



TRIPREVIEW



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BURMA (MYANMAR)

1992-1998

By Will Weber, Directors of Journeys International

Flying into Yangon on my first trip to Burma in 1992, a rumor about the discovery of the world's largest ruby, a 7,000 carat, near-flawless stone, fueled passenger conversation. The gem was to be the showpiece of the annual gem emporium. Burma is the world's leading producer of rubies. Many of my fellow passengers were gem merchants from around the world. It was possible one of them would leave with the jewel.

My own aspirations were more modest. Our long time guide in Burma, U Win Tin (Kishan), had sent me an enthusiastic message just a few weeks earlier. JOURNEYS Ltd. of Myanmar was now an official reality. Kishan had obtained one of the first private tour operator licenses to be granted in Burma. He had two vehicles and a staff of drivers and guides. He was ready for us to send him clients. He felt I should come as soon as possible to see for myself.

Eyes of the SLORC

When Aung San Suu Kyi, Burmese winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, was placed under house arrest in 1990, we stopped booking trips to Burma. We felt government tours were providing direct support to the oppressive military regime. Curiously, however, at the same time the dreaded, self-appointed State Law and Order Restoration Committee (SLORC) assumed all power in Burma, the process of liberalization and free market economics also had begun. In desperate abandonment of socialism, the government declared suddenly that private enterprise was now legal, allowing private tour operators to open their own businesses. International joint ventures soon emerged. At the same time, many foreign governments cut off their aid programs. While an earlier, disastrous demonetization invalidated all large currency notes, foreign exchange ownership was permitted in more circumstances. Foreign goods from Japan, Korea and especially Thailand flooded into the shops.

Many Burmese now feel life is getting materially better even as it gets politically worse. I did not want to get involved in political discussions that would embarrass or endanger my hosts. Virtually all nonmilitary Burmese dislike their government leaders but realize they have little recourse. Pursuing contact with tourists and prying open the widening cracks in the crumbling socialist economic policies offers more truth and hope than has been possible in Burma for years.

Dealing for Dollars

One thing about Burma has not changed from pre-SLORC days. The official exchange rate between Kyat (pronounced “chat”) and dollars is absurdly inequitable. Dollars on the black market bring 13–40 times the official rate of exchange. More than ever, the tourists’ strategy is to avoid paying expenses in dollars. Independent tourists may be required to exchange up to \$500 for Foreign Exchange Certificates (FEC) used in place of regular currency. As a “group” person with JOURNEYS, you will not have to exchange at the airport.

Rangoon Roads

Kishan met me at the airport and we hopped into an elegantly preserved 15–year–old Nissan sedan neatly painted with the JOURNEYS logotype. Clean streets and neatly painted and maintained public buildings gave Rangoon an unexpected air of civility, elegance, and order.

“I mistook a hellishly-hot green chili in the soup for a green bean ... he probably saw flames as I spoke.”



“With a good guide, a little background reading and your imagination, you can go back in time 500 years.”



Green Chili Torment

In Rangoon, we enjoyed the very courteous, friendly formality of dining at the Panda Restaurant. Foolishly, I mistook a hellishly-hot green chili in the soup for a green bean. It happened while our waiter was looking at me, and I dared not spit out the chili. It was too big to swallow whole. Two quick chews and I swallowed it in panic. The culinary conflagration continued to rage on my tongue and palate! My eyes watered. Perspiration soaked my forehead. My brain screamed fire. I gasped to Kishan what had happened, and he probably saw flames as I spoke. He ordered more water and beer. Over my discomfort I observed a very polite amusement among the restaurant staff, and we all laughed about how I would perhaps warn future JOURNEYS travelers that they would have more to fear in Burma from the chilies in the soup than from the government.

Busy Night Markets

Rather than visit the official government culture show, the standard first night event on government tours, we took a walk in the night bazaar. I saw no foreigners amidst the busy crowds. People were eager to practice their English and determine my nationality. When I said “USA,” they reacted with pleasure and approval. The little shops were jammed with electronics and consumer goods. I am sure I saw at least 25 video rental shops. Merchants displayed Thai clothing, Chinese shoes, imitation brand name sportswear and much food. I had the impression that every Rangoon citizen was an entrepreneur, which is, of course, not true. The scene reminded me of Kathmandu’s New Road in the early 1970’s. Not everyone could afford to buy, but all could look and dream and imagine that one day they might own a TV or motorcycle.

To Fly or not to Fly

Both the international air service to Burma and the internal flights met a much higher standard in 1998 than in previous years. New planes maintained by Singapore Airlines operate on the routes between Yangon, Mandalay, and Pagan, and we judge the air service now to be much safer and more comfortable than the trains or buses on the same routes.

Extensive Forests

We flew over extensive uncut forests between Rangoon and Pagan. From the ground, all of Burma appears agriculturally developed, but many large tracts of forest do remain.

Incomparable Pagan

In just 200 years, Pagan grew from the dust of the plains to the wealthiest city in Asia. Built by armies of slaves, Pagan represents an extraordinary achievement in architecture and religion through human subjugation. When Ghenghis Khan stormed into Southeast Asia in 1250 AD, the citizens abandoned Pagan never to return. The body and spirit of Pagan have survived 750 years. Today there are thousands of Burmese pilgrims who visit Pagan as the Buddhist equivalent of Mecca. Climbing to the top of the highest temple at dawn or sunset evokes the maximum experience of this once supreme city of monuments. With a good guide, a little background reading and your imagination, you can go back in time 500 years. Imagine the commerce of architects, princes, monks, slaves, and warriors who must have shared a singular dedication to creating these monuments.

We now accommodate most of our guests at a small non-government hotel adjacent to the ruins. Many of the best sites are just a short walk or bicycle ride from the hotel.

We were out in the ruins before dawn. It was quite chilly in March. In an effort to travel light, I had only sandals, light slacks, and a single lightweight long-sleeved shirt with me in Burma. Since I had been in near-zero Michigan cold a few days earlier, temperatures in the 50’s were no real problem, but my companions appreciated their jackets. I would advise travelers who will be in Burma between November and April to bring a sweater and light jacket.

Restoration of Pagan

There is a casual restoration, funded by UNESCO, underway in Pagan. Soldiers, Boy Scouts, and various local people are at work restoring brickwork, fences, and plaster in the major temples. The incredible size and scale of the monuments, relatively dry climate, and the scarcity of contemporary population have contributed to the preservation of Pagan half a millennium after its zenith.

“There is a long staircase winding up to a series of temples built into a steep spire on the shoulder of the volcano.”



Mt. Popa Pilgrimage

We left Pagan as the wonderful early morning light began to give way to the flat, hazy rays of midday. Our destination, Mt. Popa, was visible far off on the horizon. This was another major pilgrimage site, and we passed hundreds of Burmese tourists headed the same way. You can best appreciate the devotion and determination of these pilgrims by noting how they travel. Typically, the conveyance is a Mazda, Isuzu, or Toyota mini-pickup with a reinforced steel frame over the bed. Four to five people sit in the front seat. No fewer than 15 people sit on wood benches in the bed of the truck. Luggage, souvenirs, cooking pots, and food tied to the top competes with 4–6 people hanging or sitting on the canvas and ropes. Finally, 4–6 people stand on a reinforced tailgate outside the frame on the back and at least 3–4 people can still stand outside the frame on the sides of the truck. I was incredulous. I counted 32, 34, 37, and 31 people on the four occasions when I observed the lengthy process of loading or disembarking. The most amazing thing about it is that everyone seems to be happy and looking their freshest, temple-ready best when they arrive at a site.

Mt. Popa is an extinct volcano. There is a long staircase winding up to a series of temples built into a steep spire on the shoulder of the volcano. Again, there were no other foreigners, and I seemed to be as much an object of interest as the Buddhist statues in the temples. I felt a friendly curiosity that made it very easy to talk with people or obtain their permission for photography. We had lunch in a restaurant serving the pilgrims, and it was very good food. Having Kishan, a very gregarious guide, helped get everyone we met involved in the pleasure of what we were doing. As we sat in the little restaurant watching the pilgrims climbing the steps and endlessly boarding the mini-trucks, I sensed the similarities of our experiences. These people were so happy to be able to afford to join 30 friends for the excitement and adventure of a pilgrimage around Burma. Kishan inquired of their budgets and ambitions. Most of them were spending the black-market equivalent of \$2–3 per day. Most of that money was for donations to the temples. They each were paying a share of the vehicle cost. They often cooked their food themselves. Very importantly, they were buying souvenirs for the friends back home. Most had never been to this place before, and they would never come again. The length of the trip depended on how often the vehicles broke down, the condition of the roads, and how long the money lasted. Unlike me, they did not have a visa that expired, a plane to catch, or a business to run. When they returned to their homes, they would be local heroes for their worldly exploits. Perhaps they would even tell stories of the tall, pale foreigner who also claimed to be a tourist!

The Climb to Kalaw

It was a long drive to Kalaw, a hill resort created for the pleasure of the British administrators of the 19th century. Our road wound up through heavily-forested hills. Perhaps twenty miles into the forest, we experienced our only vehicle difficulty of the trip. Petrol purchased on the black market tends to pick up impurities, and the engine began to sputter and choke. We had been traveling in a very comfortable four wheel drive van outfitted with a cooler, air conditioning, and plenty of leg room. I left Kishan and his crew to work on the engine and started walking along the forest road. I was soon well beyond the vehicle and feeling good about a chance to walk in some of the most natural surroundings we encountered on the trip. You can take day hikes in the area with a guide who knows the trails. We finally got into Kalaw around dusk.

Making Islands

We first drove to Inlé Lake where we chartered a boat for an excursion on the water. We watched farmers creating floating fields of weeds and mud dredged from the lake. These islands are then sold and poled to the location designated by the new owner. The long, mucky slices of substrate seem especially suitable for growing tomatoes. In a setting reminiscent of Srinagar in Kashmir, the people of Inlé Lake have built homes right on the lake and travel by boat to market, school, or their fields. Altogether it was a very pleasant experience to tour the small communities, observe the fishing activities, and enjoy the beautiful scenery of the lake.

Maze of a Thousand Buddhas

Our next stop was Pindaya Cave. This large natural limestone cave provides residence for thousands of Buddha images, large and small. This too, is a major pilgrimage site, though we arrived between local tours. We wandered through “The Maze,” listened to a monk interpret the animist significance of various cave features, and endured the serene gaze of thousands of unblinking stone eyes. The cave has been a sacred site for hundreds of years, and the Buddhas have been brought here from all over the Buddhist world.

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Markets

There is a daily market that rotates through five different village sites in the hills. The next morning was market day in Kalaw. We were out at 7:30 AM, and the vendors were just setting up. Over the next two hours the economic and cultural crescendo continued to build. At 10:00 AM, Kishan had to pry me away to leave for our next destination. Several things especially impressed me. First, at least a third of the vendors were selling flowers. Kishan told me that flower growing is a major enterprise in Burma. As poor as the country may be, people still feel they can afford beauty. Fresh produce, grains, and spices were being sold. Lots of people were dressed in tribal attire. The vendors and the buyers were a study in faces, smiles, and hope. The morning light highlighted the natural colors. Again, there were no foreign tourists anywhere. I shot almost a hundred pictures by the time Kishan coaxed me into the van.

Making the Most of Mandalay

We were headed for Mandalay, a contemporary city in comparison with Pagan. Indeed, some of the most significant events in the history of the city have occurred in the past 50 years. The grand Mandalay Palace was destroyed in fierce fighting with the Japanese in 1943. More recently, in 1981, a huge fire razed the central business area killing thousands. It has all been rebuilt.

You will want to visit Mandalay Hill and the various exceptional temples and monasteries that guidebooks insist are important. You won't want to miss the great gold Buddha statue in the Mahamuni Pagoda. Most importantly, don't miss the market. Mandalay is the distribution point for a vast area. Grain, clothing, cooking oils, flowers, chilies, fruit, fish paste, salt, and auto parts all collide and explode in the Zegyo Market. And that is just on the surface. The underground economy in foreign exchange, rubies, and intelligence also bristles here, though no one will admit it.

World's Largest Bell

We chartered a boat to visit Mingun, a few kilometers down river from Mandalay. It is known for having the world's largest uncracked bell, cast in 1790. You can stand under it while someone rings it for authentic surround sound. The bell is definitely worth visiting, and along the way you will get a good taste for life on the Irrawaddy.



“Mingun ... is known for having the world's largest uncracked bell, cast in 1790. You can stand under it while someone rings it for authentic surround sound.”

After Mandalay, we took the train back to Yangon. Now we recommend that you fly to Yangon to make your connecting flight as the train is uncomfortable and there have been some mishaps.

This is an update to previous JOURNEYS Burma reviews and narrative information. The information below was collected in early March, 1998, during a visit to Yangon by Will and Joan Weber, directors of JOURNEYS.

We have been offering Burma exploration arrangements for the past 12 years. During that time we have used the same operator and many of the same guides we use today. After just completing a trip, we feel the Burmese people and their country are more attractive than ever as hosts and as a destination for travelers.

On arrival, customs does take some time. All incoming luggage is x-rayed, and your luggage may be opened, but I was advised that it was not really necessary to fill out a currency declaration form since the total for our whole family did not exceed the \$2000 per person cash limit. We also did not have to change any money into FEC coupons, as most arriving tourists did, because we had pre-arranged services and a group visa.

Once outside the new airport, Burma seemed little changed from my last visit three years ago. Our base for Yangon visits is the Yuzana Garden Hotel. It is relatively small, quiet, very clean, and reflects tasteful styling and decor. The interior is extensively finished with teak, including parquet floors and wooden banisters. Bathrooms were all marble with new brass fixtures. It is very close to popular Yangon sites, and the staff was very friendly. Our kids loved the swimming pool. We can upgrade clients to other hotels, but most people will find the Yuzana Garden Hotel a very good choice in Yangon.

We have also upgraded hotels in Mandalay and Bagan both for convenience to popular sites and for the comfort of travelers. Kishan and Vidya, co-owners of the local JOURNEYS office, charter new vans or service cars to match the destination and group size for each location. Virtually every JOURNEYS traveler now flies between Yangon and Mandalay or Bagan. The service on Air Mandalay is efficient, safe and clean. The trains are not recommended.

I read over many of the local evaluations left by past clients. It was clear to me that most people



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are overwhelmingly pleased by their Burma travel experience. Most do not expect the country to be so open and free of apparent restrictions on travel, information or interaction. English is being widely taught in the schools and people are eager to practice. Our guides have found JOURNEYS clients really like situations where they can see village or traditional life away from the cities and the contrived circumstances of tourist restaurants and culture shows. From the guides and the client comments, it is evident that our Burma trips work because the guides are prepared to address and facilitate wishes or requests. It seems many people, on arrival, are fearful of what they will encounter in Burma. They are surprised to find how safe, friendly and easy going things are. The guides take care of all the details of travel, ordering food, dealing with permits, fees and entries to special sites. Travelers who get the most out of Burma make lots of requests of the guide to make the trip they want happen.

Burma is still the wrong place to expect luxury accommodations, but we seem to have struck a desirable balance between cultural and scenic exploration, comfortable facilities, and good food over which to reflect on each day's experiences.

The government of Burma shows no sign of changing to a more democratic or enlightened structure. Boycotts, threats, or trade treaties that may exist clearly have not impacted government policies or plans.

Burma is a safe place. There is little crime. Streets are generally very clean and in good repair. Traffic congestion is not as bad as we experienced in the big cities of Thailand, Vietnam or China. It is hard to find anyone who likes the government, but many Burmese concede they understand the rules and as harsh and repugnant as they are, it is possible to survive and prosper. Part of the challenge Western travelers face is putting the repressive government in a philosophical context that makes it possible to look beyond laws and leadership to appreciate the beauty of the Burmese people. Many of them care less about the government they have than we do.

JOURNEYS greatest strength in Burma is our guide team. I was really happy to again meet and have dinner with Maung Maung, Win Thein, Khin Zaw and our newest guide, Thi Ha Jaye. They each delight in learning client interests and then tailoring the trip to meet them.

We talked about the kinds of people who may have problems on a Burma trip and the list included those who require Western food at every meal, those unable to accept that some of the roads are quite rough and require very slow travel which may produce jostling and dustiness, and those who are very sensitive to heat or humidity may be uncomfortable during the warmer months between April and October.

Should you visit Burma at all?

Over the decade that we have been operating trips to Burma (Myanmar) a great deal has changed. We now use only private JOURNEYS staff guides, our own JOURNEYS vehicles, and privately-owned hotels. The airline service on the routes we fly is now much safer and more comfortable than the trains. Quality standards of everything from accommodations to food to communications systems have greatly improved. In spite of this modest “modernization,” Burma is still one of the most interesting travel destinations in Asia.

We also believe every traveler has the right to decide where to travel and on what terms. Many people who travel to Burma are surprised to find a society in which regular people, unconnected with government, are prospering as a result of a growing number of foreign visitors from all over the world. Travelers find that tourism is not a government monopoly, as many boycott-Burma political organizations suggest. Travelers bring ideas, friendships, and direct economic improvement to people who have neither political aspiration nor economic leverage.

When you visit Burma you may become aware that many people dislike their government. You will realize how far the Burmese people are from having democratic or even benevolent leaders. You will come to realize how a few military leaders use Draconian means to govern. There is a broad consensus in the international community that Burma's leaders are destroying their environment, engaging in drug trafficking, selling off their natural resources, and persecuting thousands of innocent people.

We are not apologists for the current SLORC junta. Quite the contrary, your visit brings hope and light to this situation. Ironically, you may be surprised by how safe you feel and how free you are to travel where you wish with a minimum of bureaucratic intrusion or restraint. Everyone in Burma, from the poorest to the highest level of ruling generals, shares a concern that no harm come to visitors. You are not likely to be hassled as long as you obey the laws and don't attend or engage in politics.