

Mandalay day 5a  
Mandalay second day

The day started with breakfast at the Mandalay Hill Resort Hotel. They tried. They had crepes and French toast and waffles and eggs to order and all the usual Asian breakfast items. But everything was cold so it didn't quite make it. The hotel looks pretty on the outside with a lovely lobby. There's a huge peacock fountain outside. But the rooms are small and basic. The water in the shower doesn't drain. There are hardly any outlets unless you unplug the lamps. The rooms look worn and just not fresh. Clean but old. Not our favorite hotel.

We headed out to wait for our car and driver and were greeted with the sight of a large white car covered in flowers, a drone overhead filming, and a young man, in a tuxedo, with his friends. It was a wedding. The



tradition is that the groom comes with his friends to pick up the bride from the hotel. He goes to her door and pleads with her to come out. She refuses a few times and eventually relents. We waited for a while to see if the bride would come down. She didn't. I ran back upstairs to my room to pick something up, and lo and behold, the groom and his crowd were in my hallway filming his approach to



her door. I waited for a while, but the bride still did not emerge. Eventually I gave up as we had to start our day. So back downstairs I went and we all headed off. We will never know if the bride eventually agreed to come out of her room and get married.

That was a good omen to start the day and the rest of the day did not disappoint.



Toe had asked us why we were not going to the Mahagandayon Monastery, a school for monks. She assumed we had vetoed going, the same way we vetoed going to any factories (although we did relent for some). But in fact, we were never asked. So, although not originally on our itinerary, that was where we headed, because Toe told us we should not miss it.

There is not a lot of information written about this particular school, but all monks are required to attend a monastery school and this is one of the larger ones. Every morning, the monks line up with their bowls to get their rice and whatever other food had been donated that day. If there are no donations, they just get rice. And that is their only meal of the day. Donors spend around \$1000-\$2000 per day. Each person that donates collects merits towards nirvana. Today's donation turned out to be boxes and boxes of chips.



Often, as Toe told us, it is very crowded as lots of tourists come to watch. Today we once again lucked out as there were just a handful of us and no tour buses. We got there early in order to have time to walk around and observe life in the monastery school. The main walkway where the monks would walk towards the eating area, was lined with marble slabs carved with writings. I assumed it was Buddhist teachings, but no, it was the names of donors. Give money and get your name on the wall. Sounds familiar. Recognizing donors seems to be ubiquitous around the world.



As we walked around, we saw laundry hanging, lots of dogs, monks running this way and that in preparation.



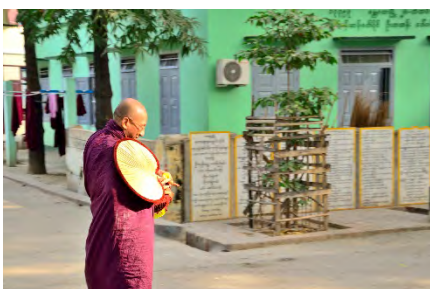
We walked through the cooking area (more than a kitchen) where huge – HUGE -pots of rice and vegetables were being prepared by volunteers (gaining merits) as well as the monks.



We passed empty dining rooms with tables neatly lined up, that soon would be bustling with food and boys.



And then the monks started appearing, started lining up, holding their bowls and carrying a towel over their arms.





All Burmese boys, when they reach the age of 7-12, become novice monks. This begins with a procession and ceremony in their village. It generally takes place in the summer during school vacation. It is considered a monk's most cherished and unforgettable moment in his life. This is the opportunity for the novice to be symbolically returned to the days of kings and imagine himself as a prince. Really the ceremony is a chance for the young boy to experience a few days of long luxury before he enters the life of a monk. Having said that, some boys only stay in the monastery for a day or two, or for many months. The ceremony can last for about five days and four people are assigned to take care of each novice the entire time. The novice does nothing for himself as everyone else caters to him. They carry him so he needs not walk, any food he asks for is given to him and he's treated with great respect. On the final day, the young boy stays home until noon before moving to the residence prepared just for him. There he waits until the official ceremony begins. Sometimes it is just one boy in the village, other times it might be a few boys. Often villagers from nearby will also come to watch. It begins with the parade which starts in the evening with the procession circling the pagoda associated with the monastery. The parents lead the parade followed by women carrying traditional lacquer baskets. Next comes a horse with no rider as they believe a nat (spirit) is riding the horse. This is followed by the boys over age 22 who are once again entering the monkhood. They also ride horses and are shaded with golden umbrellas. Following them are the novices about to enter the monkhood riding on the shoulders of the older men. This is all followed by musicians, singers and dancers. And at the end is a group of men carrying bamboo poles with bags filled with popcorn which is thrown over the crowd to congratulate the novices. The entire parade circles the stupa 5 to 7 times and continues while the village elders recite the Buddhist scriptures in the Shan language. This could take over 12 hours. As the parade ends, as the ceremony ends, the novices have their heads shaved and enter the monastery to begin their life as a novice Monk.

The boys are expected to stay at the monastery for about 3 months, but it could be shorter or longer. If they decide to go back home, they have a second chance to join at age 20. Girls also become novice nuns at that same young age, or even younger. Nuns have a much harder life as they need to cook for themselves and are not given free food the way the monks are. In addition, while lay Buddhists have 5 precepts, monks have 227 precepts to keep, and the nuns have 311. The five precepts are: never lie, never steal, no adultery, don't imbibe, never kill. And never kill means never kill anything, including a bug. So you might assume from this that Burmese Buddhists are vegetarians. Not so. If you know that the animal was killed just for you, you can't eat it. If you see or hear it being killed, you can't eat it. If you have any doubt about it being killed for you, you can't eat it. But if it is already on the table, then it is OK to eat it. Cows are revered here, but unlike India or Bhutan, they are not considered gods, but rather they are shown gratitude because they help the farmers and so many Burmese are farmers. For this reason, less beef is eaten. The main foods are veggies, chicken, fish, prawns and some pork.

1700 monks live here. They line up by dormitory and rank within the dormitory. Most of the monks are in red robes, but the young pre-novice ones are in white. A pre-novice is someone whose family did not have enough money for the novice ceremony, so they come a few months before becoming a novice.

As we captured our spot to watch, the head monk came by and Toe introduced us. We had a nice conversation about Buddhism. He explained that Buddhism is a way of life, a philosophy and not a religion. He went on to explain that while they may not want to eat meat, they will eat whatever is donated. But Buddha says you have a choice. We also learned that you never touch someone on their head as Buddha is on the head. The 10 rules for the monastery were clearly written on signs around the grounds (and I quote):

1. "To have a good heart is the first.
2. To pay respect to the Vinaya (code of monastic discipline) is the second.
3. To be healthy is the third.
4. To be clean is the fourth.
5. To know how to dress is the fifth.
6. To be clever in conduct is the sixth.
7. To be clever in speaking is the seventh.
8. To be clever in walking is the eighth.
9. To obey the rules is the ninth.
10. To be literate is the tenth."





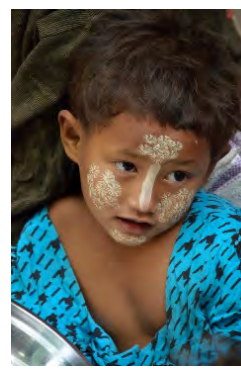
The line of monks got longer and longer. And then it was time and they slowly shuffled forward making their way into the courtyard where the food was being dished out. Volunteers also did all the serving. Each monk would hold out his bowl and the food was spooned in. He was handed a bag of chips and made his way into the dining hall to take his seat. Once everyone

was seated it was one long row of red robes after another, interspersed with white. As the younger tables, an older monk stood watch to keep them in order and behaving. They were after all, very young boys.

And as they ate, the volunteers, mostly women, passed by the windows on the outside of the dining hall, their hands in a position of prayer, to show respect to the monks.



Despite being told over and over that there is no begging in Myanmar and no one goes hungry, we did see families with small children begging for food or money. Toe explained that those in need get food from the monastery, but it turns out it depends on how much food was donated and how much is left over after the monks eat. These families had learned to put thanaka (the special bark formed into a paste that is applied to the face)



to the face) in very intricate patterns. Want a picture? Pay the price. Like the sweet face. Maybe you give more money. As Toe told us the first day, they are Buddhists, but no one is perfect.

We slowly walked out discussing the pros and cons of these families begging. No conclusion was reached. Really this is not different than we see in all third world countries, and in fact, we saw much less of it here.