbing shade of red as you chew it, rotting and turning your teeth an unsightly reddish-orange color. You can easily spot the telltale sign of betel nut chewers everywhere by the splotches of red spittle they leave on the

ground. *Yuck*! Bunny asked if anyone wanted to try betel nut chew. Carleen, who hails from the 'Show Me' state of Missouri, was more than game. She chewed for a little while until the substance turned her teeth orange and the group laughed and took photographs of her 'new smile'. As for the taste? "*Disgusting*" she replied, spitting the whole thing out after a few minutes.

As we continued walking south through the CBD, many of the colonial-era buildings we came across still seemed in need of major renovations and repair, especially the ones being used by the government. Since the renewal of the tourism industry in Myanmar, there appears to be an increasing effort to fix and maintain these structures, to preserve the historical flavor of the district, and we saw occasional crews of workers (some dangling precariously from ropes) trying to clean and repair the facades of the older units. But much work still needed to be done. With Yangon's continued economic growth, and the increasingly higher rental prices the CBD commands, I'm certain large business enterprises will continue to take over these historic downtown buildings, hopefully renovating them to one extent or another.

On the corner of Strand Road and Pansodan Street sat the Myanmar Port Authority building, another colonial masterpiece from 1928. The façade has green ginkgo leaf shapes framing its windows and Corinthian double columns topped by a circular seal depicting different ships. A rectangular tower with a pitched red roof (with bold letters announcing the **Myanma Port Authority)** marked the corner of the structure. We entered here and climbed the steps to a pedestrian bridge that crossed Strand Road and led to the waterbus terminal along the Yangon River. This ferry terminal is one of the ways people from the outlying towns commute into the city. From the bridge, high above the street, Bunny pointed out several buildings to us. To the west along Strand Road, facing the port and wharf areas, was the Custom House. Constructed in 1915, this redbrick building, with its columned porticos and towering bracket clock, was one of the best preserved colonial structures in the CBD, due largely to the fact that it has been a continuously occupied and fully functioning customs office since it was built.

To the east along Strand Road were two other notable colonial-era structures. The first was the three-story edifice currently housing the Myanmar National Airlines headquarters. Constructed during the 1920s, this building was once occupied by the offices of the Bombay-Burma Trading Company (BBTC) that came to monopolize the country's teak wood export

industry. Prior to WWII, Burma provided roughly 85% of all the teak wood sold in the world. In the late 1880s, the BBTC had a dispute over teak wood timber taxes with the king of Upper Burma and this gave the British the pretext to annex that part of the country. At one time, revenues from the teak wood industry accounted for a sizeable chunk of all the income from British Burma. One block east was the historic Victorian-style Strand Hotel, which opened in 1901 and quickly became one of the most popular luxury hotels in Southeast Asia, hosting such famous guests as George Orwell and Rudyard Kipling. During WWII, the hotel was briefly occupied by the Japanese military. Following independence, the Strand Hotel was taken over by the government and poorly maintained. In 1989, the building was sold to a group of private investors who have since renovated the hotel back to its original elegance. Bunny said it was a great place to have a traditional English tea (with finger sandwiches and scones).

We finished our walking tour on the other side of Strand Road where our bus was waiting to pick us up. We drove through the city in heavy traffic heading northbound towards Inya Lake (the large former British reservoir). During this portion of the drive, Bunny spoke briefly about the history of the military despots or juntas that have controlled Myanmar for more than fifty years. For the purpose of keeping this journal informative, I've added some additional history to bring the current political situation of the country into focus:

The Burmese military has often played a crucial role in Southeast Asia. Going back more than a thousand years, the royal forces of various Burmese kingdoms had long held sway and influence over large sections of the region (notably during the 11th to 13th centuries and then again between the 16th and 19th centuries before the British invaded and put an end to the dynastic lines). Due to the number of ethnic tribes within the country, Myanmar has dealt with many insurgencies, civil wars and rebellions throughout its history. The modern era has proven no different. The largest ethnic group is the Bamar (Burmese) people, who constitute roughly 68% of the total population. Both the central civilian government and the military are made up primarily from this ethnic group. As a result, there has been a sort of ongoing internal struggle within Myanmar – sometimes referred to as the *Burmanization* of the country – as the dominate Burmese culture tries to influence or impose its will over the minority ethnic cultures.

Following independence in 1948, many of these ethnic minority groups clamored for autonomy, and by the 1960s the country was embroiled in various rebellions drawn among specific political and ethnic lines. Making the situation worse was the constant foreign meddling in the country's internal affairs. India supported the Kachin in the Kayin State. Pakistan and Bangladesh supported the Muslim Rohingyas in the Rakhine State. The Chinese assisted the Burmese Communist Party and later armed ethnic groups in the Shan and Kachin states. The U.S. helped the Kuomintang (a group of Chinese Nationalist who fled to the Burmese border after the communists took over China in 1950). Thailand helped several different rebel groups along its border with Burma in order to create a sort of buffer zone between the two countries. So it is not surprising that by the time the Bamar dominated armed forces staged their coup in 1962, effectively taking over the country for the next fifty years, there was a deep mistrust of minority ethnic groups and foreigners alike.

The man who led the coup in 1962 was General Ne Win. A failed medical student in his youth, he joined a nationalist group opposed to British rule. During the Japanese occupation of Burma he became a member of the Burma Independence Army (BIA), a revolutionary force initially trained and organized by the Japanese in their fight to expel the British from the country. Later, the BIA morphed into the Burma National Army (BNA) and towards the close of WWII they switched allegiance and aided the British in their fight against the Japanese. General Ne Win, a commander within the BNA, rose to become the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces under the newly elected socialist government of independent Burma. He quickly brought the armed forces under his control, restructuring the military under the ruling Socialist Party's political lines. He served briefly as prime minister between 1958 and 1960 during a chaotic political period, restoring social order and handing over the government after general elections were held in February of 1960. But in 1962, General Ne Win tired of the civil unrest and political bickering within the country and staged a relatively 'bloodless' coup declaring that parliamentary democracy had failed Burma, suspending the constitution and dissolving the legislature.

To replace the central government, the military established the Union Revolutionary Council with General Ne Win as its head and ruled the country in a totalitarian manner, creating a new political ideology known as the *Burmese Way to Socialism* that modeled itself after Soviet-style nationalization and central planning. All of the major industries and media

outlets were quickly nationalized. The general enforced a 'correct way' of thinking for the country based on his convoluted philosophical leanings that mixed extreme nationalism, Marxism and Buddhism. By 1974, the Union Revolutionary Council was disbanded and a new constitution was enacted, making General Ne Win's *Burma Socialist Programme Party* (BSPP) the only legitimate political party in the country. He would continue to rule Burma as the head of this political party until 1988.

The economic reforms instituted by General Ne Win were disastrous. His deep distrust of foreigners set him on a course of economic autarky, believing that Burma could be totally self-sufficient, remaining isolated (and insulated) from the rest of the world. Instead, his economic and social programs brought the country to financial ruin. The citizens had to rely on the black markets and smuggling to acquire basic staples while the government went bankrupt. The general was also prone to superstitious beliefs and allowed astrologers to cloud or influence his thinking. One infamous example was when he changed the nation's currency so that it could be divisible by the number 9 which he'd been told was a lucky and auspicious number. New bank notes that could be divided by nine – like the 45 and 90 kyat notes – were issued to replace the older, larger denominational notes previously in use, adversely affecting the conversion rate and wiping out the life-savings of many hard-working citizens. This crippled the economy even further. Throughout the general's reign there were sporadic protests and strikes among students and factory workers alike, but each time the military response was heavy-handed and many demonstrators were killed to restore order. By the time General Ne Win was forced to resign from his own political party in 1988, Burma had become one of the world's most impoverished countries.

The events that would lead to General Ne Win's political downfall were rooted in a series of growing nationwide protests that later became known as the *8888 Uprising*. The number refers to a specific date, August 8, 1988, when students from the University of Yangon and the Yangon Institute of Technology (among the most prestigious schools in the country) staged a highly organized protest movement that rapidly spread throughout the nation. Hundreds of thousands of students, monks and workers took to the streets to rally against the country's economic mismanagement and the military government's totalitarianism. By mid-September of that year, Senior General Saw Maung staged a bloody military coup, overthrowing the Burma Socialist Programme Party of General Ne Win and creating, instead,

a new military junta called the State Peace and Development Council (or the SPDC) that would officially run the government until it was dissolved in 2011 following the first elections under the new constitution. The crackdown against the demonstrators of the *8888 Uprising* was extremely brutal, with more than 3,000 suspected of having died at the hands of the military.

The *8888 Uprising* led to the political rise of Aung San Suu Kyi, who is currently serving as State Counsellor of Myanmar. As General Ne Win was being forced to resign from his unpopular Burma Socialist Programme Party in the summer of 1988, Aung San Suu Kyi had just returned home to Burma to tend to her ailing mother. Her father was Major General Aung San, who is considered the architect of Burmese independence and fondly referred to as the Father of the Nation (despite having been assassinated six months before the country became independent). Her mother, Khin Kyi, was also a prominent political figure, ambassador to India and Nepal in the early 1960s. Aung San Suu Kyi was educated abroad and worked for three years at the United Nations in New York City. During her studies, she met and married Dr. Michael Aris, an English historian, and had two sons with him. When Aung San Suu Kyi returned to Yangon in 1988 the country was in political and social turmoil. General Ne Win had resigned and large groups of people were demonstrating on the streets for change. Aung San Suu Kyi got caught up in the struggle and addressed a rally of half a million people in front of the Shwedagon Pagoda on August 26, 1988, calling for a democratically elected government. But just a few weeks later General Saw Maung staged his bloody coup and a new military junta was installed. With the help of several retired military officers who opposed the military coup, Aung San Suu Kyi organized an opposition political party known as the National League for Democracy (NLD), becoming its general secretary, and began to lead the pro-democracy movement.

In 1990, the new military junta called for national elections to create a parliamentary-sized committee for the purpose of drafting a new constitution. When Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy won 59% of the vote, assuring them 80% of the seats on this new committee, the military balked and nullified the election results, drawing the ire of the international community. In order to stifle the out-spoken and popular Aung San Suu Kyi, the military routinely placed her under house arrest at her home along Inya Lake beginning in 1989. She was often denied visitors and contacts with her own political party members, and remained in isolation for nearly 15 out of 21 years (from 1989 to 2010). In fact, she was denied visits

by her husband who later died of prostate cancer in Great Britain, and while she was given permission to leave Myanmar during her husband's illness, Aung San Suu Kyi refused to go because she believed the military would bar her from returning. During her time as a political prisoner, she won numerous awards (including the Nobel Peace Prize) and was universally recognized as the voice for democratic change in Southeast Asia.

By the late 2000's, the combined affects of economic sanctions and continuous international condemnation and pressure to release Aung San Suu Kyi forced the military junta to create a new constitution and allow for free elections in 2010. Aung San Suu Kyi was finally released from house arrest and allowed to organize her party, but she was not initially eligible to run for office herself. The National League for Democracy boycotted the 2010 elections. One of the provisions of the new constitution barred people married to foreigners (or who had children with foreigners) from serving as president, a law that was deliberately written to keep the popular Aung San Suu Kyi from becoming president of the country. In 2015, her party entered the general elections and won a sweeping majority of the seats in the new legislature. Although barred constitutionally from becoming president, the role of *state counsellor* (similar to a prime minister) was created for her, and in April of 2016 she assumed this new position, essentially becoming the head of state. Recently, her government has come under increasing pressure and criticism for not doing enough to stop the genocide in the Rakhine State. A charge that seems unfair considering the enormous power the armed forces still wields in the country under the current constitution, which the National Democratic League is trying to amend.

We drove up to Aung San Suu Kyi's home along University Avenue in the Bahan Township of Yangon, one of the most exclusive districts in the city, and stopped just outside the gates of her beautiful colonial-era villa facing Inya Lake. This was the family home where she was placed under house arrest for a combined total of fifteen years. Yellow and red painted banners of the National Democratic League (NDL) framed the large metal front gates. Atop the entrance was a photo of her father, Major General Aung San in military fatigues. An armed policeman stood guard in front of the gates; he was very friendly and allowed us to pose with him while taking pictures. Later, our guide told us that while Aung San Suu Kyi's life is under constant threat from right wing nationalist extremists, the police cordon that protects her actually report back to the military. A convenient way of

keeping tabs on her movement. We were not allowed to enter the property, but from a corner of the front gate we could get a glimpse of the house.

From here we drove west along University Avenue adjacent to Inya Lake, passing the U.S. Embassy complex and turning north on Inya Road where we continued to hug the lakeshore until we reached the Yangon University of Economics building where part of the *8888 Uprising* took place. Bunny spoke about education in Myanmar, telling us that primary school is compulsory but middle school and high school are not. Good grades will get a child into a public school where the tuition is cheap, but the private schools in the country are better (and, of course, cost a lot of money). Both Frankie and Bunny talked about corporal punishment and its use in the school system when they were growing up, but today the practice has been abolished. Judging from their separate stories, it was hard to tell if they thought that was a good idea or not.

We turned south along Pyay Road and drove into the Kamaryut Township to have lunch at a unique restaurant called the House of Memories, situated along U Wizara Road. The establishment is often derided as a tourist trap but the food and surroundings were excellent. The building itself is a handsome teak mansion set back from the road, so elegant and nostalgic it is often used in local movies or TV shows; in fact, when we arrived a film crew was busy setting up a scene in the lobby downstairs. The main dining room has an impressive dark wood bar. Our included lunch consisted of sweet and sour fish, chicken and pork with chestnut and mushroom dishes, fried veggies, an asparagus salad, spring rolls, plenty of white rice and fruit for dessert.

What is unique about the House of Memories restaurant is the upstairs museum. The manor was the first base of operations for the Burmese Independent Army back in the early 1940s, headed by *Bogyoke* (Major General) Aung San, the Father of the Nation. The room upstairs, which served as the general's office, is now a museum containing authentic furniture including his original desk. Adorning the walls are black and white photographs of a young Aung San together with his wife and children (Aung San Suu Kyi can be seen as a toddler in some of these pictures). Bogyoke Aung San was a nationalist revolutionary who was one of the founders of the Communist Party of Burma (although he later renounced communism). He helped organize many anti-British organizations within the country during the late 1930s. When Japan entered WWII, Aung San and a group of trusted

comrades worked with the Japanese to expel the British from the country. He became War Minister under the Japanese installed government of Burma during the war, but soon realized two things about his new masters: first, they were more tyrannical than the British, and secondly, the Japanese were beginning to lose the war in the South Pacific. Aung San switched sides again, aiding the British in expelling the Japanese from his homeland. Following WWII, he worked with regional ethnic leaders and hammered out a blueprint for independence. Sadly, he and several members from the Executive Council (who were preparing the country for independence) were assassinated six months before they could realize their dream. Today, Bogyoke Aung San is fondly remembered as the leader of the independence movement, which is one of the reasons why I think the majority of the country supports his daughter, Aung San Suu Kyi. She seems to embody his passion for justice and democracy for *all* the peoples of Myanmar.

We returned to the hotel by 2:00pm. The rest of the day was free. I was originally going to go to the National Museum because I read in my guidebook it was worth a visit (among the many cultural artifacts on display are some marvelously ornate exhibits from the country's last royal dynasty). But Bunny mentioned she would be taking the city train to her old college stomping grounds for a walk through the neighborhood and the nearby public street market. That sounded more interesting to me so I agreed to tag along. She told us to meet her in the lobby at 3:30pm. I went to my room to wash up, make some coffee and write the day's events in my journal. When I joined Bunny in the lobby only Carleen and Nancilu had opted to go. Debbie was still not feeling well from her earlier intestinal issues and we agreed to meet later for dinner if she was up to it.

Bunny required 7,000 kyats ($5) from each of us to cover the costs of two taxi rides and the train fare. From the hotel we took a cab to the Yangon Central Railway Station located inside the Mingala Taungnyunt Township in the east-central section of the city. This turned out to be another fascinating, unscripted cultural experience. We saw no foreigners during our three-hour excursion, only locals going about their business. The British originally built the Yangon Central Railway Station in 1877, but then destroyed it in the 1940s while retreating from advancing Japanese forces. The station that exists today was completed in 1954, designed by Burmese architect U Tin who also created the Yangon City Hall building. Despite needing major uplifting, the building was nonetheless a prime example of U Tin's syncretic

architectural style, blending Burmese and Western designs, fusing indigenous tiered roofs (*pyatthat*) with a more traditional European layout.

The main lobby of the railway station was pretty worn-looking and required a paint job, but that didn't distract from its historical flavor. Bunny purchased our train tickets at an old fashion counter (the ones with bars separating the employees from the public). Next to the counter was a beautiful relic from the past, an old stepping scale which provided your horoscope along with your weight. We couldn't resist and paid the elderly couple that owned the scale to try it out. The girls took turns getting on the scale and were given little horoscope scrolls afterwards. Surprisingly, the horoscopes were not particularly upbeat – 'you'll be unlucky in love', for example – and when it was my turn the proprietors immediately stopped me, explaining to Bunny in Burmese that I was too hefty to get on the scale. How humiliating. To placate me, they said I could purchase my horoscope separately. I thought: *For what, so I could be insulted some more?* ('We see mounds of girth in your future, you big fat fatty') *No thanks*.

Bunny led us up a stairway to a pedestrian bridge which crossed several platform tracks below. As we made our way to platform #7, Bunny stopped to point out a section of one of the banisters that had a very faded image of Queen Victoria. She said it was a holdover from the original British-built railway station from 1877. We arrived at our platform just minutes before the train pulled into the station. The Yangon Central Railway Station is not only Myanmar's largest, but also the hub of a vast 3,126-mile (5,031 km) rail network connecting Upper Myanmar (including Naypyidaw and Mandalay), the Kachin State, the Shan hills and the Tanintharyi coastal region. The train we boarded was a simple commuter circular train servicing Yangon, it made over forty stops along a route that stretched northward in an elongated loop around the city. Bunny said it took approximately three hours for the train to complete this circuit. When our train pulled into the platform we had to hurry to get on board since this particular line didn't linger at any stop for very long.

The compartment car we entered was spartanly designed; several rows of plain, blue-painted bench-like seats over a simple boarded floor with metal storage racks running overhead, just below the ceiling. Many of the windows were slid open for ventilation. No A/C here. I'm not sure how old this train was, but I guessed it had been in operation for several decades. The car quickly filled with local commuters. Nancilu, Carleen and I sat together in

one section on the right-hand side of the compartment to get a better view of the passing scenery from station to station. Most of the homes built along the railway tracks seemed dilapidated, made of wood and corrugated metal sheets. We came across a dirt playground where youngsters were kicking a ball around. On one section of the tracks a small crew was filming a music video. Each station we pulled into revealed platforms full of local women wearing colorful skirts and ethnic dresses, while most of the men wore *longyis*, a traditional sheet of cloth usually sewn into a cylindrical shape and worn from the waist to the ankles just above the feet. Both men and women use them. When I first arrived in Myanmar I was taken aback seeing all the men dressed in what looked like long skirts. Near the end of our tour Bunny surprised us by buying the entire group longyis, which we donned for our farewell dinner. I have to admit they were quite comfortable. Men usually wear underwear or shorts underneath their longyis (but I'm sure some guys just free ball it). Back home, I sometimes wear mine while lounging in my apartment. My pizza delivery boy must think I'm a cross-dresser.

We got off the train at the Hledan Station, the ninth stop on the circuit, a very busy junction where four of the city's major roads intersect. We were to the southwest of Inya Lake in the Kamayut Township, known as the 'college town' section of Yangon. The streets within this ten-ward township contain the city's top universities and institutes, along with avenues lined with apartment buildings housing tens of thousands of college students. This is also a great place to stroll if you want to do some street shopping or experience local dining. The avenues here are usually filled with young people. Bunny led us down Hledan Road, crowded now with middle and high school students heading home for the day. As we slowly made our way up the narrow sidewalk – electrical wires and cables dangling just inches above my head at times – Bunny stopped to point out an apartment building across the street where she had dormed with six other female students during her college years. Her former apartment was located on the fifth or sixth floor (no elevator!) and consisted of only one room (albeit a very long one). Each student was assigned a section where she kept a sleeping mat and a chest with her belongings and clothes. Bathroom facilities were shared. *Wow*! I tried to imagine what it would be like if seven young American women had to live in a one-room apartment with absolutely no privacy and had to share the same bathroom every morning. *Yikes*! But she confessed this was one of the happiest times of her life. I guess the freedom of living away from home for the first time inspires a universal feeling of fun and adventure for young people everywhere.

We walked for about ten minutes before turning into a side street that led to the Hledan Street Market, a bustling public market that ran for several city blocks. Vendors in stalls and pushcarts lined both sides of the streets and walkways selling everything you can imagine: flowers, fresh fruits and produce, rice and spices, assorted meats (some of it butchered right there), fish and seafood, clothing, cosmetics, utensils, school supplies, etc, etc. I love public markets because they offer a real glimpse into a society's culture, the things locals buy and how they bargain for them. For example, in one area I saw vendors selling small tree bark logs used in the making of *thanaka* cream. The bark is ground into a yellowish-white paste that is applied cosmetically to the face and body, usually in a decorative pattern. The cream, which has the scent of sandalwood, is used to cool the skin and acts as a natural sunblock, and also helps prevent acne and improve the overall tone of the skin. You cannot walk down any street in Myanmar without running into someone whose face isn't smeared with thanaka cream or paste. The difference is in the artistic application. Most women make a circular patch on each cheek and might add stripes to the nose or the bridge of the nose and forehead, or make leafy patterns (Bunny often wore the cream this way). Others cover their entire face in a yellowish mask for some reason, which makes for quite an unsettling look when you're out and about. But the stuff must work wonders because it has been used for over 2,000 years (and the cream is sold cosmetically around the world).

Once again, Bunny could not resist the food vendors. She stopped at several pushcarts to check out the fare and finally settled on one seller who was her favorite food vendor while in college. This woman sold over a dozen different food dishes displayed in stainless steel pans, including rice and salads. Bunny picked four sides and an order of white rice (each was individually wrapped in a plastic bag) for only 2,500 kyats (less than $2 US). Practically the entire student population of Yangon eats from food vendors like this, she said, it's cheap and the choices are varied.

From the market we walked to the corner of Hledan and Pyay Road and stopped briefly at the City Mart – an underground supermarket located inside the Hledan Center shopping mall – to pick up some goodies at their bakeshop before taking a taxi back to the hotel, arriving around 6:15pm. I immediately called Debbie's room and she told me she was feeling much better. At 6:45pm we met in the lobby and walked to the White Rice Restaurant (recommended by both Bunny and Frankie), situated in a small

park area along Kandawgyi Lake just a few blocks from the hotel. The restaurant was perched on a hilltop, constructed mostly of wood in a circular open design overlooking the lake. The place was busy but seemed half-empty because it was so airy and spacious inside. We were able to select our own table near the center of the establishment. The staff was very cordial and attentive despite the language barrier. We were given bound English menus that were longer than a Russian novel, offering a wide and unique selection of Chinese foods I was not familiar with. Debbie opted for the fried soft shell crabs and I had a chicken-with-cashews dish. On the table – as either an appetizer or condiment – was pickled seaweed. Or, at least, that's what it tasted like. The food was plentiful and we shared from each other's plates. According to our guide, this restaurant was considered to be on the expensive side, but when our check arrived the entire meal came to less then 22,000 kyats with tip (around $15), which didn't seem expensive to us, at all. We got back to the hotel by 8:30pm after a lovely dinner and conversation.

In my room I was too tired to repack my luggage for tomorrow's early morning flight to Bagan, so I watched a little of the BBC news broadcast on TV until I nodded off.

Day Five

I had set my cell phone alarm for 2:30am but woke thirty minutes earlier. I needed a lot of coffee that morning. I shaved, showered, and managed to write in my journal for a while. By 5:00am I had repacked my luggage and placed it in the hallway for the bellhop. Twenty minutes later I went down to the lobby to join the rest of the group. The hotel had prepared a boxed breakfast for us, which we picked up at the front desk before boarding our bus for the 20-minute ride to the airport (at that hour of the morning there was absolutely no traffic!). Our flight was scheduled to take off at 6:45am and I was concerned we were cutting things a little close, but upon arriving at the airport Bunny and Frankie secured our boarding passes in no time. Less than an hour after we left the hotel we were already boarding the

aircraft, a small turbo jet prop plane. The flight lasted approximately one hour and twenty minutes. I tend to be a nervous flyer and when I first saw our 'tiny' plane on the tarmac my anxiety level – pardon the pun – *skyrocketed*. But in reality, it turned out to be one of the smoothest (turbulent free) plane rides I've ever experienced. In fact, all of the domestic flights on this tour were similar. My seating companion was Nancilu and we spent most of the flight sharing traveling stories.

We arrived at Bagan's Nyaung U Airport around 8:00am. As we approached the landing strip from the air, Nancilu and I could spot some of the many centuries-old Buddhist temples that are the hallmark of this rural area. Bagan was a former ancient royal city where more than 10,000 Buddhist temples, pagodas and monasteries were built between the 11th and 13th centuries. Today, over 2,200 of them are still standing – in an area known as the Archaeological Zone – dotting the landscape here like trees. We exited the airport and boarded our new bus, which was even nicer and roomier than the last one, and drove along a rural country road towards the small town of Nyaung U. The amount of ancient temples we saw through the bus windows was nothing short of remarkable. Whether they were peeking out of the foliage, standing next to the roadway, situated in an open meadow or smack in the middle of a farmer's crop field, these structures were everywhere. *Absolutely amazing*.

Just outside of Nyaung U, Bunny had our new driver stop near a hillside in the Archaeological Zone so we could get a panoramic view of the countryside. And by 'countryside' I mean the multitude of ancient pagodas jutting out of the natural landscape. No matter where I focused, I saw nothing but beautiful fields and hills interspersed with ancient structures from another era. I found it difficult to put down my camera. (I took a nice photo of Debbie against this backdrop of nature and temples and was able to catch a large dragonfly hovering next to her in the frame; apparently, even the bugs were mesmerized by the view). We spent about thirty minutes here, many of us walking to some of the larger temples at the other end of the hillside for a closer look. Two in particular were quite large with local maintenance personnel doing restoration work along the tiered rooftops. Both structures dated back more than 800 years.

From here we drove to the Mani Sithu Market in the town of Nyaung U for a short visit. At that hour of the morning the market was packed with locals shopping for their daily staples. The adjacent dirt lot served as a

parking area and it was filled with scooters and motorbikes. Nyaung U, until not too long ago, was nothing more than a sleepy little rural town about 4 kilometers from historical Old Bagan. But with the advent of international tourism the town has emerged as a sort of traveler's center, and its bustling market – located on the eastern end of the town's main road – a great opportunity for foreigners to mingle with the locals. Consisting of tightly packed rows of wooden stalls underneath corrugated tin roofing, this public market offered everything from locally made handicrafts, durable goods, to dry grains, fresh fish, vegetables and produce. It was both exciting and cumbersome to maneuver among the crowds – the walking areas between the stalls narrow and confining in sections – witnessing the townsfolk shopping and bargaining with the vendors. At the back of the public market was an area set up exclusively for tourists, selling all sorts of handicrafts and souvenirs. Initially, as we meandered our way to the back of the market nobody paid us any mind, but no sooner than we reached the 'tourist section' when suddenly the vendors pounced. It was a bit overwhelming in such a confined area. And while the female sellers were very friendly they did not stop hounding us, trying desperately to sell us something, *anything*. It was almost impossible to move, surrounded by vendors holding up items or insisting you stop by their stalls. The scene was so chaotic that after purchasing 3 kitchen magnets from one young woman I nearly left them behind trying to get out of there! We spent 45 *exhilarating* minutes at the market before reboarding our bus.

After leaving the marketplace we headed southwest along Anawrahta Road to visit the 11th century Ananda Pahto, one of the areas most famous Buddhist temples. On the drive, Bunny handed out several photocopied informational sheets with a general description, or introduction, into Buddhism. She briefly went over some of the key elements as it pertained to Buddhism in Myanmar. I have added some additional information for the purpose of trying to 'nutshell' Buddhism in a few paragraphs:

(Disclaimer: The following is an *overly* simplistic viewpoint of Buddhism. For those of you who are truly interested in the religion I suggest you do your own research)

Basically, all forms of Buddhism follow similar precepts, regardless of the various sects. The physical world is illusory and full of suffering due to the continuous attachment of conscious existence. The more we cling to the physical aspects of our world, the more lives we must experience (through

reincarnation), perpetuating this suffering. The ultimate goal of Buddhism is to attain Perfect Enlightenment, ending this cycle of perpetual suffering (or reincarnations). To accomplish this, one must strive to abandon (transcend) the concept of self, the Ego within us that makes us cling to our earthly desires and our own self-importance (like the notion of our eternal soul) and the renouncement of the physical attachments of our existence. This is not an easy thing to do since most people tend to lack will power and can be stubborn in their beliefs, giving in to their selfish and physical impulses and material desires. It often takes many re-incarnated lives for the Buddhist to finally 'get it right', as it were, and each of these lives brings additional suffering. Once you achieve Perfect Enlightenment, the perpetual cycle and pain of rebirth will end and you will enter the peaceful eternal state known as nirvana. How one can reach this goal is where some of the Buddhist sects differ.

The historic Buddha (the one most of the secular world is familiar with) was born 2,600 years ago as Siddhartha Gautama, a prince within the Sakya clan that lived near what is now the Indian-Nepalese border. During his lifetime he set down a series of rules for monks and nuns to follow in order to preserve the Buddhist monastic order and the Path to Enlightenment. Prior to his death, though, the Buddha proclaimed that certain minor changes could be made to these rules. This loose interpretation led to disagreements over what could actually be changed, resulting in the emergence of different Buddhist sects. Today, there are two main existing branches of Buddhism: *Theravada* and *Mahayana*.

Theravada, the most ancient form of Buddhism, is dominant in parts of Southeast Asia (including Myanmar). It centers on the Pali Canon, or scriptures, the doctrinal foundation of Theravada, a vast collection of writings believed to be the recorded words of the Buddha himself. Under Theravada, Buddhists believe they can achieve Enlightenment by studying the ancient Pali texts, meditating and following the Eightfold Path (a blueprint for proper living). There is also a strong emphasis on the monastic community and respect for its elders.

Mahayana Buddhism developed out of the Theravada tradition roughly 500 years later. Several different schools and traditions have formed under Mahayana (like Zen Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism and Tantric Buddhism). Mahayana Buddhism focuses on compassion and touts devotional figures called *bodhisattvas,* these are beings – either alive or celestial – who have

embarked on the Path to Enlightenment but have not yet achieved it, or have renounced it, in order to help liberate sentient persons from their suffering. I imagine their role might be akin to the role saints play within the Roman Catholic faith, interceding or lending guidance to the poor suffering masses when called upon. Today, Mahayana Buddhism is widespread, reaching across Central and East Asia.

In addition, some religious scholars argue that *Vajrayana Buddhism* (a Tantric Buddhism) is also a separate branch of Buddhism, although most Buddhists dispute this since it evolved from the Mahayana tradition. Vajrayana Buddhism first developed in India around the 6th or 7th centuries and has become popular for its 'fast-track' Path to Enlightenment. The Theravada and Mahayana schools teach that meditation and monastic-minded living over the course of many reincarnated lifetimes is necessary to attain Enlightenment and enter the state of nirvana. But devotees of Vajrayana Buddhism believe they can achieve this in one lifetime, placing great emphasis on *mantras* (incantations), *mudras* (hand gestures), and *mandalas* (diagrams of the deities and cosmic forces). Vajrayana Buddhism involves esoteric visualizations, symbols and complicated rituals that are taught by a master (on our side of the world he is more commonly referred to as a guru). Vajrayana Buddhism has taken strong hold in Tibet and Japan and is quite popular in the West (although, I have a sneaking suspicion that the latter is due more to the tantric view concerning sexual indulgence…*ahhh, us decadent Westerners*!).

In the Theravada tradition, the most conservative of the Buddhist branches and the dominant religious school of thought in Myanmar society, one must study the Pali Canon, meditate and live a monastic (or righteous) life in order to attain Enlightenment. Bunny mentioned that in her country young people – as a ritual of indoctrination into Buddhism – usually become 'monks' or 'nuns' at least twice before reaching adulthood. At age five, children spend several days at a monastery (similar to a summer religious camp back home) where they begin to learn about Buddhism. Later, in their mid-teens, they stay at a monastery again for a longer period of more serious reflection; for many, this is the point when they make the decision to either become a monk or nun, or embark on a different path altogether. Obviously, most young people would find the monastic life both rigid and constraining and opt for pursuing other life goals. But there is a *deep* respect for monks and nuns in this society that transcends tribal cultural lines. The work they do not only in guiding the faithful spiritually but also in aiding the poor and

downtrodden is both inspirational and commendable on all levels, whether you believe in Buddhism or not.

When we arrived at the Anando Pahto temple we found a large gathering of international tourists roaming the grounds. And for good reason. This historic temple dates back to the year 1105AD, constructed under the reign of King Kyansittha, one of the greatest rulers of the Pagan (Bagan) Dynasty. The Kingdom of Pagan – which ruled the Irrawaddy valley and its periphery for 250 years – was the first to unify the regions of what would later constitute modern-day Burma. Most of the magnificent pagodas in the region were constructed during their time in power. The Anando Pahto is considered one of the most important temples of this kingdom because it marked a new architectural style that would influence temple building in Burma for centuries to come. Its construction is nothing short of an architectural wonder, fusing various elements of Mon and Indian influences. In fact, historians are almost certain that Indian architects designed the temple.

The Anando Pahto was constructed out of bricks and plaster, a perfectly dimensional cruciform structure that uses iconographic images within its stones and terra cotta glazed tiles to educate the people on Theravada Buddhism. The temple houses four giant standing Buddha statues made of teak wood and adorned with gold leaf, representing four different Buddhas. Each statue has its own sanctum and faces one of the cardinal directions of East, North, West and South. Staring at the faces of these statues was kind of creepy; their expressions seemed to change depending on how close you stood or the angle in which you viewed them. The main plinth of the temple has two receding curvilinear roofs, followed by four receding terraces culminating in a small pagoda and topped by an umbrella-shaped ornament (the *hti*). The temple was damaged by an earthquake in the 1970s but has since been restored. The whole thing is remarkably well preserved through frequent upkeeping. In 1990, to mark the 900th anniversary of the Anando Pahto, the spires were gilded, adding some golden color to the temple's otherwise whitewashed walls.

Bunny had us gather in the temple's courtyard before we went inside to give us some details on the building's architecture. As impressive as the outer structure was – with its Greek cross design and Indian elements – I found the inside of the temple to be more fascinating, with all those glazed terracotta tiles lining the walls and the enormous Buddha statues. One set of

tiles depict scenes from the *Jataka* tales (a body of literature native to India) concerning the previous births of the Gautama Buddha; another set of plaques show the forces of the demon Mara attacking and being vanquished by the supernatural powers of the Buddha. In the outer vaulted corridors leading from one sanctum to the other were a series of 1,500 smaller stone statues that are considered unique to Bagan, representing scenes from the life of the Buddha. Most are pretty worn and indistinguishable. In the prayer halls are remnants of 900-year old murals, although sections have been whitewashed over the years. We had plenty of time to walk around on our own, exploring and taking pictures.

Just before noon we got back on the bus and drove a short distance to the Art@Bagan Restaurant for an included lunch. This popular outdoor restaurant, with its shady trees and scenic views of the Irrawaddy River, was the perfect place to relax and taste the local cuisine. Our lunch consisted of chick pea chips, green tea leaf salad (and other veggies), fried noodles, chicken with pineapple, beets with peppers and, as usual, plenty of white rice. Bunny and I also shared a small pot of green tea with ginger and honey (she was experiencing the sniffles and said this stuff was wonderful for warding off colds). After lunch we headed to the Aye Yar River View Resort located near the small village of Taungbi, our home for the next three nights. This beautiful resort was built on a hilltop above the Irrawaddy River in the heart of the Old Bagan archaeological zone, just walking distance from a seemingly endless array of historical structures, including the remains of the fortress walls that protected the royal city of Pagan (dating back to the 9th and 10th centuries). The surrounding landscape was very rural and serene. As we drove through it en route to our hotel we passed the Bagan Archaeological Museum (which some of us visited on our last day here) and the excavated ruins of the old Pagan royal palace, not to mention dozens of ancient temples and stupas lining the roadway. *I fell in love with this place immediately*!

It was shortly after 1:00pm when we finally checked into the hotel. The rest of the afternoon was free for us to explore on our own. Bunny handed out photocopies of a hand-drawn map outlining the key historical sites near the resort. She also announced a walking tour to the nearby Bupaya temple situated above the banks of the Irrawaddy River for later that afternoon; anyone interested in going was instructed to meet her at 3:00pm in the resort lobby. I spent the next thirty minutes in my room having a cup of instant coffee, freshening up and sorting out my luggage for the next couple of days.

I then grabbed my camera, water bottle and, using Bunny's crude map, decided to go for a hike up the main road. Debbie told me she wanted to rest before the walking tour so I took off on my own. Along the way I encountered Nancilu and we teamed up and walked the length of the road until we reached the front entrance of the ancient Pagan palace ruins. It was Sunday, and the site was officially closed, but from where we stood outside the gates we could easily see many of the open mounds and ruins of the former palace. The grounds were still under excavation.

We backtracked and stopped at the Mahabodhi Paya, one of the more notable temples in the immediate area. The architecture was modeled after the famous Mahabodhi Temple in Bodhgaya, India, which commemorates the spot where the Gautama Buddha attained Enlightenment. The temple was built in 1215 and has an unusual pyramidal spire covered in niches enclosed with seated Buddha figures. The outer structure has been remarkably well preserved, although the inner temple has been given a more modern makeover. Nancilu and I sat on a bench beneath a tree directly in front of the temple, sipping on cokes and bottled water we purchased from the caretaker's tiny store adjacent to the site, taking this breather to muse about our own religious beliefs. If there was ever a quiet place to ponder one's own spirituality (or purpose in life), it was here in Old Bagan, amidst these ancient temples and rural setting.

Nancilu and I returned to the resort by 2:45pm. I had enough time to go up to my room and use the bathroom and grab an extra camera battery before heading to the lobby for our 3:00pm walking tour. Everyone in the group was there. Bunny led us south along the main road past the closed Lacquerware Museum and Institute building and turned right onto a dirt path through a wooded area filled with smaller temples and stupas. We stopped at one brick temple from the 10th century topped by a beehive-type spiral roof. Bunny wanted us to notice the windows, which were rectangular with a brick latticework design that only permitted narrow beams of light to filter inside, a telltale sign of an older Pyu-style pagoda. Most of these temples, she said, tended to be dark and very dank inside due to poor air circulation. The construction of the Ananda Pahto temple we saw earlier (built during the late11th century) changed all that, influencing the future architectural designs of the temples that followed, allowing for more natural light and ventilation.

We continued along this dirt road through sections of what I assumed was the village of Taungbi, a few isolated wooden dwellings with thatched or sheet metal roofs. At one point we reached a clearing in front of the Bupaya temple that served as a mini town square and/or market area. Along its perimeter were local vendors selling clothing, crafts, cooked foods and produce/seafood out of pushcarts, umbrella stands or shacks. This was the first real gathering of locals I'd seen since we arrived at the resort. As usual, Bunny headed straight to one of the food carts. She purchased a few snacks for us to sample: breaded crabmeat, fish and tofu squares, and hard-boiled eggs. All of the items came skewered on wooden sticks and were quickly deep-fried inside a large wok. At a nearby pushcart Bunny also bought a freshly prepared papaya salad, the vendor crushing the ingredients together in a clay pot with a wooden pestle, adding spices as he went along. She didn't share the salad with us because it was raw and she didn't want us to get sick.

Afterwards, Bunny gathered us in front of the Bupaya temple for a brief historical lowdown on the site and then allowed us time to wander around on our own before heading back to the resort. The name of the temple, *Bu*, means 'gourd' in Burmese, and refers to its bulbous shape (as I mentioned earlier in this journal the word *paya* means pagoda or temple). It is located along a bend of the Irrawaddy River, situated atop a hill overlooking a riverbank that serves as the village jetty. Local legend dates the Bupaya as far back as the 3rd century, to the reign of one of the earliest kingdoms in the region, which would make it the oldest pagoda in Bagan. But archaeologists who have studied the temple are pretty certain it was constructed somewhere between the 9th or 10th centuries during the Kingdom of Pagan because its design is similar to other temples from that era. Any further attempts to accurately pinpoint the pagoda's age were stymied by the earthquake of 1975. The original Bupaya toppled into the river below and was destroyed. What exists today is a reconstructed stupa, completely gilded and standing on crenulated terraces that lead down to the river. It serves as a golden landmark along the Irrawaddy. I managed to make my way down the winding stairway along the terrace walls to the riverbank and took photographs of the gilded pagoda looking up from the jetty. I immediately regretted this action when I climbed the stairs to rejoin my group. It was exhausting!

We got back to the resort around 4:15pm. I was very hot and sticky and decided to take a quick shower to freshen up. At 6:00pm I headed to the

hotel's restaurant for an included dinner. Prior to eating, Bunny and Frankie demonstrated for us how to don and tie a longyi. The garment is cylindrically shaped so basically you step into it, pull it up to your waistline and then tie a knot to keep it in place. The trick is in wrapping the upper edges of the longyi in a way to give you enough slack to tie the knot. Women wear their knot on the side, while men tie their knot in the front. Their attempts to show us how to dress in a longyi were very funny; at one point our group playfully whistled, cheered and asked for a table dance!

Our dinner that evening included eggplant and chicken dishes in a curry sauce, a soybean paste salad, fried cauliflower, baked fish in a spicy chili sauce, plenty of white rice and fruit slices for dessert. It was Debbie's birthday and Bunny surprised her with a cake and a beautiful black lacquer jewelry box decorated with rabbit images. Nancilu gave Debbie a sand art picture of a monk she had purchased earlier. I could tell Debbie was very touched. We sang her 'Happy Birthday' and sliced up the cake. It was a wonderful dinner. I made it back to my room shortly after 8:00pm. I tried to stay up and write in my journal but I was too tired, having been up since 3:00am. I climbed into bed and quickly slipped into a nirvana-like trance…

Day Six

I awoke several times during the night, beginning at 1:30am. The power went out more than once and each time I had to get up and reset the A/C thermostat lest I melt in my bed. Every time I woke I watched a little of the international CNN news broadcast covering the confirmation hearings of U.S. Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh…that put me back to sleep almost immediately. By 5:20am I was wide awake and hopped in the shower. When I turned the hot water faucet nothing happened. Thankfully, the normal water temperature was so tepid it wasn't a concern. I shaved and got dressed, made two cups of instant coffee and wrote in my journal. At 7:30am I joined Debbie in the hotel restaurant for breakfast. We sat with Mark and his wife, Merle, sharing traveling stories. Mark, if I'm not mistaken, was a retired electrical engineer. An inquisitive fellow by nature, he proved to be an invaluable source of information throughout the tour. If

something of a technical nature intrigued me, Mark was the guy who could explain the how and why. After breakfast I returned to my room to use the bathroom and get my handy little backpack ready for the day's activities.

By 9:00am we were on the bus heading into the town of Nyaung U to visit the Owl Soya Bean Paste Factory, a local, family-owned enterprise. On the drive into the town Bunny passed around a plastic sheet filled with various paper currencies once used in the country: the Indian and Burmese Rupee (from British colonial times), the Japanese Rupee (circulated by the Japanese during their occupation of Burma in WWII), the first kyat notes printed after independence and one each of General Ne Win's ill-conceived 45 and 90 kyat bank notes. As I perused the different currencies it dawned on me how much this country has endured over the last eight decades.

It didn't take us long to reach Nyaung U. I knew we were in the town because we passed the hectic Mani Sithu Market from the day before. We continued for a short distance beyond the marketplace before stopping in a residential area off the main road. I cannot be certain of our exact location because neither Google map nor the Internet listed an address for the Owl Soya Bean Paste Factory (at least not in my research). We walked a few blocks along the paved back streets of this quiet neighborhood. The homes represented an eclectic mix of the country's economic classes. We saw concrete two-story homes with iron gates and cement entranceways alongside hut-like dwellings made of thatch and corrugated tin sheets enclosed by stick fences. At this hour of the morning the streets were empty save for a few children playing and longyi-clad locals going about their chores. After a few blocks we reached the Owl Soya Bean Paste Factory.

The Irrawaddy region is known for its cultivation of soybeans. This sturdy nutrition-packed legume is native to East Asia. It is commonly used worldwide as a significant and cheap source of protein for humans and also in the manufacture of animal feeds. In Myanmar, fermented soybean paste (called *pon ye gyi*) is a staple condiment or marinade used in traditional Burmese cuisine, especially in pork and fish dishes. The Owl Soya Bean Paste Factory was a family run affair, utilizing a labor pool of relatives, close friends and neighbors. The property occupied one corner of a residential street and consisted of several small brick and cement buildings and platforms where the various phases of making fermented soybean paste were carried out. We entered the facility through a large open gated area and found ourselves in the middle of a dirt yard. In the center was a raised

wooden platform where sacks of soybeans were being dumped and sifted. Beyond this platform was a series of small circular cement pools used – I imagine – to wash the soybeans before further processing. Although someone from the factory was there to field our questions, it was Bunny who took charge of the tour. She led us from one station to the other explaining the various phases of the operation.

Locally harvested soybean varieties in Myanmar tend to be smaller than those grown in the U.S. These tiny beans are washed and put in very large vats of wok-like cooking utensils and boiled for 2 hours while male workers stir the mix with long wooden sticks. Once fully boiled, the black juice extracted from the soybeans – which contain all the nutrients – are drained and boiled again for another two hours. The discarded soybeans are used for animal feed. This work is particularly grueling in that the men who boil the soybeans must stand over these hot and steaming pots all day long, stirring continuously. When coupled with the naturally warm climate of the region, the heat and humidity is immense and stifling. The second phase of boiling thickens the liquid, forming a black paste. After the heating process is completed the paste is poured into large pots and put in a dark room to cool. Once sufficiently cooled the paste is transferred to another platform where female employees press the substance into measured disk-shaped globs. Sitting around them on the matted wooden floor are women who package the hardening soybean paste into individual plastic wrappings which are then boxed and shipped to local and national markets for sale. According to Bunny, a package of 10 individually wrapped soybean paste disks costs 1,000 kyats. The workers are paid by the load; roughly 550 kyats per load. I have no idea how many packaged soybean paste products this represents, but the factory spokesperson said they sometimes produce more than one batch per shift and that if an entire family is involved each individual family member receives 550 kyats *per* load, making this little enterprise an important source of income for everyone involved.

From here we took a stroll through the neighborhood and stopped to visit another family enterprise right down the street. This business was more modest than the soybean paste factory. The small property we entered was the home of an extended family containing two simple wood hut dwellings built one in back of the other. Several of the young female members were sitting on the ground in front of a square tabletop gluing together two sheets of paper onto bamboo sticks to form handheld fans. The paper had either a business logo or an advertisement printed on them. The woman in charge

told us these fans were not only used by local businesses as a form of cheap advertising, but they were also popular for weddings or special occasions (the image of a bride and groom, or a recently deceased loved one, or a birthday recipient could easily be substituted for a business logo). In Bagan, where the weather this time of year is as hot as Miami in July, a handheld fan is a nifty thing to have, especially at large outdoor gatherings. Before we left, the family graciously gave each of us a souvenir fan. And let me tell you, they were put to good use throughout the trip.

We continued walking through the neighborhood back to the main road where our bus was parked. At one point we passed the small office of the local Social Security Board. Bunny laughed and said this department was practically defunct, providing basically no meaningful services for the public. Without a government safety net to fall back on, the average family must fend for itself. Myanmar is essentially an agricultural economy, which means most of the population is dependent upon a localized market system to survive. Hence the creative entrepreneurial activities we witnessed throughout the day, as families did whatever they could to make ends meet. Approaching the bus, a few of us stopped to photograph the only mosque in Nyaung U, a small rundown temple catering to the equally small Muslim community that lives here.

We drove along Anawrahta Road to the village of Myinkaba – located about half a mile south of Old Bagan – for a brief tour of the Gubyaukgyi Temple. Many fascinating pagodas dating back to the 11th and 12th centuries line the main road entrance into this small village. A Pagan prince by the name of Yazakumar commissioned the Gubyaukgyi Temple in the year 1113 to commemorate the death of his father, King Kyansittha. The temple was designed using both Mon and Indian elements, its towers constructed in a typical Indian Shikhara style while the interior contains a large vestibule attached to a smaller antechamber. The exterior walls are covered in fine stuccowork that has endured the passage of time remarkably well. The frescoes lining the interior walls are the oldest paintings to be found in Bagan. More than 540 painted *Jakata* panels adorn the inside of this temple depicting Sri Lankan history and the lives of the previous Buddhas. These paintings, and the pattern of imported textiles worn by their subjects, show a connection between the Pagan Dynasty and East India/Bengal region. The windows were designed in the same perforated Pyu-style manner as the region's older pagodas, creating poor lighting conditions inside. Visitors might want to bring a small flashlight to see these magnificent paintings.

Besides the frescoes, this temple is famous for preserving two of the earliest written languages of Bagan. Each painting is inscribed by ink captions written in old Mon. In addition, near the temple is the Myazedi Inscription, also commissioned by Prince Yazakumar, a stone inscription believed to be one of the oldest surviving such monuments in the country. It tells the story of the prince and his father. Its significance is often compared to the Rosetta Stone of Egypt because the written carvings on the stone were made in four languages – Burmese, Pali, Mon and Pyu – allowing scholars to decipher the ancient Pyu language.

Before boarding our bus to head to our next destination I purchased three souvenir shirts from an enterprising young female street vendor. She originally approached us back in Nyaung U earlier that morning and when she sensed I was interested in her shirts she followed our bus on a scooter until she made the sale. I was so impressed by her tenacity I didn't even bother haggling with her (besides, she only wanted $10 US for the three XXL shirts, which I thought was a pretty good deal).

Our next stop that morning was to visit a local palm tree farmer. We drove to an isolated rural area just outside the village and stopped in front of a scattering of what I'll describe as 'modest dwellings' surrounded by groves of toddy palm trees. The farmer's name was Min Min; a small, thin and incredibly agile young man in his thirties (I'm guessing) who lived in a thatch and bamboo-plaited hut together with his wife and young daughter. He wore a weathered longyi and had a thick scabbard attached to his waist by a belt. Inside the sheath was an equally thick machete used to hack away at foliage and the tops of palm trees. On one section of his property we saw several cows and one calf taking refuge from the heat underneath the shade of a small tree.

Min Min's primary business, we soon discovered, was the sale of *sky beer* to the locals. To make sky beer, Min Min climbs to the top of his palm trees (he had about four or five dozen toddy palm trees on his farm) and collects tree sap using clay pots that are hung overnight beneath an improvised sap spigot he cuts into the bark. Rice yeast is added to the pot beforehand, fermenting the sap by morning when it is collected, creating a foamy concoction affectionately known as sky beer (because it comes from the sky…*get it*?). Early in the morning the liquid has the light alcohol content of a domestic beer, but as the day wears on the natural fermentation

process makes the sky beer more potent until eventually it turns into vinegar, which is why the consumption of sky beer is usually done before noon.

Min Min had fashioned a roofed bamboo and thatch sitting area on his property where locals (usually men) come to buy a pot of his 'brew' (1,000 kyats per pot). His customers sit, drink and socialize (think of it as a very crude outdoor pub). This is a popular pastime. On the farm next to his we could faintly hear a group of young men drinking sky beer, laughing and singing songs while someone strummed a guitar. Carleen (the 'show me' Missouri gal) asked if we could sample the stuff. Min Min did not hesitate. He quickly made his way up a nearby toddy palm tree using a rickety bamboo ladder and brought down two big pots filled with foamy sky beer. He poured it into cups for us (as a recovering alcoholic I had to abstain; I was given unfermented palm tree juice as a substitute). From the 'mmmmmmmmm' and 'it's delicious' comments of my companions I would say the sky beer was a hit. In fact, Carleen asked for seconds – and possibly snuck thirds – and would have been delighted to sit there like a sailor on furlough if Bunny hadn't moved us along. In addition to sky beer, Min Min's family also made palm sugar sweets. His wife was boiling palm juice in two large woks under a wood fire while his daughter was busy slicing the hardened sugary paste into round shapes to be bagged later and sold at the market. We were given samples of the delicious caramel-like sweets to take with us.

Lunch was on our own that day. On the way back to the resort, Debbie and I were dropped off at the Sarabha Restaurant, one of the local eateries recommended by our guides. The restaurant is situated on the east side of the original royal palace, about a twenty-minute walk from the hotel. Across the street from it is the famous 9th century Tharabar Gate, the only remaining gate entrance into the royal palace site and probably the best-preserved section of the old fortress wall. Traces of the original stuccowork can be seen on the arched gateway, including two niches on either side that belong – according to local legend – to a brother-and-sister pair of old folklore *nats*, these are spirits of former people who died violent deaths and now serve as protectors, but only if appeased by offerings. Locals often leave the *nats* bananas and coconuts in an attempt to ward off roadway accidents. Lunch was simple, but good. Debbie opted for a large bowl of chicken soup; I had white rice with chicken, tofu and veggies. The entire meal came to 5,500 kyats (just under $4 US). An hour later, Bunny and Frankie picked us up and took us back to the hotel. I spent the next two hours relaxing in my room. I

removed my clothes to let them dry off. Even though Bagan is located in the middle of the country's dry zone, shielded from the rainfall precipitation and humidity of the coastal areas by the Rhakine Yoma mountain range to the west, it was still hotter than hell and it didn't require much physical effort to work up a sweat. I sat in front of the A/C to cool down and wrote the day's events in my journal. At 3:00pm I joined the group in the lobby for an outing to visit a popular lacquerware shop. Frankie had to lead the group because Bunny's cold symptoms had worsened and it was decided she should take some medication and rest.

We drove to the Ever Stand Lacquerware Workshop in Wet Kyi Inn Village, located between Nyaung U and Old Bagan. The proprietor of this establishment, a colorful character with a long drooping mustache and an excellent command of the English language, not only greeted us when we arrived but also conducted a brief seminar on how traditional Burmese lacquerware is made. He told us the art of lacquerware has existed in Myanmar since at least the 11th century (possibly older, though) and that at one time many areas of the country engaged in the craft. Today, only the Bagan region specializes in lacquerware, which is sold mostly for export and as souvenir items for the growing tourism trade. Normally, the base of a lacquerware product is sculpted or shaped from bamboo, teakwood or larger types of hardwood. But the owner showed us a sample that was molded from woven horse tail hair. So I guess any number of porous surfaces can be used.

In Myanmar, lacquer comes from the tall *melanorrhoea usitata* tree, known locally as the *thit-si* tree, an Asian sub species of the anacariaceae family of plants that is native to Southeast Asia and grows in abundance in the west and northwestern parts of the country. The sap (or lacquer) turns a black color after harvesting due to oxidation. Once the artisan sculpts, molds or weaves the base, a layer of lacquer is applied and then the object is placed in an underground 'dry cellar' for a week. Each item made in this shop requires several layers of lacquer (some might need 12 coatings or more) so the process is very time-consuming. In addition, applying lacquer is a two-stage procedure. Only half the item can be coated at one time because the artisan must be able to hold the base while applying it, so if 8 coatings were required, it would actually take 16 weeks of drying to complete the process. Once fully lacquered, the base is engraved with designs that are done freehand by skilled artists in various stages, and then painted with natural colors (gold leaf can be used, as well), which adds several more weeks of production before the final product is completed. The dried lacquer is

washed with a mixture of teakwood charcoal and water, and each layer is gently polished with finely ground hardwood sawdust to give the item that glistening, mirror-like finish.

When the brief seminar was over we were given time to wander around the workshop area and witness the various stages of lacquerware in progress. More than a dozen artisans were employed here, some were either drawing designs or engraving them, while others were applying coats of lacquer or polishing the finished products. The owner was very proud of the fact his business also functioned as a school, teaching locals the art of lacqeurware, enabling them to earn a living through this craft. Afterwards, we spent roughly 30 minutes in the gift shop browsing and/or buying samples of the items made in the workshop. I purchased several lacquer bangles for my nieces, and a small black and gold leaf owl for my own personal souvenir collection.

We returned to the hotel by 4:30pm. Debbie and I had the opportunity to sit with Frankie in the lobby and engage him in an interesting conversation on religious philosophies and world issues, including the current state of political affairs in Myanmar. An hour later I returned to my room to wash up and prepare myself for that evening's home-hosted meal. Every OAT tour includes at least one scheduled visit to dine with a local family in their home. The guides do not tag along, so this is a *real* cultural experience, especially if the family does not speak English very well and the food is all new to you. Usually, the guides will give you a vocabulary list of simple words and phrases to help facilitate the evening. But there are no guarantees. You must be charming and use your wits in order to communicate with your host family. In my own experiences, these little encounters can go either way: at times they are stressful and awkward, or they can be fun, engaging personal glimpses into the local lifestyles. It's a coin flip. The true 'world traveler' will embrace the opportunity, though.

The gang gathered in the lobby just before 6:00pm. Bunny divided us into two groups; Merle, Mark, Debbie and I would visit one family, while Bill, Sandy, Carleen, Carol and Teresa would have dinner with another. Nancilu opted to make separate plans for that evening. Two taxi vans pulled up to the hotel with several members of our host families inside. Representing the family we were going to visit was the mother, Myo Myo, and her grade school age daughter whose name I cannot recall. Neither one spoke English very well so the conversation was somewhat limited on the

drive to their home in the township of New Bagan. It took us approximately twenty minutes to reach their residential neighborhood.

New Bagan is situated 2.5 miles (4km) south of Old Bagan's archaeological zone, along the Irrawaddy River. This is a fairly new community, established in the early 1990's when the military government, eager to turn Bagan into a tourism destination, forcibly removed the families living around the old fortress walls and relocated them here. It was already nighttime when we drove through New Bagan, but I could tell this was a thriving community; traffic was heavier and the busy main streets were lined with small businesses. It was definitely more modern looking than anything we saw in Old Bagan or Nyaung U, with a rapidly growing population. As construction around the archaeological zone continues to be prohibited or strictly regulated, many newcomers to the region settle down in New Bagan.

The family's home was a well-constructed two-story dwelling (one of only two such houses in the neighborhood) with an iron gated entranceway that formed a small compound with a more modest house built adjacent to it belonging to Myo Myo's mother-in-law. It was obvious to me our host family was probably considered middle-class by Burmese standards. A gathering of relatives was on hand when we arrived. Myo Myo's 40-year-old husband, Tun Tun (I'm assuming these are nicknames), greeted us and became – to our delight – the interpreter for the evening. Tun Tun had worked at the Dubai international airport as a retail manager for three and a half years and spoke English reasonably well. He later told us he had saved enough money living abroad to build his home and start his own rice selling business in New Bagan. His wife was 47-years-old. They only had the one daughter. Living in the house next door was his mother, a rather frail-looking woman in her mid-eighties, his unwed brother and his widowed sister-in-law and her children. Some of Tun Tun's sisters (he had six of them) were also there to assist and welcome us.

We sat in the small living room and were served tea with ginger. During this time Tun Tun introduced us to his mother and extended family. He briefly gave us his back story. He and Myo Myo married in their thirties, which by traditional standards was considered late in life to wed. Myo Myo is from another village (not from this region) and was working in a local hotel when they met and fell in love. In addition to their rice business, Myo Myo sells silk garments worn at weddings and a line of imported cosmetic products out of her home and at the nearby marketplace. Afterwards, we

were taken upstairs to see the rest of the house. We had to remove our shoes in the living room before we could climb the stairway. The upstairs had two bedrooms on opposite ends of a hallway. The center of the corridor contained a shrine with a gilded lacquer Buddha. At one end of the hallway was an open balcony; below it was a small courtyard with an outdoor kitchen area and the family outhouse. We then went back downstairs and put on our shoes, walked roughly ten paces to his mother's house and – to our chagrin – had to remove our shoes again to go inside. The mother's home, a very simple one-story affair, was where Tun Tun originally grew up after his parents were forced by the military to relocate to New Bagan in the early nineties; it consisted of a large living room area and three small bedrooms. In the back of the structure was an enclosed section for cooking. Tun Tun told us most of the meals for both houses were prepared here to save on fuel. In one corner of the living room was an ancient Singer sewing machine that Myo Myo's seamstress sister used to earn a living.

After our tour of the compound we sat down at a prepared table in front of Tun Tun's house for dinner. It was a beautiful night for eating outdoors. A gentle breeze was blowing and the stifling heat of the day had completely dissipated. Only our immediate host family (Tun Tun, his wife and daughter) joined us at the table. The rest of the extended family served as the wait staff, if you will, bringing us bowls of food and removing plates and so forth. The entire meal was prepared at the mother's house by – (I'm assuming again) – the ladies who were present. The first course we were served was a traditional green tea leaf salad. Myo Myo actually made the salad before we sat down, showing us how the ingredients are mixed together. Tun Tun explained that the green tea leaf salad is a national dish, the ingredients coming from different parts of the country, and is usually served with the main meal. The key ingredient is loose green tea leaf, which looks a little bit like chopped romaine lettuce. But this is not the actual salad. The green tea leaf is boiled and strained and then mixed with peanut oil, vinegar, crushed garlic, onions, minced ginger and other spices and then blended together until it has a pasty consistency. This paste is then sealed in a tightly lidded container and kept in a very dark and cool place (some bury it underground) for several days, or even weeks, allowing the mixture to ferment. In fact, it's more of a salad dressing than a salad.

To prepare the *actual* salad you first boil lentils and then stir-fry them in peanut oil. To this you add roasted garlic. Once this stage is done, you assemble the salad by sections. Traditionally, you place vegetable greens on

a plate (which serves as the base) and add tomato halves, the fried garlic, the lentils, green onions, roasted peanuts and sesame seeds (for crunchiness), hot chili peppers and lemon wedges. This is arranged keeping each ingredient in a separate pile or clump. On top of all this you add a generous scoop or two of the green tea leaf paste, then squeeze the juice from the lemon wedges all over the whole thing and mix it together with salad forks or large spoons. It is now ready to be eaten. I served myself a large plate certain I was going to enjoy it. I mean, I like salads and all the ingredients in this one suited me fine. Lentils, roasted garlic, tomatoes, green onions, crunchy nuts, some spicy peppers…heck, what's *not* to love, right? Well, the answer for me, folks, was the green tea leaf paste. I'm not a big fan of fermented foods and the strong taste of this mixture, which now permeated the entire salad, was a little too much for me. Most of my traveling companions enjoyed the stuff. Good for them. *I did not*. Tun Tun was sitting next to me when I took that first forkful. Believe me, I needed to marshal all my physical powers so as not to gag in front of the man, especially since he and his wife were so proud of their green tea leaf salad presentation. I managed to swallow that bite and wash it down with a sip of soda (they had Coco Cola and bottles of local beer on the table). Ever the diplomat, I nodded, smiled and congratulated Myo Myo on the salad, quickly moving on to the other serving bowls.

The family had prepared four types of curry: eggplant, pork, fish and chicken. And, of course, plenty of white rice. In addition, they had made a chili tomato paste that was very hot and spicy and served as a condiment. It was Tun Tun's favorite; he put it on everything. Next to the sauce were carrot and celery sticks for dipping. Hmmmmmm. I had an idea. After trying a celery stick dipped in the chili tomato paste I exclaimed how delicious it was (which was true) and – taking Tun Tun's lead – proceeded to spoon the sauce over my green tea leaf salad. The hot spicy chili masked the taste of the green tea leaf paste and I was able to finish the salad. I thought the rest of the meal was pretty good. For dessert we had pineapple and dragon fruit slices, peanut brittle, palm sugar sweets and a flaky tamarind candy made in Myo Myo's home village.

As the night wore on everyone felt more at ease. We had a wonderful conversation about Burmese traditions and life in the rural areas and they, in turn, asked us about our jobs and life back in the States. We exchanged emails and took group pictures. By 8:45pm we headed back to the hotel. Tun Tun, Myo Myo and their daughter accompanied us in the van. Bunny was waiting in the lobby when we arrived. She was delighted we'd had a great

time. We said our grateful ‘goodbyes’ to our host family and called it a night. Despite being thoroughly exhausted, though, I couldn’t sleep due to my lingering jet lag. After forty minutes I decided to take a Xanax. I slept like a baby Buddha…

Day Seven

I awoke at 5:00am feeling wonderfully rested. Ahhhh, the marvels of modern chemistry! I shaved, showered, got dressed and sat down to write the details of the previous evening’s home-hosted dinner in my journal. Today would have been the scheduled early morning hot-air balloon ride over the Archaeological Zone (an experience recommended by most guidebooks) but unfortunately the season for that popular activity didn’t start until the middle of October. At 7:30am I met Debbie in the restaurant for breakfast. By 9:00am the entire group gathered in the hotel lobby and followed Frankie and Bunny (who was feeling much better from her cold) to the road in front of the hotel. Six horse-drawn carriages were waiting to take us on a tour through the Archaeological Zone.

We split up into groups of two – with weight distribution being the determining factor as to who rode with whom – and boarded the coaches. My companion was Carleen who sat in the front of the two-wheel carriage next to the driver while I positioned myself in the rear; it was a bit bumpy back there, but at least I was able to spread out. Our driver’s name was Ko Thaung Lwin, a local farmer in his late forties who’d been driving his carriage to earn extra income for a number of years now; as a result, he’d learned quite a bit of English and was useful in describing key elements of some of the more important temples we saw along the way. He hailed from one of the villages near the hotel and had two grown sons serving in the military. Before we headed out, Ko Thaung Lwin opened the carriage’s hooded roof to shield us in case it rained. The skies were overcast and gray that morning but thankfully the weather held up.

In order to understand why so many pagodas adorn the landscape here, let me provide a brief historical digest of the region:

According to the *Burmese chronicles* – a series of detailed historical records of the early monarchies that ruled Burma – the founding of Bagan dates back to the second century AD. The oldest recorded peoples in Burma were the Pyu, a Tibeto-Burman language group that migrated southward into Southeast Asia following the Bronze Age. They formed several large city-states within Burma and effectively held sway over the region until the 9th century. Their trade with neighboring India heavily influenced the Pyu people, who introduced Ari Buddhism (a form of Mahayana Buddhism) and other significant Indian concepts in architecture, politics and agriculture to Southeast Asia that would significantly shape the future of Burma. The decline of the Pyu civilization began with relentless attacks on their city-states by invading armies from the powerful Kingdom of Nanzhao, which ruled southern China and parts of upper East Asia. The Bamar (or Burmese) people, who hailed from Nanzhao, set up a garrison town in Bagan in the 9th century, this would later morph into the royal city of the emerging Pagan Kingdom. Over the succeeding centuries, the Pyu were eventually absorbed into the more dominant Bamar culture.

The Pagan Kingdom was founded in the mid-11th century by the great Bamar king, Anawrahta, who took his small principality in the Bagan region and set upon a course of conquest that would eventually unite the territories of what is now modern-day Myanmar. This was the first Burmese Empire, and much of the country's verifiable history begins with Anawrahta's reign. He is considered the greatest ruler of Burma. During his time he was able to unify various kingdoms and greatly expanded his empire's economy by instituting a series of irrigation projects that promoted agricultural growth and trade in what was a predominantly dry region. Perhaps the most profound impact of his reign was his conversion to Theravada Buddhism in the year 1056AD by a visiting monk from the Mon Kingdom to the south. At that point, Theravada Buddhism had been on the decline for centuries, being replaced by the more popular Mahayana sects. But King Anawrahta's conversion led to a royal zeal to spread this more conservative philosophy of Buddhism; to his credit, he largely succeeded in keeping this branch of the religion alive and well. Once converted to Theravada Buddhism, he invaded the Mon Kingdom in the south in order to acquire all of the sacred Buddha texts and relics he could get his hands on. Afterwards, the king instructed his architects to begin building temple after temple, a practice continued by his

successors for the next 250 years. The result is the staggering amount of pagodas and stupas that dot the landscape of Bagan. More then 10,000 were originally built during the Pagan dynastic period, and while many deteriorated or were damaged by repeated earthquake activity, more than 2,000 survive today. And it wasn't just the Pagan kings who commissioned these temples. Members of the nobility and the wealthy upper classes, to garner favor with the royal house, often built temples on their lands in honor of the king, who would, out of tradition, attend the official consecration.

Historians seem to disagree on what led to the Pagan Kingdom's rapid decline by the end of the 13th century. Some argue that despite the empire's robust economy, the act of making donated temple lands tax-free led to a serious shortfall of revenue for the king's coffers, limiting the amount of funds available for continued expansion. While many others contend that repeated invasions from the Mongols to the north helped weaken and disintegrate the Pagan Empire. But despite its political decline, Bagan remained an important religious and cultural center until at least the 14th century, when the population began to dwindle as a result of a power struggle between the Bamar, Mon and Shan peoples for control of the country.

Today, the enduring religious significance of the area has made it a key destination in the country's fledgling tourism industry. After a powerful earthquake rocked the region in 1975, UNESCO donated money and spent 15 years assisting in local restorations. By the 1990s, the military government realized the travel potential of turning Bagan into the next Angkor Wat and sped up restoration work on roughly 2,000 structures, leading to complaints by international preservationists about shoddy workmanship and historically inaccurate materials and methods. Bagan, many archaeologists and historians argued, was beginning to look and feel more like a themed attraction, with hastily re-created structures from the piles of temple ruins. And then, in 2016, a 6.8 magnitude earthquake struck central Myanmar, leveling or severely damaging hundreds of these 'restored' temples. Surprisingly, in an act of cosmic poetic justice, most of the destruction was limited to the shoddy reconstruction efforts. The *actual* temple foundations – which had endured centuries of earthquakes – remained largely intact. The new government of Aung San Suu Kyi advised the Culture and Religious Affairs Ministry to avoid further restoration work until a thorough assessment of the damage could be made. UNESCO has since been working with local agencies in this regard to ensure proper and

accurate repairs are being carried out. None of this, though, takes away from the beauty or historical significance of Old Bagan's Archaeological Zone. This place is magical, an absolute must-see if visiting the country.

Over the course of the next hour and a half our caravan slowly made its way along several dirt pathways through the rural areas of Old Bagan, at times passing sections of small villages. We came upon so many temples and stupas, some situated in the middle of overgrown fields, that it would be impossible for me to list them all here. Many of them tended to be small, modest redbrick monuments, probably built in haste back in their day. One of the first interesting structures we saw was a relative newcomer to the area, the 18th century Nat Taung Kyaung Monastery near the village of Taungbi. Unlike the ancient temples, which were made from bricks, stones and decorated with stuccowork, monasteries like this one were generally constructed out of wood, but they were just as elaborate, adorned with intricate carvings. This particular wooden masterpiece was a complex consisting of *two* monasteries, each with a multi-tiered spire roof. Its decorative rosette and statue carvings date back to the pre-colonial Konbaung Dynasty, the last royal house to rule the country before the British arrived.

At one point we stopped and climbed to the top of a small rise for a better view of our surroundings. From this vantage point we could see over a hundred temple spires jutting out over the tree lines and adjacent foliage. In the distance was the Irrawaddy River. Along the river's edge were larger, gilded pagodas. The more notable temples could be seen from very far away, as they were much bigger and probably commissioned by the royal family of Pagan. We continued through the woods, passing an architectural hodge podge of smaller pagodas featuring everything from earlier Pyu-inspired bell shape towers to the more ornately terraced *hti* of the Indian-influenced temples. We stopped by one section containing a cluster of small pagodas known collectively as the Khaymingha Temple. Many had been severely impacted by earthquakes over the years. A few were tilted sideways, including the famous 'Leaning Stupa' of Bagan. One of the larger temples within this group still had remnants of its original outer stuccowork dating back nearly a thousand years. The further we traveled through this rural landscape the fewer locals we saw. At times it felt both serene and surreal, as if we were explorers discovering a previously unknown ancient village in the middle of a forest. *So cool*!

Our carriage ride through the Archaeological Zone ended in front of the largest temple in Bagan, the massive Dhammayangyi Temple built by Pagan King Narathu in 1170AD. While not the tallest, it is definitely the widest, originally constructed using a similar architectural design to that of the Ananda Temple we saw on our first day in Bagan. A wall with four gates once surrounded the entire structure and parts of it are still intact. We walked through one of these gates and toured the inside of the temple. Each side of the building had a large entrance portico. The unfinished tower was built on terraces. King Narathu, who was a bit of a prick, was assassinated before the temple was completed and it remained unfinished. The king had ascended the throne by murdering his father and stepbrother. Supposedly, to atone for his sins he commissioned this colossal pagoda. But once a prick, always a prick. His legendary cruelness followed him to his grave and into the history books. It is recorded that King Narathu personally oversaw the construction of his temple and executed masons if a needle could be pushed into the spaces between the interlocking bricks. The end result – besides a lot of dead masons, I'm guessing – was the finest mortarless brickwork in all Bagan. The high, arched passageways inside this temple are *very* creepy-looking and locals believe the place to be haunted by the spirits of those the king ordered executed. Guides will sometimes bring tourists here at night for a real spooky excursion, made even more frightening by the bats that routinely fly into and around the tall ceiling hallways and sanctums after dusk.

From the Dhammayangyi Temple we boarded our awaiting tour bus and drove just south of the old palace ruins to visit the Thatbyinnyu Temple, the tallest temple structure in Old Bagan. Its name means 'Omniscience', referring to the Buddha's Enlightenment, and was commissioned by King Alaungsithu in the middle of the 12th century. To give it height, the temple was constructed on top of four rising levels and topped with a relatively small Sikhara spire. Like the adjacent Ananda Temple (500 yards to the east) and the Dhammayangyi Temple, this was a walled pagoda. It was one of the first two-story structures built in Bagan. The corridors enshrine a large number of Buddha images on pedestals, including, on the upper terrace, a large Buddha statue made of brick and plaster sitting on a lotus throne. This pagoda has an architectural design similar to the Ananda Temple in that it is a square shape with porticoes on all sides, but the eastern portico juts out further than the rest for some reason, breaking the symmetry. Another distinctive characteristic of the Thatbyinnyu Temple is its white and gray façade, making it stick out among the surrounding red brick pagodas. Sadly,

the structure endured massive damage during the 1975 earthquake. Restoration work has been painstakingly slow and most of the temple is closed to the public in order to prevent further deterioration. But that doesn't distract from its grandeur. It is impressive to see just from the outside. A nearby smaller temple called the Tally Pagoda was supposedly built by setting aside one brick from every 10,000 used to make the Thatbyinnyu Temple. There is also an adjacent monastery on the grounds. Near the remnants of the temple gate, visitors often pile small stones on top of one another and make a wish. Most of us prayed for a safe journey. I also threw in a million dollars for Bunny and Debbie. I can be quite generous with my wishes.

From here we drove to a restaurant in the town of New Bagan for an included lunch. I don't recall the name of the establishment, but the food was outstanding: green bean salad, sweet and sour pork, cashew chicken, fried potato and onion rolls with spicy tomato sauce, and chocolate ice cream for dessert. Burmese cuisine was starting to grow on me…um, especially around my midsection (hee-hee-hee).

The afternoon was free to explore on our own. On the way back to the hotel, Debbie, Carleen and I were dropped off in front of the Bagan Archaeological Museum for an hour-long visit. The entrance fee was 5,000 kyats (just over $3). Situated in the Archaeological Zone, this beautiful museum – a three-story building with an octagonal base – was constructed in the late 1990s to replace an older museum from 1904. In front of the entrance portico is a wonderful fountain statue of the legendary King Pyusawhti aiming his bow and arrow upward and surrounded by five imposing animals spouting water – a bear, a big bird, a tiger, a large flying squirrel and a wild boar. The legend of King Pyusawhti is that he slayed these menacing creatures (which were constantly threatening the wildlife and/or people of Bagan) with his incredible archery skills.

We entered the museum through the long marble-tiled ground floor and were greeted by bronze statues of four of Bagan's greatest kings: Anawyahta, Kyansitthar, Alaungsithu and Kyaswa. Along the back wall was an enormous three-dimensional mural of the Archaeological Zone. The ground floor had various rooms displaying arts and crafts from the Pagan era, battlefield portraits and miniature layouts of villages and temples. We saw examples of ancient architectural designs, clothing, tools, weapons, literature and an assortment of statues. The second level was dedicated to

religious themes. The exhibition halls were filled with ancient religious wall paintings, portraits of temples and a vast collection of Buddha images going back more than a thousand years. With only an hour to tour the museum, we walked through the exhibition halls quickly. The building did not have an air-conditioning system so it tended to be a bit warm despite its spacious interior design.

At 1:30pm the tour bus appeared on the street in front of the museum with several of our fellow tour members inside. We headed over to the Bagan Nan Myint Tower on the eastern side of the Archaeological Zone to get a 'bird's eye' view of Old Bagan. The 13-level tower, which has a height of nearly 200 feet (60 meters), was built in 2005 as part of the Aureum Palace Hotel and Resort, a sprawling 5-star complex just to the south of the Bagan Nyaung U Golf Course. The top three levels of the tower offer a spectacular 360-degree panoramic view of the Archaeological Zone. We had to pay the equivalent of $5 US to go to the top. This included a complimentary juice drink (which must be consumed prior to boarding the elevator). With the exception of a hot-air balloon ride, the Bagan Nan Myint Tower is probably the highest viewing point in the area, allowing the visitor to truly appreciate the amount of temples in Bagan. Simply put, they were everywhere. More than a thousand years of history – in any given direction – was visible from the tower. *Amazing*.

We returned to the hotel by 2:30pm. I spent the next several hours relaxing in my room. At 5:00pm we gathered again in the lobby and followed Bunny to the Taungbi Village jetty along the Irrawaddy River, situated a 5-minute walking distance down a hillside road adjacent to our hotel. We boarded a water taxi – a two-level wooden passenger vessel – for a pleasant ride up the river. The sky was very gray, the horizon beginning to darken by thickening cloud cover and impending nightfall, but the water current was relatively calm and the boat ride went smoothly. Although, I got the feeling the captain was hurrying us along to try and beat the evening rain. River cruising the Irrawaddy River is a popular way to see the country for many international tourists. The natural ebb and flow of the river, though, sometimes makes the passage in certain areas unnavigable due to the sudden rise and fall of water levels. In fact, we actually passed a stranded and abandoned river cruise ship during the ride. Along the riverbank we witnessed groups of local women washing clothes or bathing their children. We also passed some notable temples, like the 11th century Shwezigon Pagoda, a large, landmark cylindrical stupa beautifully gilded and decorated

with intricate carvings, resting atop three square terraces. This architectural masterpiece would become the prototype for future stupas all over Burma. I think we were supposed to go further up the river but the skies turned rather ominous and we returned to the jetty shortly after 6:00pm. A mob of local female vendors was waiting for us as we disembarked.

When we reached the hotel lobby, Bunny went over the following day's itinerary with us (including the early morning flight to Mandalay) before we split up for the night. Dinner was on our own. By now it was thundering and raining heavily and most of us decided to eat dinner in the hotel. Nancilu joined Debbie and me at our table. I ordered a tasty and spicy fried rice dish with prawns. By 7:30pm Nancilu excused herself and returned to her room. Debbie and I remained at our table, chatting away, and were later joined by Bill and Sandy. We shared traveling stories for the next hour. Bill and Sandy had recently gone to Rwanda, to visit their son who works there, and had taken an excursion to see the silverback gorillas in the mountains. Sandy showed us some incredible upclose photos they had taken of these magnificent creatures. Debbie and I were blown away and I immediately put Rwanda on my Bucket List!

With a very early morning wake-up call ahead of us, we called it a night around 8:30pm. I squared away my hotel bill with the front desk before retiring to my room. I managed to write a little in my journal and watched a section of the BBC news broadcast before going to bed.

That night I dreamt I had been adopted by a band of silverback gorillas…they nicknamed me Magilla.

Day Eight

I awoke shortly after 3:00am and couldn't go back to sleep, so I made coffee and read a book about Buddhism that I found inside one of the nightstands. I'm assuming it was placed there by the hotel, like the Gideons' bibles you might find back home. I later showered, dressed and repacked my

luggage, leaving it in the corridor for the bellhop. At 6:00am I joined Debbie for breakfast. An hour later we were on the bus heading to the airport for our short flight to Mandalay.

On the 25-minute drive to the airport Bunny explained why it was necessary to fly to Mandalay, which was only six hours away by bus. The roads were not good, she said, and the drive was so bumpy the locals often joked you could digest rocks in your stomach during the trip. Bunny also shared some very amusing facts about the translation of certain Burmese words into English. For example, Myanmar's number one domestic airline is known by the acronym TIT. The third-ranked domestic carrier is SHIT (which means 'eight' in Burmese). Um, I guess if I had my druthers, I'd rather be on a TIT plane than a SHIT plane. The *8888 Uprising* is jokingly referred to as the *Shit Shit Shit Shit Revolution*. Handbags by Nicole Lee are quite popular in Myanmar. The only problem? 'Lee' translates into the vulgar form of the word *penis*. We laughed all the way to the airport.

Arriving early at the terminal building allowed us some time to browse the gift shops. I discovered, to my chagrin, the lacquerware I had purchased back in Nyaung U was actually much cheaper at the airport. This was a constant in all my years of traveling on guided tours. The designated 'specialty shops' you're taken to tend to be much more expensive than elsewhere. So, unless you absolutely fall in love with a particular item, I always suggest you wait to buy it later and save yourself some money. And if you're wondering why I didn't follow my own advice?…Well, that's because I'm an idiot.

The flight to Mandalay lasted all of thirty minutes. This was my first airplane ride where the seating was unassigned. Debbie and I sat together. We landed at Mandalay International Airport by 9:00am. We quickly walked off the tarmac and were soon boarding another big, comfortable bus for our drive into the city, which was located approximately 22 miles (35 km) to the north. We traveled along the new Yangon-Mandalay Expressway surrounded by castor bean plantations. According to Bunny, this broad highway was the best road in all of Myanmar, completed in 2010 for the purpose of connecting the country's two largest cities (Yangon and Mandalay). It used to take almost an entire day to get from one city to the other on the older highway system, but the Yangon-Mandalay Expressway reduces the travel time to only seven hours.

The other major city this expressway serves is Naypyidaw, the nation's new capital, conveniently situated halfway between Yangon and Mandalay. Naypyidaw was hastily constructed by the military government during the early-to-mid 2000s, an entirely planned city outside of any state or region, built for the sole purpose of governing the country. Because it is a modern city, devoid of any real history or cultural identity, nobody wanted to live there and the government had to force workers to relocate to the new capital. Bunny told us that on weekends, when the government offices are closed, Naypyidaw becomes like a ghost town of sorts, as residents often return to their former villages or cities to be with their families. I think the dislike of the new capital stems from the fact that it was forced upon the nation by the despised former military government. Since its completion, very few countries have moved their embassies to Naypyidaw. Russia and North Korea were the first to do so. *Surprise*, *surprise*!

As we drove into Mandalay, Bunny gave us a brief history of the city:

Located along the east bank of the Irrawaddy River, Mandalay is the second-largest city in Myanmar, with a population, according to Bunny, estimated at around 5 million. Between 1857 and 1885, it served as the last royal capital of Burma before the complete annexation of the country by the British. Today, Mandalay is considered the center of Bamar ethnic culture, as evident in the city's dance shows, puppetry and crafts shops. The founder was King Mindon Min, the second-to-last ruler of the Konbaung Dynasty, who wanted to create a new royal capital to commemorate the 2,400th anniversary of the Buddha. The city is named after Mandalay Hill, a 790-foot (240m) mound just to the northeast of the city center. A Local myth dictates that the Buddha visited the hill in one of his earlier incarnations, making it a popular pilgrimage site. There are many temples and monasteries surrounding Mandalay Hill, including the Sutaungpyei Pagoda, which sits on its summit and offers a wonderful panoramic view of the city.

The last royal family to rule Burma was the Konbaung Dynasty, which was founded in 1752 by King Alaungpaya, a heroic and crafty village chief from Upper Burma who succeeded in uniting the remnants of the toppled Taungoo Dynasty (that ruled Burma from the mid-16th century until 1752). His forces put down rebellions and recaptured the lands lost during the decline of the Taungoo Dynasty, creating what would become the third and final Burmese Empire. During their reign, Konbaung kings managed to keep the French out of Burma and eventually made peace settlements with China

and Siam (Thailand). They tried desperately to modernize the country's industries in order to develop the kind of weapons and resources necessary to keep the encroaching British in neighboring India at bay. But it proved to be for naught. After two major wars in the early part of the 1800s, the Brits had already taken over the lower half of Burma, and, fearing French expansionism from Indochina, they waged one final war in 1885 to topple the Konbaung Dynasty and annex the rest of the country.

Mandalay was designed along a 25 square mile (66 sq km) grid pattern, surrounded by the Irrawaddy and three other rivers. At its center, near the foot of Mandalay Hill, is a large walled fortress (with a deep moat) containing the sprawling royal palace compound. Under the whim of various rulers, the royal capital changed location several times during the Konbaung reign. The previous capital was in Amarapura, which was located just seven miles to the south of present-day Mandalay. When the British took over, the royal palace served as the governor's residence. It was destroyed during WWII in order to dispel the Japanese who had occupied the fortress. In the late 1990's, to attract tourists, a complete and fairly realistic replica of the original palace was constructed, but the fortress now houses a military base so basically everything else inside is off-limits to visitors except the rebuilt palace complex.

Following the devastation of WWII, a *new* Mandalay emerged around the walled palace, an expanding concrete grid-like metropolis with all the congestion and haphazard growth that comes with it. Like Yangon, the streets are often clogged with traffic – vehicles honking incessantly – with bands of scooters and motorbikes zipping in and out of lanes in harrowing fashion. At first glance, the city didn't seem all that appealing. But Mandalay was the capital of the last Burmese Empire, and despite British colonial rule the residents here have always been fiercely proud of their Bamar roots and culture, and this manifests itself in the numerous monasteries, pagodas, historical sites, workshops and teahouses that permeate this former royal capital.

One of the major reasons why Mandalay has prospered and grown over the past three decades is the steady influx of Chinese immigrants from the provinces of Yunnan and Sichuan in southwestern China. After the last military coup (in 1988, during the 8888 Uprising), the government turned a blind eye to large groups of Chinese immigrants settling in Upper Burma, many of whom ended up in Mandalay. During the 1980s, several major fires

broke out in Mandalay that destroyed nearly 9,000 homes and public buildings, leaving swaths of vacant and undeveloped areas throughout the city. The newly arriving Chinese immigrants quickly purchased these empty lots and proceeded to build homes and businesses, creating an economic environment that has made Mandalay the trading hub of Upper Burma, connecting goods from China and India with the rest of the country. Today, ethnic Chinese make up roughly 40 percent of the population of Mandalay and the surrounding suburbs, and there is genuine fear among the local Bamar that their culture is being slowly supplanted. Not surprising then that the racist *969 Movement,* a fiercely nationalistic Buddhist organization, was centered in Mandalay. Although that movement has since been officially banned, it seems to have morphed into the equally racist *MaBaTha* organization. Later that afternoon we had the opportunity to interview several local monks who were part of the MaBaTha. Another *eye-opening* moment for us.

A light rain blanketed the city as we entered from the south, driving through a commercial district that dedicated itself to religious icons. Workshop after workshop revealed yards filled with different-sized Buddha statues in varying degrees of completion. Our first visit that day was to the Myawaddy Nunnery for a Q-and-A session with the abbess. We arrived around 10:00am. The compound contained five buildings. We sat at a visitors' section near the entrance of its largest hall, divided into a dormitory for the nuns on one side and a collection warehouse on the other for donated items (piles of bagged rice lined the back area). Monks and nuns alike routinely solicit donations from the public to support the monasteries and nunneries, and you will often see them walking the streets in this endeavor with alms bowls. The public, for their part, generously supports them with whatever they can, especially with food.

We waited several minutes for the 45-year old abbess to appear. Bunny's perky, fun demeanor immediately changed. She became deferential and humble and knelt beside the woman while taking and asking questions. The bespectacled abbess, whose name I cannot remember, was head-shaven and wore pink robes (like all the other nuns). In fact, if it wasn't for the distinct pink attire they wore I would be hard-pressed – from a distance, anyway – to guess these were women at all. Their shaved heads and mostly slim bodies made them appear androgynous and indistinguishable from one another. Our first questions centered on how and why the abbess became a nun. In a very soft voice, with Bunny doing the interpretation, she told us she had been a

nun for 25 years and had studied in Sri Lanka, earning degrees in both Buddhism and the Myanmar language. She was originally from a small town near Bagan and had six siblings. At an early age she exhibited emotional outbursts and was quite rebellious (think your typical teenager, folks). When she entered the nunnery she found peace and serenity and knew that this was the way of life for her.

Next, we wanted to know how one becomes a nun and what was the typical routine of a nun. A young female can enter a nunnery at any time for up to ten days. During this period she is considered a 'nun'. According to Bunny, Myanmar Buddhist must become a monk or nun at least twice in their lifetime by staying at a monastery or nunnery for a minimum of ten days. If a woman wants to become an actual nun, then she must spend at least 15 days at the nunnery before making that decision, at which point she is allowed to stay permanently at the nunnery. When we were there, the youngest residing nun was only 10-years old and the oldest was 71. The life of a nun is strictly regimented. They rise at 3:45am. At 4:00am they do homage and prayers. At 6:00am they gather in the dining hall for breakfast. Between 7:00 and 10:00am they attend teachings and instructions. Just before noon they have lunch (this is the *last* meal of the day, they do not eat after lunch). From 1:00 to 2:00pm is naptime. Between 2:00 and 5:00pm are studies and continued teachings. At 6:30pm, more homage and prayers. Between 7:00 and 11:00pm the nuns gather for a revision of the day's learning. At 11:00pm they go to bed. And just four hours and forty-five minutes later they have to get up and repeat this entire process. It takes a dedicated soul indeed to want to commit to this way of life. For me, I don't know what was worse: the lack of sleep … or the lack of *eating*. I was reminded of a comedian I once saw in a New York City nightclub who said, "You know why they call them nuns, don't you? Because its *nun* of this and *nun* of that!" Before we left it was almost lunchtime and we were able to witness the nuns walking silently, in a single file, to the dining hall. Two hundred and forty nuns live at the Myawaddy Nunnery so it was quite the procession.

From the Myawaddy Nunnery we drove to the Mahamuni Paya for a short visit. Situated about half a mile west of Mandalay University, this temple is another of the highly venerated pilgrimage sites we saw while in Myanmar. Consisting of a complex surrounded by several monasteries, including a large teaching monastery from the *Thudhamma Nikaya* (the largest monastic order of Burmese monks), the Mahamuni Paya has a central

shrine that contains a legendary 13-foot tall seated image of the Buddha covered almost entirely by thick layers of gold leaf. We had to walk through a long arcade of kiosks selling religious items like candles, incense, Buddha images and flowers before reaching the pagoda. The building itself was beautiful, supported by 252 gilded columns, many decoratively carved or adorned with jade tiles. In the middle of the temple is the shrine, a small chamber, also gilded, with a multi-tiered roof (*pyatthat*) and a ceiling ornately covered by mosaics. Housed in this shrine is the Mahamuni Buddha image (Mahamuni means 'the Great Sage'), one of the most important icons in the Buddhist world. According to ancient tradition, only five likenesses of the Gautama Buddha were made during his lifetime; supposedly, this is one of them. The legend states that the Buddha visited a city in the Arakan Kingdom (what is now the Rahkine State) and the devout king requested that an image of the Buddha be cast for the people to worship. When this image was cast, the Buddha breathed upon it and the image immediately became an exact likeness of him.

Whether or not this statue is actually 2400 years old can be debated, but it definitely has been around a very long time. In 1784, Crown Prince Thado Minsaw of the Konbaung dynasty conquered the Mrauk U Kingdom of Arkane for his father, King Bodawpaya, and brought the Mahamuni Buddha to the royal capital. In order to transport the large statue, it was cut into sections and then reassembled in its new home. Along the pagoda's northeast courtyard is a series of paintings depicting how the Mahamuni Buddha was moved from Arkane to Burma, a daunting task at the time. Over the centuries, monks and male devotees (woman are not allowed to touch the image) have applied so much votary gold leaf to the Mahamuni Buddha that it has become misshapen under an estimated six inches of gold layering. Only the image's gleaming face is distinct due to a daily ceremonial polishing ritual performed at dawn. In one of the courtyards hangs a framed photograph of the statue taken a century ago showing exactly how much the image has changed. Underneath all this gold the statue is now unrecognizable from the one in the photograph. In fact, in the short while we were there we observed about half a dozen men applying even more gold to the statue. Apparently, this is a daily, never-ending process. God only knows what this thing is worth!

Next to a giant gong near the northwest inner courtyard is a tiny museum housing six somewhat battered bronze statues also taken from the conquered Mrauk U Kingdom. The statues were originally looted from Angkor Wat (in

Cambodia) centuries earlier and were repeatedly stolen and moved around from one conquered kingdom to another before winding up here. Of the thirty or so bronze statues that once existed, these are the only ones to survive. The rest were reputedly melted down to make cannons in the final war against the British. In the past, so many visitors rubbed the statues for good luck they have developed worn, shiny patches. To prevent further damage, the statues are now protected by an enclosed glass wall.

From the Mahamuni Paya we drove east through the busy streets of the Chanmyathazi Township in the south-central area of the city. We arrived at the Hotel Magic Mandalay just after 1:00pm. Located on the corner of 65th Street and Padauk Street, this was one of the more interesting hotels on the tour, an ultra sleek, purple-and-white Art Deco-designed building with a lot of glass thrown in for good measure. The furniture in the multiple bar lounges and restaurants was absolutely wild, like something out of a 1930's Flash Gordon episode. Armchairs with backs and footstools large enough you'd think they were built for giants. The only negative was the dimness of the rooms due to the throwback lighting fixtures. I had to request a small reading lamp from the front desk in order to write in my journal. After checking in I spent an hour in my room relaxing before heading back to the lobby at 2:15pm. Bunny had orchestrated a most unusual visit for us. We boarded our bus and headed over to a monastery complex run by the *MaBaTha* organization for a forty-five minute Q-and-A session with several of their monks.

MaBaTha is an abbreviation of the Burmese translation for Patriotic Association of Myanmar (it is also loosely interpreted in English as the Association for the Protection of Race and Religion). Essentially, this is a group of conservative far-right Burmese nationals who want to preserve the country's Burmese culture and Theravada Buddhism. One of their key concerns is the rise of Islam in the country. The apparent predecessor of the MaBaTha was the extremist *969 Movement*, led by zealous monk Ashin Wirathu who Time magazine denounced in 2013 for enflaming anti-Muslim sentiment in the country and helping to spark conflicts between Muslims and Buddhists in the Rahkine State. The numbers 9-6-9 are reference symbols relating to the Buddha, and were chosen to combat the Islamic numerical sign of *786*, which is used to convey "In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate and Merciful" in Arabic. Monk Wirathu drew the ire of the international community by denouncing Islam and its place in Buddhist Myanmar. Shortly after the Time magazine article was published, political

leaders associated with the military defended the *969 Movement* probably because their right-wing ideology was very in line with their own views. But in May of 2017, the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee, an appointed body of monks that oversee and regulate the country's Buddhist clergy, banned the *969 Movement*. The MaBaTha seems to have risen in its place, with pretty much the same ideology and message: Myanmar is – and should always be – a *Burmese* Buddhist country, end of story.

A central committee of more than 50 members – including the controversial monk, Ashin Wirathu, and his extreme fringe – run the MaBaTha. Its far-right political views are seen as being in sync with those of the military leadership. Despite international condemnation, the MaBaTha has many supporters within the country's ethnic Burmese community and has even sponsored restrictive laws to ban inter-faith marriages and religious conversions. According to Bunny, as far as she knew, this was the first time the MaBaTha had agreed to such a meet-and-greet with foreign tourists. She told us we had to be bold in our questions if we wanted to find out the truth about them. She would be acting solely as the interpreter for the session and would not be asking questions of her own, so it was up to us to press the monks for details about their organization's real agenda. Bunny predicted that if we asked the right questions, and 'pushed their buttons', as it were, the monks would reveal their true intentions. *And, boy, was she right*.

We arrived at the compound around 2:30pm. It was situated in one of the less affluent working class neighborhoods. Several shirtless boys wearing burgundy monk robes were kicking a soccer ball around in the courtyard. We were greeted by three monks and a small group of suspicious-looking civilian men who kept taking our group's picture the whole time we were there. Whether these men were from the military or intelligence apparatus, or simply supporters of the MaBaTha, we could not ascertain. Everyone was very polite, though. We were led to what looked like a small teaching hall. The three monks sat in wooden chairs on one side of the room while we were invited to sit on the floor in front of them (which is customary in such situations). On the bus ride over, Bunny had instructed us on the proper way to sit and cross our feet so as to not be disrespectful (you do not want to have the soles of your shoes facing a member of the clergy). The only problem was that we were a group of older Americans, and our flexible, limber days were way behind us. The monks sat quietly and watched as we tried – for several minutes, mind you – to sit on the floor with our bad backs and arthritic knees, groaning and moaning and straining. It was a pathetic sight,

indeed. Finally, the head monk – either out of pity or frustration – ordered the civilian men to bring in some benches for us to sit. *Thank you, Buddha*!

The monks began the session by welcoming us to their monastery and hoping that our stay in Myanmar had been pleasant thus far. The first questions we asked concerned the MaBaTha's role in the country. The older monk who sat in the middle and the one to his right seemed very passive and calm. The taller, younger monk on the left was very fidgety the whole while and was quite animated in his responses to our questions. They told us the organization's primary role was that of teaching and preserving the Theravada Buddhist traditions. They said they had the support of the majority of the clergy in Myanmar. We later found out that was a dubious claim. Probably less than twenty percent of the country's monks support the MaBaTha. The older monk spoke about the community outreach aspects of the organization and all the people they help. When asked about the MaBaTha's anti-Islamic rhetoric they simply denied it and said they were a pacifist group who tried to promote their religious values but believed in peaceful coexistence with the nation's other religions.

Eventually, someone in our group asked the 'hot-button' question that Bunny alluded to on the bus. If the MaBaTha was such a peaceful and accepting organization, why did the rest of the world seem to think they were instigating conflicts between the Muslims and Buddhists in the Rahkine State? The monk who exposed the true nature of the MaBaTha was the easily agitated younger one, who looked and acted more like an enforcer than an actual monk. His voice kept ratcheting upwards as if he couldn't control the animosity he felt towards Muslims. He would lash his right arm out in front of him, punctuating his every word the way Hitler used to do in those old Nazi propaganda reels when he addressed large crowds with his ugly diatribe against the Jews. This uncharacteristically angry monk, with Bunny rapidly interpreting his words, rambled on about how the Muslims were coming into the country and trying to take over, raping Buddhist women and committing other acts of violence (most of these claims, by the way, have either been fabricated or greatly exaggerated), and that the nation's Burmese population had to rise to the occasion to stop them in order to preserve their way of life. The meeting, as far as I was concerned, had now officially morphed into a Trump-like campaign rally, with blame being focused solely on foreigners and their strange cultures. Our group sat in stunned silence as this monk continued to rail against what is essentially a *tiny* minority within the country. *So much for peaceful coexistence*. At one

point the head monk realized his fellow clergy was doing more harm than good and graciously ended the session. We thanked them for the opportunity to meet with us. Before we left, they requested a group photo outside in the courtyard. Many of us did not want our picture taken with these monks. It was obvious to us the photographs were going to be used for some kind of propaganda purpose. Merle was particularly distressed over the idea and initially refused… but the civilian men *insisted*. She reluctantly stood in the back of the group and before the picture was snapped she cleverly ducked out of view. *Kudos, Merle*! It was a strange and silent walk back to our bus. I'm not sure what the monks felt about our little encounter, but I certainly sensed unease as they – and their odd group of supporters – watched us leave the compound.

By 4:15pm we reached our hotel. We had fifteen minutes to go to our rooms and freshen up before gathering again in the lobby for an excursion to the *U Bein* footbridge in the township of Amarapura, about seven miles south of central Mandalay. For 70 years, Amarapura was the royal capital of Burma before King Mindon decided to move the capital a little north to what is now Mandalay City in 1857. Today, this former capital serves as a sprawling suburb of Mandalay, set beautifully alongside Taungthaman Lake, a wide, shallow body of water named after an ogre who supposedly came here looking for the Buddha. The main attraction is the U Bein Bridge that crosses this lake. Built during the 1850s from wood taken from the former royal palace of Inwa (another ancient capital city), this is considered the oldest and longest teak footbridge in the world. It spans .72 miles (1.2 km) across Taungthaman Lake in a gentle curve. More than one thousand teak posts were hammered into the lakebed to anchor the bridge. The walkway is a continuous long path of nailed down wooden planks, many of them showing their age. Four wooden pavilions situated along the bridge allow visitors to stop, sit and watch the view. During the dry season, when the water level is very low, the U Bein Bridge appears much taller than what it really is. But during the rainy season the water rises dramatically and often laps just below the wooden planks. To be honest, it appeared quite rickety in sections and I'm surprised it can still handle the weight of hundreds of thousands of pedestrians crossing it every so many months. A few concrete barriers have been put in place to shore up the more decayed posts, but overall this bridge is pretty much in its original state.

A good time to visit the bridge is just around sunset, when the locals commute across it. Thousands of people, including large groups of tourists,

make their way from one end to another. On opposite sides of the bridge are rows of souvenir sellers and the whole area takes on the appearance of a bustling night market. After taking us to our rendezvous point near the bridge entrance, Bunny gave the group over an hour to explore on our own. Debbie and I followed the heavy foot traffic across the bridge to the midpoint. In the waist deep waters below we saw tourists being ferried about in colorful canoes and some local men fishing with bamboo poles. We opted to return to the shoreline and browse the little market area near the western end of the bridge for souvenirs. There are a few interesting pagodas within walking distance of the U Bein Bridge, as well. We saw one bell-shaped temple covered with hundreds of niches containing a tiny Buddha image in each one. It took a while before our normally organized group finally gathered at the rendezvous spot, the large crowds and trinket stalls conspiring against us. I took this opportunity to purchase several souvenir scarves for some female co-workers back home. We returned to the hotel around 6:45pm.

At 7:30pm we had dinner in the hotel restaurant that included a presentation by Bunny on how to make a Burmese salad. She had the staff prepare a long table with all the ingredients laid out in separate bowls (there was steamed rice, greens, dried shrimp, beans, onions, tomatoes, roasted garlic, cooked peanuts, various oils, green tea leaf paste, etc, etc). Using plastic gloves she made a salad to her liking, mixing all the ingredients by hand and then invited us to do the same. I have to admit, I was not a big fan of any of the salads I had eaten up to that point. So I decided to forego the salad altogether but Bunny insisted, preparing one for me with ingredients I selected (um, I nixed the green tea leaf paste). The salad was actually quite good. I sat with Debbie, Bunny, Nancilu and Carleen at the end of the table for dinner. In addition to the salad we were served chicken and fried fish cakes. I remember that we had an interesting conversation about ghosts, for some reason. By 9:00pm I was back in my room. I went to bed almost immediately and slept soundly.

Day Nine

I awoke at 4:00am. The fiber from all the salad I had consumed the previous evening had me running to the bathroom. Afterwards, I made several cups of coffee (which necessitated another run to the bathroom!), watched the BBC news broadcast and wrote more details into my journal. By 7:00am I joined Debbie in the hotel restaurant for breakfast. We sat with Mark and Merle; the topic of our conversation was mostly focused on our visit to the MaBaTha compound the day before. At 8:30am we were on the bus for a morning of sightseeing. Our first stop was a visit to the top of Mandalay Hill. Traffic was exceptionally heavy and it had rained hard during the night so some areas were slightly flooded. We arrived at the bottom of Mandalay Hill at 9:00am. The sky was an ominous gray, a light drizzle filled the air.

Located adjacent to the northeastern corner of the royal palace compound, Mandalay Hill's height of 290 feet (240 meters) offers the best vantage point from which to see the entire city. Surrounding the hill are numerous pagodas and monasteries, the entire area serving as a sacred pilgrimage site for Burmese Buddhists for the past two hundred years. Like all pilgrimage sites in Myanmar, Mandalay Hill comes with an interesting legend concerning the Buddha. According to this legend, the Buddha once visited Mandalay Hill and prophesied that a great city would be built around it on the 2400th anniversary of his being, which is the reason that King Mindon, to fulfill this prophesy, moved the royal capital from Amarapura to Mandalay in 1857.

Although there are many things to see around Mandalay Hill, the major destination point is the top of the summit where the Sutaungpyei Pagoda is located. To reach it, most visitors begin climbing one of two stairways along the southern slope of the hill. The main stairway is guarded by two giant half-lion, half dragon *chinthe* statues and contains 1,729 steps. It is not just one continuous climb, either; there are many things to stop and see on the way up, including a giant standing image of the Buddha pointing down to the city and the remains of a stony fortress used by the Japanese during WWII (an epic battle was waged to dislodge the Japanese from the royal palace and Mandalay Hill). In addition, two other stairways can be found along the northern and western slopes offering different views, but each is much steeper to climb. To the locals, taking the stairs to the top of the summit is seen as a meritorious task. *Thankfully, we were not locals*. I'm almost certain I would have suffered a heart attack if I had to climb 1,729 steps. Instead, Bunny contracted the services of a hill truck (an old jeepney-

like vehicle) to ferry us up to the last section of the hill where the climb was less than 300 steps to the summit. To board the truck we had to hoist ourselves inside using a thick piece of dangling rope attached to the back of the vehicle. It was a tight fit. Bunny actually hung off the backend bumper during the drive. Because of the earlier rain, plastic covers had been rolled down on each side of the truck obscuring the view. But I was grateful I couldn't see the rising scenery and the precipitous drops below. Our driver, for some crazy reason, decided to charge up the switchback road with such abandon, rounding the hillside bends so precariously, that I began contemplating my next incarnation.

We disembarked below the summit and had to remove our shoes and socks before proceeding up the covered main stairway. The terrace just before the Sutaungpyei Pagoda serves as a shrine to the legend of Mandalay, containing some interesting images. On the east side of this terrace is a contemporary (and somewhat disturbing) statue of ogress San Dha Muhki holding one of her severed breasts. Legend dictates that the ogress, for want of something to give to the Buddha, cut off her own breasts as an offering. This so impressed the Buddha he promised the ogress she would be reincarnated in 2400 years as a king and build him a great city at the foot of the hill. King Mindon is supposedly the reincarnation of the ogress. I also saw several green statues of ogre kings kneeling in obeisance to the Buddha (with their little green minion armies behind them), and there were images of creatures representing the various animal incarnations the Buddha took throughout his cycle of rebirths (*Samsara*). From this penultimate terrace, we had to climb another short covered stairway to reach the actual summit.

The Sutaungpyei Pagoda at the top of Mandalay Hill was colorfully decorated with golden porticos and colonnades lined with jade and mirrored tiles. Each corner of the temple had a small courtyard containing a bell and gong, the walls covered in beautiful geometric designs. The floor of the patio surrounding the temple was also tiled and proved to be quite slippery from the rain, so we had to gingerly walk across it. *Sutaungpyei* means 'wish-fulfilling' in Burmese and many locals will light candles or make a flower offering at the temple, asking the cosmos for a favor. But the most impressive thing about the summit of Mandalay Hill was not the Sutaungpyei Pagoda – as nice as it was I had now seen a lot more interesting ones – it was the view. The terrace that wraps around the temple offers a wide platform from which to see the city of Mandalay from every direction. According to Bunny, this is also a popular spot to experience the sunset.

Below us the almost pancake-flat landscape of Mandalay stretched out into the valley. Bunny pointed out certain landmarks like the royal palace compound with its gigantic moat now entirely visible from our hilltop vantage point, a famous medical university and the half moon-shaped building of the city's prison. In the distance we could see the expanse of the rice plantations ringing the city limits and even further in the distance, towards the northeast, were the cloud-covered peaks of the Shan Hills mountain range that border China.

After spending 45-minutes visiting the summit, we made our way down the stairway to our awaiting hill truck and headed (or raced) back to ground level. Our next stop was the Kuthodaw Paya located on the southeastern foot of Mandalay Hill. This gilded stupa, which was modeled after the Shwezigon Pagoda in Bagan, was built by King Mindon as part of the traditional foundation for his new royal capital. The main entrance has large opened teak doors ornately carved with floral designs, scrolls and Hindu Deva images; the *saungdan*, the covered pathway that follows, is adorned with frescoes on its roof. The stupa itself is another golden marvel, but the real importance of the Kuthodaw Paya lies in a remarkable series of 729 text-inscribed marble tablets, each housed in its own mini temple, that line the area around the stupa. When King Mindon commissioned this site, he wanted to leave behind a great work of merit by having the *Tripitaka* (the entire Pali Canon of Theravada Buddhism) inscribed on stone for posterity's sake. If stacked atop each other these tablets collectively form the 'world's biggest book' (and it is billed that way for tourism purposes), rows and rows of whitewashed little temples containing a single marble tablet inscribed on both sides in the Pali language with sections of the Buddhist scriptures. Combined, the 729 tablets form a reference library for the entire doctrinal works of Theravada Buddhism. According to Bunny it takes months to read the whole thing and the site is often a fun way to resolve friendly religious debates. For example, she said, if two people disagree on the actual wording of a particular verse in the Pali Canon, they can go to the Kuthodaw Paya to settle the argument, as the original texts can be found on these stone tablets.

The temple-encased tablets are lined in neat rows with well-maintained walkways between them, making this a popular site for wedding photos. In fact, when we visited, two couples were being photographed as they posed between the rows wearing traditional wedding attire. It's interesting to note that when the British finally annexed the upper portion of Burma they set up camp in the royal palace compound and in the areas around Mandalay Hill,

making the temples and monasteries off-limits to the general public. A direct appeal was made to Queen Victoria who had promised to respect the religious practices of her subjects, and in 1890 she ordered the withdrawal of British troops from religious sites. Sadly, when the faithful of Mandalay reclaimed the Kuthodaw Paya they found it in ruins. The main stupa had been looted, stripped of its gold and precious gems, with parts of it toppled or missing (some of the bricks were used to build a road). Starting in 1892, a group of senior monks began the long, arduous process of restoring the Kuthodaw Paya to its current form.

From here, we abandoned the hill truck (thankfully) and boarded our tour bus to visit the Shwenandaw Kyaung Monastery located several blocks south of the Kuthodaw Paya. This wooden monastery once stood inside the palace compound and served as the royal apartment of King Mindon, who died inside its walls in 1878. His youngest son and successor, King Thibaw, the last monarch of Burma, supposedly was either haunted by his father's ghost or couldn't bear to see the building where he died, and ordered the structure to be dismantled and reassembled outside the fortress walls as a monastery in honor of the former king. It's a good thing he decided to do that, because during the fierce fighting to dispel the Japanese from Mandalay the palace was bombed heavily and most of it burnt to the ground. One of the few intact structures to survive was the relocated Shwenandaw Kyaung Monastery.

We spent thirty minutes walking through the monastery and taking photographs. Built in a typical Burmese architectural style, the teakwood used in its construction was later heavily gilded and adorned with glass mosaics. Sections of the outer walls were blackened from lacquer because gold does not stick to teakwood. The most interesting aspect of the structure has to be the detailed teak carvings of Buddhist myths that cover the walls, doorways and multi-tiered roofs, and the gilded Jataka scenes inside the main hall. The couch where King Thibaw used to sit and meditate is also on display. Outside, beneath a covered work area, two employees trained by UNESCO were at work meticulously restoring pieces of wood panels that had deteriorated with age. Surrounding this historical site are several monasteries and the State Pariyahti Sasana University.

Next, we drove to the King Galon Gold Leaf Workshop and Showroom to see how gold leaf is actually made. We headed down 62nd Street and then hung a right onto 26th Street, the main road that runs parallel to the moat

along the southern entrance of the royal palace compound. As we approached the citadel's southwestern corner we made a left and continued south through the congested streets of the city until we reached the workshop on 36th Street. This particular area of Mandalay is often referred to as the 'gold pounders' district' because of the many gold leaf workshops in the vicinity. But according to Bunny, many of the shops have closed in recent years due to their inability to find workers for this labor-intensive task. Today, the King Galon is probably one of the more famous gold leaf workshops in Mandalay.

Inside the small workshop, an English-speaking staffer walked us through the process of making gold leaf. And let me tell you, it was immediately clear to us why they would have a hard time finding laborers for this type of work. A young shirtless male, wearing only a longyi, was busy pounding a piece of pressed gold placed on a wide, flat stone in front of him. Using an incredibly heavy iron mallet with a long wooden handle, he would repeatedly raise it above his head and bring it down hard, striking the gold and flattening it with each pounding until it formed into a thin paper-like consistency. The women in our group had a field day photographing the young worker, as he was shredded, not an ounce of fat on his lean, muscular build. Because of the backbreaking work of continuous pounding, coupled with the insane heat inside the workshop, these laborers are given plenty of breaks to rest and recoup their strength.

The gold to make gold leaf usually comes as nuggets from the Irrawaddy River. Before these nuggets are smashed into a desired wispiness, the gold is first run through a press and flattened and then sandwiched between two sheets of bamboo paper (the making of bamboo paper in itself requires another intricate process which I will not get into). My hat goes off to these men. I'm pretty sure this method of producing gold leaf hasn't changed since medieval times. From the workshop we entered the showroom and were given plenty of time to browse and shop. In addition to selling the thin sheets of votary gold leaf that the faithful plaster onto the Buddha images, the shop sold many items covered in thin gold. I purchased a tiny gold owl vase to match the lacquer one I had bought in Bagan. Gold leaf – which doesn't weigh much – is not that expensive. I also purchased a small golden bunny statue for Debbie; to accompany the wooden jewelry box our guide had given her a few days earlier for her birthday.

Our morning sightseeing over, we headed back to the hotel. Lunch was on our own so Debbie and I asked to be dropped off in front of the recommended Apollo BBQ Restaurant on Theik Pan Street just a few blocks from the Magic Mandalay Hotel. To our disappointment, the establishment did not have a lunch menu and the young staff did not speak or understand English. So we opted to cross the street and have lunch in a deli/bakery/restaurant called Mommy Café. We ordered fried rice with pork, hot wings and a side of fries. Debbie also had a delicious coconut espresso. The entire meal came to just $9 US, including the tip. Afterwards, we walked back to the hotel.

At 3:00pm we gathered in the lobby for a visit to the Aye Yeik Mon Girls' Orphanage. Overseas Adventure Travel, through their Grand Circle Foundation, sponsors many needy schools or facilities like this one around the world. It is customary on OAT tours to visit at least one such site, and they usually recommend bringing school supplies as a form of donation (although, cash and other items are also welcomed). The Grand Circle Foundation routinely donates money to upgrade or build new facilities. At the Aye Yeik Mon Girls' Orphanage, for example, which OAT has sponsored since 2011, they've given $40,000 US (to date) to purchase wooden bed frames for the girls' dormitory (they used to sleep on the floor) and to modernize the bathrooms and improve the safety of the facility's water system. Oftentimes these visits can be quite emotional, but they're also among the most *cherished* moments on any OAT tour. To prepare us in advance, Bunny provided some details about the orphans designed to tug at our heartstrings and, I'll admit, leave us a little misty-eyed before we even arrived. She suggested that when we leave the orphanage to give the girls a hug. I was a little confused, at first. Apparently, the 'ug' sound in *hug* translates into an 'ag' sound to a Burmese speaker, and for a moment I thought Bunny had said, "Don't forget to give the girls a *hag* when we leave." I remember turning to Debbie and frowning. A hag? *After what these poor girls have been through we gotta leave them a hag, as well*? To which Debbie later joked, "I wonder which one of us she had in mind?"

The orphanage was located off 62nd Street just to the east of the royal palace compound. When our bus pulled up to the gated entrance about a hundred grade school girls were waiting to greet us. Dressed in green longyis and white uniformed blouses they gathered around us excitedly as we stepped off the bus and grabbed our hands to lead us inside. Some of the youngest ones had their heads shaved. They were *absolutely* adorable, all

smiles and giggles. We were taken to the courtyard area where we sat in front of one of the school buildings and met the abbess who runs the facility. The abbess – a rather serious-looking nun in her late fifties or mid-sixties – sat behind a long table on top of which we placed our donated school supplies. A moveable blackboard in back of her offered details about the orphanage like the school grades offered at the facility and the current number of orphans and staff members residing there. She spoke only in Burmese, with Bunny, displaying the same respectful tone and manner she showed all members of the clergy, serving as our interpreter. School was officially over for the day and a growing number of curious uniformed orphans surrounded us during our Q-and-A session with the abbess.

Once we were all settled, she welcomed us to the orphanage and spoke about the generous nature of the Grand Circle Foundation and everything they had given the facility, including the ongoing water improvement project they were funding. The abbess went on to thank us for our donations, as well, and our interest in the orphanage. She then fielded questions from the group. Basically, we wanted to know how the orphanage was run and where the girls came from, and what happens to them when they become adults. The abbess provided very detailed answers. She told us that the Aye Yeik Mon Girls' Orphanage opened in 1963 and was one of 15 orphanages currently operating in the Mandalay area. At the moment, the facility had 150 orphans ranging in age from 2 years old on up. I believe she said that the oldest was a 33-year-old woman who grew up in the orphanage and because she had no family or place to go she was allowed to stay on. A staff of 11 nuns and 3 teachers work at the facility; five of these nuns administer the orphanage.

Most of the children were placed there because either both their parents had died or the father died and the mother could no longer support a family. The orphans come from all over the country. Sadly, since the orphanage opened, no mother has ever returned to reclaim her child. In very rare cases, though, relatives are allowed to reclaim an orphan if they can prove their relationship to the child. In order to protect the girls from physical or sexual abuse, adoption is strictly prohibited. The orphans are educated and taught a vocation; some might even go on to college or become nuns themselves.

The Aye Yeik Mon Girls' Orphanage does not receive any assistance whatsoever from the government. They rely solely on donations to keep their doors open. Many families in the community, whose children play with

the orphans in the courtyard, lend their support with money and food. If medical attention is required, there is a clinic in Mandalay that provides free services, but medicines must be paid in cash. Once a month, a volunteer doctor and dentist perform free check-ups at the orphanage. While this facility is exclusively for girls, a boys' orphanage was located down the street so that brothers and sisters can still have contact with each other. Most of the orphans, once they reach adulthood, usually reintegrate with the community, marrying and having families of their own, and some come back to do volunteer work or help the orphanage any way they can. By the time the Q-and-A session was over, many of my earlier concerns about the future of these young girls began to subside, for they seemed generally happy, well fed and were obviously looked after in a caring manner. It was, in fact, very inspiring and uplifting. And while I'm not trying to put a positive spin on being an orphan in Myanmar, I don't think I would be wrong in saying that many of these girls were infinitely better off here than living in abject poverty in some remote village or inner city, where the likelihood of abuse and exploitation was great.

We retreated to the playground area and sat on benches while the girls performed two traditional Burmese dances for us. Bunny said one of the younger nuns got permission from the abbess to teach the girls dancing, which I'm certain would have been frowned upon if this was a conservative nunnery. But this young nun was a freewheeling spirit, and directed the girls with the same enthusiasm as Sally Field's character in The Flying Nun sitcom of the 1960s. For the third dance we joined the girls, moving around in a circle and mimicking their dance steps. It was fun and funny at the same time. Not to be outdone, Bunny had us perform for the orphans. We sang some nursery rhymes, showed them the hokey pokey, and then 'Sally Field' put a cassette in a boom box and soon all the girls – led by Bunny, of course – were doing this hysterical free-style dance to a modern beat, jumping up and down and having a fantastic time. As we were leaving, the younger girls kept hugging us all the way to the bus. Before boarding, I crouched down on one knee and hugged one last orphan. I couldn't help but think about my own daughter Rachel, who died at the age of 26 just four years earlier. She was half-Filipina and looked a lot like many of these girls when she was their age. It was a very emotional moment for me. I had to hurry back onto the bus to avoid crying. As our bus pulled away, the orphans stood near the entrance and waved.

We returned to the hotel around 5:00pm. I went up to my room and made some instant coffee and wrote the day's events in my journal. By 6:30pm the entire group reunited in the lobby and we took the bus to this cute eatery called the BBB European Restaurant situated just off the main road in front of the citadel. I guess Bunny thought we needed a break from Burmese cuisine. The place was decorated with old posters and unique Cubist-style paintings. The meal was fantastic. I had steak, fries, grilled veggies and garlic bread. Dessert was good ole chocolate ice cream. Not a shred of green tea leaf salad in sight! We got back to the hotel by 8:30pm. Before retiring for the night I joined Teresa and Carleen for a quick visit to the hotel's open rooftop bar and pool area to check out the view of the city. It wasn't all that impressive. Mandalay is not a cosmopolitan town with an interesting skyline; in fact, at that hour the city's streets were mostly dark and quiet. I returned to my room, exhausted by the day's activities, and promptly crawled into bed and fell asleep.

Day Ten

I awoke at 5:30am, fully rested. I went through my usual routine: drank several cups of coffee, wrote in my journal, showered, shaved and dressed. That morning Bunny joined Debbie and me at our table for breakfast. We talked about our visit to the orphanage and I mentioned my daughter and how emotional the moment had been for me. Almost everyone in the group had expressed how special and moving the experience had been, but Bunny confided to us that not all tourists react the same way. Apparently, some adults have a difficult time relating to children and feel awkward holding their hands or embracing them. She's even had tour groups that refused to interact with the children during the singing and dancing portion of the visit. They just sit there and look bored. How sad for the children.

At 8:30am we boarded our bus for an excursion to Mingun Village, located roughly 11 kilometers upriver from Mandalay on the west bank of the Irrawaddy River. Bunny's boyfriend, Yan, also a tour guide, joined us on

the trip. A tall, handsome man in his thirties, who wore his long hair in a ponytail, he introduced himself to us on the bus, welcoming us to Myanmar and offering his assistance in any way possible. Bunny mentioned beforehand that Yan had asked her to marry him on several occasions but she was still undecided. She joked that perhaps the group might persuade her by casting a vote later concerning his worthiness as a potential husband. Needless to say, the chap was the epitome of good manners and graciousness. To be honest, he seemed genuinely in love with Bunny, gazing at her in that loopy way that all loved-struck people exhibit. When she spoke he would cling to her every word with rapt attention as if she was a sage imparting life altering wisdom. Yan would call and text frequently, and he showed up that morning with flowers and her favorite dessert. In fact, I'm certain that if Bunny chose *not* to wed this man a few of the ladies in our group would have gladly stepped in and offered themselves as a suitable replacement.

We drove north along 62nd Street and made a left turn on 26th Street, traveling west until we reached the Irrawaddy River. We parked in front of the Mingun Jetty and walked across the muddy riverbank towards a row of passenger ferries docked side by side. This 'jetty' was as improvised as you can get. There was no visible road, just muddied tracks where transport vehicles moved cargo all day long from the wooden ships coming and going up and down the river. Along one side of the riverbank I saw a series of huts. On the other side was a mountain of piled sand, dredged up from the riverbed by trawlers and used to make cement for the construction industry. Milling about were men carrying sacks on their shoulders or tending to their boats, souvenir vendors and a bustling outdoor fish market filled with the day's latest catch. It was quite a hectic scene. There wasn't a wharf or pier in sight; most of the boats were simply anchored in place and/or moored to one another by thick nautical ropes. Our passenger ferry was the fourth one out. To reach it we had to gingerly walk across very narrow planks set up between the boats. The crews from each vessel lent a hand, making sure we didn't topple into the water. It took a while to get us all safely onto the ferry, but once onboard we immediately set sail, traveling north up the Irrawaddy River towards Mingun Village.

The Irrawaddy is Myanmar's largest river and stretches through the center of the country. It originates in the north from the confluence of the N'mai and Mali Rivers, which get their water source from melting Himalayan glaciers. The river flows south where it drains into the Andaman

Sea near Yangon. It is by far Myanmar's most important commercial waterway, linking markets and communities, and this was evident on our 45-minute trip to Mingun Village. We saw cargo vessels and fishing trawlers sharing the river with houseboats, passenger ships and smaller wooden motorized boats that serve as water taxis. The river forms the backbone of the local economy, providing not only a food source for the community, but also the means by which to bring goods and people to the marketplace in a country where the infrastructure is still not up to par with the rest of the world. Bunny told us to keep an eye out for the Irrawaddy dolphins, an endangered species of oceanic dolphins that live in the estuaries and rivers of East Asia and resemble beluga whales, with large melon shaped heads and small blunt dorsal fins. They can grow to a length of eight or nine feet and sometimes hop in and out of the water. These dolphins have been known to help local fishermen by driving fish into their nets and are rewarded for their efforts by some of the fishers' bycatch.

As we sailed upriver we came across several small fishing villages ringing the waterway. I also saw some unusually tall, white reeds growing along the river's edge that, according to Bunny, were used by the locals to make brooms. When we reached Mingun Village a group of female souvenir vendors was waiting for us. Bunny instructed us to be firm and let them know upfront if we were not interested in buying anything or else they would follow us around. As it turned out, they followed us around, *anyway*. The jetty where we 'docked' was nothing more than the muddy riverbank in front of the village. The crew set anchor and another narrow wooden plank was used to transfer us precariously off the boat. Immediately, a young, pretty Burmese vendor, whose name sounded like *Chu-Chu*, became my personal 'companion' throughout our visit in Mingun. Although I informed her I was not interested in buying her trinkets, she smiled and followed me around the whole time. At first I was a little annoyed, but it turns out her English was quite passable and she proved to be a good source of information regarding Mingun Village and the area's historical sites. Besides, it was very hot that day and Chu Chu had the most enjoyable habit of fanning me when we stopped to look at something, keeping me cool. Debbie ribbed me about it, calling her my servant girl. But…*hey*.

Mingun Village is famous for several structures, most notably the massive, but unfinished, Mingun Pahtodawgyi (or Mingun Temple). It was commissioned by King Bodawpaya in 1790, and would have been the largest Buddhist temple on the planet – it was designed to be 490 feet

(150m) tall – but the king decided to slow down its construction after an astrologer prophesied that he would die upon the temple's completion. King Bodawpaya was an eccentric and demanding ruler. He forced thousands of slave laborers and military conquest prisoners to build the temple, the cost and toll on the country was enormous. Supposedly, his advisors appealed to his superstitious nature and concocted an astrological prediction that the king would die and his nation would cease once the temple was completed. This convinced the king to slow down construction and when he died in 1819 the temple was left unfinished. But judging from the surviving uncompleted structure, this enormous temple would have been something grand, indeed. What remains is a gigantic block of a building that sits atop several raised terraces. Its scale, even unfinished, is so impressive you can see it from the Irrawaddy as you approached Mingun Village from a distance. And to think, its construction was halted at only *one-third* of the temple's originally designed height. I read online it holds a record for being the biggest pile of bricks in the world. Beginning in 1839, a series of earthquakes have caused large cracks to appear throughout the remaining structure, and parts of the temple appear almost ready to split off and collapse. It's possible that another strong quake could topple the whole thing. And while the Mingun Pahtodawgyi today serves more as an attraction than an actual temple, there is a small shrine with a Buddhist image inside where locals can pray and meditate.

Bunny led us along a tree-lined path filled with souvenir stands to what looked like a giant boulder near the temple. Turns out this boulder, and another one just like it nearby, are the ass-end of two enormous lion statues that once guarded the entrance to the Mingun Pahtodawgyi. Both statues were taller than the average pagoda. Bunny stood next to a three-foot high circular object lying on the grass and asked us to identify it. Nobody guessed correctly. It was one of the lion eyeballs. *Wow*. Our guide gave us a brief historical accounting of the site and then we had thirty minutes on our own to explore the unfinished pagoda before meeting back at the lion's eyeball to continue our tour of Mingun Village.

I set out – with Chu-Chu in tow – to walk around the entire Mingun Pahtodawgyi taking photographs as I went. I was amazed this symmetrically square structure, built atop three brick terraces, was still standing. Although solidly constructed, the damage from earthquake activity over the years had splintered whole sections of each side of the building, with one side partially collapsed. A staircase had been built to allow tourists to climb to an upper

viewing area, but the whole thing looked rather unsafe judging from the large cracks permeating the structure. As I made my way around the temple I asked Chu-Chu questions about her family and life in Mingun. She was 19-years old and had 2 brothers and 3 sisters. Her dad worked as an unlicensed dentist in the village and her mom was a food vendor. She was a high school graduate who wanted to go to college but her family couldn't afford it at the moment. She mentioned that Mingun Village relied heavily on tourism to survive and was divided into three economic zones. The purpose of the zones was to allow the three separate communities that make up the village an opportunity to make money from the tourists without squabbling. For example, Chu-Chu could only sell goods in her zone.

By 10:45am our group rendezvoused at the lion's eyeball and Bunny took us on a brief walking tour through Mingun Village. At one point, Chu-Chu could no longer follow me because she had reached the boundary of her economic zone. She smiled sweetly and told me she would wait for me to come back. *If only my ex-wife could have been this accommodating*! A short distance later we stopped to visit the Mingun Bell, a 200,000-pound (90,000 kg) bronze bell that King Bodawpaya commissioned to accompany his massive temple. It took two years to complete (1808-1810) and was considered the world's largest ringing bell up until just recently. During the earthquake of 1839 the bell was knocked off its support beam; due to its weight it was not re-suspended until 1898. A tiered wooden structure has been built over it to protect it and make it more attractive for tourists. The bell does not have a clapper, but can still be rung by pounding it with a piece of thick wood. Our group took turns being photographed while ringing the bell. Some of the more agile among us actually crawled inside the bell, which is 12 feet tall and has an outer diameter of more than 16 feet.

Not far from the Mingun Bell we stopped to see the beautiful, whitewashed Hsinbyume Pagoda built in 1816 by Crown Prince Bagyidaw, the grandson of King Bodawpaya who succeeded him on the throne. The temple was dedicated to his first wife who died during childbirth. The architecture is quite unique, a departure from the usual Burmese temple building. It was designed based on a description of Mount Meru, the sacred, mythical five-point mountain that serves as the center of the universe in Hindu, Jain and Buddhist cosmology. Surrounding the main temple are seven concentric terraces representing the seven mountain ranges leading up to Mount Meru. To appreciate its symmetry, this is one of those temples best viewed from a higher vantage point.

Bunny gave us another 45-minutes to go off on our own before we had to gather back at the lion's eyeball. The vendors' section near the Mingun Bell featured local artwork – like woodcarvings and paintings – and Debbie and I wandered from stall to stall admiring the different crafts. Debbie collects paintings from around the world, which she later has professionally framed before mounting them on her walls back home. She has a good eye for this stuff. I am not as discerning, but I do like to bring back a piece of artwork that reminds me of the country I just visited. In this case, I came across a carved replica of a Buddha image on a wooden panel similar to those I saw at the Shwenandaw Kyaung Monastery. It now hangs on my 'souvenir wall'. Chu-Chu was waiting for me when we returned to her section of the village. She knew from experience that our group was leaving and this would be the last chance to get me to buy something. I believe she was selling bracelets and/or Buddhist medallions. I really was not interested and offered her $5 US as a tip for accompanying me around the temple. She seemed somewhat offended at first because begging for money is either against the law or frowned upon in Burmese society. But I explained to her calmly that I was giving her the money because she had served as my local guide. This appeased her and she smiled sweetly again before taking the $5 bill. No sooner than this transaction expired, another boatload of tourists arrived at the jetty and Chu-Chu hurried off looking for another prospect. My loyal 'servant girl' abandoned me faster than…um, well, my ex-wife.

We were back on the boat shortly after 12:00pm and returned to Mandalay less than an hour later. We stopped at a Chinese restaurant called the Golden Duck near the citadel for an included lunch. It was a delicious meal. Crispy chicken and duck, sweet and sour fish tempura, stir-fried veggies, fresh spring rolls, some kind of pumpkin side dish and fruit slices for dessert. We got to the hotel by 2:35pm. Everyone said 'goodbye' to Yan (and promised to give him two thumbs up). The rest of the day was free for us to explore on our own. I spent an hour in my room, having a cup of coffee and writing in my journal, before going back to the lobby to join Mark, Merle, Carleen and Teresa for a trip to the Royal Mandalay Palace. Bunny had arranged with our bus driver to drop us off at the citadel for a 45-minute visit. Tourists are only allowed to enter the fortress through a checkpoint manned by armed (and unsmiling) military personnel. The entire compound serves as an army base and is entirely off-limits except for the area containing the replica of the former royal palace. As we drove along one of the main roads inside the fortress, we could see army barracks with off-duty

soldiers sitting idly nearby and a row of two-story apartment buildings used by the families of married personnel; wives were busy hanging up laundry or cooking outdoors while small children played all around them.

The royal palace was built within a 1020-acre (413 hectare) fortress surrounded by four 1.2-mile long defensive walls and bolstered by a very wide and deep moat. The fortress walls are the first thing any visitor sees of the compound and it is quite impressive, with merlons and bastions topped with gold-tipped spires at regular intervals. The height of the wall is 22 feet not including the taller battlements. Each wall has at least one bridge that crosses the moat and contains three gates for a total of twelve, to coincide with the Burmese zodiac signs. Other bridges were built for supply purposes when the British occupied the royal compound and turned it into Fort Dufferin.

The main entrance to the palace grounds was originally from the Eastern Gate. The palace buildings were constructed on top of a platform. King Mindon had planned to build a much more ostentatious palace compound, but after the disastrous Second Burmese-Anglo War of 1852 (which led him to overthrow his half-brother and assume the throne), his kingdom was left with ever diminishing resources as the British continued to stake their claim in Burma. To compensate, he dismantled most of the royal palace buildings in the former capital of Amarapura and moved them by elephants to Mandalay to be used in his new capital city. The royal palace of Mandalay was completed in 1859. Just twenty-six years later the British annexed the rest of Burma, ending the Konbaung Dynasty, and would occupy the fortress for the next several decades. And while the British may have billeted troops in there, making it a despised reminder of occupation and colonial rule, many Burmese actually looked at the former royal palace as a symbol of national identity and sovereignty.

During the fierce battles of WWII, allied bombers destroyed most of the fortress, which had been taken over by the Japanese. Only the Royal Mint building and the Watch Tower survived the onslaught. The Myanmar government ordered the reconstruction of the palace compound in 1989. Due to shortages in funding, though, some corners had to be cut. The overall design of the former palace buildings is very faithful – they look almost identical – but corrugated sheet metal had to be used for some of the rooftops and in certain structures cement had to replace the original teakwood construction, so its far from an *exact* replica. Still, it's worth a

visit to see this collection of more than 40 timber buildings to get a sense of what the last Burmese royal capital looked like.

Bunny told us it would take longer than 45 minutes to see the entire palace compound, so she suggested we focus our visit on several of the key buildings situated on the palace platform. We began in the Great Audience Hall, a structure divided into three sections measuring 253 feet (77m) from end-to-end. This is actually the public entrance into the compound. We climbed a series of steps that were flanked by European style cannons to reach the Great Audience Hall. Of the eight thrones inside the palace compound, the Lion's Throne located within the center of the Great Audience Hall was the largest and grandest. Located behind the transept that connects the North and South Audience Halls, the Lion's Throne was ornately decorated with gilded carvings and two sculptured lion statues positioned at the bottom of a series of small steps leading up to the throne. All three of the connected halls had low relief carvings of lotus and foliage-band images and plain scroll designs; most of the decorative work was evident around the corners of the hipped roofs and the gables as well as their lower extremities. Basically, the halls consisted of large gilded wooden columns supporting a tiered roof design – with open walls – that were used during special occasions and feasts, like the celebration of the Burmese New Year or the beginning of the Buddhist Lent, when the royal couple would receive their subjects and accept their offering with much pomp and pageantry.

From the Great Audience Hall we walked west to see the Central Palace, a group of royal apartments where the monarch lived. Unlike European royal palaces where the rooms were all usually located within one large manor-like building, Asian palaces tended to be spread out over a defined area. The most famous of the royal apartments was the Glass Palace, the largest and most ornately decorated building within the compound believed to have been used as the principal apartment by King Mindon. Like all of the palaces, it was partitioned into two rooms: a throne room and the actual living quarters of the king. The entire wooden structure is decorated with intricate carvings, jade, gilded wood and mirrored and glass mosaic panels. Parts of the original roof were made from gilded copper. From here we opted to climb the spiral staircase of the Watchtower nearby to get a bird's eye view of the compound. This was one of two buildings to survive the bombardments of WWII. At 78 feet tall (24m), it is the highest structure within the royal citadel and was used by the King and Queen to survey the

beautiful panorama surrounding the fortress. The top of the Watchtower has a gilded seven-tiered pyatthat roof. From the observation deck one gets a wonderful view of the palace layout, with glimpses of Mandalay to the south and mountain ranges in the far distance. Although we did not have time to thoroughly investigate the compound, there are some things of note that visitors to Mandalay Palace might want to see, like the Royal Mausoleums where King Mindon's tomb is located (due north of the Clock Tower) and the Royal Mint (the only other building within the compound to survive WWII). There is also a small culture museum which features royal exhibits like the glass-pilloried bed King Mindon slept on.

We arrived back at the hotel by 5:00pm. I went to my room to freshen up and relax for an hour. At 6:00pm I took the elevator up to the rooftop Sky Magic Bar lounge on the seventh floor for what turned out to be another *exceptional* cultural experience orchestrated by Bunny. She had arranged for two former political prisoners to meet with us to discuss what life was like under the country's former military dictatorship. We sat around several tables next to the rooftop pool. Night was rapidly descending over the city; the air was no longer as hot and sticky as it had been during the day. As usual, Bunny served as our interpreter. She introduced the guests – Saw, a 46-year old male, and Su, a 47-year old female – to the group, thanking them several times for agreeing to meet with us. I'm not sure if Saw and Su were their real names, but for the purpose of this journal they will suffice. To underscore how much things have changed in Myanmar in recent years, an unsanctioned meeting between political prisoners and foreigners would have led to everyone being arrested. We listened in earnest as this soft-spoken couple told us their brave and harrowing stories:

Saw was a student protester who took part in the *8888 Uprising* (of 1988). He was still in high school, only 16 years old, when he was arrested in 1990 for being a member of an illegal student movement. His major crimes? Handing out pamphlets and public speaking. He was handcuffed, a black hood placed over his head, and taken to a military jail where he was beaten for 3 days. This, according to Saw, was the 'interrogation' phase of his arrest. He was denied food and was given little water and deprived of sleep during this period. His parents had no idea he was even in jail until four months after his arrest. Saw was assigned a military defense lawyer who told him beforehand how everything would play out. He would have to confess to his 'crimes' and receive a five-year prison sentence. Had Saw

elected to plead innocent, he would most likely have disappeared like thousands of other student protesters.

Prison, understandably, was no picnic. Sometimes, prisoners were put in tightened leg shackles or held in small isolation cells as punishment. He was placed in isolation for 3 months and was told he could not work while in prison or communicate with more than 2-3 people at a time so as not to influence other inmates. He slept on a small, dirty mattress on the floor and ate food that was contaminated with bugs. For breaking any of the prison rules, or the slightest perceived slight, he was made to crawl along the ground 'like a crocodile' and beaten by the warden. After serving his sentence, Saw was released from prison in 1995 but was re-arrested 10 days later and held for an additional three weeks. He had to agree in writing that he would no longer join any protest movement before the authorities would release him.

Life was very difficult for Saw when he left prison. Because of his arrest record nobody would hire him and he could not go to college because he hadn't graduated from high school. To survive, he did backbreaking work unloading cargo at the jetty and saved enough money to pass the high school exam and enroll in college. While in college he continued to be involved in the student protest movement, often changing his name and location to stay one step ahead of the authorities. Eventually, Saw married and settled down. His daughter is now a college student. But he continues to work with an organization that helps former political prisoners currently funded by USAID.

Su was a 17 year-old high school student who had participated in a protest rally at a monastery. She, too, was arrested for the 'crime' of public speaking (against the military junta). She was initially held for three months without being formally charged or questioned. Luckily, she was not beaten like Saw. Finally, with her uncle present, she was submitted to 12-hour interrogation sessions that lasted for three days. The investigation unit wanted her to reveal the names of the organizers of the protest movement. Defiantly, she told them that she had participated under her own volition and refused to gave them any names. She was sentenced to one year in prison and served her time between 1991-1992. Apparently, women are afforded a little more courtesy in prison than their male counterparts; her incarceration, while not remotely pleasant, was nothing like what Saw was subjected to.

Upon her release from jail, Su could not attend college because, like Saw, she hadn't graduated high school due to her arrest. She was forced to work as a convenient store clerk to save up money (some of which she used to

help other political prisoners) and was able to pass the high school exam and get into college. She continued to participate in student protest activities even after the military clamped down again, and returned home to try and avoid being re-arrested. Unfortunately, the local police knew who she was, detaining her for six months at the military stockade inside the fortress without being charged. During this time her family had no idea of her whereabouts and feared she had been 'disappeared'. Like Saw, she had to agree to cease her political protesting in order to be released. In 1997, Su married a fellow student activist. In 1999, she helped organize another student protest organization and was once again targeted by the military. When they came for her she was able to avoid arrest because she had recently given birth and her physical appearance had changed. The officers did not recognize her and she slipped away. Su has managed to avoid the police and military ever since. Although a middle-aged mother now, she also works for the same organization that helps past and present political prisoners, keeping data on their arrests and internment.

When our guests finished detailing their experiences we were invited to ask questions. Basically, we wanted to know what has changed since their student activism days. They both agreed that the biggest change in Myanmar society today was the ability to speak freely about the past *and* present without being arrested. This is due, in large part, to the election of the opposition party. But they cautioned that behind the scenes the generals still run the country and everyone has to be vigilant lest their limited freedoms be taken away again. Another coup d'etat could be lurking just around the corner, they warned. Case in point, in order to conduct a lawful student rally today, organizers must acquire a permit from the local police officials, who report directly back to the military. So the generals are still keeping an eye on everyone. Someone in our group asked if there were any reformist generals who might be able to change the military mindset. Su replied that the only two generals in recent memory who had professed reformist leanings had both been removed from their posts. The military leadership keeps a tight rein on their own. The meeting ended on that somber note. It's almost sad to say, after all these two have endured, and despite the current political changes in the country, Saw and Su did not appear overly enthusiastic about the future of the country as long as the military continued to pull the strings. *Hmmmm*.

We thanked Saw and Su warmly and took a group picture before splitting up for the night. Debbie, Nancilu, Bill, Sandy and I headed down to the hotel

restaurant on the second floor to have dinner. I ordered the pork schnitzel and a delicious pumpkin soup as an appetizer. After dinner we lingered for about an hour chatting about mostly travel topics. By 8:15pm we called it a night. We had another early airport departure scheduled for the following morning so I went straight to bed.

Day Eleven

My cellphone alarm went off at 4:00am. I wearily crawled out of bed and made myself a cup of coffee. I shaved, showered and then repacked my luggage, and by 'repack' I mean rotated my dirty laundry to the bottom of my suitcase. On long journeys such as this one, I usually bring my rattiest underwear and T-shirts so that I can simply discard them on a daily basis after I've worn them, thus freeing up space in my luggage for souvenirs. But despite leaving my Fruit of the Looms all over Myanmar, my suitcase felt heavier than ever. At 6:00am I joined Debbie for breakfast. Carol sat with us that morning. By 7:30am we were on the bus heading for the airport.

As we drove along the Yangon-Mandalay Expressway, Bunny answered several questions fielded by the group. Someone wanted to know who built the roadways in the country. She told us the major toll highways were built free of charge by private companies that later administer and collect the tolls for a number of years as compensation. I recall that a similar practice was used in India to build their major highways. Someone else asked about healthcare in Myanmar. Bunny said there was no real national health insurance in the country. Public hospitals are free, but the patient must pay for the medications. The more affluent go to private hospitals or clinics where the service and treatments are much better but the costs are also much higher. Going to a public hospital, she explained, is usually an unpleasant experience. The doctors and nurses are low paid and can be quite rude with the patients and their families. Many locals fear hospitals as places people go to die, so they tend to avoid them, if possible, and rely on holistic or natural remedies to treat what ails them. She also mentioned that because Myanmar

is a conservative society certain health topics have long been considered a cultural taboo, and are rarely discussed in public *or* private. For example, when she was growing up there was no education or discussion – even within families – about sex, birth control, or even a young girl's menstruation cycle. When Bunny experienced her first period at age 13 nobody had given her 'the talk' and she thought something was terribly wrong with her body. She did say that public perceptions were changing and more information is now readily available. I think you can chalk that up to the electronic age and social media.

We arrived at Mandalay International Airport at 8:30am and quickly checked in. By 9:00am we boarded a shuttle bus outside our departure gate and were transported onto the tarmac where a small passenger jet was waiting. Debbie and I sat together for the pleasant 30-minute flight to Heho, a small town located within the Shan State in the east central region of the country. The airport in Heho once served as an airstrip for both the Allies *and* the Japanese during WWII and was heavily bombed during the war. As you approach the landing zone from the south you can still see some of the bomb craters and remnants of aircraft bunkers from the 1940s. From the airport our group boarded yet *another* big comfortable tour bus and began heading southwest along National Highway 4 (NH4) towards Kalaw where we would be spending the night. As we left Heho behind, a light rain began falling, blanketing the hills that make up the Shan State geography. This is the largest of Myanmar's administrative states, bordering China to the north, Laos to the east and Thailand to the south. According to Bunny, the highway we were traveling on (NH4) was recently expanded by the Chinese, and for good reason. This wide, four-lane roadway serves as a major commercial link between China and Myanmar; much of the traffic we saw consisted of large trucks hauling goods back and forth between the two countries.

About twenty minutes into our drive we stopped to take a brief walk through Thayetpu Village, a tiny rural settlement situated just off the highway. Bunny wanted us to see a typical Shan State ethnic village before we reached Kalaw. By now, the accumulated rain had converted the mainly dirt streets into slippery mud paths. Huddling under umbrellas, we slowly maneuvered down one section of Thayetpu. The houses were spread out and each appeared to have an adjacent farm plot. The homes were constructed out of cinder blocks, timber and woven bamboo strips, while the roofs were fashioned mostly out of corrugated sheet metal. Within minutes the light drizzle turned into a downpour and we got stuck underneath the porch of a

two-story bamboo dwelling. The few locals we saw were women, dressed in their traditional ethnic clothes and staring at us through open windows, smiling and waving, but probably wondering what the heck were we doing walking around in the rain? *A very good question*, *indeed*, I thought. We made it back to the bus stepping ever-so-gingerly over the water soaked ground without anyone slipping in the mud…but just barely.

We continued heading southwest along NH4 for about 20 more minutes, passing a few more isolated villages along the way, and stopped in the junction town of Aungban for a pit stop. You wouldn't know it from looking at the place, but Aungban was a boomtown, of sorts. Surrounded by agricultural villages, it has become a major trading hub in the region. Produce from local farms (mostly potatoes, ginger, tomatoes, garlic, cabbage, cauliflower, oranges and tea leaves) are collected in the town by traders and then distributed to other parts of the country. The expansion of NH4 has helped facilitate the economic growth of Aungban. Many of the country's largest companies have set up branches in the town and there are at least half a dozen national banks in operation. In addition, a small branch of the Yezin Agricultural University (the top agricultural school in the country) had recently opened in the town, along with a golf course and a military base with a large hospital offering free services to the community. Due to the recent rise of Kalaw as a tourism destination (especially among hikers), the town boasts several hotels and hostels. Again, you wouldn't know it from looking at the place. At least not from the strip along NH4 where we stopped at a grocery store to use the bathroom and pick up some snacks and water.

As we continued our drive to Kalaw, Bunny spoke briefly about the Shan State. Boxed in by higher mountains in the north and south, the region's terrain is basically a hilly plateau, forming the Shan Hills system, a series of fertile valleys famous for their agricultural production. The weather here tends to be temperate and sunny, and in the higher regions much cooler than the rest of the country, which makes it an ideal place to escape the hot, dry season. In addition to agriculture, there are notable silver, lead and zinc mines in the region, and timber from teakwood. The Shan State is also part of the infamous Golden Triangle, a term coined by the CIA referring to a swath of mountainous lands that converge along the Mekong and Ruak Rivers between the borders of Laos, Thailand and Myanmar, where a large part of the world's opium is produced. For decades, leaders of the Wa ethnic minority – who live in the northern hills of the Shan State and along the

border with China – have controlled the opium business here, fielding a large army in a bid to gain autonomy. Up until the mid-2000s, Myanmar was the second-largest producer of illicit opium behind Afghanistan. A peace treaty between the ethnic Wa and the government has led to eradication of poppy fields and a decline of opium production overall in the region. But poppies are still grown here. In recent years, Asian criminal gangs have begun switching to *yaba*, a form of methamphetamine mixed with caffeine. Myanmar, it turns out, is also one of the world's largest suppliers of *yaba*.

There are nine primary ethnic groups that make up the demographics of the region. The Shans, from which the state gets its name, is the largest of these ethnic minorities. Estimated to have more than five million people living in different parts of Myanmar, the vast majority of Shans reside in the Shan State. They are descended from the ethnic *Tai* group of Southeast Asia, believed to have migrated south from Yunnan, China around the 10th century AD. Besides Myanmar, they can be found in adjacent regions of Thailand, Laos and China. They speak their own language but are also fluent in Burmese. I will be discussing some of the other ethnic groups in the region later in this journal.

Upon entering Kalaw we headed straight to the Thirigayha ('7 Sisters') Restaurant for an included lunch stop. Located on the town's main road, this adorable wooden cottage eatery had my vote for the best restaurant of the entire tour. In fact, *all* of the meals I consumed while staying in the Shan State were delicious. The Thirigayha Restaurant (opened by a group of sisters, hence the name) featured full-flavored Burmese, Shan, Indian, Chinese and Western dishes, plus daily local specials. Although small in size, the restaurant was apparently popular among foreigners, as they seemed to be the main clientele. Many kept arriving while we ate. An interesting (and tasty) aspect of the local cuisine is the added spice influenced by the Nepali Gurkhas and Indian communities that live in Kalaw, whose ancestors came here under British colonial rule to build the roads and railway. We feasted on fried chick pea noodles w/hot sauce for dipping, minced chicken with cilantro and lemongrass, local fish steamed in banana leaf, coconut rice and stir-fried veggies. Dessert was a ripened banana doused in wine and set ablaze on our plates by the friendly staff. I ate to my heart's content and highly recommend this restaurant to anyone visiting the area.

After lunch we headed to the Dream Mountain Resort and checked in. Situated on one of the leafy hills surrounding the city, this quaint hotel offered an upper terrace with a phenomenal view of the nearby mountain ranges. Like all of our accommodations thus far, the rooms were big and comfortable, each with a welcomed sitting area to take a load off and a sizeable desk (perfect for journal writing). Our group settled in and at 4:30pm we reunited in the lobby for a few hours of local sightseeing. We drove briefly through the center of the town, along Min Street, passing the still busy public market and the Aung Chan Tha Zedi, a tall glittering stupa covered with gold and silver glass mosaics and topped by a mosaic rooster. When the sun sets the whole thing begins to sparkle. We turned around and followed University Road past the spacious Kalaw public park located just below our hotel and continued south, beyond the historic Christ the King Church, a small Anglican Church built by the Brits in 1906. The British developed Kalaw as a hill station. Located high along the mountains of the western Shan Plateau, its cool, crisp air was perfect for British civil servants who wanted to escape the sweltering heat of the tropical plains. And today the town still serves as a mountain retreat. We headed west now, passing several hilly neighborhoods with upper class dwellings, the vacation homes of Myanmar's elite, according to Bunny. We drove by the View Point Golf Club – built primarily for the officers' staff of the nearby military base – and arrived at the Shwe Oo Min Paya (a temple cave complex located within the military base). After going through an armed checkpoint we pulled into the parking lot and spent about 45 minutes touring this unusual collection of Buddha images.

The Shwe Oo Min Paya is Kalaw's most famous religious site. And for good reason. The complex is actually a craggy limestone cave that burrows into the side of a large hill and is filled with (at last count) more than 8,000 Buddha images left there over the centuries as offerings, usually by Buddhists hiding or fleeing from invading forces. Outside the cave is a marble terrace with a beautiful collection of gilded stupas and Buddha statues (both large and small, some situated up the hillside), but the real impressive part of this complex is the cave. Lining the dripping and mostly narrow limestone corridors are Buddha images of so many shapes, sizes and materials it will make your jaw drop. According to Bunny, the cave had to be sealed off at one point due to a lack of oxygen, so it extends much farther than the area visitors are allowed to wander around in. Nobody is really sure how many Buddha statues are inside since sporadic excavations have uncovered more images over the years.

A white and green neon entrance leads you into the cave. Normally, my claustrophobia would have made this visit somewhat nerve-racking, but as we filed down the narrowing tunnel I made sure to keep some space between me and everyone else. What wrecks havoc with my anxiety levels is the notion of being hemmed in. To be honest, though, despite the tightness of the corridor and the eerily dripping limestone walls and ceiling, I was so amazed at the sight of all those images to even think about my claustrophobia. There were gilded Buddha statues – of differing sizes – *everywhere*. The images sat on thrones, or were captured in reclining poses, with seemingly countless smaller statues lining the cave walls. They were made of wood or copper or ceramic or marble; some were bejeweled or dressed in capes or clothing, or had painted faces or eyes that appeared to stare at us as we walked by. A few of the images had crowns, which, according to Bunny, signified they probably dated back to the more ancient dynasties. She led us to two of her favorite images: a crowned Buddha surrounded by elephants and two *unicorns*, and another Buddha statue dressed in a long coat decorated with tiny Buddhas. At one point, Bill and I ventured briefly into a separate chamber through a very narrow corridor to find even more images, and I wondered how many more chambers or passageways existed in the areas closed off to the public. After exiting the cave, we spent about twenty minutes or so wandering around the beautiful collection of statues and stupas that mark the entrance to the site.

From here, we drove to the top of 'Cloud Hill', which is located just above NH4 near the main center of town, to visit the Thein Taung Dhamma (or Dharma), a small monastery established in the 20th century by an esteemed Shan monk. The dhamma hall within the monastery, where the senior monks lecture, has five statues of the Buddha – including images in the Shan style – featured in a golden-mirrored shrine with an inner ring of paintings portraying episodes of the Buddha's life. Each May, the monastery hosts a 10-day meditation retreat that is attended by monks from different parts of the world. To reach the Thein Taung Dhamma most locals climb the 'Stairway to Heaven', a series of wide, red painted stone steps covered by a wooden rooftop located just north of Kalaw's marketplace. Bunny thought the climb up the hillside staircase might be too tasking for some of the tour members so we drove to the top, instead. Besides the historic monastery, a main reason for visiting the hilltop is the commanding view one gets of Kalaw and the surrounding mountains. We tried to catch the sunset as it reflected off the glass mosaic tiles of the Aung Chan Tha Stupa below, but

unfortunately there was too much cloud cover. Some of us decided to walk down the 'Stairway to Heaven' and met the bus at the foot of the hill.

We returned to the hotel shortly after 6:00pm. I busied myself for an hour writing the day's events in my journal. At 7:00pm I joined my fellow tour mates in the hotel restaurant – which doubled as a souvenir shop selling locally made crafts like paper parasols and rosewood sculptures – for an included dinner. We were served vegetable soup, beef steamed in sauce (very tender), spicy chicken cooked with chickpeas, chickpea noodles, vegetable curry, Indian naan (bread), steamed rice and egg custard for dessert.

I enjoyed the meal immensely, but discovered that some of my companions did not like the food. This led to an interesting discussion concerning contrasting opinions. For example, our group thought the visit to the Buddha cave complex was a wonderful experience, yet Bunny told us the previous tour group had complained about the site on their trip surveys. In my own experience traveling on guided tours, the group dynamic plays an important role in perceptions. Whenever I've been with a smaller, adventuresome group that got along as well as this one did, the tour was not only more pleasant and enjoyable, but the cultural experiences tended to be more profound. Sadly, I've traveled with tour members who complain at every turn, and fail to understand that to be a 'world traveler' means opening yourself to new experiences, both good *and* bad. What is the purpose of leaving your home if all you wish to experience are the same creature comforts you left behind? For me, world traveling is not a vacation, I rarely find anything *relaxing* about my trips abroad. Hectic travel schedules, unusual accommodations, strange new foods, people and customs…and all of this usually crammed into a jet-lagged ten-to-fifteen day time period. I only relax when I get back home! I often tell people if you want to get the most out of world travel you need to keep an open-mind and be willing to adjust to a totally new environment. And if you're unwilling – or incapable – of doing that?…well, my friends, you should stick to Disney World or a beach resort, you'll probably be better off.

After dinner, a few of us stayed in the restaurant talking with Bunny about gender discrimination in her country. She spoke openly about some of the problems women in her society encounter in the modern workforce, especially in a field like tourism, from unwanted sexual advances to kickbacks in pay to rude foreign tourists who hail from countries where

women are typically treated as second-class citizens. She gave us a few pointed examples but for privacy reasons I've decided not to include them here. By 8:45pm I was back in my room. I tried watching some television but soon found myself nodding off to sleep.

Day Twelve

I awoke at 4:15am and felt fully rested after seven solid hours of sleep. I made coffee and quickly shaved and showered. I spent nearly an hour going through my photos, deleting and editing as I went along. On average, I tend to take more than 1,500 pictures during my trips abroad. The process of editing them once I get home is very time consuming, so now I try to delete as many of the bad ones as I can while I'm still traveling. My photos serve as an invaluable timeline reverence and allow me to re-visualize many of the moments I later describe in my journals. Before meeting Debbie for breakfast at 7:00am, I repacked my luggage and put it in the corridor for the porters to pick up. We were heading to Inle Lake later that afternoon for the final portion of our tour.

We left the hotel at 8:15am and headed straight to the public market across from the beautiful glass mosaic-decorated Aung Chan Tha Zedi (Stupa). Throughout the region there are public market days known as the Five-Day Market, a rotating schedule of rustic outdoor market events that occur every five days in different locations. The Five-Day Market attracts thousands of villagers from the many ethnic tribes living in the hills who come to sell livestock and trade and/or buy produce or other essential staples. It is an awesome experience to witness because you can glimpse not only the local economy in action but also the various ethnic people, in their separate (and unusual) clothing, gathering in large numbers. Apparently, many ethnic communities within the country have a particular 'look', a style of clothing and head wear that distinguishes them from other tribes. Bunny had the *adorable* habit of dressing each day in the ethnic clothing of the region we were traveling through.

Our bus parked on Min Street and we walked across the road and entered the hectic marketplace. We were on a mission. Today's activities were marked 'A Day in the Life' – a typical part of any Overseas Adventure Tour itinerary – designed to immerse the group in a series of 'cultural chores' to experience how the locals live. Later that morning we would be visiting a Danu hill tribe village north of Kalaw. Bunny informed us we would be having a traditional lunch at a family's home in this village. *The only catch*? We had to buy the food for the meal at the marketplace and then later cook it ourselves. *Gulp*.

Bunny separated us into three groups: A, B and C. Each group was given 5,000 kyats and told to buy specific items to be used in the meal we would be preparing later. In my group were Debbie, Carol and Carleen. We had been instructed to buy fresh garlic, cauliflower, cooking oil and cabbage. An easy enough task, right? The only problem was that almost no one in the marketplace spoke English…and Bunny only told us what the items were in *Burmese*. In other words, we had no idea we were suppose to actually buy garlic, cauliflower, cooking oil and cabbage. She gave us four Burmese words and we had to write them down phonetically, hoping that when we inquired in the marketplace for these things we didn't butcher the meanings in our convoluted translations, or God only knew what we would be bringing back to the bus! Bunny bid us 'good luck' and let us loose in the marketplace, first group who made it back with all the correct items on their list would be the winner. If we made a mistake, she said, we would have to re-enter the market until we got it right. *Double gulp*.

The first thing my group did was to ask a young local man selling goods out of a stall for one of the items on our list. He smiled, nodded and led us down an aisles of vendors to a couple of women selling a wide variety of produce and other food staples. Nobody spoke English and we tried our best to pronounce the things Bunny wanted us to buy. Slowly, the women began to understand, looking at one another and speaking in their ethnic language. We ended up buying eggs, some kind of fish cakes, cooking oil and cabbage. I don't recall exactly what all that stuff cost, but the 5,000 kyats was more than enough to pay for it all. Excitedly, our group headed back to the bus with our bounty, elated that we were the first ones back. The bus driver, who had a list of the things each group was supposed to purchase, was waiting for us. When he saw what we brought back he laughed. Only the cooking oil and cabbage were correct. Bunny appeared a few minutes later and looked over our items and she laughed, too. She informed us that neither the eggs

nor the fish cakes were on our list, but that she would keep them and incorporate them into our meal later. She repeated, in Burmese, the two missing things we needed to buy and sent us back into the marketplace. Luckily, on our second try, one of our phonetic renditions struck a cord and the women vendors figured out that what we really wanted was garlic and cauliflower. We rushed back to the bus to discover we were dead last in the contest. *The story of my life*!

After our 'buying chores' we were given thirty minutes to wander through the marketplace to browse and take photos. Some of us were looking for souvenirs but the Five Day Market was more about local consumption than a place for touristy keepsakes. In addition to the rows of vending stalls, which sold everything from dried goods to clothing to toiletries, many of the pathways were congested with tribal groups selling their produce or goods on mats they placed on the ground. It was a beautiful morning, and the marketplace felt so exciting and lively.

We left Kalaw shortly after 9:00am and drove north until we reached the Myin Ma Htie Village. Along the way we stopped to photograph a small herd of water buffalo and their calves cooling off along a wide river bend. The Myin Ma Htie Village is home to a Danu community, one of many small ethnic hill tribe villages ringing the hills around Kalaw. The Danu people live in the southwestern part of the Shan State, in a historical region called *Myelat*, considered their ancestral homeland. Although not large in numbers, they are concentrated around the famous Pindaya Caves (another series of large limestone caves filled with an amazing collection of Buddha images dating back centuries). We arrived at the home of a local Danu family by 9:30am. The village – a small picturesque farming community nestled in a fertile plateau surrounded by green rolling hills – consisted of extended families living in large two-story dwellings. I cannot recall the name of the family we spent the day with, but there was quite a gathering waiting for us when we arrived, including the entire extended family, friends and neighbors.

After some introductions punctuated by many '*mingalaba*'s' with our host family – and a quick visit to the bathrooms – our group split up and we boarded three awaiting vehicles for a short tour of the village. And what unusual contraptions they were! The only way to describe them was *tractor wagons*. The motor was a completely exposed tractor engine while the back part could be used to either transport passengers or as a flatbed for moving

local crops or goods. They went from 0-to-60 in about ten hours, inching along the dirt roads at a pace that would make snails indignant. In fact, it took us almost twenty minutes to reach our destination – the village's new monastery and public school – a distance we could have easily walked in probably half the time, but it was an enjoyable ride, nonetheless. We passed many homes and farms along the way and every time we did, the locals would stop what they were doing to smile and wave. It was Sunday, yet the school and monastery grounds were filled with playing children who immediately rushed our vehicles to say 'hello'. Bunny explained that young children are usually required to attend sessions on Sundays to learn about social etiquette and respect for elders (and, I'm assuming, acquire some religious indoctrination in the process). After classes, the children scatter around the playgrounds. We approached the new monastery building and took our shoes and socks off before entering the dhamma hall where we sat in front of the lecture platform. The elderly head monk, whose name I do not recall, was dressed in a burgundy robe and sitting patiently on the matted floor with his legs crossed in front of him. He smiled and greeted us, welcoming us to his village. Bunny acted as our interpreter. She sat deferentially on the floor in front of the platform, oozing respect as she addressed the monk on our behalf during our short Q-and-A session.

The monk told us the monastery, which was still under construction, was expected to be completed by 2020. The entire building was being paid for by donations from the local community. Currently, five monks and ten novice monks run the monastery and school. Prior to entering the building, Bunny had given each of us a string of prayer beads based on the day of the week were born; each 'rosary' had 108 beads, representing the mortal desires of mankind. The monk explained how to use the beads. Basically, the individual beads are passed through your fingers as you count the number of times you recite a mantra, or the breaths you take while meditating, or how many times you repeat the Buddha's name or the number of prostrations you recite. In this way they are very similar to the prayer beads found in other religions, used as a counting tool. The monk taught us that in Theravada Buddhism, the faithful will recite a mantra invoking the Triple Gems of Buddhism (which include the venerated *Buddha*, the *Dharma*, his teachings, and the *Sangha*, the monastic order that carries on his teachings). As they recite these Triple Gem mantras they will turn the beads. The monk also imparted three very sacred but simple rules that all Buddhist (and everyone else, for that matter) should follow on a daily basis. *First*, don't do bad things. S*econd*, do good things. And *third*, purify your mind. He then

showed us how to meditate by sitting in the correct position and concentrating on our breathing. The monk blessed us and said a prayer for our safe return home, and we chanted ‘let it be done’ three times. Afterwards he fielded some questions from the group.

Many of us were curious to hear his opinions concerning the Rakhine State situation. In a very calm, passive voice he told us that Bangladesh was over populated with few economic opportunities, and many Bangladeshi immigrants enter the Rakhine State looking for a better life. The conflict, he believes, stems from the fact that for a person to marry a Muslim, they must first renounce Buddha and convert to Islam. This has led to anger within the Rakhine State Buddhist communities who view this as a national sovereignty issue and see Bangladeshis as interlopers bent on changing the religious landscape of that region. Sadly, he explained, this has led to violent clashes, especially when a crime is committed by a Muslim against a Buddhist. He conceded that many Buddhists within the country are angry. As for himself, he is concerned but will not join an organization like the MaBaTha because he is a pacifist who believes in inclusion for all religions. He cautioned that Westerners had to understand all the facts in the matter before labeling the situation in the Rakhine State ‘a genocide’, for no country, he concluded, would be amenable to a large group of foreigners crossing their borders and trying to change long held cultural and religious customs, at least not without *some* kind of repercussion or backlash. I have to admit, regardless of whatever side of the Rakhine issue you’re on, hearing this gentle monk explain the situation in such a soothing voice made a lot more sense than the rantings of the MaBaTha we heard back in Mandalay.

When our session ended, we thanked the monk for meeting with us and for his blessings. From the monastery we had the option of either getting back on the tractor wagons and returning to our host family’s house or walking back with Bunny. Most of us opted to trek through the village. We made our way down a dirt road, through a quiet residential area of farmhouses and planted fields. We could see women wearing conical bamboo hats hunched down between the rows of crops (they smiled and waved) and farmers tending to their livestock. The dwellings varied greatly, some were made out of wood or cinder blocks while others were fashioned from woven bamboo, but they did have one thing in common: they were all fairly spacious, two-story homes, capable of accommodating large, extended families. Along the road we passed guava trees and baskets filled with picked squash and carrots, and in front of some homes we saw mats of chili

peppers drying in the sun. It was a wonderful stroll, the surrounding hillsides made for a perfect backdrop to this beautiful green valley.

No sooner than we returned to our host family's house we set about preparing our lunch. Bunny served as the master chef, doling out chores and supervising the whole operation. Sandy, Bill and I were in charge of making the avocado dip. We sliced and mashed the avocados and (unbeknownst to the others) added some chili to spice up the mix. With a bowl of potato chips nearby, we kept sampling our creation, complimenting each other through mouthfuls of dip and chips (I was amazed there was any left after we finished…but, um, it would have served them right for putting a fat guy like me in charge of making the appetizers!). Several of the women were peeling, slicing and cleaning vegetables and making the green tea leaf salad, and I believe Carol and Carleen were doing the actual cooking, which was done outdoors on woks over makeshift stoves. Members of the host family were on hand to assist, probably making sure we didn't burn the property down. I think Mark helped make the cocktails; a rum sour drink consisting of locally produced rum with honey and lemon juice. I didn't have any, but I kind of got the feeling they really tipped the bottle because everyone kept saying how strong it was…*and then asked for more!* We finally sat down to eat in the lower room of the house, which served as a dining and entertaining hall. Several plastic tables and chairs were set up for us. The host family had prepared a soup and plenty of rice, and we made everything else: the green tea leaf salad, a potato and egg curry dish, stir-fried veggies, the avocado dip and the alcoholic drinks. It was a nice meal. For dessert we had bananas and either oranges or tangerines, I'm not certain.

After lunch, our group washed up, removed our shoes and headed upstairs to the main living quarter for a Q-and-A session with our host family and some of their neighbors. From what I gathered during my trip, most of the homes we saw, especially in the rural areas, were designed as one large room stacked on top of another large room, with little or no partitions. Don't get me wrong, these were mostly *huge* rooms, but individual privacy didn't seem to be of utmost importance as everyone was sharing the same space. Our group sat on plastic chairs lined against the walls of the second floor living quarter. The ceiling was the corrugated sheet metal rooftop; the wooden floor was covered by a worn layer of linoleum. At the far end of the room was a carved wooden cabinet used as a shrine to Buddha (something you will see in every Buddhist home). Along the walls were framed family photographs. Besides the plastic chairs and the wooden

cabinet, there was no other furniture, just a big empty space in the middle of the room. The host family and neighbors sat on the floor around the shrine during the session. Before we began we were offered tea.

Bunny, serving as our interpreter, thanked the family for their hospitality and they in turn welcomed us formally to their home. Sitting in front of the Buddha shrine were the owners of the house, whose names I forgot to jot down, an elderly couple in their mid-seventies who had two grown children with families of their own. Sitting between them was their youngest grand daughter. Earlier, Bunny had presented the little girl with a beautiful pink dress and she was now wearing it, looking absolutely adorable. At first, everyone seemed kind of shy and nobody knew what to say, so Bunny asked the family to tell us about the village. The Myin Ma Htie Village consisted of roughly 2,000 inhabitants, members of the Danu hill tribe. According to them, the Danu people had been living in the valley since the 10th century, and were once known for their archery skills. The village had a free clinic, which offered the children vaccinations, but it lacked a doctor or a full-time healthcare staff. It seemed to me that whatever basic services these people enjoyed – beyond electricity and water – had to be provided for by the community.

Some of the family members spoke about the peace and order situation in the valley. Since independence, the Shan State has always been a volatile mix of warring ethnic groups. In the past, the region has seen the rise of a number of militant factions, fighting not only the central government but each other, as well. For example, the Shan State Army, or the SSA (at one time the largest but now defunct militant group in the state) was originally organized to establish autonomy for the Shan people. Their initial fight was against the central government but they found themselves battling other factions like the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), and a militant group comprised of Kuomintang soldiers from China who had fled the communists there and had settled in the eastern part of the Shan State, and the well-armed United Wa State Army (who control the opium trade), to name a few. All these civil wars took a drastic toll on the ethnic communities within the Shan State, as different militant groups would often exact taxes on the villages, which included goods and forced labor. Eventually, the central government – unable to establish a firm control of the region – entered into negotiations with the different warring groups, and by the late 1990s no less than 17 militant factions had signed peace treaties. Most of these groups, though, still remain heavily armed till this day, so it’s a shaky peace, at best.

But our host family told us that the ceasefire treaties had put an end to the violence in the region and that they've experienced a peaceful existence for a number of years now.

We asked about the legal system in the village, and how local disputes or lawbreakers are dealt with. In a community as small as theirs, they have elected ward officials known as 'house holders' (a few were present at our gathering) who represent about 100 households each, and they form a sort of village council to settle legal issues or disputes between neighbors. If a serious matter arises that they cannot resolve, then the nearest police authority is contacted, but this is only done as a last resort. I imagine in a village as small as this one, where everyone has known each other for decades, most problems are probably settled amicably.

I asked a question about courtship, wanting to know how a man pursues a woman in such a small community. They seemed to enjoy the question for they began smiling and laughing and offering examples of how love blossoms in the valley. The courtship usually begins with eye contact at public gatherings between a young man and woman who are attracted to one another. The young man will attempt to pass a note to his love interest professing his feelings for her. If he cannot hand over the note personally, he will ask a village elder to do it for him, signaling the seriousness of his intent. There is no casual dating in these villages. Once a couple commits to a relationship the families meet and the inevitability is marriage. If the families do not get along and are opposed to the union than the young couple, if they are truly in love, will elope. Apparently, this must be a real and constant situation judging from the laughter of our host family and the playful finger pointing. Someone in our group wanted to know about land ownership, and can outsiders settle in the community who are not members of the Danu tribe? In order for someone to buy land and build a house within the village, they told us, a local land committee must first investigate if the people who are attempting to buy the property are of decent, law-abiding stock (and be welcomed in the community) and also if the land in question is free of any legal claims.

We wrapped things up around 2:45pm. Before leaving, we took a number of group photos with the family and other villagers. Some of the men performed a special Danu musical number using traditional instruments (a drum and a bamboo clapper). They sang for us, dancing with their hands in the air and inviting us to join in. Some of us did. From beginning to end, the

entire visit was a wonderful experience for us. Shortly after 3:00pm we said our final heart-felt 'goodbyes' and left Myin Ma Htie Village, spending the next two hours driving to Inle Lake. We traveled east, then south, though valleys of beautiful hillsides and farm country. After a while, though, I nodded off and didn't wake until we had reached the official entrance plaza into the Inle Zone area.

We arrived at the Pristine Lotus Spa Resort, located on the northern tip of Inle Lake, around 5:00pm. The resort was divided into two sections. One side contained more than four dozen private villas, a large spa facility, a natural hot spring and a spacious restaurant. Across the main road – where we stayed – were seventy cabins or bungalows lined up along a series of private canals that led directly into Inle Lake. This was my favorite lodging, an absolutely beautiful resort surrounded by the naturally serene setting of the lake and mountains. Each cabin had tall vaulted ceilings decorated with woven bamboo; the floors were polished hardwood. My cabin had two full-sized beds with mosquito netting above each one suspended by a ring dropping down from the ceiling. In the living room area was a bathtub – of all things – made out of a white porcelain enameled material inside of a polished wooden frame. Just beyond this was the balcony – jutting over the canal – and shaped like the front end of a large long-tail motorboat that locals use to navigate the lake.

After checking in I busied myself squaring away my luggage, making coffee and writing in my journal. Before dinner I walked around the resort taking photos. The sky was overcast. By 6:30pm I met Debbie and we walked to the nearest restaurant – (there were two on the property) – located across the canal from us. It was very dark and beginning to rain. Fortunately, Debbie came prepared. She was equipped with the cabin's flashlight and was using the umbrella conveniently placed alongside each bungalow's front door. Our dinner that night was an included meal and we were allowed to choose from the hotel menu. The staff placed a brushetta-style appetizer on our table made from crusty bread topped with locally grown tomatoes and dripping with olive oil. I ordered the pork steak with brown sauce, potatoes and grilled veggies, which came with a side of regular salad. Dessert was a chocolate mousse cake. Everything was delicious! We sat with Bill and Sandy, sharing more stories from our travels. By 8:30am I was back in my room, it had been a very long day for us and I was thoroughly exhausted. The staff had set up the mosquito nets while we were at dinner; they were

now suspended over each bed and firmly tucked underneath the mattresses. I climbed inside one of them and quickly fell asleep.

Day Thirteen

During the middle of the night I woke to use the bathroom (damn my middle age prostate) and, in my groggy condition, forgot I was surrounded by a billowing mosquito net. I couldn't see anything, my glasses were on the nightstand and it was darker than a black hole in my room. I swung my legs to one side of the bed, caught the net with my feet and when I tried to sit up the whole thing, which was positioned over my bed by a rope attachment hanging down from the ceiling, came crashing down on top of me. Um, I'll admit, I was caught by surprise and may have uttered a less-than-manly shriek. In my defense, though, it felt like a giant spider web had suddenly enveloped my half-naked and vulnerable body…*and in the dark, no less*! After using the bathroom I was too sleepy to figure out how to re-attach the mosquito net, so I climbed into the other bed and promptly went back to sleep.

I was wide awake by 5:00am. I set about making coffee and charged my batteries and smartphone. I took a shower, got dressed and wrote in my journal. At 7:00am I joined Debbie in the hotel restaurant for a buffet breakfast. I was back in my room an hour later. We would be spending the entire day on the lake, so I prepared my little backpack. I also wrote a note to the hotel staff apologizing for the mosquito net. At 8:30am the group gathered in the lobby building near the canal dock. Bunny gave us a brief orientation on the places we would be visiting that day, pointing out each location on a painted map of Inle Lake that stood next to the reception desk. From the lobby we walked over to the small dock area and began boarding our long-tail motorboats.

Our group needed three of these boats, no more than four passengers per vessel. Bill and Sandy joined Debbie and me on our boat. We sat snugly on what looked like small wooden lounge chairs, positioned one in back of

another. Bunny instructed us to rotate the seating assignment after each stop so everyone had a chance to sit in the front. The long-tail motorboat is quite popular in Southeast Asia. They have a simple design; a long, narrow wooden hull – up to 30 meters long – that tend to be wider than your average canoe with an outboard motor and long tail propeller perfect for navigating through shallow waters. When the water is not too deep, the propeller is tilted upward to skim the water and push the vessel forward. The boats themselves were not that expensive, every family who lived on the lake had one. It was the long-tail motor that was costly. According to Bunny, more than 70,000 tribal people live on or around Inle Lake and these long-tail motorboats were the main form of transportation for both people and goods. Poor families who could not afford a motor had to use oars to paddle themselves around. There were also many *longer* boats used as water taxis connecting the various villages, forming a kind of public transportation system. I have no idea what the road situation was like around the lake, but almost everyone who lived there used the water to get from one place to another. Including us. The Pristine Lotus Spa Resort had a private canal – just in front of our cabins – that cut through the marsh and tall grass and led directly into the lake.

It took us about ten minutes before we reached the wide open northern section of Inle Lake. While not very large in terms of overall size – roughly 14 miles long (22k) and 7 miles (10k) at its widest – this freshwater lake is nonetheless the second largest in the country, containing a number of unusual snail and fish species that are found nowhere else in the world, including the tiny silver *Burmese rammy nose* fish (which has no scales) and two unique species of cyprinid fish known as the *Lake Inle danio* and the *crossbanded dwarf danio*. Inle Lake is situated at a relatively high altitude of 2,900 ft (880m) surrounded by the Shan Hills mountain range. The watershed that fills the lake is a series of small rivers on its northern and western sides that drain in the south and are fed by rainwater from the surrounding mountains. Despite the constant water flow, Inle Lake is not very deep. During the dry season it averages a depth of only 5 to 7 feet (2.1m) and climbs to a high of 12 feet (3.6m) during the rainy season.

The *major* tribal group around Inle Lake is the Intha people who speak an archaic form of Burmese and live primarily in four towns and several smaller villages located around the lake. They have also built villages directly over the water; the houses constructed on top of stilts. The Intha subsist primarily on fishing and agriculture, some farm directly on the lake

in what are described as *floating gardens*. The other ethnic groups who live around the lake are members of the Shan, Pa-O, Danu, Taung Yo, Kayah and Danaw tribes.

As we traveled south on Inle Lake we came upon many Intha fishermen on smaller motorboats. Because the lake's natural ecosystem produces thick reeds and floating plants, it is often difficult for the Intha fishermen to spot fish while sitting down. So they have developed a very unique style of fishing that has to be seen to be believed. They stand at the tip of the stern – which, believe me, is amazing in itself because of the balance they have to maintain on what is a very narrow and bobbing surface – and steer by keeping *one* leg on the boat while the other leg is wrapped around an oar over the water. *Whoa*! This method, I read, is only done by the males, who probably spend years mastering the technique; Intha women fish by sitting cross-legged on the stern, paddling slowly with the oar so as not to disturb the fish. Bunny had our boats stop near a tiny cluster of fishermen so we could observe the process. The fishermen slowly circled an area by gently moving the oar with their extended leg. Once they spotted a fish they quickly cast either a netted cone-shaped trap or a regular fishing net into the water. It was fascinating to watch. The Intha are basically subsistence farmers and fishermen, whatever fish or vegetables they do not consume can be sold at the Five Day Market.

It took us about 45 minutes to reach the Nga Hpe Kyaung Monastery, our first stop of the day. Located on the western side of the lake, near the floating gardens, this wooden monastery was built on stilts over the water in the mid-1800s. The name means 'Jumping Cat Monastery' and refers to a time when the resident monks, probably out of boredom, trained stray cats to jump through hoops. They would perform these circus-like tricks in the lazy hours between scripture recitals. Apparently, this feline ritual is still being done today as a tourist attraction, but when we were there the only cats we spotted were a couple of fat ones snoozing comfortably along the dock area. There didn't appear to be an energetic jumper in the bunch! Cat loving aside, the real reason to visit the historic Nga Hpe Kyaung Monastery is to see its collection of ancient Buddha images that are on display in the large meditation hall. These Buddha statues – dating back centuries – feature Shan, Bagan, Tibetan and Inwa styles. The Buddha images varied in size and positions, many were sitting on thrones atop beautifully carved wooden pedestals or mosaic-decorated platforms, some were gilded, clothed and/or bedecked with precious gemstones. A few of the really old images sported

crowns, and *all* were intricately detailed. It seemed apparent that these statues once graced the dharma halls of bygone temples or even palaces. How they all ended up here I was not able to ascertain through my research. But it's definitely worth a visit to see them. Adjacent to the meditation hall was a vendors' area where you can purchase religious items or local souvenirs. We spent a total of 45 minutes here before continuing our tour of the lake.

Surrounding the Nga Hpe Kyaung Monastery was a section of the floating gardens, an area that covers approximately 25 percent of the lake surface. Our boats slowly maneuvered through a path between rows of man-made fertile islands bobbing gently on the water. On top of these little islands we could see tomatoes growing abundantly and Intha farmers tending to them. I was completely amazed. I had never seen farmland over water before. We asked Bunny how was this possible? She explained that the lake was filled with naturally occurring clumps of water hyacinth plants – which, incidentally, produce *lovely* lavender flowers – and reeds (or seagrass) that grow on the lakebed. Farmers drive bamboo poles into the lake bottom and then collect clumps of plants and reeds and position them between the poles, in mats, allowing them to knit into a cohesive mass. As these mats dry, grass begins to grow on them. This grass is cut, burned and re-applied as a nutritious ash. More reeds, which the farmers dredge up with poles from the bottom of the lake, are added, including a layer of nutrient-rich mud. Eventually, all this layering produces 3 foot-long mats that are now suitable for seeding. Two-thirds of this new terrain juts up above the water and is quite stable to walk on. As more mats are added, the farmers produce long narrow rows of farm fields on top of the lake. It was an ingenious way of farming. Because root vegetables will not grow in these conditions all of the crops are of the vine variety like tomatoes, cucumbers and gourds. Bamboo canes are used to hold up the vines. Modernization has introduced a heartier seed variety from countries like China and Thailand, but this has also encouraged farmers to use modern pesticides and fertilizers, negatively impacting the lake, allowing for the growth of non-native plants that choke oxygen from the water and endanger the fish population. The government has introduced several measures to combat this pollution, from banning certain chemicals to bringing in foreign snail species to eat the invasive plant life. To be sure, it is a constant struggle to maintain the lake's delicate ecosystem.

As we continued south through this watery farmland we witnessed the daily grind of the Intha. Farming on the water entailed the never-ending task of dredging up reeds from the bottom of the lake to create or shore up the floating gardens. We saw many Intha on their boats transporting *huge* piles of reeds which they probably spent all morning collecting. Beyond the floating gardens we came upon several water villages – Ywama, Tha Lay and Nampan – and continued along a narrower channel beyond the southern tip of the lake until we reached the village of In Phaw Khone. Almost all of the villages within or around the lake have now been impacted by tourism in some way. Many have souvenir shops and restaurants catering exclusively to the steady influx of visitors. At times, the local vendors do not even wait for you to come to them. When we entered In Phaw Khone a small flotilla of souvenir vendors sailed right alongside our boats trying to sell us trinkets. And they stayed with us until we left the area.

In addition to its natural beauty and indigenous species, Inle Lake is also famous for a rare and equally remarkable craft*: lotus silk weaving*. The water village of In Phaw Khone, consisting of teak wood stilt dwellings, is home to a large concentration of weaving workshops. Even as you sail down its watery streets, you can hear the clatter of shuttles and shifting loom frames emanating from the larger structures. We docked at the Mya Setkyar Company, established in 1934 – one of the largest and oldest workshops in the area – for a tour of the facility. This company employed more than 120 skilled local weavers who worked out of two teak wood buildings built directly over the water. The structures were connected by wooden walkways. Although typical silk weaving (from silkworm cocoons) is now common throughout Asia, the art of making silk threads out of *lotus plants* is still a specialty confined to a few select Southeast Asian countries like Myanmar.

The lotus plant is considered a very beneficial and sacred species of flora in Asia. The lotus flower is used as a medicinal herb to treat a litany of ailments, from bleeding disorders to high cholesterol levels. In addition, the lotus plant has symbolic meanings for Buddhists. Lotus plants grow in muddy water, their beautiful flowers bloom above the muck, symbolizing good fortune and spiritual purification. The color of the lotus flower has meaning, as well. A white color signifies purity of the mind and spirit; a red color denotes compassion and love. Pink lotus flowers are associated with the Buddha's history. Blue flowers refer to the wisdom and common sense necessary for finding Enlightenment. Purple flowers represent spiritual

awakening and mysticism. The sacred gold lotus flower signifies the achievement of Enlightenment, especially in the Buddha. The growth stages of a lotus flower are also seen as a symbolic representation of a person's rebirth (or reincarnation), from a closed flower rising above the mud (life's suffering) to a blossoming thing of beauty (Enlightenment).

We began our tour of the workshop in the section were lotus silk threads are produced. A middle-aged woman was sitting cross-legged on the floor. In front of her was a tiny wooden table, next to it a bowl of water and a basket of cut lotus stems. Using a thin-bladed knife, she cut the stem pieces in half and slowly pulled them apart revealing a sticky cellulose thread. Dipping her fingers in water, she gently pull the cellulose substance from the stems and then rearranged them into weavable threads, a time-consuming task if ever I saw one. It takes a skillful and patient set of hands to do this, which is probably why lotus silk weaving is so rare. Nearby, another woman was attaching the newly extracted lotus silk threads onto a large, antiquated spooling machine made out of wood. She would run her fingers up and down the threads so that the natural oils from her body would penetrate and strengthen the fibers. A few feet away was a row of noisy old-fashioned looms and shuttle machines made from wood and bamboo – some powered by foot pedals – weaving patterns from a combination of cotton, lotus silk and silk imported from silkworm cocoons. The cost of a garment made entirely out of lotus silk is *very* expensive, so the threads are often mixed. In an outdoor section of the workshop several employees were using natural dyes to color the fabrics, hanging them up to dry on wooden racks. We finished our tour in the gift shop on the first floor of the building where we had docked. Most of the items on sale consisted of scarves, shawls and longyis. The fabrics were so soft that on one shelf we came across a cat snoozing happily on his back atop a pile of garments. I was able to purchase a cotton and lotus silk shawl for my sister-in-law for about $60 US.

We left In Phaw Khone and made our way back north to the Inn Thar Lay 2 Restaurant located within the village of Tha Lay for an included lunch. Situated along one of the channels just to the south of the floating gardens – and near the famous Phaung Daw Oo Paya – the Inn Thar Lay 2 Restaurant is a popular establishment (one of two locations in the area). The stilted two-storey, open-air eatery has an elevated view of the canal and is known for its Shan cuisine. We sat at a long table on the second level overlooking the water. In front of each of us was an enormous ceramic plate resting on a platform of tiny columns that Bunny described as a royal serving dish

(supposedly a replica of the eating dish of the former royals). On top of these humongous plates the friendly staff placed nine individual food servings in small bowls. We started off with a delicious pumpkin soup, followed by tempura vegetables, a spicy chicken and potato curry, a milder pork curry, strips of breaded and fried local fish, squash leaf salad, a sticky rice-and-potato dish, regular mashed potatoes and plenty of white rice. It was a relaxing and thoroughly enjoyable meal.

By 2:00pm we were back on our long-tail motorboats zipping through the channel to visit the nearby Phaung Daw Oo Paya, perhaps the most venerated pagoda of Inle Lake. We docked about half a block from the site and walked along the canal's jetty the rest of the way. In my own research, I could not come across a specific historical digest for the Phaung Daw Oo Paya, so I'm not certain when it was constructed. But like most such sites in Myanmar there is a legend attached to it. According to this legend, King Alaungsithu, the great Bagan monarch (1112-1167AD) built this temple after he visited Inle Lake on his 'magical' royal barge. The story goes that the royal barge had the ability to turn land into water, taking King Alaungsithu anywhere he wanted to go in his kingdom. Wherever the barge stopped, the legend goes, the devote Buddhist king would commission a temple or pagoda to be built. But judging from the actual pagoda, I would guess the structure has definitely been, at the very least, 'upgraded' within the past two centuries or so.

The Phaung Daw Oo Paya is a large, multi-level building with a gilded spire atop a tiered rooftop foundation. The whole temple is ornately decorated with spindly bridges and gated outdoor walkways on the upper level. The lower level platform – which is occupied by a large contingent of vendors – has gilded columns on all four sides leading to covered staircases that take you up to the main hall. Before we could take the stairs to the temple we had to remove our shoes and socks and walk past the vendors, some of whom sold – in addition to their usual wares – a few rather bizarre items like headdresses made entirely out of big bovine teeth and horns. I have no idea what special occasion called for such a headdress, but I found the rows of teeth disturbing to look at. Or perhaps it was the mental image of some poor toothless cow trying to chew her cud. Either way, they gave me the willies.

When we reached the temple hall on the second level we saw firsthand what makes the Phaung Daw Oo Paya such a sacred religious site. Resting

atop a round, intricately carved wooden pedestal in the center of the hall were five Buddha statues – ranging in size from nine inches to eighteen inches tall – that were supposedly donated by King Alaungsithu when he built the temple. Over the centuries, so much gold leaf has been attached to these statues that the images of the Buddha have been completely obscured and they now resemble five misshapen balls. On display were old photographs (I'm talking turn-of-the-last-century) showing what the icons once looked like before the layering transformed them into heavy, glistening globs of precious metal. Anyone can visit the temple, but only males are allowed to place gold leaf on the images, and several were doing just that when we arrived. Around the pedestal, prostrated on the floor, were tribal women in their ethnic attire praying or reciting chants. Along the walls hung canvas paintings representing the various stages of the Buddha's life. The hall's patterned ceiling and columns appeared to have been gilded, as well.

We had arrived at Inle Lake during the annual 18-day Phaung Daw Oo Paya Festival held during the Burmese month of *Thadingyut* (late September or Early October), which also marks the end of the Buddhist Lent known as *Waso*. The festival seems to have started back in the 1800s and is a much-anticipated event around Inle Lake. Each year, four of the five golden Buddha images are ferried around the entire lake on a gilded barge shaped like a giant golden *hintha* (a bird-like image used as a spiritual passage symbol in both Indian and Southeast Asian cultures). One of the statues has to remain at all times in the Phaung Daw Oo Paya; the other four are taken along the lake to various villages where they spend the night before moving on in a slow procession to the main temple of Nyaungshwe – a large township located on a channel beyond the northern tip of Inle Lake – where most of the pilgrims from the surrounding region come to pay their respects and veneration. The barge is towed in a clockwise direction around the lake by several boats of volunteer leg-rowers, all rowing in unison. Other boats accompany the barge, as well, making for a grand procession along the water. We were not privy to the actual festival, but as we made our way around parts of Inle Lake we did see several boats with large numbers of young males getting ready for the procession by practicing their one-legged rowing skills. Docked next to the Phaung Daw Oo Paya was the gilded barge used in the festival, the bow shaped like the top half of a gigantic bird.

After thirty minutes we made our way back to our long-tail motorboats and headed south to visit the oddly named establishment the Golden Moon World Cheroot Industry in the peaceful village of Nampan. The store's

teakwood structure, like the rest of the village, was built on stilts over the water. This family-owned business was divided into two separate enterprises; the front half of the building produced cheroots (a local cigar), while the back portion of the establishment made wooden canoes. We docked in front of the building but before we toured the inside Bunny asked us if we wanted to take a canoe ride around the village. Only five of us were game, probably because getting into the small vessels seemed somewhat precarious. Carol and Nancilu got in one, Bill and Sandy in another and I went by myself. The paddling was done by local middle-aged women (there was one sitting at the back of each canoe). We slowly made our way down watery avenues, between rows of stilted homes, getting glimpses of local life on the lake. The houses on the water were no different than those on land; fairly large, one-room dwellings (some were stacked) made out of any combination of local lumbar, bamboo and corrugated sheet metal. The fancier ones were painted. We saw women washing and hanging laundry, feeding infants or preparing dinner. I guess most of the men were either fishing or tending to their gardens. The water was mostly calm, interrupted only by the ripples caused by motorized boats crossing the village intersections. At measured distances throughout Nampan were very tall utility poles supplying some of the larger homes with electricity. In my paranoid mind I wondered what would happen if a storm brought the wires down? I mean, would the entire lake become electrified? I made sure to keep my hands in the canoe!

After thirty minutes we made it back to the cheroot factory. Our group went inside to see how these local cigars were made. Sitting on the floor in front of large, circular bamboo lids – which served as trays – were three young women making cheroots. The tray was filled with a mysterious mixture that was skillfully scooped up and stuffed inside cylindrical cigar casings made out of dried cornhusks and wrapped in a green leaf. Cheroot smoking is a popular pastime for both men and women (and sometimes even children!) in Myanmar. These relatively inexpensive cigars come in different lengths, from thin cigarette-size to the fancier and larger eight inch ones with a half-inch girth. They're usually opened on both ends, but the smoking side has a rolled cornhusk filter. Any similarity to an actual tobacco leaf cigar vanishes the moment you see one being made. In fact, tobacco might be the *least* of the ingredients in a Burmese cheroot! Local women in different parts of the country usually roll cheroots to their particular tastes. On Inle Lake, the cheroots are famous for their tamarind and Star of Anise flavorings. Bunny told us the closely guarded recipe of this company's

‘tobacco mixture’ contained bits of dried bark, stems, roots and tobacco, flavored – in addition to the tamarind and Star of Anise – with palm sugar, honey and cinnamon. The finished product is usually wrapped with a red silk thread (or a paper band, if mass produced, with the company’s logo). We were allowed to try the smaller cheroots. Both Debbie and I are ex-smokers, but we couldn’t resist taking a few puffs to experience the taste. The little cigars were quite smooth with a sweet flavor. Depending on the brand, some cheroots do have more tobacco and can be as addictive as regular cigars. At any rate, cheroots pose the same kind of health risks as using any other tobacco product.

In the back of the cheroot factory was a canoe-making workshop. The vessels – all sold locally – were made from long teakwood planks with grooves that fit into one another and cemented into place with a combination of sawdust and lacquer (which also acts as a waterproof shield). The owner told us that a regular-sized canoe, like the one used to paddle me around the village, cost the equivalent of $600US, while a longer one (like those used for long-tail motorboats) run about $2500US. This didn’t include the long-tail motor. I have no idea where they order those from, but they’re quite expensive in terms of a local family’s income.

By 3:30pm we boarded our boats for the 45-minute trip back to the hotel. It had begun to rain, or more like drizzle, and Sandy, Debbie and Bill donned the rain gear that was available on the boat. The rain eventually picked up as we got underway, pelting us hard as we raced across the lake. I draped my rain gear around me like a blanket and used the umbrella by my feet as a shield against the wind and rain. It was a wet, chilly ride all the way back. We reached the resort by 4:15pm.

Debbie and I had earlier booked the ‘Royal Thai full-body massage’ – a 90-minute treatment – at the hotel’s spa for 6:00pm. I returned to my room to have a cup of coffee and decided to take another shower in preparation for my massage. At 5:50pm I met Debbie in the lobby and we walked across the street to the spa facility. The building looked like a small hotel. In the reception area we checked in for our appointment and helped ourselves to some ginger tea. A relaxing aromatic scent permeated the air. After filling out the required forms, two young women appeared and led us to separate rooms where we changed into flip-flops, loose cotton pants and T-shirts. By ‘loose’ I mean large, but since I was about twice the size of most Burmese men my T-shirt fit me like a sausage casing. Debbie’s T-shirt was too small

so she just wore her own blouse. We ended up in the same room, lying face down on the two beds set side-by-side for the couple's massage. For the next hour and twenty minutes, our individual masseuses pounded, kneaded and rubbed our feet, limbs, muscles and heads. This was my first couple's massage. In fact, this was the first full-body massage I had ever experienced. Prior to this, the closet thing was the therapy sessions at my doctor's office whenever my back went out. (Um, I don't count the visits to the massage parlors of the Philippines during my Peace Corps days because the therapeutic value of those sessions was of a completely different nature…*and I'll just leave it at that*). So, throughout the massage I was very quiet, enjoying the moment. Debbie, on the other hand, wanted to chat. She kept glancing over to see if I was even awake. I'll admit, I was so relaxed that I actually nodded off at times. When the session ended, we each tipped our masseuse a 10,000-kyat note, got dressed and headed over to the hotel restaurant across the road for dinner. I don't recall what we ordered, but we spent quite a bit of time talking about…well, *everything*, in general. Life, relationships, the trip. By 9:00pm, though, between the meal and the massage, we were so sleepy we called it a night. When I returned to my room I noticed, for the first time, that the staff had re-attached the mosquito net. *How nice*, I remembered thinking, before quickly shedding my clothes and collapsing into bed.

Day Fourteen

Déjà vu. During the middle of the night I got up to go to the bathroom and, once again, caught the mosquito net with my feet, collapsing the infernal thing all over me. In the dark, without my glasses, I tried to find the opening and ended up frustratingly thrashing about until I was thoroughly cocooned inside the net. Mind you, I had to pee. I managed to stand, still covered in the mosquito net like some poorly wrapped mummy, and stumbled about before freeing myself. After using the bathroom, I frustratingly climbed into the other bed and went back to sleep.

I awoke at 4:45am. I quickly hopped in the shower, shaved and then had several cups of coffee while I wrote in my journal. At 7:00am I joined Debbie in the hotel restaurant for breakfast. Bunny and several of the other group members inquired about our Royal Thai massage from the night before. I told everybody I was 'loose as a goose' and recommended it. By 8:00am I was back in my room. I brushed my teeth and prepared my little backpack for another outing on the lake. Thirty minutes later our entire group met in the lobby. Bunny was wearing an ethnic Pa-O tribal dress; a black cotton skirt and jacket with an over-sized striped red bandana on her head that was piled high like a turban and bunched to one side. *She looked adorable*. Everyone took her picture. It occurred to me, looking at Bunny in her Pa-O clothing, that Myanmar ethnic tribes would fit right at home in the Los Angeles street gang scene. Throughout our tour, it was easy to spot the various ethnic groups simply by the clothes they wore. Hmmm, I wonder if they also flash hand signs?

We boarded the same three motorboats from the day before and made our way south again along Inle Lake. Upon reaching the Floating Gardens our boats veered to the right and we followed a series of channels just west of the watery farmlands through the heart of Ywama Village, the largest water village on the lake. I read this was the first area developed for tourism on Inle Lake, and its subsequent prosperity was evident in the larger sizes of the homes, constructed on piles driven into the lakebed, each with its own private dock. Bamboo walkways and wooden bridges had also been erected over the channels in certain parts. As we entered Ywama from the north we came across one section famous for its gold and silver smith shops. The commercialization of Ywama was not limited to its souvenir shops and restaurants; at times, vendors in long-tail motorboats continuously sailed alongside us peddling their wares. Debbie succumbed and purchased two unique-looking necklaces from them (note: she later told me, after we arrived home, that one of the necklaces quickly fell apart). It made me ponder the impact tourism would eventually have on the traditional life of the Intha people. Obviously, tourism made for a stronger local economy…*but at what cost*? Once a family realizes they can make more money selling souvenirs to tourists, I imagine it would be difficult for them to go back to traditional fishing or growing tomatoes on the lake to survive.

We turned into a wide channel and headed west through the central part of Ywama, passing on our left hand side the Aung Mingalar Pagoda, in front of which was a complex of smaller whitewashed and gilded temples and

stupas lined along the banks of the water. A short while later we passed the Phaung Daw Oo Pagoda (the one with the five golden Buddha images) and turned south onto a narrower canal to visit the Hnin Thitsar Umbrella Workshop. This particular store dedicated itself to three different local crafts: weaving (cotton), paper making and the production of traditional Shan umbrellas or parasols. But perhaps the most interesting aspect of visiting the Hnin Thitsar Umbrella Workship was meeting the women from the Padaung hill tribe who are employed to weave the cotton scarves and garments that are on sale in the gift shop.

We docked in front of the establishment and made our way up to the platform overlooking the water just in front of the gift shop. Four of the Padaung women were sitting on chairs at one end waiting for us. We took one look at them, smiled, and immediately drew our cameras and began snapping away. The Padaung hill tribe is an ethnic minority that lives in the southern Shan and Kayah States. They are a subgroup of the Karen people, a large Sino-Tibetan language speaking ethnic group that is divided into numerous different tribal groups within the country and surrounding region. The Padaung hill tribe is also referred to as the Kayan Tribe. What is remarkable about this particular tribe is the coil of rings some of the women wear around their necks. Often called the 'longneck women, (and in some parts of Southeast Asia the less-flattering 'giraffe women'), their necks appear extended by a series of heavy brass rings that push the shoulders down. It was an unusual sight, indeed, to see these women – one old, one middle-aged and two teenage girls – with their stretched out necks entirely concealed by metal, their heads perched high and held in place. Unable to swivel heir heads normally, they tended to shift their upper torso slightly in order to look sideways, lending an unnatural and seemingly uncomfortable complexity to their overall movement. But they didn't seem to mind and looked quite happy wearing that heavy chunk of metal around their throats. They also wore smaller rings around their calves, just below the knee. Let me tell you, I wouldn't want to be standing next to a Padaung woman during a lightening storm!

We sat down for a brief Q-and-A session with these women. On a table were coils of the type of brass rings they wore around their necks and we took turns passing them around. What astonished many of us was the weight of those rings. Depending on the type of metal used, some of the older women were literally walking around with 18 pounds of bling underneath their chins. *Wow*. As usual, Bunny did the interpreting. The Padaung women

hailed from the village of Loikaw in the neighboring Kayah State (just to the south), a two-hour car ride or five-hour boat ride away. Their particular skill set was weaving traditional cotton scarves and fabrics on wooden looms. Unable to find work back home, they make the commute in order to support their families. Thailand, which borders the Kayah State, also has Kayan tribal groups, and their members often go back and forth between the two countries.

The first question we asked was the most pressing: *Why the rings*? We received two separate answers. The mythical goddess of the Padaung is a dragon, so the 'long-neck' look is a nod to their protector. But another, perhaps more practical, explanation was that the rings once served as a defensive role. Women mostly worked in the woods and fields and were susceptible to tiger attacks centuries ago. Tigers sneak up on their prey and kill them by biting down hard on the back of the neck, snapping the spinal cord. The heavy rings might allow a woman to survive such an attack. Regardless of their origins, today most Padaung women wear the rings for traditional reasons, as an integral part of their customs, and because they believe the rings make them attractive and popular. The two younger women, who were cousins, said they like the attention most people give them when they're out in public. I guess it makes them feel like celebrities, as everyone wants to pose and take photos with them (um, *guilty as charged*). But this custom is not forced upon Padaung women. It is a personal choice whether or not a young girl would want to have the rings attached.

The rings are made out of brass, copper or bronze. Starting at age nine, 14 rings are attached. By age fourteen another 5 rings are added. By age nineteen, an additional 4-6 rings are attached. The limit is between 23-25 rings, depending, I would imagine, on the women's physicality. The weight of these rings press down on the shoulders, lowering them and giving the appearance that the neck has been stretched. The rings are permanently attached and never come off during a women's lifetime unless there is some medical reason for doing so. The oldest Padaung of the group (a 74-year old women) told us she recently underwent surgery and the rings had to be removed for the procedure. Her neck muscles – which had atrophied over the years – could no longer support her cranium, and during her medical recovery her head leaned sideways on top of her shoulder like a rag doll. *Yikes*! We wanted to know how they washed their necks and how they managed to sleep. 'Carefully' seemed to be the operative word. They mostly

slept on their sides. They also wear a series of smaller rings just below the knee. Most Padaung women are buried with their rings but if a family cannot afford to buy new metal rings for their young daughters, then the rings are passed down after death. One question we forgot to ask was *how* were the rings attached? They seemed to be spot-welded into place. In order to remove them they must be cut somehow. Hmmmmm, and so close to the carotid artery. *Double yikes*!

We took many photographs of the Padaung women. They were very gracious and accommodating. Afterwards, the two older women returned to their weaving. We followed Bunny and the store proprietor to the workshop located at the back of the business where they produced traditional Shan paper and parasols. Papermaking was invented during the Chinese Han Dynasty (206BC – 220AD), and due to Myanmar's border with China this practice carried over and making paper out of tree bark has been a very long tradition in the country, especially in the Shan State, where the paper is now mostly sold as some form of souvenir or used in the production of colorful paper parasols. One of the workshop employees explained the process to us. Bark from the mulberry tree is ground into fibers that are dried for several days before being dipped in water and mixed with wood ash or clay and then baked in a wood fire for an entire day until the mixture develops a dough-like consistency. The paper dough is then beaten repeatedly with a wooden mallet. Following this, a bamboo frame – covered with a fine cotton fabric coated with oil – is placed at the bottom of a water tank. By hand, the paper dough, which is diluted in the water, is spread evenly over the canvas. Clumps of dough or air bubbles are removed. The frame is then pulled out of the water with the paper dough attached to it. This is allowed to dry in the sun for several hours before the paper is carefully pulled from the bamboo frame. Prior to removing the bamboo frame from the water, flower petals or small leaves can be added to form a design on the paper. In fact, as we watched one worker applying the paper dough to the frame she spelled out the letters O-A-T (for Overseas Adventure Travel) with orange flower petals. The finished paper product can be used to make notepads, books, lampshades, umbrellas, prints for framing and fans. All of which were on sale inside the establishment.

In an adjacent room we got to see how the famous Burmese parasols are made. Skilled wood carvers were cutting and shaping pieces of bamboo on an antiquated wooden lathe machine to form the base of the umbrella, from the handle to the pawl. Later, sheets of dyed Shan paper are attached,

creating a very decorative parasol. The back section had one room filled with colorful umbrellas of varying shapes and sizes for sale. We were given thirty minutes to browse and shop before leaving. The upper level of the workshop contained an area with more expensive items, like intricately carved wooden statues, vases and religious icons, and hand-woven tapestries dating back nearly one hundred years. Bunny surprised everyone by buying longyis for the group. She wanted us to wear them later that evening for our farewell dinner. I purchased another scarf to give to my sister-in-law made by the Padaung women.

We boarded our long-tail motorboats and continued west along a main channel. As we left central Ywama behind, the canal became narrower, winding its way southwest surrounded mostly by reeds and thick vegetation. Occasionally we would pass other motorboats ferrying locals back and forth. We followed this meandering pathway for a good while before reaching the Pa-O tribal village of Indein, our next stop. We docked at the village jetty just in front of a wooden road bridge near the Indein outdoor market. This seemed to be the center of town. There were plenty of people in the area, from vendors to families shopping to children playing. Indein is part of the Five Day Market circuit and is considered to have one of the largest and liveliest markets on the lake. Most of the people who live in the surrounding hillsides are from the Pa-O and Danu tribes, and Bunny certainly fit in with her ethnic dress. We grouped at the jetty and Bunny led us down a nearby dirt trail that followed the channel. The current was very strong here and we soon came upon its source, a small waterfall in a wooded area filled with bamboo trees. It began to rain and we quickly took refuge under the umbrellas provided by the motorboat operators.

In the rain, we followed the now muddy trail to the main attraction of Indein Village: the mysterious hilltop ruins of hundreds of ancient pagodas. There are two groups of crumbling stupas and pagodas here. The first collection, known as *Nyaung Ohak*, is located just behind the village. Despite their decaying conditions, surrounded by encroaching vegetation, some intricate details are still evident, like the stucco carvings of celestial beings (devas) and mythical creatures (chinthes) and fading images of the Buddha. The larger of the two pagoda complexes is the *Shwe Inn Thein*; to reach this amazing site we had to climb a long covered stairway (lined with vendors) to the top of a hill overlooking the village. Around this hill are *hundreds* of crumbling pagodas dating back to the 17th and 18th centuries. According to local legend, the origins of Shwe Inn Thein are rooted in the

great Indian emperor, King Ashoka, who sent monks to this area in the 3rd century BC to spread Buddhism. But like most of the legends in the country there was no real archeological evidence supporting this claim. What *is* known as that two Bagan kings later built pagodas on the hill, which began the proliferation of temples we see today. But regardless of who built these temples what is remarkable is the sheer number of them ringing the hillside. At the very top is a new monastery, completed within the last ten years according to Bunny. We stopped climbing the stairway just before reaching the summit and strolled along pathways that led around the hillside to get a better view of the ancient pagodas. Luckily, it had stopped raining. The temples – mostly built out of red brick – were in varying degrees of decay. Some had been restored with stuccowork, some were gilded.

We were given an hour to wander on our own before rendezvousing at the Golden Kite Restaurant – which we passed on the dirt trail heading to the site – for an included lunch. Because of the rain, nobody really wanted to take off their shoes and socks to enter the monastery temple on top of the hill, so most of us spent the time walking between the rows of pagodas on the hillsides taking photographs. Carleen and I got separated from the group and ended up in one secluded section lined with smaller temples sporting intricate deva carvings. As we neared the edge of the hill we were surprised to find a large herd of grazing cattle.

By 12:40pm, Carleen and I started heading back towards the Golden Kite Restaurant, but were sidetracked by the vendors on the stairway. I purchased a small rosewood sculpture of the Buddha, while Carleen continuously stopped to browse the various items on display. We were the last to arrive at the restaurant. Everyone was waiting for us to eat. How embarrassing! Lunch consisted of tempura vegetables, fried chicken legs, de-boned and minced tilapia fish, tomato salad and plenty of white rice. For dessert we had crepes with chocolate syrup and papaya chunks on the side. Lunch lasted an hour. As we ate, several stray dogs positioned themselves under our tables looking for scraps. Someone in the group complained about the dogs and the waitress came over and tried to shoo them away but to no avail. These canines knew a good meal when they saw one. The waitress then squirted the dogs with water, which only seemed to amuse them. Unable to get them to budge, the waitress abandoned the endeavor. Like the rest of the group, I feigned irritation while clandestinely feeding scraps to the little mutt by my feet.

By 2:00pm we headed to the jetty and boarded our boats for the hour-long ride back to the hotel. When we arrived, Bunny had us gather in the lobby and reminded us that for our farewell dinner later that evening we were to don our longyis. She had hotel staff members – a male and female – demonstrate for us how the longyis are worn. The most important thing, she told us, was that women tie their knots on the side while the men tie their knots in the front. Bunny also told us to bring our flashlights and cameras for the farewell dinner. Afterwards, the group split up. I returned to my room and made coffee and wrote the day's details in my journal. I also began repacking my luggage for the next day. I took a hot shower, put on a clean T-shirt and spent the better part of thirty minutes trying to tie my red-colored longyi so I wouldn't look like a dork when I joined the group for dinner. At one point I thought I got the knack of it and was able to roll enough slack along the top of the garment to make what I thought was a pretty good-sized knot. Unbeknownst to me, though, it was *way* too long, looking more like a hanging, flaccid phallic symbol. When I showed up in the lobby, Bunny and the staff took one look at me and burst out laughing. I guess they must have been thinking: "*Is that a knot in your longyi or are you just happy to see us*?" She had one of the male employees re-do the knot for me. But I wasn't the only one. Mark and Bill needed the staff's assistance to tie their longyis properly, as well. We took plenty of group pictures posing in our new attire before heading out to the hotel restaurant on the other side of the road. It was drizzling and very dark outside and we needed our flashlights and umbrellas for the short walk.

Our farewell dinner was held in the upstairs dining room. The entire room had been cleared except for one long table where we sat. It was a private affair. Before the staff began serving the courses, Bunny made a little speech. In heartfelt tones she mentioned that we were one of her best travel groups ever. She commended us on our cohesiveness, our friendly attitude and our respect for her culture and each other throughout the tour, and for our willingness to learn about her country. It was pretty sentimental and we raised our glasses for a toast, thanking her, in turn, for the great job she had done as trip leader. And then we chowed down. We were served chicken curry, a pork dish cooked in soya paste, a traditional tomato salad, a green tea leaf salad and sticky potato rice. For dessert we had chocolate ice cream.

During dinner, the hotel staff – dressed in a variety of ethnic costumes – treated us to a cultural show, performing traditional dance numbers. The first one was a courtship dance with three couples. Our luggage porter performed

two dances; a sword routine and an exhilarating acrobatic dance with lighted torches. I particularly enjoyed the bamboo clapping number. A series of long bamboo poles were crisscrossed on the floor and repeatedly banged together while four young women hopped in and out of the way of the heavy wooden sticks, it was like skipping rope but with the added anxiety of having your feet painfully whacked if you screwed up the timing. My favorite dance was a hilarious piece called the Five Mystical Beast Dance. Two male staffers – concealed within a bizarre two-piece costume shaped like a combination fish, sheep, antelope, horse and some other animal I couldn't ascertain – pranced around comically throughout the room, interacting with our group, at times requesting something to eat or drink. The musical instruments used throughout the show were the traditional drums, small cymbals and bamboo clappers. And there was quite a bit of vocalizing and cheering from the staff during the numbers. The show ended with the Unity Dance finale, our group getting pulled into the center of the room for a circle dance. When it was over we gave the staff a big round of applause. Before retiring for the evening, Bunny went over the itinerary for the following (and final) day of the tour. We were flying back to Yangon in the morning and she went over the airport pick-ups times for our departures back to the United States. I was back in my room by 10:00pm and wrote down the details of our farewell dinner before going to bed.

Day Fifteen

Déjà vu, *again*. My prostate nudged me awake during the middle of the night and before I got out of bed I was mindful to push the opening of the mosquito net to one side as gingerly as I could to avoid having it collapse on top of me. But I was foiled by the young woman who cleaned my room each morning. Apparently, she had grown weary of re-attaching the damn thing and decided to fasten the mosquito net with complete abandon. When I took hold of the net – ever so gently, mind you – it just slipped off the rope from the ceiling and enveloped my entire body in a now familiar soft whooshing

sound. I uttered a few choice expletives in the dark as I thrashed around again trying to free myself from what had become my 'second skin'. I stood up, arms flailing, and in my frustration inadvertently stepped on my backpack – (which, for some stupid reason in this comedy of errors, I had placed next to the bed) – and the weight of my foot made it slide forward along the polished wooden floor causing me to lose my balance. I was propelled awkwardly onto the other bed, bringing *that* mosquito net crashing down, as well. Call me crazy, but for a split second I could have sworn I heard the mosquitoes laughing. I finally freed myself from my predicament and stumbled into the bathroom. When I returned to bed I threw both nets on the floor and went back to sleep. *Malaria be damned*!

I awoke at 5:00am and took a quick shower. I made several cups of coffee and repacked the rest of my luggage while watching the CNN international news broadcast for updates on Hurricane Michael, which was threatening the Florida panhandle. Debbie lives in Tampa, and the storm was expected to impact her area around the time we would be arriving back home, so I was checking for reports regarding cancelled flights. At 6:15am I met Debbie for breakfast and sat with Bunny, Carleen and Theresa. We were leaving for the airport at 8:00am. Bunny mentioned that she was going to visit the Five Day Market just down the road and asked those who wanted to tag along to meet her in the lobby at 7:00am. Only a few of us joined her, I guess the rest were busy packing.

The marketplace was situated in a wide clearing just a short walking distance from the hotel. The lone paved road in front of the market area was lined with parked jeepneys, flatbed trucks and motorbikes. The place had the feel of a rural country fair. These rotating Five Day Markets are scheduled for different locations around the lake, and the large crowds we saw must be locals who hail from the general vicinity or nearby hilltop villages. There were many stalls covered by bamboo and plastic tarps. Vendors who could not secure a stall laid out blankets on the grass to sell their wares. The market was full despite the intermittent light rain, which had turned the walkways into muddy rows. We walked between produce vendors and fish sellers watching the ebb and flow of the local economy in action. Some vendors sold homemade sweets; others dried goods and clothing. In the center of the marketplace was a makeshift food court. Vendors sold fried dough and tofu snacks or made breakfast in giant woks on open grills for the early morning shoppers. Bunny suggested we might want to buy something for the hotel staff at the front desk to show our appreciation for the cultural

show they put on the night before, so we purchased a large bag of fried dough snacks for them to eat and several bouquets of flowers they could use as offerings at the temples. After about thirty minutes we returned to the hotel. The staff was delighted with our gifts.

By 8:00am we were on our way to Heho Airport for our flight to Yangon. During the hour-long drive we passed a sugar mill, a Eugenia tree farm, a large prison complex and a police-training academy. Bunny told us that during the rainy season (when the tourism industry shuts down) she sometimes works at a police academy in Yangon to supplement her income. She performs admin work and assists in teaching child development training, and is used as an interpreter for foreign visitors. We continued along a winding mountain road through misty valleys and lush greenery, arriving at the small Heho Airport by 9:00am. We were checked through quickly. The security detail at the airport was a joke. The x-ray technician who was supposed to be screening our luggage was busy on his smartphone, and the metal detector didn't register an alarm even though I had keys and some coins in my pocket. Our flight left at 10:10am. An hour and twenty minutes later we touched down in Yangon.

We left the airport and headed into the city, stopping to have lunch at a popular eatery called Ykko Kyay Oh and Café inside a shopping plaza not far from the Hledan train station. Most of us ordered the house specialty, a big bowl of chicken noodle soup made with chunks of tofu and large fried wontons filled with chicken. It was pretty tasty. For dessert we had chocolate ice cream. After lunch, a group of us requested to be dropped off at the famous Bogyoke Aung San Market in the downtown business area for some last minute souvenir hunting. Our bus headed south on Pyay Road and then made a left on Bogyoke Aung San Road, cutting through an incredibly busy commercial district. *Traffic at this hour was insane*! Carleen, Theresa, Nancilu, Mark, Merle and I were dropped off at the main entrance to the Bogyoke Aung San Market. Bunny informed us the bus would return in an hour and a half to pick us up (those who wanted to stay longer could take a taxi back to the hotel).

The Bogyoke Aung San Market is a large covered bazaar built by the British in 1926. It was originally named after Gavin Scott, the Municipal Commissioner of Rangoon, and is still sometimes referred to as Scott Market. Taking up several city blocks, this sprawling colonial building is split into four wings and has more than 1,600 shops. A new market building

was added across from it on Bogyoke Aung San Road in the 1990s. Surrounding the market are old colonial streets bustling with activity: private shops, clinics, jewelry stores, hotels and newer malls. The entire area jam-packed with people. Our little group split up as soon as we entered the bazaar. I joined Carleen and Theresa. We made our way down the center aisles of the building, not sure where to go first. Unlike other covered bazaars I've been to in Asia, the shops here were not necessarily grouped by the merchandize they sold. In fact, you could spend half a day walking around the different wings and not know what you'll find. That's part of the fun of visiting the Bogyoke Aung San Market. We ventured down rows of stalls and shops selling every kind of Myanmar handicrafts available: lacquerware, Burmese puppets, Shan shoulder bags and paper products, woodcarvings, cheap trinkets and cosmetic jewelry, religious icons, souvenir t-shirts and hats, longyis and other garments, and colorful fabrics. When we reached the northern wing of the bazaar we discovered a mini Diamond Exchange with dozens of shops selling high-end jewelry and precious gemstones like jade, rubies, diamonds, sapphires and gold. We rendezvoused with the others in front of the building by 3:20pm. Everyone had managed to buy *something*. I purchase some really cool embroidered souvenir hats and t-shirts for family and friends back home.

Bunny showed up with the bus at the scheduled time but it took us nearly forty-five minutes through late afternoon traffic to reach the Chartrium Hotel Royal Lake. This was the same hotel we had used when we first arrived in the country. I spent about an hour in my room writing in my journal and watching the Hurricane Michael updates on TV. At 5:00pm I joined Bunny and some of the others in the café/lounge area for a drink and some conversation. Later, at 6:00pm, Debbie and I walked down the street to have dinner at the White Rice Restaurant next to Kandawgyi Lake where we ate on our third night in Yangon. It was another pleasant meal. We got back to the hotel by 8:00pm. I had some coffee in my room and continued to write in my journal. By 10:00pm I returned to the lobby to say 'goodbye' to the rest of the group. They were heading out to the airport for their return trip home. Debbie and I left later because we had booked our own airfare. The group hugged one final time and exchanged email addresses and promised to write.

I will not bore you with the tedious details of our trip back to the U.S. Debbie and I left the same way we had come, flying first to Dubai and then on to JFK Airport in New York City where we took separate flights back to Florida. No one sat in the seats next to us on the transatlantic portion of the

flights. I popped a Xanax, stretched out and slept for much of the ride. Hurricane Michael shifted at the last minute, slamming into the Florida panhandle and sparing Tampa, so Debbie's flight home was not affected by the storm. I had several days off from work to do laundry and other errands. I quickly organized my photos from the trip and posted them on my website, but I didn't start writing this journal until several months later. The holiday season is a very busy time of year for the U.S. Postal Service. I was working such long hours I couldn't find the time to sit down and focus on the journal. Thankfully, I finished it just in time for my next trip. So stay posted!

My tour of Myanmar was exceptional, for all the reasons I've mentioned in this journal. Bunny allowed us to experience aspects of her country that most tours would have glossed over or ignored altogether. She was committed to showing us not only the rich cultural, historical and religious history of Myanmar, but also exposing us to some of the people and events – for better or for worse – shaping the current political landscape. And for this I am truly grateful. I recently read an article written for The Atlantic by Ben Rhodes, a former deputy national-security advisor to Barack Obama who met State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi on numerous occasions as an emissary for the United States government. It was a sobering article about the transition that is going on in Myanmar today, and perhaps the disillusionment some might be having for Aung San Suu Kyi and her party. The issue, it seems, is in the perceived lack of desire on behalf of her government to stem the tide on the Rohingya crisis. Some argue, as I have mentioned in this journal, that the armed forces are still pretty much in control and have the exclusive right to pursue military action under the current constitution. But some ethnic groups are beginning to question Aung San Suu Kyi's role as a champion of human rights, arguing that her power struggle with the military is still about keeping Myanmar a 'Burmese Buddhist' country. To be sure, this political drama will continue to play out, especially as the country's 2020 elections draw near. Aung San Suu Kyi has long maintained that democracy and a *new* constitution guaranteeing basic human rights and political freedoms is the first necessary step in healing the country's many divisive wounds. Until the military is reined in, nothing else will really matter. So I will continue to give her the benefit of the doubt and until I am proven wrong.

In closing, I would also like to thank Debbie, Carol, Theresa, Carleen, Nancilu, Mark, Merle, Bill and Sandy. This wouldn't have been such a great

tour without you. Thank you for being such awesome travel mates. Until next time, happy trails…

Richard C Rodriguez,
My trip to Myanmar took place in September and October of 2018.