

Day 4c Mandalay

Then it was back in the car and up to Mandalay hill to the Pagoda at the top, Sutaungpyei (literally wish-fulfilling) Pagoda, to see the sunset. It seems seen sunrise and sunset it's already deal in Myanmar.



Mandalay Hill sits 755 feet above the city and is the natural watch-tower to watch sunrise or sunset and to see the panoramic view of the city, the old Royal Palace and Fortress, as well as the Ayeyarwady River and the distant Shan Hills. The entrance at the bottom is protected by two immense statues of Lions guarding the holy hill.

Everyone who visits Mandalay ends up at some point at Mandalay Hill and either climbs the 1729 steps to the top or takes the elevator (there is also an escalator which was not operating when we were there). While of course we still needed to take off our socks and shoes at the bottom, we did get to ride the elevator to the top. No need to climb stairs.

At the pagoda itself and along the way up there are stalls selling flowers, paper streamers, miniature pennants and umbrellas for the Buddha, and food. In one area we saw women cooking food and giving it to those who were hungry, including monks and families with small children. We saw what looked like a sister and brother, sitting on the stairs, eating their food. They were beautiful, with smiles and facial expressions that were priceless.

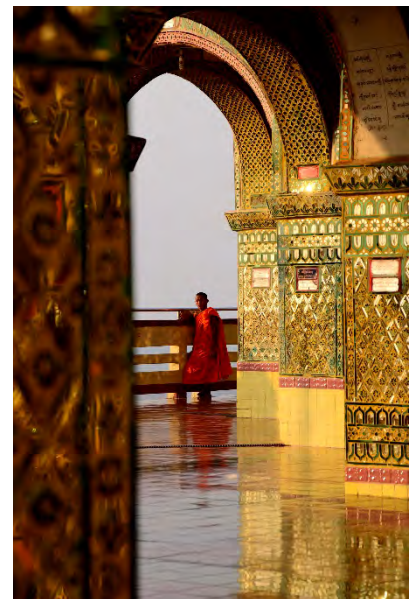




As we walked off the elevator in our bare feet, we had no idea what was awaiting us. The tall elevator tower led onto a bridge over the stairs with a view out onto the surrounding fields. We could see the Kuthodaw Pagoda (largest book) in the distance.

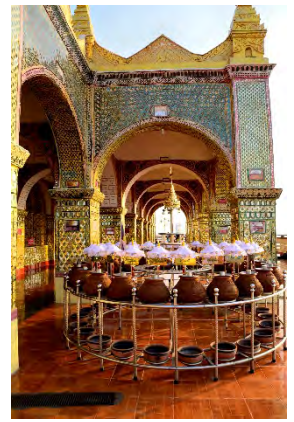


But Sutaungpyei is also known as the Glass Palace and the walls were covered in glass mosaic (built by two Italian architects!). It has an endless array of hallways and archways covered with Burmese script, shiny floors and inlaid mirrors on the columns. The walls literally sparkled as the rays of the sun reflected on the colored glass. And in between were the orange and red robes of the monks. It really was quite spectacular.





There were flowers everywhere being offered to Buddha. There was a whole room covered in beautiful rose offerings. And there were views of the entire city. Unfortunately it was quite hazy so the view did not amount to much.



While we waited for the sun to set, Andy and Phyllis each found a spot where they could sit and observe the people. Ben and I however, captured our spots at the railing, cameras in hand, ready to shoot the sunset. And standing right next to us was group of young monks.



The monks come every day to practice their English with the tourists. We spoke with three of them. Two were novices, age 14 and 16, and the third was a monk who was 22. The younger novices were not yet sure if they would become monks, although the older one had already lived in the monastery for five years.



The Monk, who also looked like a child although he said he was 22, had become a monk two years previously. He came from the Inle Lake area and had not seen his parents since arriving in Mandalay. When I asked how old he was, he asked me how old I was. I told him and then we laughed and I said I was old. I asked how many languages he spoke and he said four but when he named them, I think three were perhaps different Burmese dialects. He asked how many I spoke and I said two, English and Hebrew. He did not know what Hebrew was, so I explained that I was Jewish and Hebrew was the language of the Bible. I still don't think he got it, but a young man, also about 22 years old, standing next to us, said he was Jewish too. I asked where he was from and he said Lithuania. I explain how my parents are from the Shavel area, from Vilna and Radvilishkes, and he said his grandfather had been from Shavel as well. We had to travel to Myanmar to meet a landsman. He confirmed that they were only about 5000 Jews left in Lithuania today.

The young novice monks really are children. They talked about loving soccer and watching TV. All the things that young boys around the world do. But they were living the austere life of a monk. Each one was the only Monk and his family, so they were not felt following a family tradition. Rather they had each felt the calling. They asked us about our country, how many countries we had traveled to, how did we like Myanmar. Their English was very broken, and we had to use hand signals at times, but we managed to communicate and have a lovely conversation.

And then we all watched the sun set, found our way back through the mirrored halls to the elevator, rode down, found our shoes and went back to the hotel. Another day.

