

Day 4a Mandalay

We flew early in the morning from Bagan to Mandalay, where the airport was new, modern and quite a bit larger. They are trying to make Mandalay an international airport but now only flights from Bangkok land here. The rest are domestic. Nevertheless, the luggage was still hauled by carts pulled and pushed by men. It was a 50 minute ride into town, and not only was the airport modern, the roads here were newer, better built and there were even toll roads. But two of the first sights that greeted us was two men on a motorcycle with shotguns on their backs and watermelons. Lots and lots of watermelons. And like everywhere in Asia, along with regular gas stations, much of the gas was still sold out of soda bottles along the side of the road.



While there are no motorbikes allowed in Yangon (as I explained there is a rumor that a high official had a motorbike accident and banned them), in Mandalay there were many, many bikes. One common sight is large arrangements of flowers being derived by bike which makes for very colorful street scenes.



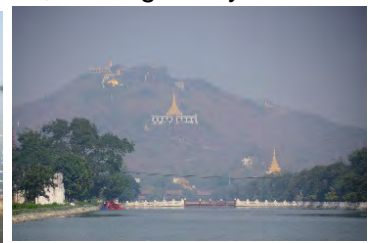
We passed through a part of town where marble statues were being carved. At first I thought the trees were covered in snow, which was weird enough, but then I realized it was marble dust. Everything was covered with dust. The air was full of dust. You could not breathe the air

and everyone wore a face mask. Luckily for us we were just driving through and never left the car. Not so lucky for people living here.



Mandalay, which sits on the Ayeyarwady River, was founded in 1859 by the second king, King Mindon, who was the most religious of his dynasty. He built many pagodas and monasteries in Mandalay, thus earning merits towards nirvana. It gets its name from Mandalay Hill, although the real name was actually Yadanabon meaning Mount of Gems. Mandalay is now known as a rich, traditional, spiritual and cultural city and was the last royal capital of Myanmar.

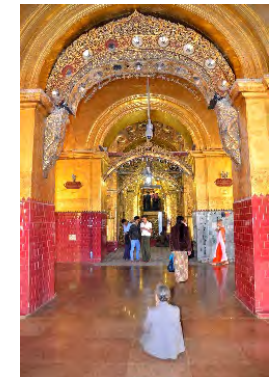
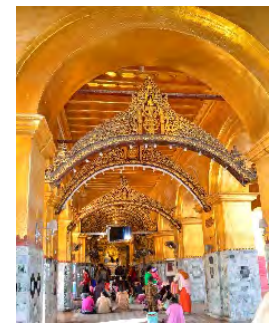
You can still see the old palace walls surrounded by a moat, but there is no more original palace, other than the tower. A replica of the palace was built in the 1990s. The original palace was captured in 1885 by the Burma Field Forces, during the third Anglo-Burmese war, and was turned into Fort Dufferin (after the viceroy of India) with troops living in the different monasteries and temples. These areas all became off limits to the locals, which meant that the Burmese were no longer allowed to visit their religious sites. They petitioned Queen Victoria. The good news was that she immediately ordered that the religious sites be returned to the people. The bad news was that all of the pagodas had been looted and all bells, gold, silver, diamonds, rubies etc were gone. And the bricks from the walls were used to build roads for the troops. The pleasures of war.... And now there is exercise equipment across the moat. And a great view of Mandalay Hill, although hazy.



Our first stop was the The Maha Myat Muni Pagoda. Inside this great pagoda is the Maha Myat Muni Buddha Image, also known as the Phaya Gyi, which is the most ancient and most revered Buddha image in Mandalay. People come from all over to pay homage to this image. The Buddha is in the seated position on top of a large alter. The Buddha itself is 13 feet high, weighs 6.5 tons and has a body covered in gold leaf. The crown is decorated with diamonds, rubies and sapphires. Thousands of devotees come each day to apply new gold leaf to the body, which gains them merit (in the afterlife and reincarnation). So much gold leaf (about 6 inches) has been applied that the image is now totally distorted and has lost all proportions. Only the head is not covered in gold leaf as the face is most revered. Every morning at 4:30am, a team of monks wash the face and brush the teeth. Needless to say, we did not get up to see this. Interestingly, this was the first place we saw signs saying “no ladies are allowed to enter.” While women can pray to this Buddha, only men can approach to apply the gold leaf. When I asked why women were not allowed, the answer was, “They may be unclean.” Very similar to Orthodox Judaism.



And the women’s section, so to speak, was so colorful as the women, primarily from the Pa-o tribe, wore their orange or blue headdresses (more on this later when we get to Kalaw), were holding flowers and were smiling and praying. And children were everywhere.



In fact, there were quite a few children here getting ready to be initiated to monkhood or the nunnery. They are all dressed up as if they are little princes and princesses, with extensive jewelry and crowns on their heads. The crowns and fancy accoutrements are sold in the markets leading up to the temples. I missed my opportunity to buy a Purim crown!

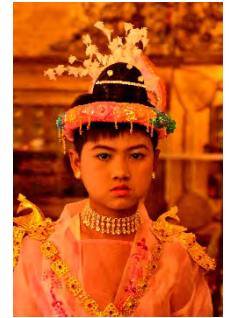


The children also have on a lot of make-up, including full eye make-up and lipstick. And this includes the boys. In fact, the boys are dressed like girls. Toe explained that they want to look their best for the photographs and “for their memory.” I found it very strange. I am not questioning their culture, just wondering why so many images of the Buddha are feminine (see my post from

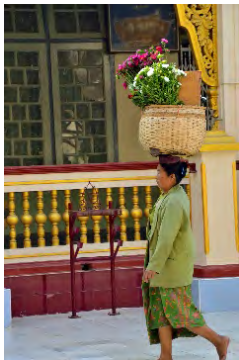
Yangon) and why little boys are dressed as girls. Isn’t looking like a dressed up boy just as good? There is something here I don’t understand and could



not be explained to me. I looked it up when I got home, but could find no explanation. Perhaps the problem is in my interpretation that make-up is for women only.



The pagoda itself is huge with many different rooms and buildings, each more beautiful than the last. These were not gold, but rather were covered in carvings and marble. There was one building with large bronze statues that were brought from Angkor Wat. It is believed if you rub the statue in an area that is giving you pain, your pain will cease. I rubbed the statue's knees and lower back. Time will tell if I feel better, although at this writing it has been several months...



In one building there was a very large Burmese spinning gong, known as the Kyeezee or Burma Bell. This bell is traditionally made of bronze, resembles a three cornered hat and is flat. It is played by holding the string on the top and hitting the gong on the corners which makes it spin and thus creates an unusual pulsing or vibrating sound. In many temples you see the gong being held on a long stick whose ends rest on the shoulders of two creatures, one half-man half-lion and the other half-man half bird. At this temple we saw a newly initiated monk with his family, proudly taking pictures in front of the gong.

