

Mysterious Myanmar

Traveling through an exotic land

**Yangon – Inle Lake – Pindaya – Kalaw
– Mandalay – Bagan – Ngapali**



A poor rich country

Measured against capitalistic countries Myanmar is very poor, the state and the people do not dispose of much money but of another sort of wealth: beautiful landscapes, lovely lakes and marvellous mountains, a fertile land, plentiful fruit and vegetable, an extensive livestock, manifold handicraft and arts. Many goods and services are exchanged without money, and so the gross national product does not express the real production in this self-contained country. The people have all they need: fine food, tasteful clothes and modest houses. And they permit themselves a luxury which is unimaginable in the rich countries, the luxury of excessive gold-plating thousands of Buddha images and pagodas. Also this kind of richness does not count in the international measurement and comparison – because it is not productive, it is only good for the religious feeling of about 40 millions Buddhists.

Yangon is ugly and wonderful

Myanmar's capital is the first station for all travellers, and the first surprise. Yangon is ugly and wonderful, noisy and cosy, metropolis and provincial: broad avenues and narrow lanes, few brilliant buildings and many shabby shanties, some de luxe models and plenty of scrap cars, particular elegant stores and stinking stalls, proud businessmen and bothersome beggars. Many children are hunting tourists for to sell postcards. Trishaw-drivers offer their transport service to each tourist who is walking more than ten

meters. Well dressed gentlemen ask tourists whispering whether they want to change dollars to *kyats* and offer a much more better than the official course. The tourists need the national currency for the daily purchasing; hotels, restaurants, taxi-driver and busi-nessmen they can pay in dollars too. The biggest and most prominent market in Yangon is called *Bogyoke Market* in the Bogyoke Aung San Street, the former so called *Scott Market*. It is famous for its great variety of goods: wood-carving, lacquer-ware, goldsmith's work, jade, woven products, brass sheets, tapestry, marionettes and wickerwork.



Normally trishaw drivers have only two passengers

The cultural highlight of this town is the Shwedagon-Paya – the greatest sanctuary, the landmark of Myanmar and the front-runner of self-sacrificing devotion. The 2500 years old pagoda has been covered by gold plaque and various kinds of jewellery. Millions of faithful are permanently spending gold-plates. Apart from the religious mania the architecture of the whole temple and the sculptures around the stupa are worth seeing, especially in the evening light. (More? → guidebooks).

Another sort of highlight is the big fish-market in the early morning, if you want to see hundreds of day-labourer carrying heavy crates full of fish or



ice- blocks and loading into barges and trucks while the dealers are counting their notes.



The right time for watching this macabre live-show is daily between 6.30 and 8.00 a.m. with an empty stomach, subsequently you should return to your hotel and have a shower-bath before breakfast. You could also avoid to visit such ugly scenes like the fish-market. In Yangon you have enough to do visiting the many beautiful pagodas and parks. But for me it was most interesting to watch the people how they are living there, in the houses and in the streets.

Inle Lake, a little paradise – for those who don't have to work on the fields

During the flight from Yangon to Heho the view to the ground shows the huge „patch-work“ with the coloured fields of the multifarious agriculture. This central part of the country is the granary and the fruit and vegetable garden of Myanmar. Inle Lake is 22 km long, 11 km wide, 900 metres above sea level and surrounded by big hills. At the lakeshore and on islands



there are 17 villages with bamboo houses on stilts and many *swimming gardens* ↓ with plentiful vegetable.



The fishermen propel their teak canoes by standing at the stern on one leg and wrap-ping the other around the oar. This unique leg rower-technique offers relief to the arms and enables the rower to catch fish.



In *Nam Pan Village* in the South-east of the lake one can visit a colourful market and workshops where they make boats and cheroots ↓ .



Across the lake, *Se Khaung Village* is famous for the black smith productions, *In Phaw Kon Village* for silk weaving.



Also at the west side of the lake, in the *Myay Ni Gone Village*, you can visit the very special *lotus clothe weaving* in Ann's Handweaving Centre & Restaurant *Shwe Inn Tha*. Near by, in the *Phaung Taw Oo Pagoda* there are the 5 Buddha images which are so often covered with gold leaf that they have lost all shape or proportion.

Not far from there the *Nga Phe Kyaung Monastery* is famous as the "Jumping cats monastery" where the monks teach their cats to jump through hoops. Also a attraction for foreigners is the *floating market Ywa-ma* where the dealers' boats filled



with souvenirs surround closely the boats hired of the tourists.

Most impressive for me was *Shwe Indein* at the west side of the lake, an old pagoda and the surrounding field of temple ruins



amidst of yellow sesame flowers ↑.

A marvellous trekking tours leads from *Nyaung Shwe village* at the north-eastern end of the lake to *Kone Hson Taung Village* on the top of a big hill where the *Intha* people cultivate tobacco, wheat and coffee plants. The way down comes to the picturesque *Mang Thauk village* where they grow sugarcane.

To recommend is a day's journey by car from Inle Lake to *Taunggyi*, the capital of the Shan state (30 km), and further (km) to the famous temple ruins of *Kak ku* with 2548 pagodas which partly are entwined with climbers. In many niches you can find curious statuettes.



Pindaya

On a highly scenic road you reach this small quiet town (3 car hours from Inle lake), picturesquely situated at a little lake between big green hills. It is famous for the 8000 Buddha images inside of a huge stalactite cavern (*Shwe Umin Pagoda*).

In Pindaya there starts a lovely trekking tour to the *Htwel-ne* and *Taung Baw Gyi* villages and tea plantations on the hills; there we visited a farmer's

family which told us about their work and served cooked tea-leaves with roasted peanuts and beans.



kitchenroom

Each Tuesday they have their market in *Pindaya* – not made for the tourists and therefore most interesting for them too.

In the town you find some local handicrafts. We visited a workshop which produces parasols made of bamboo wood and *Shan paper*; this special material is made from mulberry bark.



Along the road from Pindaya to Kalaw we saw yellow blooming sesame fields, white blooming mustard fields, and farmers threshing by hands.



Kalaw

Situated 40 km south of Pindaya, Kalaw sits on a hill, 1300 metres above sea level. At this altitude it is pleasantly cool and a good place for trekking

tours around Kalaw. We visited *Pein Ne Bin village* of the *Palaung* tribe known for their colourful traditional costumes. The families live in 'long houses' and they have many little snort-noses who don't know the using of handkerchiefs.



The main livelihood is the cultivation of *tanapet*, a large leaf used to wrap Burmese cigars. Tribes-people come into town to do business, especially on the local five day-market, and they like good food and coloured plastic bags.



In the town we visited a monastery school during the reading hour: they loudly rattled off text in *Pali*-language which they had learned by heart without understanding it.



A young monk at school

Near Kalaw there is held a big cattle market with thousands of oxen and water buffaloes.



Mandalay – the centre of handicraft, rafting and poverty

It was a last capital of Myanmar and is until today the centre of Myanmar culture. Of course you have to climb up the 1729 steps to the top of Mandalay hill (236 m) because of the view. But just so remark-able than the buddhas and pagodas on the hill are the both monasteries in Mandalay, which

are built of teak wood: *Shwe-nan-daw-Kyaung* and *Shwe-in-bin*. Both are of great interest not only



Shwe-Nan-daw-Kyaung Monastery – like a ship bow

as good examples of the architecture of traditional Burmese wooden monasteries but because of the fine carved panels inside and out.



Shwe-in-bin monastery

From Mandalay hill you have a view down to the *Kutho-daw pagoda* with many little stupas around, but you should visit it: Each of the 729 stupas contains a marble slab on which are inscribed parts of the entire Buddhist canon – the *Tripitaka*. It has been estimated that, reading for eight hours a day, one person would take 450 days to read the complete ‘book’. So you walk through “the world’s biggest book”.



A few of the stupas with inscribed marble slabs inside

We visited not only holy places but some handicraft workshops too: bronze casting, wood carving, tapestry, alabaster sculpture, bamboo paper-production and gold leaf-hammering.

Bamboo-paper used for the gold pounding is specially made from certain kind of bamboo and produced by a town some miles north of Mandalay. Most interesting is gold leaf-hammering: The square gold leaf tissues used for centuries are hand made in workshops of Mandalay. Only 24 carat gold is used. It is pressed to the form of a ribbon (90 cm long and 2 cm wide) which is cut into 200 squares. Each is placed between thin sheets of bamboo paper about 7 cm square and the whole stack wrapped in two pieces of deerskin to firmly hold it. The packet is placed on a stone and beaten with a hammer weighing 7 kg, by young men in rows.



After 15 minutes the stack of papers is handed over to girls working in a separate, closed room. They separate the gold from the paper and cut the gold tissues into six pieces. Then, each piece is placed between bamboo papers once again and given over to the boys for a 2 ½ hours-long pounding. After that, yet again the paper-thin pieces are placed in 13cm square bamboo paper and finally pounded for five hours. Lastly the girls cut the fragile gold leaf into neat squares and carefully transfer them between squares of ordinary cardboard papers to be sold in packets of tens.



Goldleaf (24 carat) after the second hammering, between sheets of bamboo paper.



Wood carving covered with goldleaves

At the Mandalay riverside of Ayeyarwady

there are landing hundreds of large rafts with teakwood and bamboo, coming from the mountains where the woodcutters bring the trunks to the river. The rafter village seem to be the pauper downtown – lying at the westside for weeks and months at the banks until their float will have been took to pieces and brought to land.



The raftsmen and their families are living in small shanties and one can read a thing in the face of the children who implore the tourists. The most of them are dressed badly. Rafting is a very hard work but the rafters do not look like making a lot of money out of. Myanmar have been up to now the biggest exporter of teakwood which is very expensive in whole the world but do not bring wealth to Myanmar and it's working people.

One-day trips from Mandalay to 'deserted cities'

Some former capitals of Myanmar are within easy day-tripping distance. One trip leads to *Amarapura*, *Inwa (Ava)* and *Sagaing*. *Amarapura* – though meanwhile grown together with the south part of Mandalay looks like a village with many handicraft workshops, especially weaving, sculpture, wood carving and brass-foundry.



Women are not allowed to climb up the Pahto-daw-ghy-Pagode

For me the best of Amarapura – besides the *Pahto-daw-gyi Paya* – is the wonderful teakwood bridge *U Bein* over the *Taung-thaman Lake* in the south of the town.



U Bein – the longest teakwood bridge of the world

You should have time enough to stroll along the 1,2 km bridge, to have a look to the exhibitions of paintings where you can buy amazing originals, and to the farmers with the oxen ploughs on the fields at the shores. At the other side of the bridge sits a little village and the *Kyauk-taw-gyi pagoda* with the most curious and imaginative sculptures of Myanmar ↓.



The owl-buddha of Kyauk-taw-gyi pagoda

For the way back to the beginning of the *U Bein* it is easy to find a little boat which crosses under the bridge so that you get the worm's-eye view to the high teakwood stilts which came out from the ruins of the last capital *Inwa* in the 18th century – and so they look:



U Bein bridge

In the *Mahaganda-yon monastery* near by the bridge each morning you can watch short-dressed tourists photographing the monks eating. The ancient city of *Inwa* (or *Ava*) is situated at the confluence of the two rivers *Ayeyarwady* and *Myitnge* and surrounded by four canals. So you reach it only by ferry. With horse carriage we rode to the teakwood monastery *Bagaya*.



Teakwood monastery Bagaya in Inwa

At the end of our first one day-trip we reached the ancient city *Sagaing*. The best of all was the Mae-Nu-Kyaun monastery at sunset time.



Mae-Nu-Kyaung monastery in Sagaing

A one day-trip to Mingun

Although it is a ruin it is so holy that you are allowed to climb to the top only barefoot. Any comparable ascent in the Bavarian mountains would be only allowed for well shod climbers free from giddiness.



The world's biggest pagoda-ruin



Wood carving at the wall of Shwesigon

Near by in a shrine building you find the world's biggest bell weighing 90 tonnes.



The world's biggest bell



Details of pagodas in Old-Bagan

Bagan

In the era from 11th to 13th centuries Bagan was the city of four million pagodas, today Bagan is one of the richest archeological sites in south-east Asia. The ruins of the ancient capital cover an area of 42 sq.km containing more than 2000 edifices.



The bell-shaped Shwesigon Paya, one of the oldest stupas in Bagan, now renovated. Its design became a virtual prototype for all stupas in Myanmar.



A temple guardian in Old Bagan

Lacquer-ware

It is very instructive to visit the **lacquer-ware museum** in Bagan and workshops in the village *Myukaba* near Bagan.

The use of lacquer as an adhesive and a paint is one of the oldest forming techniques of the world. Lacquer protects the ware from decay and humidity and also offers solidity to containers of many materials – of wood, bamboo, paper, cloth, metals, leather, stone, earthenware, porcelain, glass, shells and mother of pearl. Lacquer is used for everything from exterior and interior building decorations to furniture, utensils, statues, altar ornaments, books, stationary, musical instruments, masks, weapons, production tools and toys. In the museum one can see a rich variety plates, trays, meal tables, kettles, soup bowls, food containers, tobacco cases, baskets and boxes, coffers and chests, and some pieces are hundreds of years old. The tradition of using the resin of lacquer trees is much more older. In China there have been found lacquer ware dating back seven thousand years. Today, 98 % of lacquer is imported from China, with another one percent coming from Vietnam. In Southeast Asia lacquer has many expressions: *Son mai* in Vietnam, *Sa nam kien* in Laos, *Klan khoon* in Thailand, *Khmok mark* in Cambodia, *Benda lac* in Indonesia and *Yun* or *Yunthe* in Myanmar.

In a lacquer workshop in Bagan we could watch the different production steps of lacquer ware. The resin of lacquer trees, a milky white sap, is stirred in sunlight to evaporate the water. This raw lacquer is coloured by several pigments. The traditional colours are black, vermilion, yellow and green; turquoise is a concession to the tourists from the West. *Thayo* is the special technique to mix the lacquer with the ash of cow-pat, milled bones and rice-water for to strengthen it, so that it could be shaped easier. The body, for example a bamboo network, becomes sealed by loam and lacquer and then settled some days for drying. After that the vessel is abraded with a pumice stone, again covered with lacquer, again dried – the whole procedure recurs up to seven times. The artisans scratch the design with knives into the layer of lacquer. Each colour they want makes necessary an own operation. So the production of high quality needs some weeks or even months.



For this vessel they worked half a year, they told us. A movie-star ordered it. It costs about 5000 \$.

We liked very much small cups which are made from woven horse-hairs and lacquered similar to the big jar in the picture above. These cups are elastic and nearly unbreakable.