

Myanmar



With Bangkok and Singapore
October 2014

Bob and Molly Hillery

This was our first visit to Myanmar (formerly Burma) and, indeed, it is only in the past few years that the country has opened up to Western tourism in any significant way. We were taking a Viking River Cruise down the Irrawaddy River from the starting point in Mandalay. However, the tour itself started in Thailand with a couple of nights in Bangkok before flying to Mandalay. We chose also to add a few days in Singapore at the end of the tour to relax—and because we always enjoy that city.

The cruise had been suggested by our friends Jay and Gord, whom we had met on a similar Viking cruise on the Mekong almost three years ago. This meant that we had excellent companions for the time in Bangkok and Myanmar before they spent a few days on the coast in Thailand and we went to Singapore.

Myanmar is emerging from several years of military dictatorship (some would say that it continues in a slightly different form) and from many years of virtual isolation from the West. It is definitely a Developing Country and, from what we saw, a very under-developed infrastructure. Nevertheless, its people seem to be very happy, they are certainly very friendly and—with over 2000 years of history and culture—the country makes a fascinating place to visit. The predominantly Buddhist population has given Myanmar a wealth of temples, pagodas and stupas (many coated or covered in gold) that form a colorful and awe-inspiring backdrop for the visitor.

Thailand, Myanmar and Singapore; October 2014

Tuesday October 7

We left home just before 7pm to drive to the airport Marriott, stopping first for a good dinner at Bonefish, just a few miles from the airport. We checked in soon after nine, had coffee and dessert in the lounge and retired about 10pm.

Wednesday October 8/Thursday October 9

We were up about 7 so had time for coffee in the lounge and catching the 8am shuttle to the airport. We were soon checked in and through Security in plenty of time for our 9:30 departure for Atlanta.

This flight left and arrived on time so we had almost two hours in the Atlanta lounge before our 1:30 departure for Tokyo - a 14 hour flight!

We left on time and settled in for the long flight. Lunch (or dinner, depending on the time zone) was served shortly after takeoff as we headed due north all the way to northern Michigan and across the eastern end of Lake Huron in Canada. We were only a little south of Hudson's Bay before we headed in a more northwesterly direction.

By now lunch was finished (with ample wine) so it was time for a nap.

Actually, we both had good periods of sleep. Molly read at times but I didn't even get my computer out for the entire journey. It had been cloudy on the occasions that I looked out but it was daylight the whole time as we chased the sun.

We arrived in Tokyo about 30 minutes ahead of schedule at 4:20pm Thursday, having crossed the International Date Line en route.

We had over two hours before our next flight, a period we spent in the well-appointed Delta lounge.

The flight from Tokyo left on time (6:45pm local time) and we had another six hours to Bangkok. There was a two hour time change (back) so we arrived around 11pm in Thailand.

We cleared Immigration and Customs, found an ATM for some local currency and got a taxi to the Millennium Hilton hotel in the middle of town. Although we should have been tired after traveling for 28 hours from Cincinnati, we were actually awake enough to have a shower and unpack before retiring. By this time it was almost 2am local time.

Friday October 10

Despite our late night, we were awake by 7am and were downstairs for breakfast in the hotel by 8:30. We had finished eating when we met our traveling companions, Gord and Jay, who had arrived even later than us last night.



View of the Chao Phraya River and our Hotel Lobby

We sat with them while they ate breakfast and then we checked out of the Hilton (that had been pre-cruise and booked before Viking changed our tour hotel) and got two taxis to the Shangri-La. Here we unpacked, had a stroll around the streets local to the hotel and met the Viking representatives who were already set up on the lower level of the hotel. We then had a light lunch in the main restaurant before taking two hours out for a nap and to catch up with computer work, etc.

This evening we took the hotel's shuttle boat to the night market, perhaps a couple of miles downstream. This was unlike other night markets we have seen (portable stalls, crowded narrow aisle ways and lots of tourist goods) and was much cleaner and more permanent. It was built in what appeared to be old warehouses but had nicely paved streets and alleyways as well as a number of nice looking restaurants.

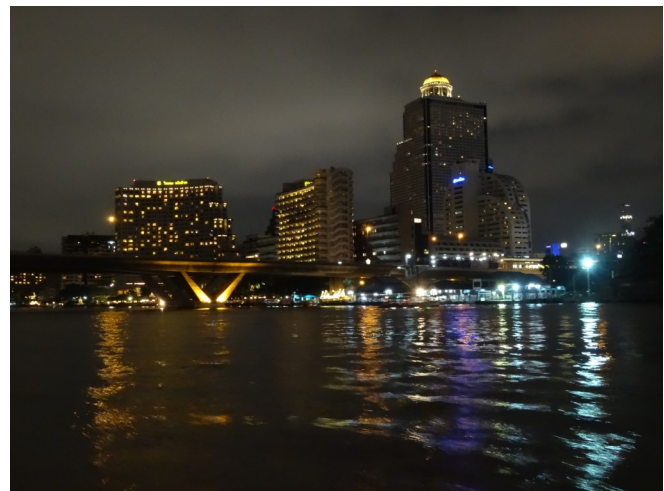


There were many of the usual tourist goods - silk, carved wood, electronics - but the whole impression was much more upscale. It was nice to wander around for an hour before sitting down for a cold drink.



Rather than go back to the hotel we chose to have dinner at a pleasant Italian restaurant near the water and then got the shuttle boat back. It was interesting to see all the boats on the busy waterway as well as the brightly lit buildings. Bangkok certainly is an attractive city, especially from the water.

Back at the hotel we sat in the Long Bar (modeled after the one in Raffles in Singapore) and had a nightcap looking out over the water once again. There was some lightning in the area but there had been only a few drops of rain before we retired at 10:30, after a relaxing day before the tour begins in earnest tomorrow.



Saturday October 11

We both had a pretty good night's sleep but are clearly not quite over jet lag as we were up before 7am and down for breakfast by eight.

This morning we had a briefing on the tour from our local guides before leaving for a visit to the Grand Palace. We took a boat on the rather choppy river to a pier about 15 minutes' walk from the palace entrance.



Wat Arun ("Temple of Dawn") is a Buddhist temple (wat) in on the west bank of the Chao Phraya River. The temple derives its name from the Hindu god Aruna, often personified as the radiations of the rising sun. Wat Arun is among the best known of Thailand's landmarks. Although the temple had existed since at least the seventeenth century, its distinctive prang (spires) were built in the early nineteenth century.

The Grand Palace, including its many state buildings and temples, was built between 1782 and 1882 by the first three kings of the Rama Dynasty (The current king is Rama IX). Consequently there are several architectural styles, including Chinese and European, as the various rulers traveled and were influenced. However, the overarching style is unmistakably Thai, with its bright colors and graceful lines. Orange and gold predominate but it seems that every color appears, particularly in the mosaic-like decorations on almost all surfaces.



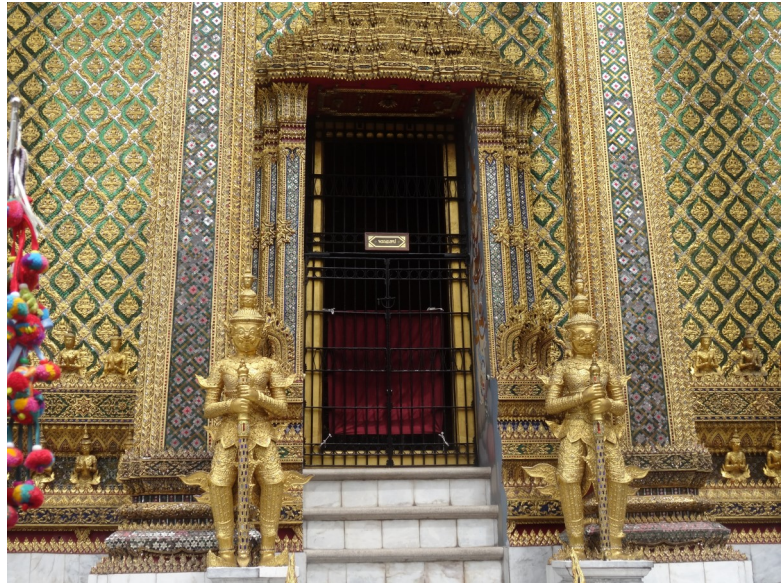
The approach to the Grand Palace



We visited the temple containing the Emerald Buddha, a small but revered piece found in the 15th century in what is now Laos. The object measures less than two feet in height (and is actually carved from jade) but it is housed in a "monastery" that must be fifty feet long and over twenty feet wide. The building is also perhaps 40 feet high and the Buddha sits on a pedestal close to the ceiling.

The Emerald Buddha

From this shrine, which is in a large temple complex within the palace walls, we walked into the palace proper. Here there are several grand buildings, again reflecting the architectural desires of the kings, all set in beautiful grounds and all immaculately maintained. The whole of the Grand Palace deserves its title and is a wonderful place to visit - even for a third time!



A model of Cambodia's Angkor Wat commissioned by the King in 1860





More recent buildings of The Grand Palace



Back to the boat..... And a view of the Palace from the river

However, although 1 1/2 hours cannot do it justice, on a 90 degree day with high humidity, we were not too sorry to get back to the boat and happy when we were in the air-conditioned walls of the hotel. The heat and humidity caused Molly to feel a little groggy so we related with a cup of tea in the lounge before resting until late afternoon.

Tonight we went by boat to a highly acclaimed restaurant on the side of the river about twenty minutes upstream from the hotel. The food was certainly plentiful (perhaps eight courses) and mostly quite good but somewhat shy of the billing. There were Thai dancers to entertain us while we ate. They were quite good but not up to the caliber of the Apsara dancers we have seen elsewhere.

It had turned into a dry and pleasant evening after some heavy rain late in the afternoon so it was great to see the city by night – particularly the Grand Palace and the Wat Arun, both of which were superbly flood lit. We finished the evening with a nightcap in the bar at the hotel. Tomorrow we leave for Myanmar!



Wat Arun at night (Web site)

The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, commonly shortened to **Myanmar**, is a sovereign state in Southeast Asia and shares a border with Bangladesh, India, China, Laos and Thailand. One third of Myanmar's total perimeter of 1,200 miles forms an uninterrupted coastline along the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea. Myanmar's population of over 50 million makes it the world's 25th most populous country; it is the world's 40th largest country and the second largest in Southeast Asia. Its capital city is Naypyidaw and its largest city is Yangon.

Early civilizations in what was then Burma included the Tibeto-Burman speaking Pyu in Upper Burma and the Mon in Lower Burma. In the 9th century, the Burmans of the Kingdom of Nanzhao entered the upper Irrawaddy valley and, following the establishment of the Pagan Empire in the 1050s, the Burmese language, culture and Buddhism slowly became dominant in the country. The Pagan Empire fell due to the Mongol invasions and several warring states emerged. In the 16th century, reunified by the Taungoo Dynasty, the country was for a brief period the largest empire in the history of Southeast Asia. The British conquered Burma after three Anglo-Burmese Wars in the 19th century and the country became a British colony. Burma became an independent nation in 1948, initially as a democratic nation and then, following a coup in 1962, a military dictatorship which formally ended in 2011.

For most of its independent years, the country has been engrossed in rampant ethnic strife and a myriad of Burma's ethnic groups have been involved in one of the world's longest-running unresolved civil wars. During this time, the United Nations and several other organizations have reported consistent and systematic human rights violations in the country. In 2011, the military junta was officially dissolved following a 2010 general election, and a nominally civilian government was installed. Although the military retains enormous influence, it has taken steps toward relinquishing control of the government. This, along with the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners, has improved the country's human rights record and foreign relations, and has led to the easing of trade and other economic sanctions imposed by the European Union and the United States. There is, however, continuing criticism of the government's treatment of the Muslim ethnic minority and its poor response to the religious clashes, described by human rights organizations as ethnic cleansing.

Burma is a country rich in jade and gems, oil, natural gas and other mineral resources but the income gap in Myanmar is among the widest in the world, as a large proportion of the economy is controlled by supporters of the former military government. As of 2013, Burma had a low level of human development, ranking 150 out of 187 countries.

The country was colonized by Britain following three Anglo-Burmese Wars (1824–1885). British rule brought social, economic, cultural and administrative changes. With the fall of Mandalay, all of Burma came under British rule, being annexed on 1 January 1886. Throughout the colonial era, many Indians arrived as soldiers, civil servants, construction workers and traders and, along with the Anglo-Burmese community, dominated commercial and civil life in Burma. Rangoon (now Yangon) became the capital of British Burma and an important port between Calcutta and Singapore.

A major battleground, Burma was devastated during World War II. By March 1942, within months after they entered the war, Japanese troops had advanced on Rangoon and the British administration had

collapsed. Although many Burmese fought initially for the Japanese as part of the Burma Independence Army, many Burmese, mostly from the ethnic minorities, served in the British Burma Army. The Burma National Army and the Arakan National Army fought with the Japanese from 1942 to 1944 but switched allegiance to the Allied side in 1945. Under Japanese occupation, 170,000 to 250,000 civilians died.

On 4 January 1948, the nation became an independent republic, named the *Union of Burma*. Unlike most other former British colonies and overseas territories, Burma did not become a member of the Commonwealth. A parliament was formed and multi-party elections were held in 1951–1952, 1956 and 1960.

In 1961, U Thant, then the Union of Burma's Permanent Representative to the United Nations and former Secretary to the Prime Minister, was elected Secretary-General of the United Nations, a position he held for ten years. Among the Burmese to work at the UN when he was Secretary-General was a young Aung San Suu Kyi, who went on to become winner of the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize and today's leader of the opposition party, the National League for Democracy.

Since the 2010 election, the government has embarked on a series of reforms to direct the country towards liberal democracy, a mixed economy, and reconciliation, although doubts persist about the motives that underpin such reforms. The series of reforms includes the release of pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest, the establishment of the National Human Rights Commission, the granting of general amnesties for more than 200 political prisoners, new labor laws that permit labor unions and strikes, a relaxation of press censorship, and the regulation of currency practices.

Civil wars have been a constant feature of Burma's socio-political landscape since the attainment of independence in 1948. These wars are predominantly struggles for ethnic and sub-national autonomy, with the areas surrounding the ethnically Burman central districts of the country serving as the primary geographical setting of conflict.

This is where we will spend the next ten days!



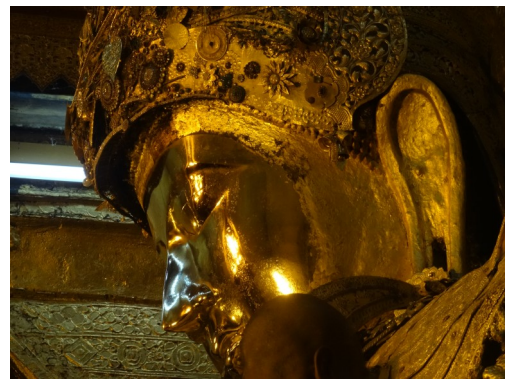
Sunday October 12, 2014

We had a leisurely breakfast in the hotel, having put cases out for an 8am pickup, after which we got our bus to the airport for our flight to Myanmar. The journey was about 45 minutes, after which we proceeded through check-in and security before our noon flight to Mandalay. This was on Bangkok Airlines, apparently an award-winning regional airline in Asia, and they lived up to their reputation today. In a 1 ½ flight they fed us a hot meal (with wine) and generally treated us well – especially when compared with familiar Delta.

We arrived in Mandalay (an International Airport by name but not size), to very high temperature and humidity, even in the “air-conditioned” Immigration Hall. However, Immigration and Customs went smoothly and we were soon with our Myanmar guide, Dorothy.

We boarded a bus and immediately went for one sight-seeing visit on the way to our cruise boat. This was to the most revered Buddha temple in this part of the country, perhaps in the whole of Myanmar since it was reputed to have been in contact with Buddha himself in some former time.

Ancient tradition refers to only five likenesses of the Buddha, made during his lifetime; two were in India, two in paradise, and the fifth is the Mahamuni Buddha image in Myanmar. According to the legend, the Buddha visited the city of Arakan(now a region of Myanmar) in 554 BC. The king at the time requested that an image be cast of him. After the Great Image was cast, the Buddha breathed upon it, and thereafter the image became the exact likeness of the Mahamuni.



The “serene gold-leaf Buddha” is housed in the very ornate Mahamuni Pagoda. The shrine was well attended by the locals (85% of the country is Buddhist) who have, over the years, applied 20 inches of gold leaf to the figure and are still doing it today.



Actually, only men are allowed close to the Buddha and women (including those in our group) had to view the figure from a distance. Nevertheless, men and women by the score were in and around the temple praying and otherwise paying their respects.

From the temple we drove another 40 minutes to our cruise boat, passing dozens of gold domed temples, Buddhas and pagodas on the way. This continued right to our boarding as the dock was within a monastery wall and many other temples and Buddha figures were visible from the ship.

Once on board we unpacked, showered and went to the upper sun deck where we were greeted by the crew, had a welcome drink and the necessary safety drill. At this point we were sailing in an area surrounded by hills, each covered, it seemed, with more temples and shrines. This was simply a cruise around our dock area to give us this wonderful introduction to Mandalay and Myanmar and its very colorful environment – especially as the sun was setting.

This was followed by a good dinner on board and an after-dinner drink on the sun deck – in a raging thunderstorm!



Our small group (Jay, Gordon, Molly and I) recognized this ship as the exact one that had taken us along the Mekong River in Cambodia and Vietnam almost three years ago. It is a little outdated in terms of amenities (bunk beds, relatively poor air-conditioning, etc) but it is a very attractive wooden ship with a good deal of atmosphere befitting the region. It turned out that we were wrong on this being the same ship—but it is essentially identical.

It was after 11 before we finally retired and prepared for a full day of sightseeing tomorrow in the City of Mandalay.

Monday October 13

We both had a very good night's sleep and were up and about at 7am and breakfasted before eight. Then it was off on a hot, sunny day for a full seven hours of sightseeing in Mandalay.

Mandalay is the second-largest city and the last royal capital of Burma. Located 445 mi north of Yangon on the east bank of the Irrawaddy River, the city has a population of 1 ¼ million.

Mandalay is the economic hub of Upper Burma and considered the center of Burmese culture. A continuing influx of Chinese immigrants, mostly from Yunnan, in the past twenty years, has reshaped the city's ethnic makeup and increased commerce with China. Despite the capital Naypyidaw's recent rise, Mandalay remains Upper Burma's main commercial, educational and health center.

Like most former (and present) capitals of Burma, Mandalay was founded on the wishes of the ruler of the day. In 1857, King Mindon founded a new royal capital at the foot of Mandalay Hill, ostensibly to fulfill a prophecy on the founding of a metropolis of Buddhism in that exact place on the occasion of the 2,400th jubilee of Buddhism.

The former royal palace of Amarapura was dismantled and moved by elephants to the new location at the foot of Mandalay Hill although construction of the palace compound was officially completed two years later. For the next 26 years, Mandalay was to be the last royal capital of the last independent Burmese kingdom before its final annexation by the British.

While Mandalay would continue to be the chief city of Upper Burma during the British colonial rule, the commercial and political importance had irreversibly shifted to Yangon. The British view on the development of Mandalay (and Burma) was mainly with commercial intentions. While rail transport reached Mandalay in 1889, less than four years after the annexation, the first college in Mandalay was not established until 40 years later.

Throughout the colonial years, Mandalay was the center of Burmese culture and Buddhist learning, and as the last royal capital, was regarded by the Burmese as a primary symbol of sovereignty and identity. Between the two World Wars, the city was Upper Burma's focal point in a series of nationwide protests against the British rule. The British rule brought in many immigrants from India to the city.

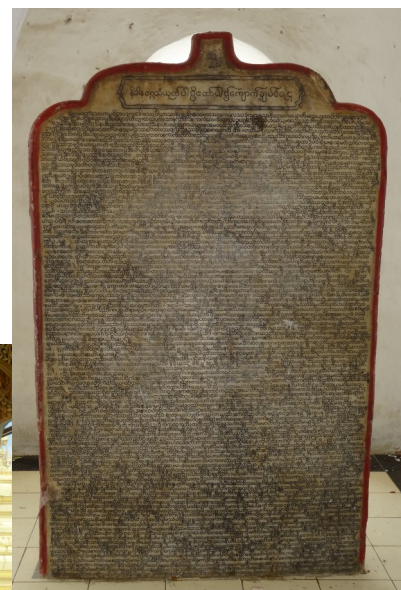
During World War II, Mandalay suffered the most devastating air raids of the war. The palace citadel, turned into a supply depot by the Japanese, was burnt to the ground by Allied bombing; only the royal mint and the watch tower survived. (A faithful replica of the palace was rebuilt in the 1990s.)

We first stopped at the Kuthodow Pagoda where there is a magnificent golden temple but which is more famous for the “Biggest Book in the World”. This is a series of 729 marble slabs (each in its own small housing) on which are written teachings of Buddha from the 17th century. These are written in Sanskrit and measure about 3 by 2 feet each and we were told that to read the entire set would take six months chanting around the clock! Apparently only a relatively few monks can even read the inscriptions these days.



Row upon row of Book “Pages” (below)

And Model (left)



*Kuthodow
Pagoda*



Then we went to the Shwenandaw Monastery which is decorated inside and out with amazing wood (teak) carvings – most of which were originally covered in gold leaf. These carvings are almost 200 years old and in remarkably good condition. The building itself was built for the king but he died there and it has been a shrine to him and home to a monastery ever since.



The Beautiful Teak Shwenandaw Monastery and our guide with some of the pupils

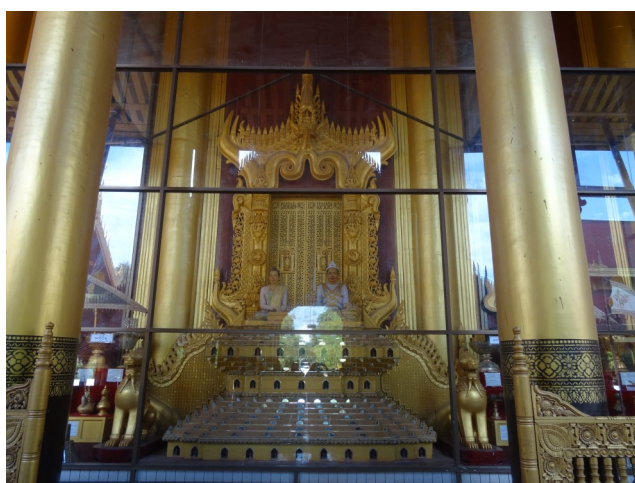


We had an enormous lunch, all of which was very good, in a local restaurant before driving to the Royal Palace. This was built for the monarch when he moved the capital to Mandalay in the 19th century but only two kings reigned from there before the British took over Burma and the second king was exiled to India. He had no sons and, although his queen did eventually return to Myanmar, it was basically the end of the monarchy in this country.

The palace, however, is enormous. We were told it was 2 Km on a side but it seemed much bigger than that as we drove past it. Inside the wall, there are dozens of buildings which housed the royal family as well as reception and entertainment rooms for visitors to the palace.



The approach to the Royal Palace



The Royal Palace

with one set of the Royal Thrones

The main entrance hall is a gold covered building and many others are similarly decorated, one of which is essentially built in glass.



The whole complex is lavishly decorated and carved and must have made a great impression on visitors as well as providing a very nice home for the royal family. Many of the buildings have been re-built after a fire destroyed a large part of the complex during World War II.

The Watchtower (not destroyed in WW II) and the view from its top





The Royal Palace

- *overall map (top left)*
- *Its beautiful buildings and setting*

Finally today we went to the craft “factories” and, of course, their associated shops. We saw very fine needlework, wooden carvings and the process by which very thin gold leaf is made. Since attaching a small piece of leaf to Buddha figures is very common, a lot of gold leaf is required in this country – but, equally, since it must be affordable, it must be beaten until very, very thin. All this is done manually!

Starting early to learn the trade

We returned to this ship about five o’ clock and had time to shower and get ready for cocktail hour (6pm) an informative talk and then dinner at 7pm. At 8:45 we were entertained on board by a troupe of traditional dancers. Unfortunately, the exertion of the day and/or the wine with dinner took over and I missed all but about 10 minutes of the one hour show. Most who had managed to stay awake said that the dancers were quite good – not in the same class as the Apsaras of Thailand but nevertheless very entertaining.



Tuesday October 14

Today's excursions were split – one beginning at 8:30 and the other at 3:30, with a three hour break for lunch and relaxation on the boat.



In the morning we were taken by bus to the Ada River, which joins the Irrawaddy (on which our cruise will be) here in Mandalay. Here we boarded a small ferry boat to take us across the relatively narrow crossing. There had been a heavy downpour (we are still in the monsoon season) earlier in the morning so the approach to the ferry was a little muddy. However, this was mild when compared with the inches deep mud that we had to negotiate on the other side as we made our way to our waiting horse-drawn cart! Each cart took two tourists (based on other modes of transportation we have seen, I suspect that at least 20 natives would normally be packed in) on a 15 minute ride through mud and water to the Mae Nu Oak Kyaung monastery.



Wagons roll!

This monastery is one of only a few built of brick rather than the more normal teak wood and had been built for the king (and his personal monk) when the capital of the country was here – approximately the 300 years preceding the move to Mandalay and the palace we had seen yesterday. It wasn't clear whether the main building simply housed the king and his entourage when it was first built but it certainly was an impressive building. It was built on three levels (all Myanmar temples and other important structures are an odd number of storeys) and, when it was painted in its original pale yellow it must have been even more spectacular. Now it is blackened with the rain and humidity and only a few areas have been given an attempt at re-painting but apparently it doesn't stand up very well.



When the capital was moved the palace became a monastery and we were able to take a walk inside to the second level to see the narrow brick passageways and the teak floors that would have been used by the monks. It seems that it was a working monastery until an earthquake in the last century did extensive damage and the monks moved out – leaving the building to deteriorate even further. Recently, however, it has been re-opened as a museum but with nothing in the way of explanatory information or administration; certainly little in the way of obvious maintenance or cleaning.

From the monastery we walked to a nearby village where we saw the bamboo homes (and one or two “colonial” brick structures). The living quarters and infrastructure were very primitive (no electricity, a com-

mon well for water and who knows what for sewage) and we visitors would classify it as very poor or even uninhabitable. However, everyone seemed to be comfortable with their lot and it seems were well fed and clothed. Certainly the dozens of young girls trying to sell trinkets and accompanying us the entire time) were very happy, had beautiful teeth and clean clothing (obviously their feet today were caked in mud – but so were ours!). One girl who latched on to Molly and I at the dock and rode behind the cart on her bike claimed to speak several languages and indeed said a few words that we recognized in French, German and Spanish.



Education in Myanmar is not provided by the state (at least not until university level) and many kids (including our new friend) are educated in monasteries and nunneries when the priests clearly do a very good job. It would appear that in the rural areas at least the monastery is the education source for most and only city dwellers (with some money) send their children to private schools.

At our first talk on board last evening, the cruise director talked about how we should take precautions while in country to avoid sickness or accident as health care is limited and very slow but she also made the point that, although we look at the conditions here and are horrified, the locals are not “poor”. They are well fed, despite a 40% unemployment rate (“just look at their perfect teeth”) and are a very happy people. We have difficulty relating to that from our perspective, but as she said “What you have never had, you never miss”.



Our afternoon excursion took us to a silk and cotton weaving workshop (emphasis on “shop”) and to the biggest monastery in Myanmar, Mahagan-dayon. This is a working monastery with 1500 monks on site so we were able to get a glimpse into their daily life. As was

mentioned earlier, 85% of the population is Buddhist so it is as much a way of life as it is a religion. There are 850,000 monks in country's 60 million population and (although I am not certain on this point) I don't believe that includes those (especially boys, but girls also) who serve some time (from weeks to years) as monks as part of their early life before joining a different workforce.



Left: A very young monk (novitiate) with our guide.

Right: A young Burmese girl being readied for the Ear-ring presentation



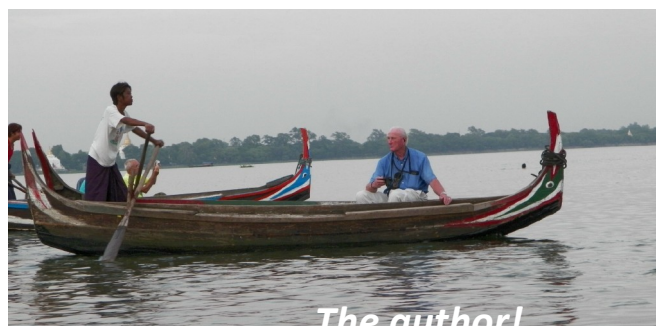
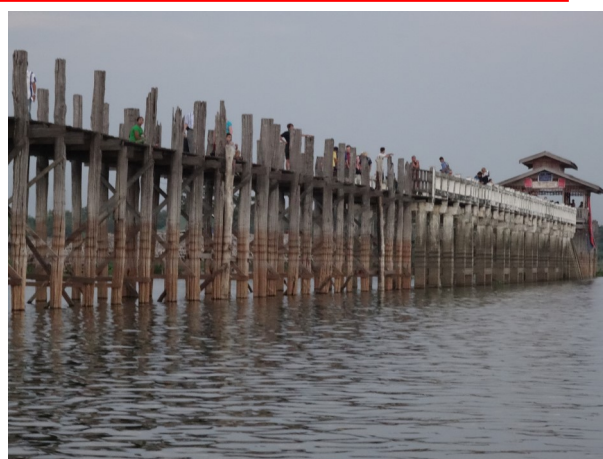
Actually, the monks are not strictly a part of the workforce as they hold no jobs (perhaps they do some tasks within the monastery) and twice a day they go "door to door" to be given donations of food for their two meals. Apparently many people (perhaps all?) prepare something for a monk as part of their own meal preparation and, indeed, set it aside, rather than giving the monk the "leftovers". Mahagandayon, being such a large and prestigious monastery, receives substantial gifts and is housed in simple but modern buildings. The monks here do not have to go out seeking food donations – the locals bring them food which presumably is prepared on site.

Right now, at the entrance to the monastery at which our boat is docked, a donation "booth" has been set up (with some inordinately loud music playing) as a collection point for donations to the monastery. Presumably these donations are more substantial and/or money, since their daily food needs are already covered. It seems completely different (and more widely accepted than, for example, Christian tithing) and certainly must be more applauded than condemned or ridiculed.

Shinbyu is the Burmese term for a novitiation ceremony in the tradition of Theravada Buddhism, referring to the celebrations marking the samanera ordination of a boy under the age of 20.

It is deemed the most important duty that parents owe to their son by letting him go forth and embrace the legacy of the Buddha, join the Sangha and become immersed in the teachings of the Buddha, at least for a short while. A boy may become a novice on more than one occasion, but by the age of twenty there will be another great occasion, the upasampada ordination, in which the boy becomes a fully ordained bhaddanta. Allowing a son to spend some time however short it may be, in a Buddhist monastery is regarded by most Buddhists as the best religious gift that his parents can give him and it is believed to have a lasting effect on his life.

While Myanmar boys are novitiated in the Shinbyu ceremony, the girls also have an important ceremony in which their ear lobes are pierced so they can wear ear-rings when they come of age. Unlike the novitiation ceremony, this is more a social than religious event, and Myanmar women have traditionally worn ear-rings as ornaments as well as status symbols.



After leaving the monastery we drove a short distance on the bus and then took a boat ride (two to a "canoe") on a lake to watch the setting sun. A unique feature of the lake is a 1.2 Km teak footbridge built across a narrow section. Hundreds of locals were walking on the bridge, either getting between villages or simply watching the sun set, which was indeed a beautiful sight. The bridge had been constructed when Anamanpura was abandoned as the capital in favor of Ada and used the wood from the old palace; apparently it was pretty good stuff as it seems to be holding up very well.

A nice touch on our short cruise was that the Viking bar staff pulled alongside each boat and handed us our cocktail of the day in a real wine glass! The cocktail of the day is a feature on board in the hour before dinner but we had not expected it to be provided to us on this excursion so everyone was thrilled to be able to toast the sunset in quite romantic surroundings.

We finished the day with dinner and after-dinner drinks on the sunset and were entertained by a local group – singing songs from the fifties through eighties! A fun way to end another busy day.

Wednesday October 15

Today we actually set sail on the Irrawaddy River. We cast off at 6am (although I suspect few actually witnessed the scene) and sailed until about 10:30 when we docked at Yandabo. This village is famous for its terra-cotta pottery production so, needless to say, our primary focus on the short shore excursion was the factory. It turned out to be a rather interesting visit as we were given demonstrations on pottery making. This is a two woman operation (usually mother and daughter), the mother moulding the clay while the daughter turns the wheel with a foot operated jig. In this way they can make 50-100 pots of various shapes and sizes in one day. After drying in the sun for some time, the still malleable clay is further worked to add decoration and finishing before large numbers (up to 2000) are fired in a large straw-fueled fire in a large open space.



The village itself was tree covered and rather attractive and, once again, we saw how friendly and generous a people they are. The tour lasted 1 ½ hours but was quite exhausting as the temperature was well into the 90s and the humidity matched. It felt the hottest we have experienced so far while we were out in the bright sunshine.

The four hours of sailing on the way to Yandabo and a similar stretch in the afternoon provided a pleasant time to relax and to view the rural river life along both sides of this very wide waterway. There was some com-



mercial barge traffic, several cross-river ferries and small villages or hamlets scattered along the banks. It would appear that it was primarily a farming and fishing area and most of the housing was the primitive bamboo structures that we had seen in the rural areas around Mandalay. All were on stilts even though they may have been twenty feet above the river today. Clearly the water level can get much higher!

We were on the boat for the rest of the day, although we docked in Bagan about 5:30. The afternoon included a demonstration on how to apply and wear the longyi (with which we were all provided) as well as a talk on the city of Bagan where we will spend the entire day tomorrow.



All dressed up in our longyi



Thursday October 16

We started our shore excursion at 8:45 on a bright, sunny morning once again.

Always something for sale as we leave our ship for the day



We used buses to drive to Pya Thet Gyi Pagoda and the Thapyinnyunt Temple. At the temple we climbed over seventy steps to a terrace from where we had a panoramic view of the Old Bagan area.

Bagan is an ancient city located in the Mandalay Region of Myanmar. From the 9th to 13th centuries, the city was the capital of the Kingdom of Pagan, the first kingdom to unify the regions that would later constitute modern Myanmar. During the kingdom's height between the 11th and 13th centuries, over 10,000 Buddhist temples, pagodas and monasteries were constructed in the Bagan plains alone, of which the remains of over 2200 temples and pagodas still survive to the present day.

The Bagan Archaeological Zone is a main draw for the country's nascent tourism industry. It is seen by many as equal in attraction to Angkor Wat in Cambodia, and certainly it is a very impressive complex.

According to Burmese chronicles, Bagan was founded in the second century CE, and fortified in 849 CE by King Pyinbya, 34th successor of the founder of early Bagan. Mainstream scholarship however holds that Bagan was founded in the mid-to-late 9th century by the Mranma (Burmans), who had recently entered the Irrawaddy valley from the Nanzhao Kingdom. It was among several competing Pyu city-states until the late 10th century when the Burman settlement grew in authority and grandeur.

From 1044 to 1287, Bagan was the capital as well as the political, economic and cultural nerve center of the Pagan Empire. Over the course of 250 years, Bagan's rulers and their wealthy subjects constructed over 10,000 religious monuments (approximately 1000 stupas, 10,000 small temples and 3000 monasteries in an area of 40 sq miles in the Bagan plains. The prosperous city grew in size and grandeur, and became a cosmopolitan center for religious and secular studies and city attracted monks and students from as far as India and Ceylon as well as the Khmer Empire.

The Pagan Empire collapsed in 1287 due to repeated Mongol invasions (1277–1301). Recent research shows that Mongol armies may not have reached Bagan itself, and that even if they did, the damage they inflicted was probably minimal. However, the damage had already been done. The city, once home to some 50,000 to 200,000 people, had been reduced to a small town, never to regain its preeminence. The city formally ceased to be the capital of Burma in 1297 when the Myinsaing Kingdom became the new power in Upper Burma.

Bagan, located in an active earthquake zone, had suffered from many earthquakes over the ages, with over 400 recorded earthquakes between 1904 and 1975. The last major earthquake came on 8 July 1975 and damaged many temples, in many cases severely and irreparably. Today, 2229 temples and pagodas remain.



This ancient city was built by kings and commoners alike and in every shape, size and degree of decoration. An earthquake in the last century (1975) had destroyed or damaged almost half of these but we were still looking over a valley containing over 2000 teak or brick buildings.