Quiet flows the Ayeyarwady

"This is Burma, and it will be quite unlike any land you know about..."

Rudyard Kipling
Letters from the East
1989

Text and
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Sunset looms over the Irrawaddy
where seagulls sing and fleet
Quiet flows the river to the east
streaming to the far-away sea...

Once upon a time, this idyllic folk song brought a child's imagination to a dream-like wonderland. At the time, I only knew Irrawaddy as a river in a distant country named Burma. But the sunset, the seagulls, and the serene river has haunted in my dreams ever since.

Sandwiched between the Indian subcontinent and Indochina, Burma has long been the backwater of the region. The country emerges from a complete oblivion in the mind of people mainly due to its much charming and charismatic Nobel Peace Laureate Aung San Su Kyi, and the notorious military government she is fighting against. International sanction in recent decades deepens the country's isolation, shielding it from the sight of the world. The legendary name of Mandalay is degenerated to a casino in Las Vegas.

Even fewer are familiar with the country's official name Myanmar. The name adopted in 1989 reflects the complete severing from its colonial past. In the native language, Myanmar has always been the official name for the nation. The British colonists imposed the name of Burma in the 19th century when they annexed the kingdom into part of British India. The name Burma was due to the Burman, one

of the largest of the 130 plus ethnic groups in the country. The United Nations has officially recognised the change, even though it is still resisted by some countries like the United States.

Similarly, the Ayeyarwady River was also anglicised into Irrawady by the colonists. So named by its statue, the 2000-km big (ayeyar) river (wady) has nurtured the land and its people since genesis. Gushing down from the southern slope of the Himalayas, streams of snow water merge in the plain, forming the mighty river that cradled the civilisations along its shores. Dynasties flourished, Buddhism thrived. Centres of civilisation like Amarapura, Sagaing, Mingun and Mandalay adorn the magnificent river like pearls on a silver belt.

But Myanmar wasn't always as unnoted as it is today. During the British period, foreigners fantasised a land full of boundless treasures, exotic gems and precious timbers. Rudyard Kipling was mainly responsible for romanticising the land with his numerous poems and correspondences. The sunshine, the palm trees, the pagodas, the temple bells, and the flying fish all come to live under his pen, not to mention his famous lines "Road to Mandalay" that conjure up fascinations of generations. However, George Orwell was more realistic in his roman *Burmese Days*. The book critical to the British colonial system was based on the personal accounts during his police service in Burma. By the end of the World War II, Myanmar attracted the world's focus again as a grand theatre where allied expedition forces fought bloody battles with the Japanese Imperial Army in the steamy jungles.

Long political isolation and economic sanction hinder developments. However, they also create a benign side effect that not only keeps the country relatively immune from the influence of foreign cultures, but also retains the originality and human touch among its people. Life remains undisturbed in this country despite the rapid developments of the neighbouring country.

Even its capital city Yangon is in no way resembling an ultra-commercialised capital of its neighbour. One January morning, several travellers and I stand alone on the tarmac of Yangon's International Airport. The arrival hall is locked. The doorkeeper scramble to find immigration officers. But soon I come to appreciate this seemingly underdeveloped city: parks and lakes make up a large part of the suburb, while high-rises has not yet substituted the colonial houses the city centre. Men and women in sarongs poise gracefully on their bicycles roam avenues filled not with traffic fume but the scent of magnolia. Adding the beetle-like teakwood Chevrolet buses, it only lacks a British officer in colonial uniform to complete a perfect souvenir picture of the South Asia in early 20th century.

Source: CIA World Factbook (http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/)

Country Name (English): Union of Myanmar
Country Name (Burmese): Myanmar Naigngandaw
Population: 42,720,000 (2004 est.)
Ethnic Groups: Burman, Shan, and 130 others
Major languages: Burmese
Land: 657,740 square kilometres
Capital: Yangon (aka. Rangoon. pop. 4,383,000)
Major Cities: Madalay, Pathein, Mawlamyaing
Life Expectancy: 56 years (2004 est.)
Birth Rate: 18.64/1,000
GDP: $74.53 billion (2004 purchasing power parity)
Currency: Kyat (official $1/6, unofficial $1/900)

To visit Myanmar is to embrace Buddhism. The religion entrenches so deeply into the country's culture, tradition, mindset that everything I saw, I heard, even the air I breathed, had an unequivocally Buddhist touch. In Yangon, thousands of prayers fill the colossal, elevator-equipped Shewdagon Paya days and nights. This splendid golden wonder of architecture that once deeply impressed foreign travellers like Somerset Maugham, is not only the pilgrimage centre for all Myanmar people, but also where the soul of the entire country rests upon. One day in a restaurant, I watch in TV some men in army uniforms prostrating to the Buddha as piously as anyone else. Alas! I later learn, they are exactly the military junta.

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Throughout the towns and country, monks and nuns with lacquer bowls and umbrellas roam around their precincts for alms. In Myanmar, giving is not an act of charity but a way of life. The donors in turn receive from the monks the blessings indispensable to their current, or perhaps future lives. With nearly every man and large number of women in Myanmar having per-

Lunch time in the Maha Ganayon Kyaung in Amarapura. Founded in 1914, the kyaung (monastery) is housing more than 5,000 monks.

The Umin Thounzeh (Thirty Caves) situated in Sagaing Hill. The colonnade in crescent shape housing 45 Buddha sculptures is typical to Buddhist architecture.

(Right): Vermillion roofs of the palace inside the royal quarter in Fort Mandalay. Built in 1857, originally as the palace compound for King Mindon Min, the fort was later occupied by the British colonists as Fort Duffrin, the government house. At the end of the WWII, it was incinerated during the fierce fighting between the Allies and the Japanese Imperial Army. (Below): Palm trees and azaleas adorn the massive rampart of Fort Mandalay.

manent or temporary monastic experience, it is no longer easy to draw a line between a monastic and a secular life. Such prevalence of Buddhism attributes to the warm, gentle and generous nature of the entire population. Violent crimes are rare, gold shops in Yangon and Mandalay hardly require special protection.

My three-week journey starts with a morning stroll along the moat surrounding the Fort Mandalay at the very heart of the city. On my left side, My passport is inspected at the U-hteik Bridge in front of

the Fort's east gate. Military camps and a few villages settling their families still occupy much of the area behind the rampart. A long straight avenue lead to the royal palace at the core of the fort. The entrance is guarded by a cast-iron cannon.

I reach the top of the Nan Myint Saung Tower through the spiral staircase to take a commanding view of the entire royal living quarter and part of the cityscape. Time has washed away the pomp and circumstance of the dynasty. What left behind are the crimson palaces and other functional chambers sitting calmly amid the fresh lawns and dense tamarind trees like miniatures. King Mindon dismantled his all-wood palace in Amarapura, and reassembled it piece by piece at the current site. But his palace did not outlive himself by very long. Less than a hundred years later, the Japanese installed a military depot here, causing a total incineration by the ally fire. The replication after the war fell far short of the original grandeur, and corrugated iron sheets substituted slates for the palace roofs.

Before concluding of my royal visit, I quench my thirst with the water in pottery jars provided by the roadside at the east moat. Mandalay is a city that retained even its smallest details of the traditional lifestyle. On the way to Kuthodaw Paya (Temple), I happen to walk alongside with a procession of monks in vermilion gowns and black alms bowls – the elder in front, and the younger at back, all bared-foot. In front of me, arrays of brilliant white stupas in the paya shine in the azure sky, and an ox cart rumble from the distance. As everything converges together, I felt as if I see Kipling standing by the roadside, calmly observing this familiar scene as well as this strange modern traveller.

Coming to Mandalay is not just paying a royal homage to King Mindon. It's also carrying out a pilgrimage to the mountain to which the great city is due. Like other pilgrims, I scale the sacred mountain with my bared feet via the 1,700-plus-step stairway. Astrologers and vendors line by the sides of this covered footpath, telling fortunes to the devotees, and selling items from Buddha images, ceremonial paper umbrellas, incenses to books, antiques and souvenirs. The perpetual sound of worship from the loudspeakers inundates my ears. The spirit of devotion was in the air.

Mandalay Hill has every reason to be a sacred site. In front of the breezy observation deck at the summit is the panorama of Myanmar's central plain, traversed by the mighty Ayeyarwady that irrigates the boundless green fields and nurtures thousands of villages along its shores. Even Buddha fell in love with this fertile land, and prophesied a city at the foothill. As I am going to embark in a river journey the next day, I follow the Myanmar tradition by pouring small cups of water over a Buddha figurine at a shrine to wish myself luck. I must do so at the post of my astrological sign, I am told, and the number of cup I pour must be one more of my age.

"Come you back to Mandalay, where the old Flotilla

Three generations join and pour water onto the Buddha's figurine as a way of wishing good luck.

lay: Can't you 'ear their paddles chunkin' from Rangoon to Mandalay...". Kipling's ditty is the ultimate inspiration for my seeking flotilla experiences on the Ayeyarwady. Who could have thought that the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company was once the largest riverboats fleet in the world? Although the Scottish company has ceased to exist since the independence of Myanmar, the routines of inland river navigation carry on. Flotillas no more, thousands of government and private vessels still transport tens of million of passengers and tons of cargo each year throughout the country's waterways.

I arrive in the jetty before dawn for the Mandalay-Bagan Express Ferry. The pier had already turn into a bazaar under moonlight. On one side, porters rush the last piece of cargo. On the other, travellers garner their last-minute snacks at stalls by kerosene lamps. I jump cross the springboard, and am greeted by the Myanmar crew onboard. They might never comprehend this traveller, who has come from afar just to realise his Irrawaddy flotilla dream, albeit no longer the legendary Scottish captain in kilt and the Indian crew in turbans. Diesel has replaced steam to propel the boat.

The boat sails pass the town of Sagaing in crepuscule. Twice being the capital of central

Myanmar, one during the 14th century and the other 18th, the town is said to host some 600 monasteries and nunneries, many of which secluded in the dense woods in the Sagaing Hill on the west bank of the Ayeyarwady. The Hill and the monasteries in the mist has not yet awaken, only the sound of the boat motor disturb the dreams of sleepers inside. The first aurora of the day already casts onto the high bluff. Pagodas embedded in the lush forest shimmer like golden bells on holiday trees. But soon the sun rises over the treetop. The universe wakes up in the sea of light. Gulls hover above the fishing sampans drifting along

(Above): A man in traditional sarong stands on the Ayeyarwady ferry. Until quite recently, the Ava Bridge in the background was the only bridge spanned over the Ayeyarwady. Transportation between both shores depend heavily on ferries. (Right): Home from market via the U Bein Brigdge. The teakwood bridge spans 1.2 km across the shallow Taungthaman Lake some 10 km south of Mandalay. It was built by U Bein in the mid-19th century when the capital of Innwa Kingdom moved to the nearby Amarapura.

the gentle waves, the silhouettes of the onshore temples flicker on the golden ripples.

If there is one place representing the quintessential Myanmar, Bagan should well deserve the title. Not because of its much longer history than those of other ancient cities like Sagaing or Amarapura, its unique architectural treasure is also unparalleled in the world. When King Anawrahta was converted to Buddhist in 11th century, he started building a city of temples and stupas by the east bank of the Ayeyarwady big bend. However, he might have never foreseen what architectural legacy he left to the humankind. Marco Polo visited here two centuries later, and was stunned by the sheer number of edifices tightly packed within a small area. He astonishment by the city's splendours and craftsmanship is evident in his 1298 chronicle, in which he called Bagan "*one*

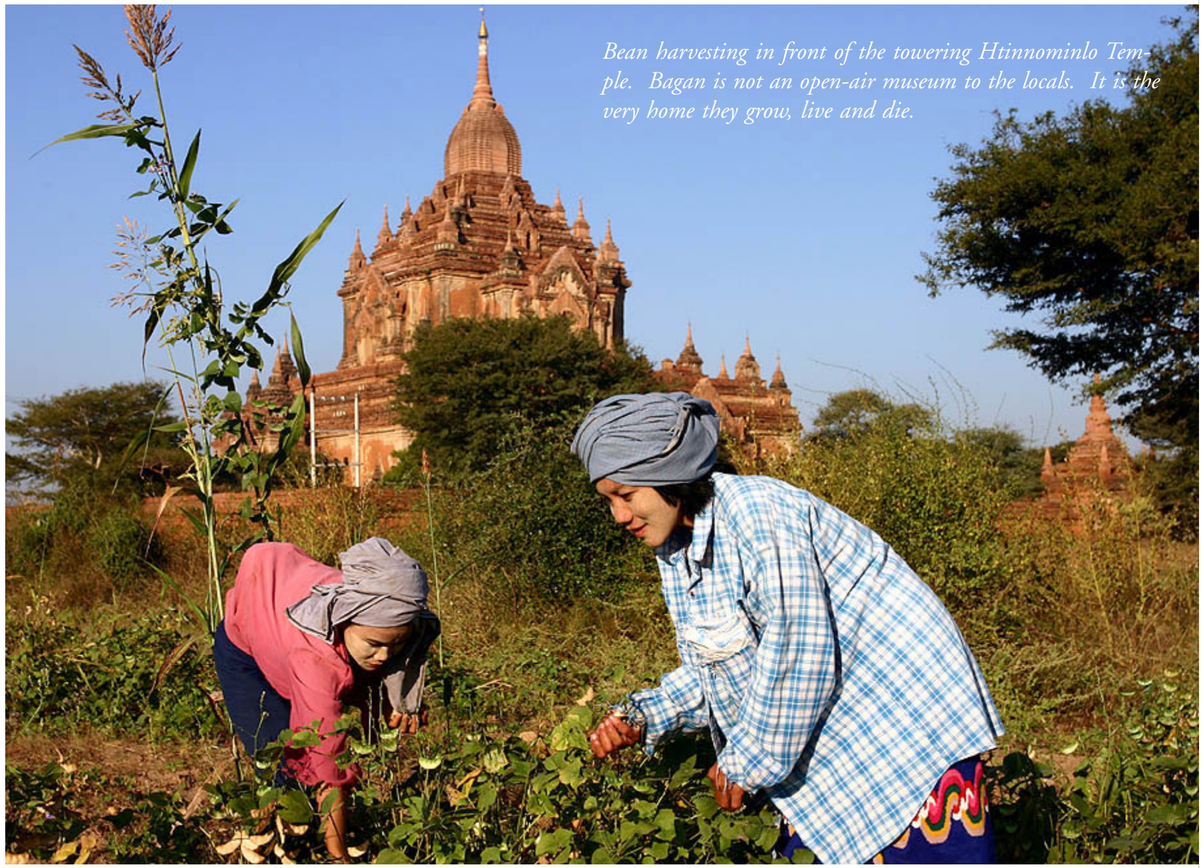
Ananda Temple(left on right) and thousands of stupas (above) dominate Bagan's skyline.

of the finest sights in the world".

In a cold and breezy morning, I pedal my bicycle under the twilight in search of a sunrise vista point. A network of sandy paths connects the few thousand ancient architectures, turning the area into an immense museum without boundary. In spite of its world-class archaeological and architectural significance, Bagan does not belong to the UNESCO World Heritage list, thanks to the politics. This might nevertheless be a blessing, for this hidden gem could be spared from hordes of tourists. Those who have come a long way to appreciate this wonder, however, would certainly enjoy the privilege to wander around this 40-square-kilometre archaeological zone, and scale most of the structures without restriction.

At dawn, I pose high on the terrace of a nameless redbrick stupa, savouring the descriptions by Marco Polo. In a distance, the majestic white Ananda Temple dominates the Bagan skyline, soaring higher than the mountains in its backdrop. Under its shadow, arrays of smaller stupas cluster around the Temple like soldiers accompanying their general in the battlefield. Time and disasters have taken tolls to these monuments. Bricks have loosen, plaster fallen. Yet these stupas never topple. They have stood and will continue to stand to witness the evolution our history.

But Bagan is not an open-air museum for the local people. It is the land they are rooted, the very home in which they grow, live and die. To me, it's a unique locale where ancient relics mingle with daily life in modern time. Each building, habitant and activity under the sun is an integral part of the Bagan landscape. Indeed, below the terrace, peasants drive white oxen and plough lands between clusters of monuments. Descending from the stupa, I say *Minglaba* (Hello or Blessing) to a group of jolly women harvesting soybeans in front of the towering Htinominlo Temple. During my journey, I am always attracted by the grace of the Myanmar women for their kind and friendly nature, their elegant sarongs and the unequivocally Myanmar cosmetics of *Thanakhar*, ground from the *Thanakhar* tree barks and smeared on faces as astringent and sunscreen. I am not content to be an observer. I share their works by joining in among their laughter, even though I realise that daily labour isn't a joyful event everyday.



Bean harvesting in front of the towering Htinnominlo Temple. Bagan is not an open-air museum to the locals. It is the very home they grow, live and die.

Meanwhile, a wisp of smoke rises from the chimney behind the stupas. I follow a herd of sheep to a village entrance. Under the lush umbrella of a huge banyan tree, children sit and form a crescent in front of a snack peddler. Their faces tell it all. The home-made snacks are the most delicious in the world. On the main street, cheers erupts as young men kick *Chinlon* – Myanmar's national sport with a flair of volleyball and football. Further down the road, outside a small grocery store, women gossip and together roll cigarettes with local tobacco.

I am cordially invited into a family home. It is a

(Above): A woman in Thanarkha, an universal cosmetic in Myanmar. (Below): Chilon, a woven rattan ball with a flair of volleyball and football, is Myanmar's national favourite sport.

A piece of cactus on the door signals the arrival of a new life in the family and, according to the Pa-O tradition, fends off evil spirits and daemons that might be harmful to the child.

typical Myanmar style home with wooden and bamboo structure, with the main floor a few feet above the ground. Tea, snack and fruits are offered, family members are introduced, neighbours gather. Smiles are written on the faces, common language is not required.

Sitting on a cool bamboo matt, I sap tea while watching people chatting and children playing. I ponder the phrase of "gross national happiness" I learnt not long ago. For a person who comes from a country with the biggest gross national product in the world, my sense of happiness is dwarfed by the peaceful and harmonious lifestyle I experience here and elsewhere in Myanmar. The people of this country deserve neither a military government nor poverty. But where should the country steer toward from here? Would the democracy we transplant from our soil ever flourish on their land? Would the merchandise we export increase their happiness? Would the land cease to enchant with the influx of foreign culture? Should all countries have the same political framework, and share the same set of value? What would be the Myanmar people's choice if they were given freedom?

When I depart Mandalay for Yangon, I hail a rickshaw from my hotel to the bus station. At the end of the long and exhausted ride on the pothole-littered streets, the rickshaw driver insists to guide me through the chaotic bus station, verify the bus number, and wait under the blazing sun until the bus departs. As I watch him waving farewell with smile through the tinted window of the moving bus, It reminds me Kipling's famous quote in his *Letters from the East*. Although this is the 21st century Myanmar, it is still quite unlike any land we know about. □

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In Innwa, a Buddha is holding a flower bouquet offered by an unknown devotee. A long time capital of northern Myanmar after the fall of Bagan, Innwa was later abandoned in favour of Amarapura a few kilometres to its north. Today, the ruin of this ancient capital offers a quiet retreat from the more touristic Amarapura.