

Day 2 Bagan Jan 7

The day began very early as we had to catch a plane to Bagan, our next destination. We were given breakfast boxes with fruit, a sandwich and juice, which we ate in the car. The airport system here is like none I have ever seen. First, as you would imagine, the airports outside Yagon are all rather small. Check-in areas are really just a desk. Our IDs or passports were never checked, maybe because Toe was with us and she arranged everything. Or maybe they just don't check. Once checked in, everyone gets a sticker to wear and that identifies you as belonging on that plane. We also had boarding passes, but it was open seating. And the planes were all propeller planes. You have to be at the airport 2 hours before the flight time mostly because the planes often leave early. The timetable is just a suggestion.



We boarded the plane while it was still dark which meant we got to watch the sun rise. It was quite beautiful. I should mention here that sunrise and sunset are a big deal in Myanmar, mostly because each is so beautiful. As we went from place to place, we were always taken to places to watch the sun rise or set, or both. More on that later.

As we flew over Bagan we could begin to see some of the many temples. That is the appeal of Bagan as its landscape is dotted with thousands of temples and stupas (remember the general term is pagodas), dating back hundreds of years. And as we landed we could see the hot air balloons in the air. This is a popular sport in Bagan, ballooning over the pagodas. As we get to do tomorrow.

Bagan is an ancient city located in the Mandalay region of Myanmar (there is also a city Mandalay which we will visit next). Bagan is known for its miles and miles of temples. From the 11th to 13th centuries, when Bagan was the capital of the Kingdom of Pagan (the first kingdom to unify the regions that later became Myanmar), the rulers constructed over 10,000 huge stupas, monasteries and temples, about 2200 of which are still standing today on the banks of the Irrawaddy River. The rest were destroyed by a large earthquake in 1975. But in 1990 the government decided to restore many of the pagodas. The local residents were relocated from "Old Bagan", several miles away to "New Bagan" and the restoration began. Unfortunately, because of this restoration, Bagan cannot be a World Heritage site.

We landed, climbed down the narrow steps of the plane and walked into the terminal which was essentially two rooms. The luggage was rolled in almost one by one, that is, each porter grabbed two suitcases and rolled them in for the owners to take.



We were picked up by our Bagan driver and off we went to our first Burmese market, the Nyaung Oo Market. This one seemed very rural, and indeed it was. The markets are not every day, so we were lucky (over and over again) to be in the right place on the right day. In fact, the market comes around once every 5 days. People travel far from their villages where they grow their vegetables so the markets don't always start very early as they often do in other places. But it was full of people, full of goods, full of people buying and selling and cooking and eating. The one word to describe these markets is colorful. The fruit and veggies are colorful. The flowers were colorful. The women's dresses and headdresses were colorful. The ambience was colorful.

Rather than hiding from the camera, almost everyone there smiled or posed for a picture. The kids waved. And there were lots of kids. Children were everywhere. In the city families now have only 2-3 children, but in the villages they often have 5-6 children. At some point during the day, Toe was explaining about children. She said, "Children are our jewelry." I thought that was beautiful.



Toe has one child of her own and two “adopted” children. She met one of monks from Inle Lake (more on Inle Lake later) who told her about a young girl who wanted to go to school. The children living in the villages often don’t go beyond 5th grade. But this young girl was bright and full of potential. So Toe brought her to the city, to Yangon, to her home. This was about 15 years ago. She is still in touch with her mother and family in the village. At first she went back once a year to visit. But it became more difficult as she became from gentrified. And she wanted to see more of her country on her vacations than always going back to the village. Now she visits once every few years. And when they visit they stay near the village, not in the village. The young girl called Toe, Auntie and is very much a part of their family. Toe also “adopted” a young boy from a village there. What a wonderful woman Toe is.



There were lots of betel nuts, although not as many as in Papua New Guinea where they were sold on every corner. Here there were noticeable in some of the stands, along with the leaves to wrap them, often looking like a wreath. I saw quite a few people chewing and spitting, and people with red teeth. Those are the ones that always cover their mouths when you ask them to smile for a picture.



Instead of woven straw or bamboo baskets, as they once used, they were now weaving plastic into baskets. We saw them weaving which is how I know they were not factory made. Very colorful. Last longer. I was tempted to buy one to use at our markets. But somehow it made me sad that one more tradition has been lost.



One thing I had never seen before were huge pots of what looked like soup. I assumed it was soup. But it was cooking oil. You bring your own bottle and fill it up and that's how you buy your oil. And empty cans are used to measure and pour beans or rice into a bag. And balance scales were used to weigh produce.



There were lots of vendors selling bark for the thanaka (the paste they put on their faces). There were souvenirs like puppets, lots of wooden monks and handmade pillowcases. I took a picture with one of the women I had bargained with for pillowcases. We both won.



