Myanmar!!

October 15th, 2019

This post is annoying late, so I guess let’s just pretend it’s still the beginning of October. Let it be known, this post is terribly long and possibly unreadable. But let’s get right into it.

In early September, I knew nearly nothing about Myanmar. My friends and I wanted to go somewhere a bit more adventurous than Vietnam, Bali or Bangkok where the majority of the other exchange students headed. We thought about Chiang Mai in Thailand or maybe Luang Prabang in Laos but really couldn’t make up our minds. When we first started to talk about Myanmar I honestly didn’t know if we were allowed to go there. Over the years I had gotten the impression that it was a dangerous place that should probably be avoided. Well, we obviously ended up going anyway and I’m so glad we chose Myanmar. I was absolutely blown away by the kindness of the Myanmar people, the other travelers we met along the way and of course all the sights we saw. Now I’ll try to convince you to go there and show off some pictures along the way.

First, there is a lot of contention between what the country is called. In 1989 the country’s military government changed the name to Myanmar. Not all countries, including the US, acknowledge this name change and continue to use Burma. Now that I’ve spent some time in the country here’s the inside scoop.

When talking about the country or it’s people Myanmar is used almost exclusively. They call themselves ‘Myanmar people’ and they call their language ‘Myanmar’. Burma is used to describe ethnic Burmans within the country. For example, we had a tour guide who was ethnically Burman and identified with the Burman people. But, not everyone in Myanmar is Burman. It’s a bit of a touchy topic in the country but an important piece of their history.

The people in Myanmar are absolutely incredible. They are kind, generous, and caring especially when it comes to tourists. Lots of tourists visiting Southeast Asia skip Myanmar so they genuinely love to see tourists visiting their home. However, this doesn’t mean there aren’t exceptions. As tourism to the country increases, the usual problems come with it. I had a predatory taxi scam me out of a couple bucks, but if you know what you’re doing it’s easy enough to avoid. In general, the people are extremely friendly.

As I walked around Yangon the first day, people came up to me asking where I was from and where I was visiting in the country. It was a little creepy at first to be honest especially because I was alone, and they wanted to know everything about my travels in the country. The next day, I met 2 girls who had been working in the Peace Corps there for a year and a half and they assured me that the people are just ridiculously friendly and interested about tourists.

For the first 36 hours or the trip I was alone because my friends got out of class a day ahead of me and went to Bangkok for 2 days. The first night I had dinner alone at one of the most famous food streets in Yangon. While I ate, this Japanese woman kept looking at me for some reason. Apparently, she felt bad for me or something because she invited me to come eat with her family. Only one dude at the table spoke enough English for me to have a conversation with so he acted as a translator for me to talk to everyone else. It was truly the strangest and most amazing thing that’s ever happened to me. We had a ton of fun and they told me about a million times that I have to come visit them in Okinawa, so I guess I’ll have to go…

Anyway, when travelling throughout South East Asia, always stay in hostels. It’s about a million times more fun than staying in a hotel and cheap. The people you meet in hostels are incredible. In the first hostel I stayed at I met 3 Australian girls who had almost the same itinerary as us, so we chilled with them for a large part of the trip. I met people who had been travelling for 6 months to a year and still had no end in sight. I even got some good Vietnam travel tips from a Dutch guy that you’ll see in an upcoming blog post if I ever finish this one. Yikes.

After 2 days in Yangon we took a night bus to Bagan. Night buses are actually super comfy and chill. Just remember to always book the VIP bus, it’s still pretty cheap and much more comfortable than non-VIP.

We got to Bagan early in the morning and took a taxi into town. Bagan is essentially the Angkor Wat of Myanmar but instead of one big temple, there’s 2,000. It’s unlike any landscape I’ve ever seen and even though the pictures are crazy it doesn’t do it justice.

Interlude: Sorry this blog post is so long and annoying. It’s pretty disorganized but I have so many things to say about the trip it’s hard to fit it all in while also making sense.

Bagan was amazing but we were headed towards Mandalay. We originally intended to take a night train to Mandalay, but it was canceled because of a religious event so we booked a bus to Mandalay. Disclaimer: this bus was not VIP. I’m pretty sure we were the only foreigners on the bus and only one guy spoke any English. It was packed and sweaty with people getting on an off the whole way. The guy driving drove like there was something chasing us the entire night. It was a wild ride, but you have to ride a bus like that once, right?

We only had about 20 hours in Mandalay, so we headed out of the hostel fairly early. We spent the day browsing some markets, impulsively buying jade figurines, checking out the local temples, and walking the oldest and longest teakwood bridge in the world, the U Bein Bridge.

After the bridge, while we we’re trying to get a ride back to our hostel, a monk approached us. He introduced himself and wanted to take us to a nearby temple to show us around. We naively followed and he toured us around the temple telling us about the history of the temple and about Buddhism. After a while he brought us to a restaurant for a Coke and then asked us for $20 each. That was ridiculous so we gave him about $10 a person and left immediately. Now I can check scammed by a monk off my bucket list.

Next, we headed to our last stop, Inle Lake. This part of the trip was much more chill and relaxed. The first morning we learned how to do some acro-yoga, courtesy of more Peace Corps people. Now I’m strongly considering applying to the Peace Corps at some point.

At Inle Lake we spent one day doing a tour of the lake and towns around the lake. It was cool, lots of the houses are on stilts above the lake and you have to canoe from house to house. But, the crown jewel of our trip to Inle was the cooking class we did. It was incredible, we had maybe 20 people in the class from places all over the world. First, we went to the market with Leslie, the guy leading the class, and he took us around to buy fish, meat and vegetables. Then we split into groups each making two dishes. I made some steamed spicy fish and one of the greatest foods of all time, tea leaf salad.

Tea leaf salad is absolutely incredible. I didn’t even know it existed until I saw it on the menu at a shop and wondered, “ew, you’re not supposed to eat tea leaves.” Boy was I wrong, it’s sour, spicy and with crunchy roasted peanuts it’s so good. The tea leaves are fermented and mashed with spices and chilies then mixed with cabbage, roasted peanuts and various sauces. Truly a legendary dish.

The other food we had Myanmar was great. We had all sorts of fish, curry, salads, and noodles. Another great dish to try is the Shan Noodles. I don’t know what they make them with, but they are delicious.

Myanmar was amazing. There’s a lot more to talk about but this post is already way too long and all over the place. It’s a hidden gem of South East Asia that is being discovered more and more every year. See it now while it’s not overrun with tourists because soon it likely will be.