

Day 3

Today was a very early day. Very early. We were picked up at about 5:30, in the dark, to go ballooning. We knew this was the way to really see the thousands of temples of Bagan. So we bundled up, layered our clothes and made our way to the lobby to await the pick-up. And before we knew it, a “buscar” rolled in to get us. What is a “buscar?” These are buses that were originally built as trucks for the Allied Forces to be used during WWII. There were originally 209,000 of them, built by Chevy and Ford and known as CMPs (Canadian, Multi-Purpose). After the war, since it was too expensive to ship them to Europe or stateside, they were all abandoned in Burma. But the locals made good use of them, converting them into buses which they called “buscar.” They were used routinely in both Bagan and Mandalay until recently when new laws on pollution forced them off the road. Each bus is a bit different but all have teak wood inside. Balloons over Bagan, the company we used, has been converting the engines and now uses 5 of the buscars to transport passengers to and from the balloon sites.

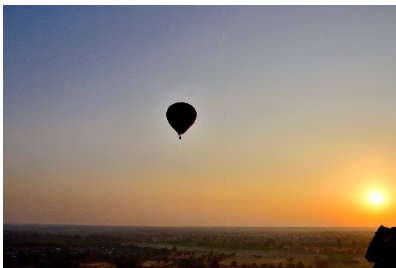
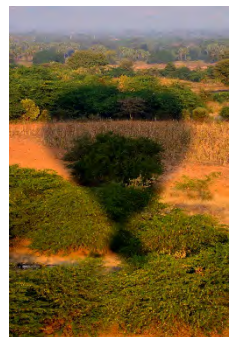


We were the first to be picked up so we got a nice long ride as we stopped at hotel after hotel to pick up the others. Quaint, but not particularly comfortable. It was still dark as we pulled up to the balloon site. We were escorted to a briefing spot where we were instructed on the do's and don'ts of ballooning, each given a “Balloons over Bagan” hat, and then separated into groups for each balloon. We were then free to wander a bit, have some coffee and a cookie, visit the rest room (which was a porta-potty) and watch the balloons being blown up. The dawn was upon us, but the sun had not risen yet. That was yet to come. The fires from the

balloons lit up the air around us. And as we watched, the balloons slowly filled up with hot air and drifted up, up, up into a standing position. We climbed into the baskets and it was time to take off.



The basket was crowded with 16 people, 4 in each section. The pilot was in the center and made it clear we were not to touch anything. Unlike our balloon ride in Cappadocia (Turkey), this pilot did not engage with us but just was on his phone communicating with “ground control.” It was unclear to me if the pilots here are less experienced, or perhaps conditions here are such that they need to be in touch with each other at all times. But that made it less fun. But we were not there for fun. We were there to see the beauty of Bagan from the sky. And that we did. We saw the thousands of temples. We saw them as a group, spread across the fields. We saw them individually as we drifted over the tops of the spires. We saw them in the distance, through the fog. Seeing them this way really put the sheer number of them into perspective. It reminded me of Antarctica where we saw penguins as far as the eye could see. Here we saw temples as far as the eye could see. And then the sun rose, and the colors of the temples changed from sand to rose and the gold roofs shimmered as they reflected the beams of the sun. It was magnificent.

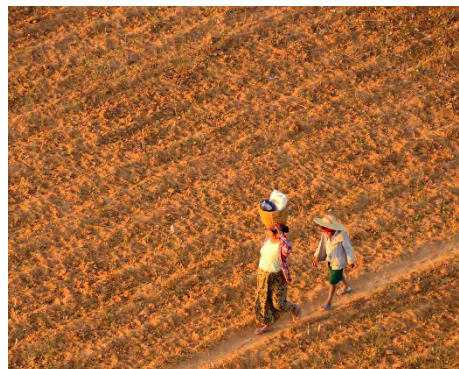




But that was just the view of the temples. There was more. There was the view of the balloons filling the sky. And there were loads of them. The number of companies and balloons is now restricted as even here, too much of a good thing is too much. But even more beautiful than the temples were the people, the farmlands, the farms, the villages, the oxen, the birds that we saw from the sky all in this beautiful glow from the sunrise.

Kids waved at us. But mostly the people were going about their daily

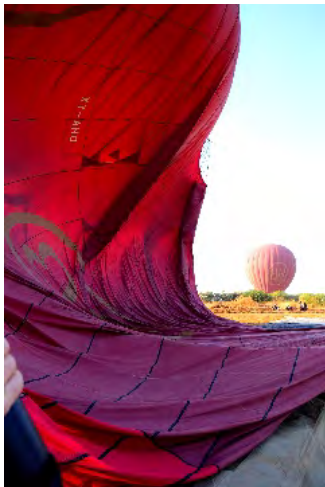
life of farming and we got to get a quick glimpse of what that looked like. The fire to cook and keep warm. The oxen eating their breakfast or already at work pulling the carts. The children running around. The mothers carrying their babies on their backs. The lone motorcycle roaring across the field. The shapes created by the fields on the farms. The shadows of the balloons. The thatched roofs. The blue roofs. The flocks of birds careening from one tree to the next





And then, after about 45 minutes, we were told to put our cameras and phones down to get ready for landing. And just after I put the camera on the floor, I saw a group of women, in their colorful dresses and hats, looking up from their farmlands and waving and boy was that ever the missed shot. But I was obeying the instructions. Cameras were down and we followed into a crouch position inside the basket. We could feel the tops of the trees right beneath us as we skimmed many a tree branch. We hit the ground and bounced quite a few times. Compared to the landing in Turkey, where the basket gently drifted down and landed on the bed of the truck, this was rough. Again, I can't tell if it is the pilot or the different wind conditions here, but this was not what I would call a smooth landing. But we were safe and no worse for wear. We climbed out (with a bit of help) and were immediately surrounded by vendors who has zoomed on motorcycles, across the fields, following the path of the balloons so they could

greet us with their t-shirts and postcards. We watched the balloons deflate, were given a glass of champagne and a certificate to celebrate and then it was back on the buscar to head back to the hotel for breakfast.



And here are some pictures taken by the balloon company one in the air and one after we landed. We were on the wrong side of the camera, so it is hard to see us.

