

Day 2 Bagan Jan 7

After our market visit, we drove to the Shwezigon Pagoda (the first ever built in Bagan), took off our socks and shoes and left them in the car, and started walking in. This pagoda has a long corridor with columns, lined with vendors leading to the entrance. Some were selling their colorful wares. Some were eating. Some were shopping. It was full of noise and color and movement and excitement. And of course, since this is part of the temple, everyone was barefoot.



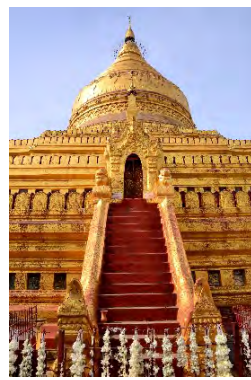
As we neared the front, we heard music and Toe explained that again we had lucked out as there was a festival going on, a dedication to the Nats. Nats are spirits and Buddhists here worship the nats. This involves placating the spirits as they can intercede in worldly affairs. This part of the temple is considered one of the most important part as it houses 37 pre-Buddhist nats figures.

These festivals are sponsored or donated by a family that wants to make a dedication to the nats. The festivals can last 3 days and cost \$500-\$3000. There was much singing and music and dancing. But the dancers were primarily men dressed as women, in full makeup and costume. I asked Toe about it and she explained that real dancers would not participate in this type of minor event, so the gay men come to practice their art.

Homosexuality is not accepted here, although mostly it is ignored. We watched the dancers, we listened to the musicians who were playing traditional Burmese instruments, and of course, for me, it was all about watching the families and the kids as they watched the festivities. Look at their faces and how entranced they were with the music and the dancing.



Shwezigon is also a gold stupa, although smaller than the one in Yangon. Nevertheless, it also was very beautiful. There are examples of all sort of art here, including wood sculptures and ceramic tile. They all tell stories with morals leading to the teaching of Buddha. Some were unusual as the woman's breasts were bare. This is very unusual here. Buddhist women are extremely modest. Even when bathing, they keep themselves covered. More on this later when we visit Inle Lake. There were families everywhere, picnicking, leaving offerings, praying together.





Most of the stupas were gold, but some of the very old ones were red brick. And some were painted white. There were novice monks there for their morning meals. And there were monks visiting and taking pictures with their phones. The Buddha's were draped in orange. The mosaics were brilliant. The wood carvings were old and you could see the faded colors. At one of the shrines, there were three woman praying. And at the other end was a mother with three young children. One, the youngest, was eating out of the offerings and asked me for money; clearly he was hungry. We were told many times that people who are very poor can always get food from the monastery, and it is true we did not see a lot of begging, but we sure did see some. I

worry that as more and more tourists come, and some will give out money, the locals will just be encouraged to keep asking.



One of my favorite sights was the little baby there with her (his?) family, face covered in bark and peeking out from behind the fence. And the father carrying his child. The gold is shiny. And beautiful. But for me it is always about the people.



At one spot, there was a hole in the floor with water in it. It looked just like a large crack, but surrounded by flowers in vases and a small fence. But when you angled your cell phone camera just right, you could see a reflection of the entire temple. You couldn't see it with your naked eye. Fantastic!



As we walked out back through the colonnade we passed two young girls with the parents, two young novice nuns. While to us they seem so young, and they are, for the family it is an honor and a way to feed their children. The father had them pose for us so we could take their picture. An honor.

Then it was clean our feet, put our shoes back on and back to the car.