

UNESCO had started a major renovation here but the last military government eventually disagreed with their methods and/or interpretation and they were thrown out. Now the Ministry of Culture in Myanmar is working alone to maintain those that are left and perhaps re-build others. Clearly it is an enormous task and the guide suggested that the new government may invite UNESCO back to help.



***Bagan: Temples and Pagodas as far as the eye can see***



In order to help the preservation process, all the people who had lived in the old city were removed to New Bagan, although they could maintain their small plots of farmland. The result for the visitor is a vast vista of clean, green area with these wonderful 1000 year old structures dotted throughout. At mid-morning, from the vantage point of the temple terrace this was a truly awesome sight – one that alone was worth the visit to Myanmar. As we have on so many occasions and in so many places around the world, we were amazed at the architectural and engineering skills involved in the construction of these temples – as well as at the cultural and spiritual level of the people who dedicated them, in this case to Buddha.

Our next stop was at the Ananda Temple, which is regarded as the masterpiece of Bagan. Indeed the very large temple itself is a magnificent building but it is the huge gold-covered teak Buddhas and the murals and frescoes inside the building that are the main attraction. Many of the paintings lining the hallways and small rooms date from the eleventh century and the colors are remarkably bright and fresh to this day. Many have been cleaned, but we were assured that no additional painting has occurred so we were looking at 1000 year old art, much of which tells the story of everyday life of both royalty and commoner. Unfortunately we were not allowed to take pictures of the paintings (for very good reason) but we were allowed to photograph the enormous Buddha figures.

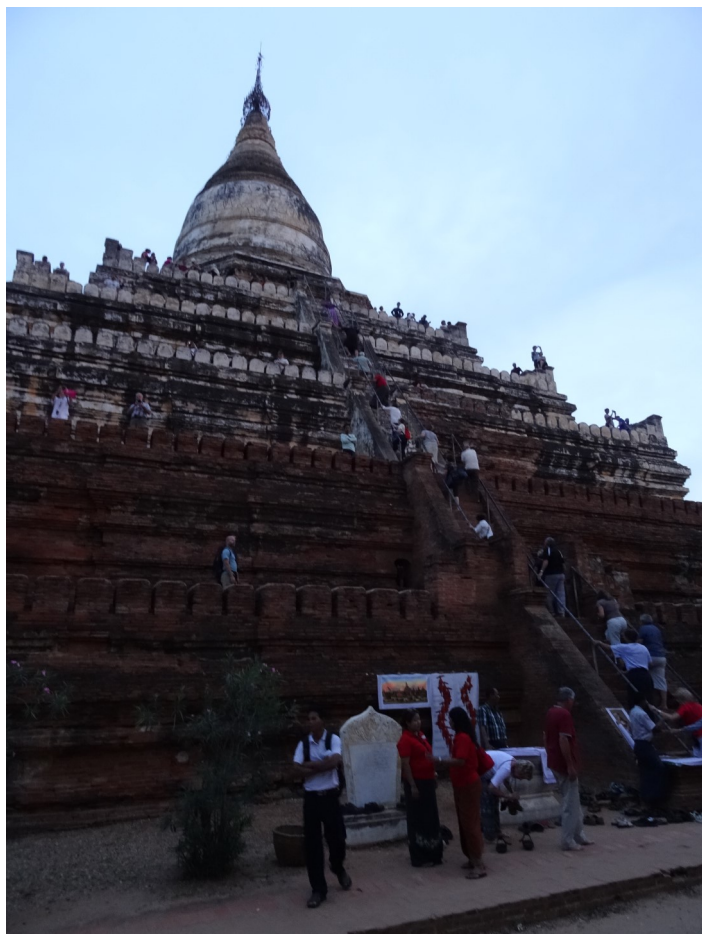






The whole visit to this enormous site was very interesting and by the very magnitude and numbers of sites was probably the highlight of the visit to Myanmar so far.

Following lunch back on the boat, we had time to relax before our 4pm excursion to a lacquer ware factory (apparently the industry is concentrated here in Bagan) before viewing another temple (Manuha) with its enormous reclining Buddha, and the Shwesandaw Pagoda for a sunset view across the old city.



beautiful view. The pagoda is built on several levels and there is a stone staircase that runs very steeply up one side, much like the Mayan temples in Mexico.

It had been somewhat overcast when we left the ship but the skies cleared to some extent as we approached our final stop at the Pagoda. It wasn't perfectly clear but the few clouds and the dark temples and stupas as far as the eye could see made for a



Several of us braved at least one level and perhaps a dozen made it all the way to the top. It was hard work, a little dangerous (although there was a handrail) but worth it for the view from the top. Coming down was perhaps more hair-raising than the ascent as the steps had a land of perhaps six inches and a height of almost two feet in places. Despite this and the age of our group, everyone made it safely back to the bus and back on board the Viking Mandalay for clean-up, cocktail hour and dinner.

The entertainment tonight was a traditional puppet show which was not particularly good but gave passengers a chance to catch an extra hour's sleep.

### Friday October 17

As we ate breakfast this morning we sailed for a little over an hour to the opposite bank of the river and docked again and at 9am walked into the small village (Tan-Kyi-Taung) for a traditional elephant dance show. There were no elephants involved, however, unless you count the very colorful fabric one into which two men climbed and made the elephant dance and perform other tricks. It was interesting in that two men could maneuver the large structure in some fairly complex moves with one man filling a pair of legs. When the elephant stood on two legs, one man was essentially being held upside down by the other. Doing this in temperatures of almost 100F was enough to exhaust anyone but they emerged smiling and apparently not as warm as most of the audience.



Back on board we saw a demonstration of rattan weaving and of course a number of items were available for purchase.

Before lunchtime we were sailing again and did so until about 3:30 when we docked in time for our 4pm shore excursion.



*Life along  
the river*





This was to the village of Saley (perhaps town would be a better description based on what we have seen so far) in which about 1000 people live. It is also home to several monasteries, temples and stupas, each beautifully decorated and painted and in good condition. How a group so small could afford to build and maintain such a range of buildings is difficult to imagine and it must be yet another example of the generosity of the Myanmar culture in this largely Buddhist country.



**Saley**



Saley is also home to a number of colonial homes and buildings and, for the first time since Mandalay, we saw architecture that would have been the image that I had of Burma before coming here.

We visited one of these homes and, although significantly more Western than the bamboo homes prevalent in



the countryside, it was still rather basic. This may have had something to do with the fact that it was a large house but the family left to take care of it is small so many rooms were essentially bare. Again, this may be a reflection of recent military government rulings or simply the end of the colonial era and its influence.



Dinner tonight was followed by a movie ("The Lady"; the story of Aung San Suu Kyi) but many, including us, felt we wouldn't stay awake for two hours in a dimly lit room so we retired to the sundeck for drinks. It was an interesting place to be for a while as we had a tremendous lightning storm with very heavy rain; we really felt that we were in the monsoon season!

### Saturday October 18

The ship set sail from Saley before breakfast but was docked again in **Pha kha Nge** village by 9am. We had an hour to walk through the village and meet several of the local people. It was interesting to see village life (especially on a Saturday when most people weren't working) without the backdrop of stupas and temples. Not that these didn't exist here (we saw dozens as we sailed away from the village) but they were not included in the tour.



Instead we met the village pharmacist, the doctor, a school teacher and a mid-wife as well as three 80 year old sisters who came out of their home to greet us. Our guide said what we had already observed – Burmese people look either very young or very old; there appear to be no 40 to 60 year olds. They are there of course, but rapidly change from youthful to elderly so there appears to be no middle age.

Back on board we had a talk by one of the program directors on Myanmar Today, essentially covering the period of British rule (mid-1800s to 1943) and the subsequent Japanese occupation – which led to Post-War Independence. The period since then has seen various shades of democracy and, more recently, military rule. The latter allegedly ended five years ago but, as we were told, it was little more than a change of clothes from uniform to civilian and now the country is controlled by a few very rich ex-military who own virtually all businesses in the country.



Interestingly, life in the small villages seems to be oblivious to the government and its influence and each village would appear to have its own leadership. Obviously that is not true in the larger cities.

In addition to the corruption, there are minor civil wars in various parts of the country between factions opposed to each other as well as the federal government and there are some cross-border skirmishes with neighboring countries. All in all, things appear to be in a rather undisciplined state which will probably take a long time to change to anything we would recognize in the West. Despite that, the people seem very happy and, as the country opens up more to visitors and tourism, perhaps things will improve. Even today, electronic technology (cell phones, television, the internet) is ubiquitous so influences from other parts of the world are surely being felt.

We sailed for several hours in the afternoon and arrived in the city (400,000 people) of Magway in time for a late afternoon shore excursion. This was a tour of the city by trishaw (a bicycle with side car). The trishaw seems to be designed for two passengers but for us it was one to a bike; presumably our size and weight were enough for the (very fit) local who had to pedal.



*Our Ship docked again*



We stopped first at a statue to a national hero who was the father of "The Lady" but who was assassinated in 1944 before seeing his country gain independence. Apparently each city has at least one statue to this revered man. We also had a brief demonstration of rattan ball kickball by six of our trishaw drivers.

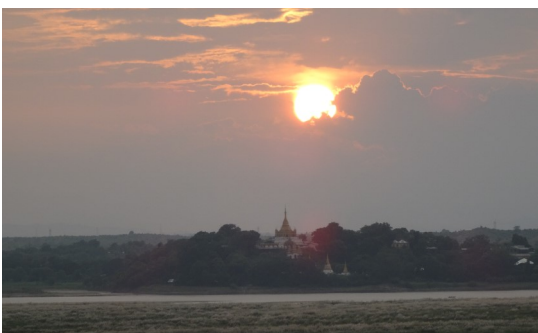


Then it was back on the bike to visit the Mya-tha-lone Pagoda. Unfortunately the pagoda itself was having its gold leaf re-applied so was currently covered but the view over the river from the top terrace was worth the 100+ step walk up. This walk was different from most in that it was a few steps, followed by a gradually climbing landing, and then a few more steps. Hence the climb was long but not too arduous and was mostly under cover – and lined with shops or stalls selling almost anything you could





think of. Mostly this was for the locals to buy offerings but there were several items that would appeal to the tourist.





Back on board we had dinner and then listened to a 45 minute talk by an author (one of the passengers) on his historical novel about Burma in World War II. I have no idea how good the book is – but it was generally agreed that his talk would do nothing to enhance sales. We retired to the sundeck.

### Sunday October 19

After breakfast five monks came to the ship to bless it and its passengers and to go through a Buddhist service. It was interesting to watch but would have had more meaning if we had been given a better introduction to what the chanting and prayers were about. The overall sense, however, was that there were readings, a “sermon”, prayers and blessings – not at all dissimilar to a Christian service. The major difference would be in the offering; the monks were given robes, food for the day and money as part of the service, once again underscoring the reverence given to these men as well as the generosity of the people.



***Washing and bathing for the locals—while we went to the market!***

Mid-morning we were each given \$1 in local currency and an assignment to purchase a given item in a local market – from vegetables to (in our case) shampoo. It was an exercise that we would not have chosen, but it turned out to be interesting; if not for making the purchase, certainly in getting the flavor of a real local market.

In the afternoon we sailed again for a few hours to dock at Minhla for a visit to a fort built to protect Royal Burma from British Burma. The architects and engineers were Italian. This was at a time (1860) when Lower Burma was ruled by the British but Upper Burma was still under the control of the Burmese Crown. The whole country did not come under British rule until 1880.





The fort is a substantial brick construction on two levels and had, on the ground floor, a total of 21 rooms for the 500 garrisoned there. The cannon have been removed (we saw one outside the Royal Palace in Mandalay) but otherwise the fort must look pretty much as it did 150 years ago.

We then walked around part of the town which is relatively large by the standards we have seen and has several paved roads and a large number of brick buildings. Surprisingly, many of these were built in the past twenty years, although they had the appearance of colonial style.



Tonight repeat customers of Viking (the Explorer Society) were invited to a reception before dinner to mingle with the staff. It seems that virtually everyone on board was a repeat.

### Monday October 20

Today was one spent mostly on the ship except for a 1 ½ hour shore excursion to the village of Thayetmyo. This had been a frontier post town in the early years before all of Burma was under British rule so we were now in the Lower Burma of old. The fort is no longer here and there is no real evidence of its former importance.

Our primary reason for the stop was to visit a middle school with an enrollment of 300 children. As we approached the school the kids (all in green and white uniforms except for about a dozen in traditional Burmese dress) formed two long lines between which we passed. As we walked into the main hall of the school the children bowed and said – in excellent English – “Hello; welcome to our school; we are glad you are here”, a chant that they repeated in unison until everyone was seated.



We were then given a performance by about twenty of the children; two presumably traditional dances and one rather Western-style mime of a boy trying to court a young lady – and eventually succeeding! The tradition-



al dance, with the girls in long dresses with “tails” was very good – better than a similar performance that we had seen earlier on the trip by “professionals”.



It is amazing to see how well educated the children are and how clean and well-dressed they are. In a country where there are few paved roads and mud and/or dust is underfoot at all times, and where bathing in the river is commonplace, it is humbling to see just how well they present themselves. Viking has recently started helping this school via donations from passengers and, unlike other similar visits from Viking boats, we were pleased to put something in the box as it seems that the children really deserve better conditions and equipment and are appreciative for it.



### ***The winners of the Longyi Competition***



The rest of our day was spent on board where we had two more lectures and, although we have one more night after this on the ship, we were treated to a farewell cocktail hour and dinner at which we were encouraged to wear our longyis. The crew entertained us; we had Burmese dancing lessons and a “competition”. Overall a fun evening.



**Tuesday October 21**

This morning we had our final shore excursion in the town of Pyay. We visited the Shwe San Daw pagoda which was probably the most spectacular we have seen. There are 160 steps to the terrace (or an elevator is available) and the pagoda and its surrounding buildings are a mass of gold. Once again, we were amazed at the obvious expense of these places of worship, especially in surroundings that are far less opulent.



*Quite a climb*

*But well worth it!*





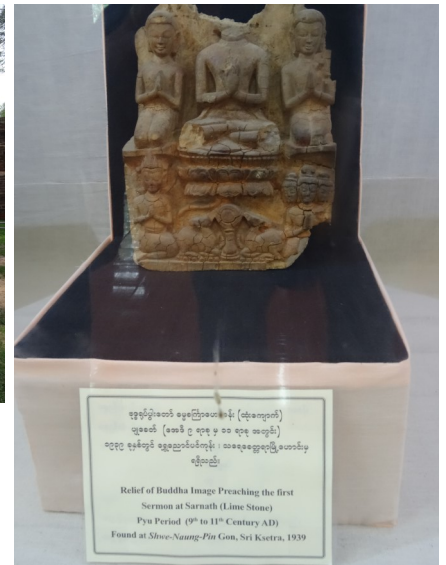
We then drove to an archeological site recently designated a UNESCO Heritage Site (Srikrettara). Here was a brick pagoda from the 5<sup>th</sup> century (Payagyi Pagoda), indicating a good deal of engineering skills in the country at that time. The actual “dig” site is unearthing a huge complex with surrounding brick walls – sometimes as many as three walls between the compound and the outside world. This had been a walled palace for a very rich king between the first and eighth centuries and the associated museum contained many artifacts from the period. Again these indicated a good deal of sophistication in terms of artisan and engineering skills with materials from gold and silver to stone and iron. The museum had good signage and was a place where more time than we had (30 minutes) would have been profitable.



*Sign on lower level of steps*



**UNESCO Heritage Site (Srikrettara)**



Then it was back to the ship for the final time. Our afternoon was spent doing some preliminary packing (we drive to Yangon tomorrow), settling the bill and relaxing. As it turned out this was a good way to spend the final afternoon as there was a sudden rainstorm around 3pm – something that we hadn't experienced on any of our shore trips since arriving in Mandalay.

### Wednesday October 22

Today was spent almost exclusively on a bus! The drive from Pyay to Yangon was only 190 miles but took the best part of eight hours. The “Highway” (one of the major arteries in the country was a two lane road (barely wide enough for two buses to pass without inching on to the dusty berm) and was an almost continuous stream of traffic even away from the towns and villages. In those more residential areas it was even more chaotic with buses (lots), trucks, motor bikes, bicycles, tuk tuks (and variants), oxen, cows, goats and people!





## “On the Road to Mandalay”. Various forms of transport in Myanmar

We made a total of three toilet stops and were given a rather large box lunch after the second one. The third stop was right across the street from a Commonwealth War Graves cemetery. Most took a somewhat hair-raising walk across to visit. It was very similar to the one Molly and I had visited in Normandy where we found her father's name on a stone pillar (designed for those whose bodies were not found or identified). So much so that for a few minutes we just stood there and cried together and it was a somber ride for a while once we got going again.

We arrived in Yangon and fought the rush hour traffic to arrive at the Shangri-La hotel around 4:30pm. Just the relatively short drive through city streets showed us how much more Western was this city when compared with the rural areas we had already seen and even with the larger towns of Bagan and Mandalay. Skyscrapers (not generally more than about 20 floors), brick and stone built houses and apartment blocks and modern shops – very much like other large Asian cities. And the difference in dress was quite startling; yes, the longyi was still in use but alongside mini-skirts, jeans, shorts and other Western clothes. Presumably this is a taste of the future here; inevitable, it seems, but desirable????



Tonight we ate in the hotel and enjoyed a buffet of Indian, Chinese, Thai and Myanmar cuisine and finished with our usual nightcap with Jay and Gord.

### Thursday October 23



We had no formal program this morning so we had a leisurely breakfast and then went a couple of blocks to a local market. It was full of souvenir stalls, many jewelry and precious stone outlets, paintings and wood carvings of every description. All were lovely to look at, tempting to buy – but we were very conservative as we have many examples of similar works at home already.

We had a coffee at a local street café and then returned to the hotel until our excursion at 3pm. This took us first to the center of town (very close to the hotel) where we saw the old city hall, a very nice square with fountains and a very nice old colonial red brick building. There was also a Baptist Church, a mosque and (of



course) a Buddhist Temple within the same area.



## *Central Yangon*

Then we drove to a very pleasant park in which there was a large lake and a replica of a royal barge. This is now a restaurant but it is ornately decorated and presumably a faithful copy in all respects.



The main attraction today, however, was the largest pagoda (Schwedagon) in Myanmar, perhaps even in the world. An elevator took us to the terrace (itself perhaps 150 feet above street level) and the pagoda rose a further 362 feet from there. It is completely gold in color with parts done in gold paint, some covered in gold leaf

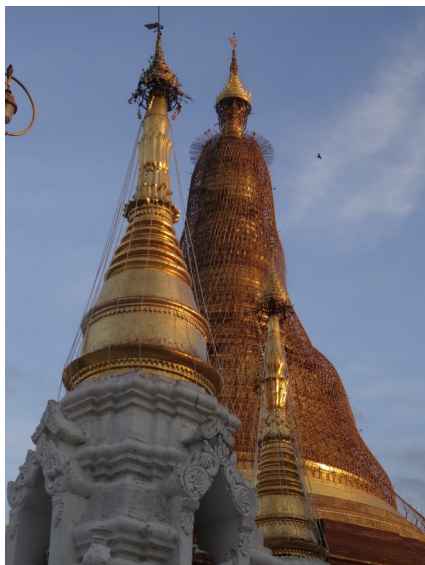


and even some parts which are claimed to be solid gold. We were told there were over 40 tons of gold on the building. It is also believed that there has been a pagoda on this site for 2500 years (making it the oldest in the world) and inside is a cutting from the hair of Buddha. The top spire contains many jewels including a huge ruby



It is impossible for me to describe the other features on the terrace itself. There are several Buddha images, dozens of shrines of all sizes and small shrines representing the days of the week. Buddhists are big on astrology and the day of one's birth is important to all kinds of union – from business to marriage. Actually there are eight days because Wednesday is represented by two elephants – one with tusks being the morning, the other (without) being the afternoon.





***"Our"  
Corners***







The overall impression on this terrace with its huge central pagoda is that it is a jewel of white (marble) and gold. There are other colors of course, but these two predominate and give the sense of opulence and beauty that is overwhelming. Many in our group mentioned that, had we taken the tour in the other direction, with Yangon and this pagoda being on the first day in Myanmar, everything following would have been a let down. I am not convinced that the rest of the country that we saw could ever be a disappointment no matter the sequence, but this was certainly a major highlight of our visit.

The day ended with a group cocktail hour followed by dinner and our final night in Yangon and Myanmar.

*Yangon, formally Rangoon (literally: "End of Strife") is a former capital of Burma and the capital of Yangon Region. Yangon, with a population of over five millions, is the country's largest city and the most important commercial center, although the military government officially relocated the capital to Naypyidaw in 2006.*

*Although Yangon's infrastructure is undeveloped compared to those of other major cities in Southeast Asia, it has the largest number of colonial buildings in the region today. While many high-rise residential and commercial buildings have been constructed or renovated throughout downtown and Greater Yangon in the past two decades, most satellite towns that ring the city continue to be deeply impoverished.*

*Yangon was founded as Dagon in the early 11th century by the Mon, who dominated Lower Burma at that time. Dagon was a small fishing village centered about the Shwedagon Pagoda.*

*The British captured Yangon during the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824–26), but returned it to Burmese administration after the war. The city was destroyed by a fire in 1841.*

*The British seized Yangon and all of Lower Burma in the Second Anglo-Burmese War of 1852, and subsequently transformed Yangon into the commercial and political hub of British Burma. Yangon became the capital of all British Burma after the British had captured Upper Burma in the Third Anglo-Burmese War of 1885. By the 1890s Yangon's increasing population and commerce gave birth to prosperous residential suburbs and the British also established hospitals and colleges. Colonial Yangon, with its spacious parks and lakes and mix of modern buildings and traditional wooden architecture, was known as "the garden city of the East". By the early 20th century, Yangon had public services and infrastructure on par with London.*

*Yangon became the capital of the Union of Burma in 1948 when the country regained independence from the British Empire.*





# *Impressions of Myanmar*



## *Impressions of Myanmar*

*The following are, in no particular order, unedited notes on observations made during the visit*

The Burmese are a very friendly and generous people.

Poor (by Western standards) living conditions (bamboo huts, mainly in villages), but this appears to be willingly accepted.

Very hot and humid. Our previous calibration points of Singapore and Cambodia seem mild by comparison. Heat indices over 100F every day. Only “cool” time outside was at night or when ship was moving

Temples, pagodas and stupas are magnificent and generally covered with gold leaf.

Bagan a UNESCO World heritage Site (but currently not supported by UNESCO) has 2000+ pagodas and is a fantastic, unbelievable site

Monks (850,000) from a total population of 60 million. Many for life, but all boys “encouraged” to be novitiate for at least a week or several months. Monks are fed and given money every day by the locals and eat only twice a day – both meals before noon.

The generosity of the people is typified by giving to monks and the opulence of the places of worship even from their very poor homes. But “they have all the need”. All appear well fed, have good teeth and well-dressed. This despite no running water and bathing/washing in a dirty-looking river.

Cell phones becoming prevalent even in rural areas. TVs in many villages (maybe not every house but in bars, etc). Little “mains” electricity but lots of solar panels to provide a little power.



Buddhism is 85% of population and seems to be practiced faithfully. Few set services but visits to temples and pagodas are frequent and especially on a person's birth day and other celebrations.

Young people are extremely beautiful but they age quickly after about 40. Life expectancy is about 65 years.

Schooling is emphasized but not free and not obligatory. Private schools (some built by the government) and many monasteries provide what appears to be a very solid education. We met girls in a small village who could speak some words in four languages.

The country's history goes back to about first century (no good records before that) but the civilization was as advanced as European and Middle East it would seem.

Burma had several kingdoms before about the 16<sup>th</sup> century after which there was about 300 years of one dynasty before the British came.

Driving is on the right (now) in Myanmar but most of the vehicles are right hand drive. We were told that this is because most of the vehicles are imported as second hand from Japan. This made it essential for a bus driver to have an assistant who could see the oncoming traffic a little better and advise the driver on good opportunities to pass.

Recent (post-Independence) history troubled – socialist, communist, military. Appears to be changing to a democracy but still run by a few (ex-military) cronies. Villages along the river seem almost immune from the federal government and retain a local hierarchy and leadership.

Farming still the country's mainstay and they are a big exporter of rice. Used to be biggest in the world but military government caused them to slip.

British influence is nowhere near as prevalent as in many other ex-colonies. However, English is taught and the younger generation speaks it well.



### Friday October 24

Today we were driven to the airport and said farewell to our tour guide before our 10:30 flight back to Bangkok. It was only just over an hour but we were given a substantial lunch on board.

In Bangkok we were taken back to the Shangri-La hotel where we had a leisurely afternoon. Jay, Gord, Molly and I went by taxi (almost an hour to cover about 2Km in the rush hour traffic) to the Millennium Hilton (where we had spent our first night in Bangkok two weeks ago) because Jay and Gord wanted to show us the view from the top floor bar. It was well worth the effort as we had fantastic views over the city at night with its colorful buildings and even more colorfully illuminated boats on the river.

We then had dinner in the restaurant there on the third floor with yet another good view of the traffic on the river before taking a water taxi back to our hotel.

### Saturday October 25

Our tour was now over and many of the group had already left for home before we got down to a late breakfast. There were some, such as us, who were going on to other Asian destinations but most were headed back to the US or the UK.

We spent a lazy morning in our room and packed up once again for the afternoon flight to Singapore, where we were to stay for five more days before going home. We checked out about 11:30 and the taxi ride to the airport took less than 30 minutes (no rush hour traffic) so we had about 2 hours in the Singapore Airlines lounge before our 3:30 departure.

The flight from Bangkok was a little bouncy for a while and we seemed to go further east than necessary (presumably to miss the worst of the weather) but we had a good meal on board and arrived in Singapore just a little late at 7pm.

We were through Immigration and Customs relatively quickly and then got a taxi to the Marriott hotel on Orchard Road, where we have stayed several times on previous visits. We had eaten on the plane so we had a snack in the lounge and then an early night.

### Sunday October 26



We had breakfast in the hotel and then took the subway to the river-side around Raffles Place and Clarke Quay. This is the area where Raffles landed and founded the city and is on the edge of the colonial district, with its fine architecture. It was interesting to see that there is yet more building taking place and it took us a while to get our bearings, despite the fact that it had been only 1 ½ years since our last visit.







This evening we went back to the same area for dinner at an Italian restaurant right on the edge of the water – where a cooling breeze made it comfortable.

### Monday October 27



We spent just over two hours in Chinatown this morning, part of it in a torrential downpour. We were able to dodge most of the rain by visiting many of the tiny shops filled with enticing souvenirs and finished our stroll with a late morning coffee.

Tonight we ate at Mezza9 in the Hyatt hotel just a short walk from the Marriott. It was an excellent three course meal with equally impressive service in very pleasant surroundings.

### Tuesday October 28

Today we took the subway to Little India and walked the length of the main street there. We saw a couple of Hindu temples, one of which we went in and viewed the magnificent decorations. Lots of people were inside as this is festival time for Hindus.



We also visited Mustafa's department store, an institution in Singapore, which seemed to be bigger than ever. It seems true that if Mustafa doesn't have what you





want that item must not be made because there are five floors in two huge buildings and each is crammed with goods of every description.

We walked from there to a local Starbucks and then to the Muslim Quarter to view the Sultan Mosque. It then started to rain a little so we made our way to the nearest subway station and back to the hotel – by which time the usual early afternoon storm was in full swing.

Tonight we dined at the very elegant Jade Garden Chinese restaurant just a little way down Orchard Road from the hotel. The service was impeccable and the four dishes we shared were excellent. Definitely this one is on the list for our next visit.



### Wednesday October 29



*Marina  
Bay Casino  
and the  
Singapore  
Flyer*

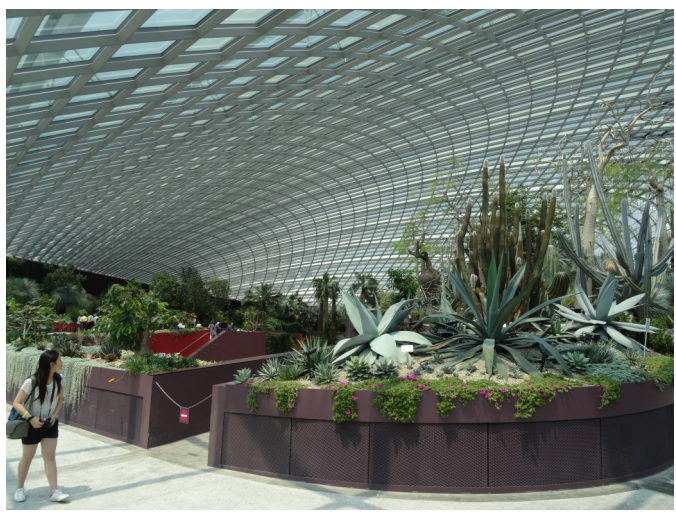


For our final sightseeing day in Singapore we went to Marina Bay and visited the new Garden at the Bay complex. This is a huge plot of reclaimed land (just filled in on our first visit in 2000) on which a large garden area has been laid out in park-like fashion. The outdoor area is very nicely presented with broad walkways and beautiful gardens (Chinese, Indian, etc), although walking in the full heat of the day is not recommended!



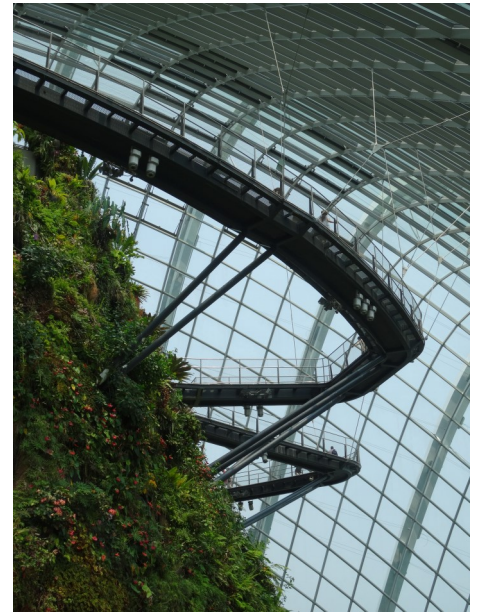
However, the highlight of the new area is a two glass-domed complex under which are plants, trees and other flora from many different areas of the globe, all presented in very natural surroundings. And it is completely air-conditioned throughout! It is similar in concept to the Eden Project in England but done in a manner that seems to fit this fantastic city.





***Inside the Domes of the Marina  
Bay Gardens***





We spent almost three hours in the area before getting the subway back to the hotel to prepare for dinner (Mezza 9 again) and an early start for home tomorrow. It was a beautiful way to end a marvelous trip.

### Thursday October 30

Today was a very long day of travel. We were up at 4am Singapore time and flew to Tokyo (6 ½ hours), on to Minneapolis (10 ½ hours) and finally (after a one hour delay) to Cincinnati (2 hours). Suffice it to say that it was a 28 hour day and we arrived home about 8pm Cincinnati time.

We were tired (but not sleepy) and it took us about a week to get “turned around”, but it was worth it to see yet another new part of the world and to get a taste for its development and culture.



