12
OCT

IN ASIA, MYANMAR

Myanmar in 1 Week—First Stop: Yangon

I remember the first time I saw a picture of Bagan—a misty green landscape, dotted with pagodas and temples, as far as the eye could see. Hot air balloons floated in the distance, among the mountains. It was a place that looked as if it was conceived by someone's imagination—as if it came from a beautiful dream. I had to go there.

Every year in China, the Mid-Autumn Festival allows me a week off of work at the beginning of October. It's not much, but with flights connecting in Kunming, a trip to Myanmar is doable. You just have to plan.

I decided to spend 1 night in Yangon, 2 nights in Bagan, 3 nights in Inle Lake and 1 night in Mandalay. It was a lot to cram into 7 nights, but it was worth it.

FIRST STOP: YANGON

Lubricants Made in Japan

I had made friends with the woman next to me on the plane, and she offered to share her driver into the city. She had actually grown up in Yangon (Rangoon at the time), and was anxious to see how the city had changed. With our faces pressed to the windows, we drove past dirty, garbage-laden alleyways, littered with crumbling apartment buildings. Matted nests of electricity wires decorated the streets. Women wearing colorful cotton skirts set up street stalls for later that night.

The car came to a stop, and I got out my camera. “Please don’t take photos here,” the driver said to me. Puzzled, I asked if it was against the law. He replied that he just didn’t want the world to see “this side of Myanmar.”

As we sat in traffic for the next 30 minutes, the driver told us about his country’s past, his feelings toward the government, and how ashamed he was for the appearance of his home town. He had spent the last few years in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and learned English by working as a bus boy at an Irish pub.

While telling his story, I noticed that he sat on the right side of the car, and drove on the right side of the road. “The government bought old Japanese cars, very cheap,” he said. “All the steering wheels are on the right, like in England, but one day the law changed and we had to drive on the other side of the road.”

The first of many insights into the problems the country is still facing, after more than 60 years of brutal government brutality and a long period of British colonial ruling.

The driver had returned to Yangon with different eyes and a very different perspective. But as an outsider, I had a much different outlook. And behind the lens of my camera, the "side of Myanmar" he desperately didn't want me to see, looked beautiful. Buddhist monks dressed in crimson robes walked barefoot down streets, collecting food from generous neighbors. Girls carrying flowers and umbrellas seemed to glide toward the golden pagodas, that shined like beacons around the city. Men fed pigeons on the stoops of buildings—and when they flew past the pastel-colored balconies, the sky got a little brighter.

At sunset, I headed to Shwedagon Pagoda—TripAdvisor's #1 thing to do in Yangon. As someone who has traveled a lot around Southeast Asia, I wasn't sure I'd be as impressed as the site's reviewers. But I was wrong.

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Tuesday Corner

It’s not just a pagoda, but an entire complex of temples and religious relics, where devotees kneel to Buddha figures, monks light candles, and children pour water over the heads of statues for good fortune. I tucked myself into a corner and watched the full moon rise over the glowing 326-foot-tall pagoda.

For me, it was an eye-opening day and a half. And while I enjoyed myself, many tourists I met along the way did not. In fact, I met up with an old colleague, who took a job at an international school in the city earlier this year. And sweating, over condensed milk-sweetened tea and snacks, she told me how hard it’s been. She told me about the mold growing in her apartment and the constant struggles with transportation. About the necessary visa runs. About the possibility of having to vacate the country after the upcoming election.

The truth is, this is a developing country, and they have a long way to go. I’m just thankful they’ve finally opened their doors and allowed me to explore this fascinating city.

Where I stayed: Lotus Bed & Breakfast (downtown)

Where I ate: Lucky 7 (traditional tea house, for breakfast or early lunch), 999 Shan Noodle House (Good noodles, but a bit too touristy, in my opinion) and some really, really good spicy peanut noodles at a street stall across from Shwedagon Pagoda.

What I did: **Shwedagon Pagoda** (If you do one thing in Yangon, this is it. I recommend going right before sunset.), Sule Pagoda (Not too impressive after seeing Shwedagon, but the surrounding area was cool.), Bogyoke Aung San Market (Full of vendors selling gems, traditional clothing, and local food. Make sure to barter!). My favorite thing I did, however, does not include a link–just walking around, exploring the little alleyways and taking in the local sights and sounds of the neighborhoods is a day well spent.

Read Next: Bagan, Myanmar: A Photo Essay

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14 Comments

Amanda | Chasing My Sunshine

POSTED AT 11:30H, 12 OCTOBER

My knowledge of Myanmar is limited only to an episode of an Anthony Bourdain show. So I thank you for adding some exposure! The Shwedagon Pagoda looks indescribable. But I really enjoyed your peek into the side of Myanmar that the cab driver was almost ashamed for people to see. You’re right, it does look beautiful from where I am sitting! I hope to learn more about this fascinating place’s history soon.

Admin_jennifer

POSTED AT 20:18H, 12 OCTOBER

So was mine, Amanda! And even though I LOVE Anthony Bourdain, I found a lot of things were already inaccurate. Thanks for reading. I will be posting an entry about Bagan on Wednesday 🙂

Bob & Winnie Hamblin

POSTED AT 18:46H, 12 OCTOBER

impressive Pagoda.
Good photos. you are getting real good at this.

Admin_jennifer POSTED AT 20:17H, 12 OCTOBER

Thanks so much! 🙂

Carolina POSTED AT 22:01H, 12 OCTOBER

Hi! Jennifer

I really enjoy to read your posts =) I don't know if you remind me but, I worked with you at Nogales School in Bogotá, I was the science Assistant, and when I started to read your posts and see your pics, I felt something awake of me, I wanted to travel as you do. I want to say "thank you" to have the opportunity to know you and show me that you can travel wherever you want, you just need to trust yourself. In fact, I travel alone to Cancun and Machu Picchu this year =).

Greetings

Admin_jennifer POSTED AT 00:39H, 13 OCTOBER

Awwww Carolina, thank you for this wonderful comment! Of course I remember you :). I am so happy that I have inspired you in some way and that you are traveling on your own. That is amazing! Gracias por leer, y un abrazo!

Edna POSTED AT 08:00H, 13 OCTOBER

So fascinating! Look forward to hearing more (especially if there are more conversations with locals and people who live there!)

Admin_jennifer POSTED AT 22:28H, 13 OCTOBER

Thanks, Edna! I will be posting more soon; and yes, I talked to every local I could get my hands on 🙂

Maddy POSTED AT 14:02H, 08 NOVEMBER

I think this is my favorite post of yours yet! Even if you didn't include these (stunning) photos, I think I would still be able to imagine a great deal of what it looks and feels like to explore Yangon – such beautiful descriptive writing here. Bravo!

And I agree with you, as an outsider looking in, this side of Myanmar looks beautiful.

http://www.travelalphas.com

Admin_jennifer POSTED AT 20:21H, 08 NOVEMBER

Thanks so much for you sweet comments, Maddy! I need to post more about my trip…I promise Inle Lake and Mandalay will go up this week. My real job has been getting in the way! haha. xo

Katie POSTED AT 13:07H, 22 NOVEMBER

Ah, related to my comment just now on your newest post, I see that somehow I missed these earlier Myanmar posts?! That first shot of Yangon is just perfect!

Admin_jennifer POSTED AT 01:52H, 23 NOVEMBER

Thanks, Katie! 🙂 I will be posting my last two this week! xo

Melai POSTED AT 10:54H, 26 JANUARY

This is informative! We're going to Myanmar on March and your posts will really help me in planning. Thanks for sharing, Jennifer! Happy to have found your blog. 🙂

Admin_jennifer POSTED AT 21:36H, 27 JANUARY

Thanks so much, Melai! I'm happy I can be a resource for you. Thanks for reading 🙂