

Jan 6 Yangon Day 1

Today we finally get to begin our visit to Myanmar, formally known as Burma. A few words about the country first.

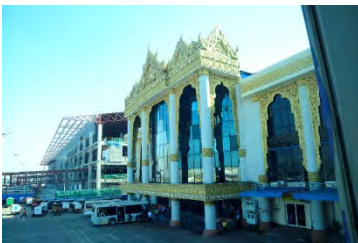
First of all, the name. The official English name was changed by the country's government from the "Union of Burma" to the "Union of Myanmar" in 1989, and still later to the "Republic of the Union of Myanmar." In the Burmese language, Myanmar is known as either Myanma, the written name, or Bama, the spoken name of the country. Both names come from the largest ethnic group in Burma, the Bamar people, also called Bama or Burmans in the spoken language and as Mranma or Myanma in the written language. But while the majority of the Burmese people are Burmans, but there are many minority groups here including the Muslim Rohingya, the Chin, the Naga, the Kachin, the Wa, the Shan, the PaO, the Kayah, the Karen, and the Mon. The government claims that there are 135 minority groups. So the name of the country has caused some of the strife here as other minority groups feel the name of the country is not inclusive. This reminds me of the controversy around Hatikva, Israel's national anthem, as some say since it talks about being Jewish, it is not inclusive to other groups of Israeli citizens.

There is another similarity between Myanmar and Israel, as our guide pointed out – both got their independence in 1948.

Myanmar is the largest of the mainland Southeast Asian states, about the size of Texas. Much to my surprise, it is the 40th largest country in the world. I always thought it was a small country. But it runs about 1,275 miles long from its northern border with Tibet to its southern border on the Bay of Bengal at the Thailand border. It is 582 miles wide from its eastern extreme on the Mekong River bordering Laos to the Bangladesh border on the west.

But despite being so large, the world knows so little about Myanmar, although this obviously has changed in the last 10 years. Rudyard Kipling once wrote: "This is Burma, and it will be quite unlike any land you know about."

Sorry for all the history, but I always think it is important to learn as much as we can about the places we visit.



We flew from Singapore to Yangon where we were picked up by Toe, our guide for the next 9 days. I don't recall ever having the same guide for an entire trip. She even flew with us from city to city, which made life very easy for us, especially since the airports are not easy to figure out, at least at first.

One of the first things I noticed about Toe was that she had a light colored paste on her face. I noticed that on many other men and women. I thought perhaps that was a custom of her ethnic group. But no. It is a Burmese custom called thanaka. They take special bark and rub it on a special stone, mix it with a little water and rub it on their face. This protects them from the sun as well as lightening their skin and making it soft. It also is supposed to help with acne and acts as an anti-fungal. Men and children also do this and they wear it all day long. Burmese women have been doing this for over 2000 years. Some just rub it on. Others make designs. We saw many with very perfect rectangles on their cheeks. We saw some in shapes and leaves or other designs.



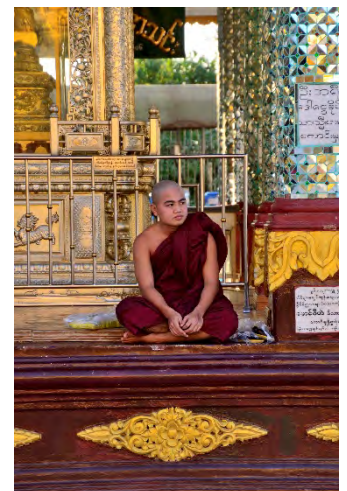




Yangon was the capital of Myanmar until 2006 when the capital was moved to Naypyidaw. It is the largest city and the most important commercial center of Myanmar. More than 5 million people live here. The name, Yangon, comes from the words 'Yan' and 'Kuon' which mean 'enemies' and 'run out.' The word 'Yangon' is also translated as 'End of Strife'.



On the way to the hotel we began to get a glimpse of Burmese life. Monks hold the highest place of honor, as this is primarily a Buddhist country. We saw a young monk being escorted across the street, being seated at an outdoor table, being served food and then the woman serving the food bowed down at his feet. Monks are offered food wherever they go. The type of Buddhism here is mostly the Theravada tradition and it practiced by about 89% of the population. Myanmar is considered the most religious Buddhist country. For those practicing this Buddhism, life is about "merit making." They follow and observe the Five Precepts and accumulation of good merit through charity and good deeds. This allows one to obtain a favorable rebirth. For now, just know that the monks here are in red robes as red is the color of the tree bark, not orange like in Thailand and Cambodia. Nuns are in pink. And they are everywhere. The monks get free food but need to come around to get it or it is donated to the monasteries. The nuns have to get donations of money for their food. I will write more about the monks and nuns later.







The traffic in Yangon was extremely bad. Toe told us that three years ago they could not import any new cars so there was no traffic. But then that changed and now the streets are overrun with cars. What surprised me was that at least in Yangon, and then later in Bagan, there were not a lot of motor bikes the way you see in China or Vietnam. That would be one solution to the problem. I asked Toe about that and she told us that motorbikes are outlawed in Yangon. Rumor has it that a government official was in a serious motorbike accident and since then they are not allowed.



Because of the heavy traffic, our driver started taking short cuts but driving through alleys and back streets. We passed some large homes, all with high stone walls and barbed wire. I asked Toe about the crime rate and if that explained all the security measures. She replied that they are Buddhists and don't believe in stealing, but they are also human. At another point she told me that the Burmese are patient people, but even they have limits.



We passed lots and lots of street food vendors with little plastic tables and chairs (the same as you see on the streets of Vietnam, Thailand and many Asian countries). We passed school children in their uniforms of white (for purity) and green (for being young). Even the teachers have the same uniforms. All the schools are government run and are free. They are mandatory from age 5, but in the outskirts and villages the children at age 10 need to help on the farms and often drop out. And at age 5 they begin learning English, Burmese, math, science and etiquette. I wish American

kids were taught etiquette! In the lake areas there is less education than in the cities, as one might expect. At 11<sup>th</sup> grade they need to pass special exams to be allowed to attend university. But the exams are very difficult and only about 30% pass. You are allowed to take them twice and that's it. The university is also free, assuming you can pass the exam and get good grades.



We saw that the majority of men and women wore traditional Burmese clothes, rather than jeans and t-shirts. The woman's are like a circular piece of cloth that they step into and then wrap around. It is called longyi. Generally it is 6.5 feet long and 2.5 feet wide, worn around the waist and falling to the feet. It is held in place by folding and tucking



the fabric, but never tying it. The Burmese women are very modest and keep their arms covered, knees covered and never wear tight clothing. The men have a similar sarong called paseo. And everyone wears flipflops. Maybe because they have to take their shoes off in temples and in homes. Maybe just because it is easy.

Back to our trip. We drove to our hotel, the Chatrium, where Phyllis and Ben were waiting for us. In order to enter the hotel, you have to go through a metal detector. Security was rather lax nevertheless. We quickly dropped off the luggage and headed back down to begin touring.



Our first stop was the Musmeah Yeshua synagogue. Burma, as it was then called, had a thriving Jewish community in the 1800's, primarily Jews from Iraq, with over 2500 Persian Jews. Then in 1962, when the Burmese army seized power, businesses were nationalized and foreigners were expelled, the Jews all left. But slowly a few decedents returned, including Moses Samuels who was the leader of the community (he passed away just this past May). So today there are only 19 Jews in the whole country. We met Kaznah, Moses Samuel's daughter, who told us that they rarely could even have a minyan, unless there were visitors or business men (yes men, this is an orthodox shul) stopping by on Shabbat. Since it was a Friday afternoon, I asked about services that evening. She said they would be lighting Shabbat candles, but no service as no minyan. And since they would count only one of us, we couldn't help.



The synagogue itself is a typical Sephardic shul, with the bima in the center and the balcony above for the woman. The ark had a red velvet curtain and contained two Torahs in silver cases. This was not a country that I expected to find a Jewish community in or a place with Jewish history. But I have learned that there is Jewish history everywhere.

The synagogue site is part of Yangon's City Development Heritage Buildings, so is protected. While in the heyday the Jews owns all the shops around the synagogue, today it is surrounded by an Indian paint shop and Muslim traders. In fact while we were there, we could hear the Muslim call for prayer.



After chatting a bit with Kaznah, taking our pictures, and leaving a donation, we were off to see more temples – but the rest would all be Buddhist.



As an aside, the majority of the population here is Buddhist. There are very few Muslims in Myanmar, representing only 2% of the population. The Chinese are 7% and the rest are Buddhists. There are 135 ethnic tribes with the Bamah Tribe being the largest.

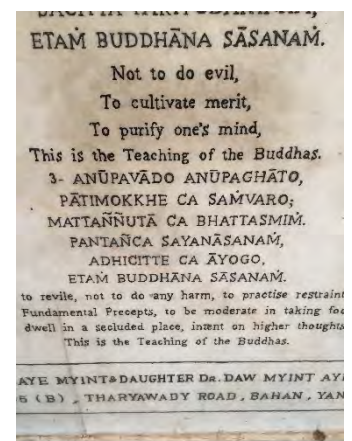
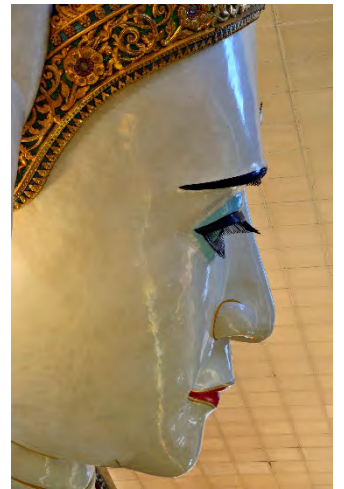




Yangon is home to the third largest reclining Buddha and that was our next destination, the Kyaukhtatgyi Pagoda. This particular reclining Buddha is 230 feet long. What is most interesting, I thought, is that this Buddha looks very feminine, like a transvestite. He is decorated with very expressive colors, white face, red lips, blue eye shadow, long eyelashes, a golden robe and red finger nails. Toe said he is not meant to look feminine, but he is



meant to look beautiful. The soles of his feet contain 108 segments in red and gold colors that show images representing the 108 auspicious characteristics of the Buddha. At the head of the Buddha there was a mountain of fruits and vegetables, offerings for Buddha. But they were beautifully arranged, not just place on a table or on the floor as we have previously seen in Buddhist temples.



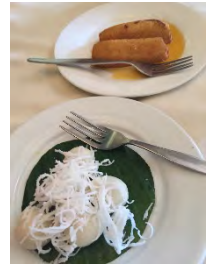
A word about temples in Myanmar. First all of the religious structures are called pagodas. A temple is a structure you can walk into and has at least one Buddha, but often 4, one facing each direction. Of course sometimes there are thousands of Buddha images as well. A stupa is a religious structure that you walk around, but not into. And at all pagodas, you must remove not only your shoes as in other Buddhist countries, but also your socks. We could not understand how walking barefoot was cleaner or more respectful than wearing socks, but we did as is the custom and removed our socks and shoes over and over as we visited temple after temple. At the end of each visit, our driver would hand us a sealed hand wipe to clean our feet before putting our socks and shoes back on.

From the reclining Buddha we went to Scotts Market, which is more of a market for gold and fabric than for food. But always fun to watch the people. Toe promised that this time was just for looking and we would come back to shop on our last day before heading home.





Then it was off to lunch at the House of Memories. Lunch was typical Burmese food. And Burmese beer. So what is Burmese food? Lots of spice. Lots of flavour. Lots of rice. One speciality is tea leaf salad, often served with a dash of oil and sesame seeds, fried garlic and roasted peanuts. We did not have any today but did get to taste it later in the trip and it was delicious. This is something that, Toe told us, they eat almost every day. One of the most common foods is fish and shrimp or chicken, with pork next and beef last. But there is a lot of Chinese, Thai and Indian influence. The traditional breakfast food is Mohinga, a rice noodle and fish soup. I tried it. For me one bite was enough.



And dessert is always fresh fruit, which they served to us after every lunch and dinner even though we did not order it. But this time we also had Moke Lone Yay Baw, a sweet coconut dessert. And fried bananas.

We continued onto our next site, the Shwedagon Pagoda, also known as the Great Dagon Pagoda or the Golden Pagoda. And it is called Golden for a reason. It is a gold leaf gilded 8-sided stupa which is 324 feet tall and surrounded by 64 smaller, also gold, stupas. It is the most revered and sacred Buddhist temple in Myanmar as it is believed to contain relics of the four previous Buddhas. Although the origins of the pagoda are unclear, the local legend states that the original structure was built 2500 years ago then renovated several times until finally being completed in the 15th century.

In addition to that, just the stupa alone of the pagoda is covered with 8,688 solid gold blocks. People all over the country, as well as monarchs in its history, have donated gold to the pagoda to maintain it. The top of the



stupa holds 5,448 diamonds and a combination of 2,317 sapphires, rubies and topaz. Immediately below the diamond bud is a flag-shaped vane. The very top—the diamond bud—is tipped with a 76 carat diamond. It is there to capture the sun's rays, which are particularly beautiful at sunrise and sunset.

Below the golden stupa are 7 more gold blocks, which are attached to 1,485 bells. Of those bells, 420 are made of pure silver, and 1,065 are made out of gold. It is rumored that even more riches lay hidden deep within, offerings made long ago to the relics of the Buddhas. This has never been proven, but it adds to the mystery and lore of this sacred site.

According to legend, two merchant brothers from the city of Balkh in what is currently Afghanistan, met the Lord Gautama Buddha during his lifetime and received eight of the Buddha's hairs. The brothers traveled to Burma and, with the help of the local King, found Singuttara Hill, where relics of other Buddhas preceding Gautama Buddha had been enshrined. When the king opened the golden casket in which the brothers had carried the hairs, incredible things happened.

As I mentioned, the stupa itself is made of bricks covered with gold plates. Only monks are allowed to access the higher levels. We saw lots of monks and nuns, but I was hoping to see one climb up as that would have been an amazing photo, the orange robes against the gold. But it was not to be.



There are 8 different entrances to the temple. You can walk up a long, long, long staircase of between 104-128 steps. But we took the elevator which took us from the bottom to the pagoda itself. As foreigners, we had to have tickets, which Toe bought. For locals it is free.





As we walked across the bridge into the pagoda, we looked and saw a group of men playing with a bamboo ball. They in a circle and kicked the ball into the air from one to the trying to keep it in the air. We saw this game a few times as regular sport in Myanmar. And the bamboo balls were everywhere, in souvenir shops and everywhere else.

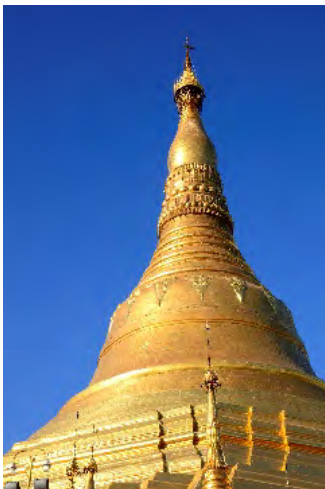


down stood other, it is a

We were told that it is customary to circumnavigate Buddhist stupas in a clockwise direction. And so we did. Each view seemed more beautiful than the one before.



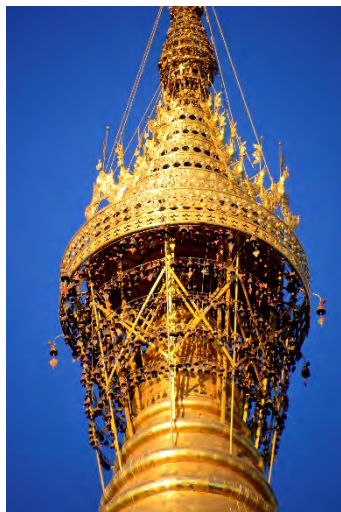
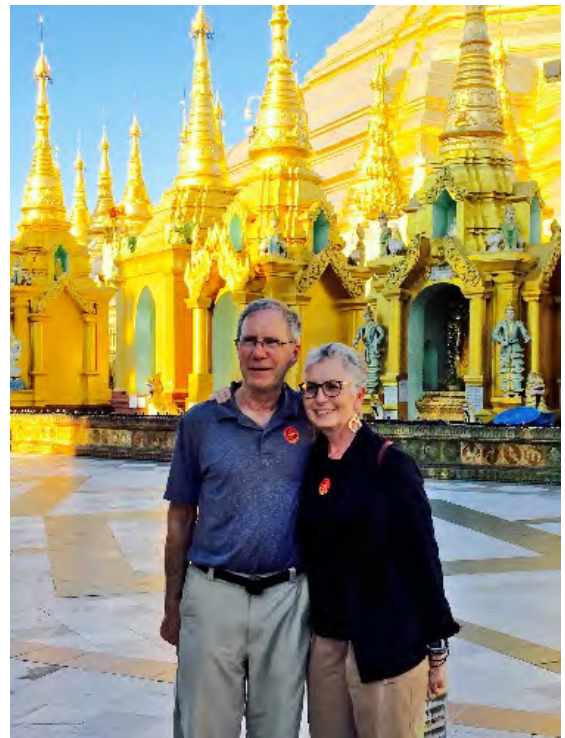
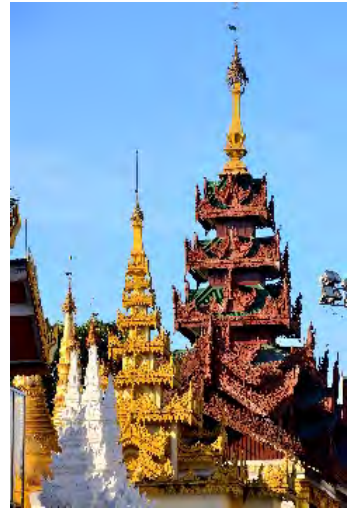
We learned that it is important for Burmese Buddhists to know on which day of the week they were born, as this determines their planetary position. At this pagoda, as in many others, there are eight planetary posts (eight instead of seven as Wednesday is split into Wednesday AM and Wednesday PM). Each post is marked by animals that represent the day and each has a Buddha image where people born on that day offer flowers and prayer flags and pour water on the image with a prayer and a wish. We watched as monks and lay Burmese bowed and prayed, showed respect to Buddha, left flowers, and food as offerings (which are then given to the poor), burnt incense and candles, and walked or sat around with their families.



The temple itself reminded us of the temple in Bangkok, but this one seemed less touristy, meaning there were fewer tourists here and more local Burmese going about their religious lives.











And then we cleaned our very dirty feet and put our socks and shoes back on and headed back to the hotel where we watched the sun set, first at the gate to the temple, and over the pagoda from our hotel window.

