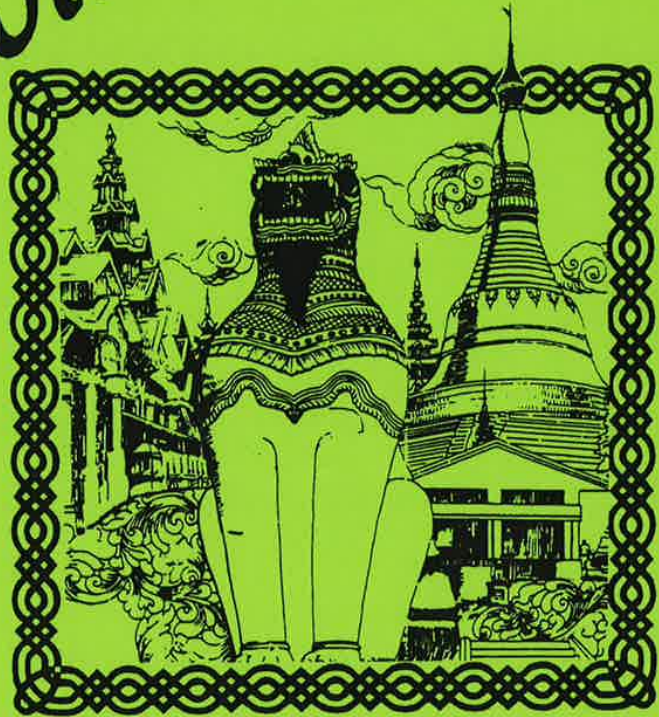


Geographical Society of NSW

January 2 to 16
1996

Burma Study Tour



Tour Leader
Stephen Codrington

Tour Diary

Geographical Society of New South Wales
Study Tour to Burma, January 1996
Tour Leader: Dr Stephen Codrington

Tour Diary

Sunday 2nd January 1996 - Sydney to Bangkok

Arriving in Rangoon will be the start of the big adventure but this is the beginning of the trip. Sydney Airport, sheeting rain, damp skin, joints stretched by the weight of luggage.

And here's the first test. There is no D, either major or minor, the point at which was instructed to rally. Will a natural leader be thrown up from amongst the first arrivals? One person who will instinctively assume control and guide us through sticky situations? But the group, as one, recognising one another from our preliminary meeting, cluster and establish a beachhead close to an open Thai Airways check-in counter. Soon our leader arrives, exactly on time and then, gradually, the stragglers, conforming to a pattern that will endure throughout the trip.

Check-in accomplished, relieved of our heavy bags, in possession of small afterthoughts from the concourse shops we move upstairs and wait for the boarding call. Late.

Finally, in a white-out of rain, the aircraft wheels leave the runway and we climb through an infinity of cloud. Surfing the air currents, we push forward slowly towards Queensland, towards the northern edge of our continent, towards New Guinea and Indonesia, bound for Bangkok.

Lulled by free alcoholic pacifiers and acceptable aircraft cuisine most of us eschew the delights of the film. "Babe", and try to sleep our way onward. But the cusp of the journey stretches out like some bizarre distortion of Einstein's theory of relativity and it is only after

a period of timelessness that we are suddenly catapulted forward to reach the end of the journey.

Formalities at the airport are swift, we're on the coach and heading towards our hotel. A strangely out-of-place Greek heroic gateway, trees and shrubs sprinkled with tiny white lights. Rooms allotted, brief ablutions. Oblivion.

- Janet Wilson

On Tuesday 2nd January 1996, despite certain discrepancies in Stephen's explicit diagrammatic directions concerning assembling in 'Area D', the NSW Geographical Society's Burma Tour Group gathered at Sydney's International Airport for their 5:45 departure on TG984 flight for Bangkok.

Two meals, two films, a touch of turbulence, a Clayton's sleep and a roughish landing preceded our safe arrival at Bangkok Airport. Gently nudged through customs (were Babe's techniques used here?) we were soon on our air conditioned way via a corridor of festive lights which terminated at the spectacular fairy light fantasy which greeted us at the Rama Gardens Hotel.

The group vanished quietly to their respective rooms after consuming their pink welcome drink. All were very appreciative of Stephen's excellent assistance which ensured a successfully completed first day and promised further interesting and enjoyable experiences.

- Richard Arndell

Wednesday 3rd January 1996 - Bangkok to Rangoon

"One night in Bangkok" the song goes. Well, we spent it in the Rama Gardens Hotel. It was an ideal way to recover from the nine hours flight from Sydney and to acclimatise to the tropics before embarking into deepest Burma.

Most of the group made the 10 am cut-off for our last sumptuous meal for a while – buffet breakfast for the Japanese, Chinese, American and European in us all.

Our return to the Bangkok Airport in the daylight highlighted the pace of activity and development in the city of eight million (and we were only on the outskirts) – constant road traffic, construction activity and billboards advertising the numerous multinationals which have set up operations in Thailand in recent years.

After a short flight in distance but a long one in years, we arrived at Yangon (Rangoon) Airport – straight out of the 50s as is the rest of Burma. However, the breeze of change is stirring – a new airport is to be built and several big tourist hotels are under construction with 1996 being the “Year to Visit Myanmar).

A dusty drive to the Kabaye (World Peace) Pagoda provided a cross-section of Rangoon in the dry season, with tantalising glimpses of the shining Shwedagon Pagoda rising above the generally tree height buildings. The smooth stones of the Kabaye Pagoda were cool against our bare feet.

The sun had sunk into the ever-present tropical haze by the time we checked in to the Euro-Asia Hotel on Strand Road. Our first dinner, in the Lonemalay Restaurant near the Royal Lake provided a very pleasant introduction to local cuisine with a selection of curries and rice, accompanied by a Burmese orchestra (gongs, clackers, drums) and regional dances.

- Jim Box

Just before midnight we arrived at the Rama Gardens Hotel and by the number of light bulbs observed it must have been sponsored by Osram. We were all tired so went to our rooms for a good night's sleep. Breakfast was wonderful and a great opportunity for members to get to know each other.

The pool looked most inviting and several of us spent an hour or two enjoying this facility. I walked around the gardens and observed the water lilies in full flower.

Off to the airport for a brief flight to Yangon (Rangoon). After take-off we had lunch and by the time we filled in all the forms we were landing. I am delighted to say we were through customs in under an hour and then aboard our bus – a touch of old world charm – to the Kabaye (World Peace) Pagoda. It was sunset, and the gold glowed, and above it all was an almost full moon. Photos were taken, and the locals seemed quite happy to see us. As we drove to the hotel, we saw the sun set as a huge orange ball in the west. We arrived at the Euro-Asia Hotel at 6 pm, and walked up to the 4th floor to find a large clean room.

After a wash, we were once again into the bus driving through the streets of Yangon, which were most interesting, to a large restaurant where we were to have dinner. Traditional music greeted us as we were taken to our table. The food and service were excellent and so was the traditional dancing. Back to our hotel to bed after a long and interesting day.

- Graham Kent

We arrived at Bangkok Airport at 2:30 am Sydney time (10:30 pm local time) after a nine hour flight from Sydney. At 3:40 am Sydney time (11:40 pm local time) we arrived at the Rama Gardens Hotel, were offered a soft drink and then retired for the evening.

Breakfast provided a wide choice, and we met the chef – an Australian from Tasmania. The rest of the morning was spent at leisure, wandering around the vast grounds, swimming and getting to know one another.

We departed Bangkok Airport at 2:50 pm and arrived at Yangon (Rangoon) at 3:30 pm. We met our guides, Mr Tun and Mr Wynn. Mr Tun told us that:

1. because Myanmar (Burma) is situated between India and China, the cultures of each of these countries has influenced culture in Burma. These influences are seen in its writing, music and dance. British influence commenced in Burma in 1824.
2. The name 'Myanmar' means 'swift and strong'.

3. There are 135 ethnic groups with different dialects in the country.
4. In 1971 the government directed the change from driving on the left hand side of the road to the right hand side to facilitate the move along 'the Burmese Way to Socialism'.

After settling in to the Euro-Asia Hotel, we were taken to dine at the Lonemalay Restaurant in the Royal Lake Park. Here we had our first taste of Burmese cuisine and were entertained by traditional dancers and musicians.

- Carol Lindsay

Thursday 4th January 1996 -Rangoon to Prome

Independence Day was declared at the auspicious hour of 4:20 am on January 4th, 1948. Therefore, the wake-up call for the young people to get up and celebrate Independence was at 3:30 am by way of amplified music from a vehicle (under our window). Then the whistle-blower started, loud music began and along came a vehicle which sounded like a chaff-cutter. It was a relief to get up from the very hard bed - a 300mm thick wad of fibre over a softer underside. Was the mattress upside down?

Breakfast at 6:00 am comprised fried eggs, toast, mixed up fruit cordial, bananas and jam. Then we drove through the streets. Curbs were painted white - easy to see at night - and where they were red and white vehicles cannot be stopped. There were some traffic lights high on posts on one side of an intersection only. Some had digital count-down indicators to change.

Along the roadside breakfast was being served. Men on low stools sat at low tables, and nearby were open drains or drains covered by cement blocks. Braziers were being used for the cooking and this added to pollution.

We stopped at a construction site. Men like ants on a timber frame were passing up minute amounts of concrete in bowls - under-utilisation of resources? Then we came to the Independence Day

procession. Leaders of each district marched in front with banners. High school students wore green longyi and white shirts. The Fire Brigade wore uniforms too, marching along to Central Park. We passed hospitals and a nurses' home on Prome Road, the ambassadorial residential area, and residential and development committees under SLORC. Houses and buses had flags flying for Independence day. Cars were decorated. Mr Tun gave a detailed explanation of the life of monks, their precepts and their physical needs – razor, parasol, girdles, needle, bowl, water strainer and robe.

We passed the May Flower Bank, which is the first bank in Burma with an automatic teller machine but which dispenses only large notes – not much use for most people. We passed an army base (peasants and young people volunteer) with living quarters for families near the old Training Centre of Indoctrination to Socialism.

Teak logs and hardwood (iron wood) are exported to Japan and Singapore from Bago (Pegu), and nearby elephants are trained in camps.

We passed a whitewashed pagoda, whitewashed because the village cannot afford gold leaf. Money was being collected at many points from passers-by for pagodas, schools and village roads. Laterite was being used for a road base – the roads were mostly very narrow. The US has offered to build a six lane highway between Rangoon and Mandalay. However the Chinese are worried that it would be used for military purposes (landing aircraft), so it has been proposed to build a line of posts down the centre of it. So far, the offer has neither been accepted or rejected.

Friesian and Jersey cows from Australia and New Zealand are crossed with tropical breeds at a breeding centre. The British brought in rubber trees from Malaysia. The government is now encouraging the growth of rubber trees on the mountains and in the southern part of the country. Unfortunately, most of the rubber trees near Rangoon have been cut down for fuelwood, hence the propagation of eucalypts for fuel. South Korean businessmen have financed clothing factories, with exports going to the USA and Western Europe.

We had our first experience of a 'pleasant house' (not convenient for women with arthritic knees) near the shrine to the guardian spirit of the road. At the shrine, floral tributes were bought and men were blessing their cars with holy water, chanting. A little further on was the war cemetery with 27,000 graves and a large Christian cross, all kept neatly and tidily.

Mango trees were grown for export to Singapore. Rain trees, originally from South America, are used to make drums. Cashew trees were grown - its nuts are 'the fruit without shame' because the seeds are on the outside - for export to Thailand (after fumigation) and China. A large Pepsi Cola factory earns much Burmese currency, but profits cannot be sent overseas so the money is used to buy agricultural products, which are then exported to earn hard currency. There were lots of tropical zebu cattle being herded, and water buffalo.

We came across a line of boys in procession with frames on their bikes in the form of stupas or trees with currency notes for the monks. They were accompanied by dancing and music.

In the rice fields, a second crop is now grown each year, irrigated from the dams. Since 1978, high yielding varieties from the Philippines have been planted in rows (not broadcast as previously). Low cost fertiliser is sold to farmers by the government. This, together with the introduction of small tractors from Yunnan (China) has trebled rice production. Most rice farms are privately owned, and about 5 to 10 acres in size.

Lower Burma became depopulated after the British settled, so Indian labourers were brought in. Money lenders lent money to the farmers at high interest rates, and the Indians took over the land. Many Indians and Pakistanis were forced to leave after independence. The State took over this land and redistributed it to the Burmese. Between the rice fields were sunflowers, mango trees, bananas, melons, radishes, cabbages, marigolds (for the temples), pigs, chickens and ducks. Teak trees were being planted on low lying ground which was well drained. Water hyacinth was a problem in some areas.

At the Shwedaun Pagoda, we heard an account of daily life in the medieval capital. A ceramics factory, recently built, was by-passed. We stopped at Zigon for lunch at a Chinese restaurant. Our lunch cost 115 kyats (duck soup, pork, chicken, shrimp and rice), plus 25 kyats for the 7-Up. The restaurant had an 'unpleasant' house. At the toll house, a record was taken of our bus passing.

We stopped at a paddy buying centre. The farmers have an average yield of 70 baskets of rice per acre. 12 baskets per acre are sold to the government at a price of 85 kyats for 46 lbs (1½ baskets). The black market rate is 200 kyats.

Our flat tyre luckily happened near a village with shady trees. It made a pleasant interlude in the open air. Irene supplied biscuits from the Rama Gardens Hotel. Then we drove into an area of very denuded hills – erosion, secondary growth – with sugar palms along the river and shadoofs for raising water. Cotton was grown and we passed a large government textiles factory.

A new bridge is being built across the Ayeyarwady (Irrawaddy) River near P'yay (Prome). In 1877, the rail line was built from Rangoon to Prome to transport the teak. Prome has a population of 80,000 people and is an important trading centre.

We stopped at Sri Ksetra, the ancient Pyu capital, which is a settlement perhaps 2000 years old. According to legend, Duttabaung founded the city where Sakka, king of the nats, held on to the tail of a dragon which delineated the city's boundaries. Walls were built around the city where there were no hills to act as natural boundaries in the fifth to ninth centuries. Sufficient food to feed the population was grown inside the city walls. In the Museum, we saw sandstone burial urns for the royal family ashes.

We went to the Bawbawgyi Pagoda in the back of ox carts. It was a solid cylindrical temple stupa, made of bricks with lime mortar, faced with mud. The stupa became the prototype for all Burmese temples. Two oxen pulled the cart through heavy sand and swamp. It was difficult to climb aboard. The ride back in the moonlight was magical. Then we had a short drive along banana lined streets to our hotel. Fairy lights revealed a lake fed by a spring with duplex

accommodation along the side of the lake. We arrived at the Mingala Resort Hotel, tired and dusty, with sore seats after more than an hour in the ox carts.

- Marie Clack

5 am - woke up after a disturbed night on a hard bed.

6 am breakfast - eggs, toast, tea and fruit juice - all served by an obliging staff, but the hotel standards were only about 1 star.

On the road at about 7 am, we stopped for an Independence Day parade celebrating the withdrawal of the British from Burma in 1948. Another stop was made at the 'giant fig tree' where flowers were sold to vehicle drivers to encourage the nats who were guardian spirits of the traffic. Before leaving, we were introduced to our first 'Pleasant House' which was just a very basic dunny.

We were driven past the war cemetery with some 27,000 graves of World War 2 soldiers from Burma and the Allied forces. Many monks, some as young as 9 years old, were passed; with shaven heads, brown robes and begging bowls.

Our route to P'yay (Prome) took us through vast rice growing areas and photo stops were made for buffalo pulling ploughs in the paddy fields. We also saw the open storage of unhusked rice, reserved for government use. This rice is of lower quality and the farmers' return is only 85 kyats per 46 lbs. The return for the farmer is somewhat better for the private sale of quality rice which returns 200 kyats per 46 lbs.

After 5 hours we were all anticipating lunch when we were stopped by a flat tyre. This enabled the photographers to capture some village life photos, and was not a real disaster. For lunch we were treated to Chinese food with soup, several meats, rice and vegetables for the cost of 115 kyats (\$US1). Our waiter even fanned us while we ate!

After passing picturesque little villages we reached a museum of ancient artefacts including funeral urns (at Sri Ksetra). We then

climbed onto ox carts and bumped along about 2 kilometres of track to an ancient 5th century brick pagoda. The sight of the ancient pagoda at sunset was ample reward for the rough ride and the return journey was a bonus, enhanced by a full moon.

Not long after, we reached our hotel at Prome after a long but most rewarding day.

- Ric Holliday

Friday 5th January 1996 - Prome to Pagan

A quiet night in the cabins of this resort around the lake - no traffic noises, no Independence Day (night) merry-making, no loud hailer at 3:30 am, no trains shunting and tooting - the opposite of our night in Rangoon. The local people in the dusty back lanes of this town gazed in bewilderment as our heavy bus of white faces squeezed its way through, but with the opening of the Mingala Resort, this will become a common sight, and the intrusion on their quiet life will be irreversible.

Irene will remember the departure for two reasons - feeding the fish in the lake, and "sitting next to a man" on the bus.

We passed areas of forest reserves (this country needs many more), sugar cane (perhaps assisted through the dry season by irrigation), cotton, sesame, peanuts and onions in dry river beds. Toddy palms have a multiplicity of uses - mainly for sugar (sap is collected from the base of leaves in the mornings, especially in February and March) and building materials (leaves and the trunks). Some palms had ladders bound to the upper trunks - we imagined young boys shinnying up the trees for the sap, rather like boys in Fiji harvesting coconuts from palms.

Roadside trees are limewashed at the base to mark the course of the road for night travel, to prevent insect attack, and to ward-off unwanted political events.

Wilga and I sat in the notorious back seat - the uneven road, the slowing and swerving for oncoming vehicles, the dips for water

courses – produced a combination of up and down, lurching and circular movements rather like those of riding a camel or elephant but played fast-forward. Last night's bullock cart ride helped ease us into this experience.

With 400 kilometres to accomplish today, we pressed on without photo stops for interesting village life, but by 9:30 am many of us were anxiously looking for the next "pleasant house". We pulled in where a group of people were heating drums of tar for road repairs – it all looked very amateurish. In addition to such road works, there is "voluntary" (unpaid) work to tidy weeds or grass at the side of the road (why not leave the grass intact, to reduce airborne dust and to prevent erosion?) and the pruning of overhanging trees.

Taungdwingyi cattle market is reputedly one of the most spectacular in south-east Asia, but to our dismay, the cattle yards were bare. We were still on a "high" from a string of new Burmese experiences yesterday, so we took this blow in our stride. The town was busy and prosperous – many people on bicycles, but no sound of motorised transport. The lonely walls of a British two-storeyed building remained, unoccupied – too big to be useful, too expensive to restore, too solid to demolish with bare hands or to disintegrate with the alternation of wet and dry seasons over decades.

Another barefoot visit – the Shweaungdaw Pagoda – drew a less than enthusiastic response until we entered the adjacent monastery – this was a surprise and a privilege for us, an invasion and interruption to the quiet, orderly routine of the monks. We were beckoned into their simple living, devotional and sleeping quarters, their privacy exposed to the flashes of high technology cameras hanging casually from our shoulders. We exhibited wealth they could only dream of and would probably not want. How long could we live with little but a hammock, a torch, a book, pen and paper and a towel?

The archaeological site of Beikthano is about 135 kilometres north of P'yay (Prome) – the earliest remains date from the 1st to 5th centuries A.D. (older than Sri Ksetra) – a large town of the P'yu people, and with no Buddha images. The slim red bricks were made of clay mixed with rice husks. Stephen may remember this afternoon for the snake he observed in the hot dry grasses.

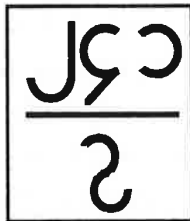
At dusk we were still a long way from our destination – we were beginning to understand the meaning of the phrase “Burmese time”. We joined the locals briefly at the waterfront at Magwe – I showed a boy the marvels of my motorised camera as it whirred and clicked while it rewound a film; I opened it, threaded a new film, shut it, the LCD display flashing numbers until it was ready for the first exposure. Mr Tun kindly provided us with Burmese pastries at a small tea-house opposite the impressive cinema. Coloured lights, staff and dinner greeted us after 9 pm on arrival in Bagan (Pagan), our pace through the darkness having been set by a VIP escort.

– Christine Edwards

The soft mist which lay over the Mingala Resort’s lake would be a strong contrast to the events of this day of 14½ hours travel. Little did we know that we were about to embark on the mobile rodeo to Bagan (Pagan) during which all participants (cowgirls/boys) would scarcely touch the bronco’s (bus) seats.

The road, its pocked and rutted surface, its edges tattered and often loose with sand, was so narrow that the driver constantly paused or ground to a jarring halt to allow oncoming traffic of bullock carts and humungously laden trucks to pass us.

There were many sights and scenes to wonder about. The textured contrasts between fields smooth, roughly ploughed or with pyramid shaped mounds on rich alluvial beds; the black digits on small



tombstone shaped markers, e.g. – did they represent tree plantation type, its group number, or maybe the identity of local village voluntary carers of the plot? (In fact, these digits were the distance from Rangoon, measured in miles and furlongs). Sometimes such volunteers were observed tidying the road side, and this included clipping away soil holding grass.

The villagers were obviously prepared to put up with any minimal conditions in order to travel. One huge lorry was packed with travellers hunched into small spaces created by 'tiering' the back of the lorry. Our sardine conditions would have been considered luxurious.

Even though it is the dry season, I think that most of us were surprised by the degree of dryness and vast open spaces. The latter, we were told by our guide, were often caused by the British exploitation of the teak forests, and not bothering to replant any replacements.

Metal towers carried wires of hydro-electric power across the countryside, while alongside our bronco route were the normal wooden poles, dusty and severely cracked by the weather.

Arriving at 11:45 am for the noon finish of the Taungdwingyi cattle market, we were all disappointed to learn that it was not being conducted. A brief respite at 5:30 along a river bank – sweet cakes and tea – helped us cope with the next hours to Pagan. How we wished that one of those several large towns could have had a suitable hotel.

– Wilga Pruden

After examining the large carp in the ornamental lake of the hotel, we set off at about 6:20 am. We travelled through lightly wooded land, past sugar cane crops and cotton plantations. The forestry department is now trying to establish faster growing trees in this area which was once covered by teak forests. Most of the houses along the way are wooden with thatched roofs, and many have a small box-like extension attached to the side at the second storey. I think these are to house the family shrine.

The road was filled with people going to work and children dressed in their green student longyis and Shan shoulder bags on their way to school. In remote areas, education was undertaken by the monks, but schools are in most parts now. In 1966–67, a literacy eradication campaign involved students going to farms and houses to help with the general work as well as to teach reading and writing.

A number of 'mezzanine' buses passed us going in both directions - these have people stacked in two layers. At least it was transport! A family moving to another village had all their belongings piled high on a truck with people perched precariously on top - I wouldn't have thought it possible! The trunks of trees lining the roads and in the villages were painted with white lime. We had noticed this wherever we went, and some members of the group mentioned that they had noticed this in other Asian countries. We were given a somewhat fanciful reason for the liming. It had something to do with the 1988 political crisis and reconciling the guardian nats of Tuesday (the day of the military takeover) and Saturday (the General's birthday) with lime - to avoid unwanted political experiences. Have I got it right? Perhaps I just was not paying attention!

As we crossed the new bridge which was built to replace one washed away in a monsoon, the view to the river flats showed people digging out piles of mud/silt, leaving extensive patterns of excavations.

The town of Aunglun appeared quite prosperous - it is a trade centre. The fire station had two aged fire trucks awaiting the call. Fires are obviously a worry, as the road was dotted with bamboo fire-watching towers. Not many were manned, so this may not be the peak fire season. The local crops were vegetables, onions and groundnuts for oil.

Children and cattle enjoyed the cool pools of the river - it was obviously the dry and dusty season. Finding a suitable "pleasant house" stop was proving rather difficult, but finally a very pleasant place was found on the sandy bank of a drying river. Overhanging bushes provided minimal privacy at an obviously popular spot! Further along the road was a group of about 15 people (several families?) camped near temporary thatched shelters. Washing was drying on bushes, and there were large tins of bitumen being heated. They were a family contracted to repair the road.

At each village, there were covered earthenware pots with a cup on the lid. They were sometimes sitting on a wooden covered platform nailed onto a tree trunk and sometimes on a little covered platform in the shade of a tree. These are the public drinking spots - the

Burmese bubbler! The pots were remarkably cool to the touch, and I noticed a man filling one by ladling water from his water carrier and straining it through a gauze filter into the public pot.

The woven and thatched houses on stilts had white picket fences around their plots of land. Very little attempt had been made to cultivate ornamental gardens, although plants in earthenware pots were sometimes grown and I noticed several nurseries selling ornamental plants. Washing was often hung out to dry on the picket fences or on poles balanced between a fence and a tree. The longyi is a very sensible garment!

As we drew into our lunch stop town (Taungdwingyi), a pretty girl approached the bus with a flat basket on a rolled towel on her head. Her goods were mandarins, peanuts, bananas and eggs. We were pleased to be able to buy the fruit, and then entered the open fronted/ open sided restaurant. This was Burmese cuisine, I understand. The "Pleasant house" behind the restaurant was attended by a girl who supplied soap and poured water from an earthenware pot over our hands.

Several gypsy children were begging at the front verandah. They were noticeable because of their comparative lack of cleanliness in person and clothing (which, incidentally, was ragged Western clothing, not longyi), and the fact that as yet, begging does not appear to be very common. I walked a little way along the main road, and watched a betel chew being assembled. A small fresh betel leaf is spread with a smear of slake-lime, then skilfully wrapped around a few parings of the areca nut (a type of palm), which is sprinkled with nutmeg (?). Three betels cost 5 kyats.

Two boys sitting at a low table called to me in beautiful English "Would you like to join us?". I lowered myself to the six-inch stool, and learned that they were 16, should have been at school but decided that a spot of practical English with an Australian tourist was a good enough substitute! Mr Wynn was disappointed that the famous Taungdwingyi cattle market was not held on that day as he had hoped. We did visit the first century Pyu city of Beikthano, about 135 kilometres north of Prome. This is an excavation site with the ruins of large brick buildings. 1122 urns have been found, but no

Buddha images. The site was rediscovered about thirty years ago. Apparently many of the bricks and stones were used in recent centuries by Indian contractors building roads and railways.

We visited a monastery with its entrance guarded by two large pink chinthas (lion-dragons). It was fascinating to see the sparsely equipped rooms where the monks live, and a room where a venerated monk had once lived and died. Mr Wynn explained various aspects of Buddha image depiction – the treatment of the robes in the carvings was particularly interesting. A group of women hovered – these were relatives of the monks who were gaining merit by helping around the place. With Mr Wynn interpreting, Ken asked what the young monks thought of us light-skinned visitors, and whether they had any knowledge of the world and Australia. The replies always insisted that they had no knowledge beyond the Buddhist teachings, and they were just not curious. So we came, we went and they will not wonder.

Our trusty bus conveyed us to Bagan (Pagan) behind a convoy of army trucks, and in the dusk we could see the many pagodas dotting the landscape. We drove between the old entrance monuments of Pagan, and arrived at the Blue Bird Hotel for dinner and a welcome rest.

– Margaret Wright

Saturday 6th January 1996 -Pagan

An excited buzz around the breakfast table in anticipation of our day in Pagan! Wasn't this to be one of the highlights of the whole tour and one of the prime reasons for participating? We were not to be disappointed – it was a very active and interesting day.

We started at the East and West pagodas of Petleik, which means 'rolled leaves'. They belong to the eleventh century and have beautiful plaques portraying scenes of the Jatakas or Previous Lives of the Buddha. It would seem from some of the plaques that the life of a monk was not quite as pure as we had been led to believe! Some of the plaques were quite exquisite and fascinating, but unfortunately many are missing and some are broken into fragments following earthquake damage.

Our next stop was the Lawkananda Pagoda which is beautifully located alongside the Irrawaddy River on a site close to what was once the busy harbour of Pagan. Lawkananda means 'Joy of the World' and it was built in the eleventh century to enshrine a holy tooth replica.

Next we went to see a lacquerware factory after receiving strict instructions that this visit was to see the factory only and a return visit would be made in the evening to the adjoining shop when there would be more time to browse and bargain.

The factory produces a number of different handicrafts such as bracelets, bowls, plates and animals, etc. The basic material is bamboo which is coated with black resin and then etched and coloured. Some are finished with gold leaf. Some have animal hair woven in strand by strand and can take many months to finish.

The reaction of the factory employees to our visit ranged from friendly smiles to outright indifference (or hidden hostility?). As in so many parts of Asia there are not even the simplest measures to protect the health of the employees – such as provision of masks so that resin fumes are not continually inhaled. One must also question what the concentrated and prolonged effect of weaving very fine individual hairs must do to human eyesight. Like many other parts of Asia, Burma is a tough place – people are employed young and burnt out quickly.

From the factory we drove to the Dhammayazika Pagoda, passing many monuments from the Pagan period which covered the landscape like mushrooms. This pagoda is unusual because it has five entrances instead of the usual four. On each of the five sides of the pagoda there is a small temple housing an image of the Buddha. The entrances to the temples, which date back to the thirteenth century, are guarded by mythical animals in the shape of a bird called Makara.

From here we walked along a thorn-strewn path to a small temple nearby which is apparently not normally visited by tourists. It is in an advanced state of disrepair and only half the Buddha was left although there were a number of small ones on the ceiling. Some of

the group climbed a dark and narrow staircase to emerge on the roof which provided a splendid view of the surrounding countryside.

The next visit was to a small village (Minnanthu) which gave us a fascinating insight into typical village life. The cattle rested contentedly outside. The men processed sesame seeds, cut corn stalks for cattle feed and made wheels for carts. The women did the washing, looked after the young children and prepared the meals. Everyone treated the matriarch of the village with a degree of respect. She invited me to join her on a raised platform inside the bamboo hut where she sat smoking a cheroot. Before leaving we were shown the village water supply which was totally disgusting. As we left some of the children were quite active asking for money. This was something we had not encountered with the children in Prome and is something which will unfortunately become more prevalent and blatant as the tourist influx gathers pace.

“Position, position, position” are the three most important factors in locating a restaurant. What better position in Pagan could you find for a restaurant than the one where we had lunch, which was right opposite the famous Shwezigon Pagoda? The lunch was excellent and afterwards we strolled across the road to visit the pagoda. Apart from its sanctity as a shrine of the holy relics of the Buddha, the Shwezigon is important architecturally because it became the prototype for later Burmese pagodas.

At our next port of call, the Ananda Temple, we were given a very good insight into the living conditions and lifestyle of the monks who inhabit this monastery. We left the Ananda in time to watch the sunset over the Irrawaddy from the Bupaya Pagoda, which is perched high on the river at a vantage point.

Some watched the sunset from the terrace of the pagoda while others descended the steps to the beach below and watched from there. There were a number of impressive young Burmese around the area, many of whom spoke good English. They were the closest thing to “yuppies” we saw during the whole trip.

For the evening meal we went to a totally delightful outdoor restaurant called the River View. This was also perched high on the

banks of the Irrawaddy and provided a perfect close to an excellent day. Not only was the food quite excellent but the pleasant house turned out to be a very pleasant five star facility. Finally, on the way back to the hotel, we stopped to shop at the lacquerware factory shop which had remained open specifically for us. In addition to handicrafts a number of the group rather surprisingly were able to purchase George Orwell's novel "Burmese Days", a symbolic and fitting end to a very stimulating day.

- Richard Wilson

Considering its close proximity to such a sacred Buddhist site, the nude calendar in the dining room of the Blue Bird Hotel seemed incongruous - especially since the young staff looked so fresh and innocent.

Our friendly, very pretty room maid, Ma Win Win Aye, eagerly agreed to have her photo taken on the little arched bridge in the central courtyard of the hotel. To see her child-like 20 year old delight at receiving her gift of a pink lipstick was very humbling and more so when she rushed to her personal cupboard to reciprocate with her 'lucky lucky owl'. With her friend, she cycles six miles from her village (before dawn) to commence her ten hour day, from 6 am to 4 pm, six days per week. On her day off, she helps her mother sell fish at the market, cleans the house, washes clothes and cooks - all without the aid of electricity!

This morning we received our first whisper of the extreme lengths Margaret will go to seal her lips against germs whilst washing her hair. Irene will clarify this at a later stage!

Inveterate photographer Stephen utilised the magic of the dawn light to capture the nearby pagodas which enjoyed their golden period between 1057 AD to 1287 AD.

Mr Wynn's wonderfully detailed account of legends concerning the temples and pagodas on our Pagan itinerary enhanced our very hands-on inspection of some of the less touristic ruins approached through briars, thistles, thorns and cactus 'trees'.

The fact that these superb pagodas (3000 still remain out of 13000) have withstood dismantling to rebuild fortifications to resist the onslaught of Kublai Khan, abandonment since the fourteenth century, and several major earthquakes, attests to the superior building techniques which are certainly not practised today.

To view this impressive archaeological site even in its 'natural' state of disrepair emphasised the amazing effort of humans to venerate their religion. What a spectacle 1000 years ago! The 1996 view from the high platform of the Taumyethna Temple wasn't bad either! Another great panorama was viewed from the terraces of the circular Dhammayazika Pagoda. The riverside location of the scaffold-clad Lawkananda Pagoda was very spectacular and should be memorable to Margaret who purchased her first temple bells here at a very 'good morning' price.

The guides tried to give us a nice balance of pagoda and village life (the latter being a bit clean and contrived compared to the real scene as observed along the roadside). The cigarettes and torches (optional extras?) beside the monks' beds at the monastery reminded Jan Wilson of her days at boarding school. Hopefully the NEGS dormitory beds were a little less spartan!

Our excellent Burmese lunch (rice and three dishes, usually pork, beef and chicken) followed by delicious paper-wrapped cinnamon layered sweets was partaken in a typical friendly restaurant with what could be a million dollar view of the gleaming golden stupa of the Shwezigon Pagoda opposite. Shame about the metal roofed walkway and swathes of electric wires.

Sunset over the Irrawaddy from the Bupaya Pagoda was particularly memorable for those who ventured down the steep banks of the river on to the sandy shore. Here women transported clay water vessels - three balanced on their heads plus one in each hand - from barge boats to a holding bay 200 metres from the water line. The dexterity of these tiny fine-boned women who balanced their difficult-shaped load and negotiated a rough, sandy, uneven uphill path was incredible.

Even more admirable were those women carrying sand in wicker baskets balanced on their tiny (often pretty) heads. I hope the remuneration was worth the physical effort, but I fear it would not compensate for such slave-like drudgery. A winch and sledge would seem quite a feasible alternative.

This outstanding end-of-day scene on the banks of the river was followed by an excellent dinner (six courses for 440 kyats) at the village of Thiripiyitsaya at a wonderfully located outdoor restaurant overlooking the superb river glistening under a full moon. It was the conclusion to a magic day which epitomised Burma.

- Vanessa Arndell

On the fourth morning of our odyssey one of our group decided it was time for a shampoo. Conscious of the health problems involved should contaminated water enter the mouth during the shampoo, she used sticking plaster across her lips. She was then hygienically sealed. Now for the shampoo sachet. This is usually opened by placing the sachet between the teeth and tearing the corner. The operation proved fruitless as her teeth were protected by the barricade of sticking plaster. Just one of the trials of travelling.

In a country where English is not generally spoken it can be difficult to make oneself understood. One of our party pulled the curtains to greet the morning, and seeing a male member of the hotel staff she waved. He waved back and pointed to the door. She replaced the curtain, but pulled it aside for another look. There were two men there this time, both pointing to the door. Quickly she replaced the curtain, but a message had been received and moments later there was a knock at the door. The staff were ready to help in any way.

The tour took us to an arid landscape where the ruins of thousands of pagodas were evidence of the religious fervour which had swept the country. A visit to a small village showed the self-sufficiency of the inhabitants. Men worked the fields and milled the grain, women cooked tasty meals over small fires and the children went to school. These children were excited to receive gifts of pens; the young girls asked for lipstick.

It had been a long day, travelling on roads that called for a skilled driver. Both the driver and the mechanic helped make the drive a pleasant one. The day ended on the banks of the Irrawaddy River. This mighty stream irrigates the plains that stretch as far as the eye can see. Dinner that evening was alfresco. The sun lowered itself as a giant red balloon through the red haze of the dying day, its reflection mirrored in the vast expanse of the river. As the sun set in the west, so the moon rose in the east, the stars began to twinkle and the night slowly wrapped itself around us.

- Irene Richards

Sunday 7th January 1996 -Pagan to Mandalay

Once again the day began early, but today it was for the journey along the road to Mandalay. Today was also the day most of the group had opted to try sticky rice for breakfast. Stephen and Carol hadn't. They must have had a premonition about our Mandalay trip that had escaped the other 21 travellers. Then again they just might not like sticky rice. But sticky rice it was! Christine, Ken and Jim did the group proud by eating all their brekky. As for the rest? Half-fried eggs began to look a lot better as the meal went on, and lots of breakfasts went back to the cook that morning.

Not long after we left the hotel in Pagan, we picked up two lone walkers - Vanessa and Richard - who had been advised to stay "on the bitumen after 7 am". And as they did, we found them! Then it was time for a group photo, hopefully with a family in their ox cart on the road into Pagan. But it was not to be. The oxen didn't like foreigners or cameras. But Tun certainly did. He had cameras hanging from each arm and around his neck. And despite the group photos he took, the best will probably be the one Wilga took of Tun juggling the cameras.

The next stop was Kyaukpadaung market where the time limit of 20 minutes became 35. But it was worth it when some of the group came back with faces painted with sandalwood, and Dick presented each of the women with a beautiful red rose.

Along the way we stopped to take photographs of Mount Popa after which Tun told us an extraordinary story about his younger 19-year old brother whose visit to the mountain resulted in his death.

A little spooked, we arrived there at 10:15 am. There was a climb down to the village and a long and steep climb to the top of the mountain, so some chose to stay in the village below and relax. Phil should have, and he would not have had to deal with an impertinent little monkey complaining to its mother that Phil should be bitten for an imaginary slight to the little "darling".

The climb was followed with lunch at 11:45 am. Had we known, all would have avoided the fish dish. Phil and Robbie did, and could remember the rest of the day and the next. Others remembered it for a very different reason. Not even the Mandalay beer could kill the bug that got us. And so the trip along the road to Mandalay was a slow(er) and painful one.

We stopped at Meiktilar at about 7 pm and so had missed the Mandalay sunset. The day's bus trip ended late, and those who were still able to face food dined across the road at the Luxury Restaurant where the menu boasted European food.

- Monica Thom

Leaving our overnight hotel at Pagan to find stupas bathed in early morning light gave a soft golden glow to an exciting landscape of so many monuments. One of these was chosen as a backdrop for numerous group photographs, taken by our guide Mr Tun, who hung so many cameras around his neck that he made an amusing sight. All this was watched by a farmer, his wife and family from atop their bullock dray.

Onward through the heavily dotted landscape of stupas, eventually leaving them behind, we came into flat, scrubby country. Toddy palm plantations appeared on both sides, and was followed by a spine of mountains towering on the right which, which viewed from above is a sharp spine with flat country around. This was caused by a plate of land being forced upwards.

We had a fascinating walk through the market town of Kyaukpadaung, where fresh fruit, vegetables and flowers, including red roses, were found, along with many other products for local people. Mr Tun dragged all those clicking cameras back to the bus and we were on our way through undulating country, elevation and growth increasing until, in the distance, the first view of Mount Popa, topped inspiringly by its pagoda. A winding climb up the mountain for a photo stop close to the pagoda let some of the group look down on a cluster of buildings of monastery-style architecture.

I could only admire those who climbed to the top of the mountain, but I chose the easy way of a slow walk along the village way with an enjoyable "cup that cheers but not inebriates". A decision was made to have lunch here, so Mount Popa turned into a leisurely stop.

But alas and alack! Our afternoon trip brought on a rash of illness for five of our travellers - a result we assumed was caused by something ingested at lunch. This necessitated a number of hurried stops, requiring a system of communication to the driver for fast action. A late arrival resulted at our hotel in Mandalay, with eating out for those hardy survivors requiring a little sustenance. An eventful day!

- Nan Warren

The combination of fresh Pagan morning air and the sticky rice breakfast especially organised by Mr Tun spurred the group with enthusiasm on to the road to Mandalay. The first stop at Mount Popa tested the stair climbing ability of most but not to be outdone by very elderly ladies, most made it to the top.

An enjoyable (at the time) lunch was followed by the long, bouncy ride. Alas, part way along the dreaded lurgy (attributed to the fish of the hitherto enjoyable lunch) caught up with several and the remainder of the road to Mandalay was a series of short runs and abrupt halts. Full marks to the mechanic who showed unfailing sympathy and kind assistance to the sick. (It wasn't the dawn which came up like thunder on the road to Mandalay!). Seldom have so many been so glad to see the hotel in Mandalay!

- Unsigned

Monday 8th January 1996 - Mandalay

After yesterday's long journey, it was pleasant to sleep in a while – the rooms were comfortable and the pillows lower. But not everyone was down for breakfast.

A pre-breakfast stroll along the main street showed us that Mandalay was security conscious; many of the houses had high walls topped with broken glass and then with strands of barbed wire above. But the street sweepers had been out and the roads were full of bicycles, tricycles and cars; the pavements with people, the well stocked stalls with bright Chinese goods, and the street posts had a formidable tangle of electricity wires.

We drove to Galway Jetty, built in 1890, to board our flat-bottomed vessel which was ready to take us to Mingun village overlooking the Ayeyerawady (Irrawaddy) River. Numerous quickly-made dwellings along the river's edge gave seasonal shelter to the workers farming the dry season crops – all to be harvested before the annual monsoon's clean sweep of the river banks.

We watched little hand-hewn teak boats being dragged upstream by family members walking along the tow path. A huge raft laden with glazed pots was drifting downstream from some clay producing village upstream. A haze from domestic fires gave the scene a traditional Eastern gentleness.

In an hour we reached the village of Mingun. A visit to the old age hostel was first. The 'over 70s' were sitting down to their bowls of rice and dutifully chanting the praises of the donors of the food. There were 125 residents. We were then accompanied by children to the Settawya Pagoda presided over by nuns, and we were helped by small hands up to the top. There were seven symbolic terraces.

The last ascent was the earthquake torn base of the Mingun Pagoda, designed to be 150 metres high. 76 steps gave a perfect vantage point of the countryside. Afterwards, cool drinks for our group and the pushers, and a quick trip back to Mandalay with the current.

After lunch we drove past the palace walls with their restored moat, in one corner of which floated an amazing duck-shaped restaurant. We visited the arts and crafts area – first to see young girls weaving silk – not much time for shopping – Vanessa and Naida bought some. It was very cheap for hand woven material. The girls' hours were 6 am to 8 pm.

Next we went to the marble carvers' area and saw some fine Buddhas being made. A visit to the U Bein Bridge gave variety to our day. It was old and interesting, and the surrounding area was lovely. Finally we crossed the Ava Bridge across the Irrawaddy River, built by the British in 1934 to the Sagaing Hills.

– Naida Holliday

After morning call at 7:15 am, many people were looking forward to breakfast without sticky black rice – even though they truly understand that all experiences are worthwhile.

After the explosive events of Sunday, most people struggled to make the 8:30 am deadline. The seven mile drive to the jetty provided an interesting look at what might be termed the Mandalay morning peak hour.

The boat trip up the Irrawaddy River to Mingun was brilliant. Sit under cover or on the roof and experience the life of the river bank, the assorted water craft, the hospitality of the crew and the general calm of the journey.

Upon arrival, the attractive Buddhist Home for the Elderly looked worth booking in to, but as it turned out to be only for nuns the interest dwindled for most people. The visit to the infirmary/old people's home provided great insight into the culture of Burma.

The next stop was Myatheindan (also called Settawya) Pagoda. The base has a concentric circle form with seven terraces. Women are allowed to climb this pagoda because of where the relic is situated, and so this is a pagoda much favoured by women.

Just after the group's descent, Margaret and Graham arrived by private boat and once again joined up with the others! Some people just a greater need than others to get away from the crowd. Onwards, and a visit to the Mingun Bell, which is the world's second largest bell and weighs 90 tons. The bell was to be dedicated to Mingun Pagoda, but it was never completed and is in ruins.

We then went on and visited the ruins of the Mingun Pagoda. This was to be the world's tallest pagoda but King Bodawpaya left it unfinished when he died in 1819. What remained was damaged severely by the earthquake of 1838. An excursion up the 76 steps of the ruined pagoda provided a great view of the area and it was well worth the climb. Cold drinks at the bottom were welcome and we met accommodating, helpful and very flattering children who very much added to our knowledge of local culture.

The river trip back was just as peaceful as the first and really appreciated by all aboard. Eleven group members braved lunch at The Luxury European Restaurant (just around the corner from the hotel and very handy) to load calories and prepare for an intensive fun-filled afternoon.

After dropping off Margaret's broken glasses, we headed off to Achiak Lunyaryaw Weaving Factory. The weavers work for at least 8 hours and up to 14 hours per day, seven days a week (it is usually closer to 14 hours). They are paid between 1500 and 2000 kyats for a completed piece of work (depending on the type of material) and each piece takes up to 14 days to complete. We could see the weavers who were on display but not the ones out the back. One can feel justified in feeling a sweat-shop was in operation behind the woven curtain!

A journey through the Mandalay streets brought us to a stone carving establishment. A medium-sized Buddha image stands about 4 feet high and takes one month to complete. Travelling on to Amarapura we paid a visit to U Bein's Bridge. We took a 15 minute stop for photographs and to take a bridge walk. The bridge is one kilometre long, built in the 18th century, is made from teak and provides interesting views of life on the shores of Taungthaman Lake.

We then proceeded to Sagaing by crossing the Ava Bridge. This bridge was first built in 1934 by the British who then bombed it during the Second World War to slow the Japanese advance. We paid a visit to the Kaunghmudaw Pagoda which is situated 5 miles north-west of Sagaing and was modelled on the Mahaceti Pagoda in Sri Lanka. The phases, coloured, neon lighting around the head of the Buddha image caught the attention of many group members.

A happy but exhausted group of travellers returned to the hotel and quite a few ventured over to The Luxury European Restaurant for dinner. Our presence seemed to cause delays with service at times but the varied menu seemed to cater quite adequately to people's individual needs at this point in the tour.

- Phil Brown

Tuesday 9th January 1996 - Maymyo

We left Mandalay early in the morning for the old British hill station of Pyin Oo Lwin (Maymyo), named after an officer in the British Army. As we went into the hills we saw plantations of green gage plums and mangoes of which there were eight varieties. We saw picket fences and then arrived at one of the viewing points where there is a pagoda. We were told it was built by the grandfather of the custodian who had great fortune as he had received first prize in a Rangoon lottery. The grandson now lived there with a monk and they both obtained food from the local village. The view would have been spectacular but for the haze, as there seemed to be fires in the valley as everything was very dry.

We saw an overturned truck - one's heart must go out to the family for it must be a great financial loss for them. The road was quite steep and as we ascended we saw coffee and the Golden Teak plantations. Young coffee requires shade to grow so I found this most interesting.

When we alighted from the bus, the air was a delightful temperature, and we saw cherry trees in blossom and well established gums. These were in the grounds of the Nan Yaing Hotel where we had lunch.

Before lunch we went to the Botanical Gardens, a large sprawling affair with lakes, pagodas, cherry trees and a number of locals.

The Brits did live well. Lunch was soup, roast chicken with vegetables, and fruit for dessert, all served by waiters in black dinner suits and bow ties. The rooms were large, high ceilings and open fires. Oh!!! - to have been here 60 years ago.

From there we went to the fine Hotel Thirimyaing, once called Candacraig, where the young British gentlemen came to stay. Restoration is taking place so I hope they get it right - the staircase was just great. Back into town we saw many old houses which would have been great in their day but like all of us in this stage of the trip were just a bit tired.

We saw the Defence Forces Institute of Technology and a Y.M.C.A. being built. Then we made a brief visit to the Pwegauk waterfalls which I felt could have been left out of our trip.

Back to Mandalay, and at about four-thirty down to the river to see the water buffalo pulling large logs of teak from the river. It was most interesting in the late afternoon sun, but the whole area looked very squalid, with children and dogs everywhere. Finally, we drove to Mandalay Hill, all of which is sacred ground. We walked bare footed to the top for a spectacular view of the sun setting over Mandalay. Then back to our hotel for dinner.

- Graham Kent

Everyone recovered and on board for an early start. Stops at View Point half way up the ascent, but the atmosphere was a bit hazy. I think I saw the first petrol station I have seen in Burma; funny little bowsers not like any others I have seen.

Interesting reminders of the British. Some very substantial English type houses and hotels. The Botanic Gardens were another reminder of the British presence. Still beautifully maintained by the Burmese.

Restoration work on an old hotel written about by Theroux. Will they get it right? Doubtful! European style lunch at hotel was quite pleasant for a change. Visited waterfall – not sure why.

Back on the bus with the usual alacrity and back on the road to Mandalay. Stopped by the traffic police – all above board. A splendid rendition of “The Road to Mandalay” was led by Janet and Graham. Janet knew the tune and Graham knew the words.

Bullocks working down by the river – deplorable conditions for man and beast. Finally sunset at Mandalay Hill.

– Janice Doyle

Wednesday 10th January 1996 - Mandalay to Inle Lake

After another delayed start we retraced the last section of our Road to Mandalay to Meiktilar. Because it was now daylight we were able to observe the extensive farming activities as we headed to Meiktilar. Most of the visible countryside was laid out to irrigation and plots were being ploughed by oxen-pulled wooden single furrow ploughs. These plots would eventually be sown to rice.

A number of grain depots were seen by the road side. Some crops observed as we passed by included cotton, beans, sunflowers, maize, mangoes, cassava, vegetables, melons, millet and chillies. The colourful chillies drying whilst spread out on the dry earth gave off a pungent aroma.

The farm curtilage comprised a residence and animal shelters, usually constructed of plaited or woven bamboo walls with thatched roofs. Scattered around were water pots, carts and ploughs. Invariably there was a dog (Asian breed) lurking about or else lazing in the shade.

Animals observed in the house yard as well as in the fields included zebu cattle, goats (usually minded by a shepherd), long-tailed sheep, and oxen. Amongst the trees growing by the side of the road were Golden Teak, rain trees and Eucalypts. Neat hay stacks were

scattered across the countryside. As we neared Meiktilar the land became noticeably less fertile with severe erosion in places.

After lunch at Meiktilar we continued our journey to Inle Lake. At first the country was relatively flat, but it soon became mountainous. Our bus clung to the steep slopes to avoid falling into the deep gullies. After observing the devastation caused by clearing the forest, it was refreshing to observe some natural forest growth supported by reforestation. Delays throughout the day in boarding the bus resulted in our arrival time at Inle Lake (at Nyaungshwe) in the dark.

- Richard Arndell

Departure was achieved by 7:50 am. Yet another visit was made to the glasses repair shop and then we were bouncing southwards en route to Meiktilar for lunch, no doubt with memories of the 'fatal' fish lunch a few days earlier. We stopped to wander through the markets at Kyaukse with its array of fruits, vegetables, grains and meats. The fish selection was particularly poignant.

South from Mandalay, the country rises gradually across the level plain which is crossed by broad, sandy streams. It becomes increasingly arid.

Meiktilar was reached just before noon. Lunch at the government-run Hun Zin Hotel would have taken too long, so a local restaurant, the Shwe Ohn Pin, was found offering rice, chicken and vegetables without a wait.

After a few slow kilometres east from Meiktilar (mainly because of traffic), we passed through Thazi, a major rail junction from which we would catch the night train to Rangoon in two days' time.

East of Thazi, on a narrow, slow road, we entered the hills and commenced climbing. The temperature steadily dropped as did our speed on the steep, winding and dusty road to Kalaw where a 'pleasant house' stop provided one member of the group with an unexpected multiple experience.

On into the night across the Shan Plateau (well, really up and down a series of horsts and grabens) to the Hupin Hotel at Nyaungshwe (Yaungshwe) on Inle Lake. Here a delicious dinner in the hotel followed by some traditional Shan dances and martial arts helped to relax our travel worn bodies.

- Jim Box

Thursday 11th January 1996 - Inle Lake

On Wednesday evening, dinner was our own arrangements. But there was a wonderful traditional dance performance for us at 9 pm. Costumes included a mythical animal looking like a sheep (looked like deer to me), dark dresses and the same with blue tops (traditional dances on lake dwellers). There was a Shan martial arts dance performed by the men. A highlight was the beautiful costumes representing nine mythical creatures like birds in a dance symbolising the love between people.

Once again I awoke at 4 am as the town clock chimed on the strike of 4. By 5 am I was fully awake due to the chanting and the dogs. My room mate remained indisposed. The scheduled 7 am wake-up call proved unnecessary for me.

We assembled at 8 am to go by bus to the boats for our trip on Inle Lake. It appears to be a rift valley lake, very shallow. At 8:20 am, we boarded a boat with an outboard motor and five chairs from the hotel with an umbrella for each passenger for protection against the sun and/or spray. The channel was marked by a white fence on both sides. Boats loaded with produce and/or people going to town - rice in bags, rocks, vegetables, tropical fruits and oil (?) drums (perhaps of diesel as back load), seagulls followed the boat, perhaps after the fish drawn to the surface by the wash.

Fishermen with nets and traps in dug-out canoes used leg power to row the boats. Nylon nets were being used. Some men were winding water weeds around poles and gathering mud to make floating islands on bamboo platforms. Some potash was put on top of the soil and weed. Blocks of island gardens were up to 200 yards long by one to two yards wide with space for canoes to be used to

cultivate, husband and harvest the crops, which were flowers (e.g. asters), tomatoes, garlic, onions, chillies, cucumbers, cauliflower, cabbage, peas, beans, taro and bananas. Ten islands can provide a living; each block costs 16,000 kyats and provides 10 to 15 years of production. Bamboo poles anchor the floating islands to the shallow lake floor. When a person stands on an island, he sinks into the mud and water, hence the weed, mud and potash stained socks left behind in the boat.

Very pleasant 'pleasant houses' were suspended over the water. Users supplied extra nutrients to the lake from a height. At 11:30 am we saw the weaving of scarves and longyis. I touched some woven silk and had to give a present (pen). I gave the mechanic a longyi, he bargained for us and bought presents - bone ring or bracelet and broach - became marks of adoptive mothers and grandmother. Ywama was a very pleasant village, clean and fresh smelling with little air pollution. New tribes were settled around the lake from lower Burma. The Phaung Daw Oo Pagoda was built in the 12th century, and housed fat Buddhas. Men were allowed to buy gold leaf and place it on the Buddha images. Women were not permitted. A gold leaf encrusted sacred hamsa bird was on an obelisk near the 4 mile mark on the lake where a karaweik boat capsized. The lake is 13 miles long (sign on channel 3 miles/10 miles). The boat did 12 miles per hour along the channel.

We were hassled by traders on the way to the village, the only unpleasant part of the visit. There were cheap but good quality goods, especially Shan bags, for sale at the market under the pagoda and along the lake front. There were no security problems for the gardens and the village, as people can keep a close watch on boat movements.

After lunch we left for Taunggyi on a road constructed only 2 1/2 years ago. Separate routes up and down made for a safe and quick climb up the Shan Plateau, a climb of perhaps 1800 metres. Taunggyi was founded by Sir James George Scott as a British hill station. We called in at a grotty temple with a view below obscured by trees. Taunggyi is a former market village being developed with modern buildings. I found lovely apples in the crowded old traditional market.

At 5 pm we arrived at the government hotel, which was run down with "my lights are dim, I cannot see" and exposed wires pushed into the power point for the standard lamp. It was a let-down after the wonderful Inle Lake experience.

- Marie Clack

The tinny chimes of the Nyaungshwe village clock sound four times but then blessed silence reigns again. It is not until an hour later that the amplified chanting from the local pagoda begins. Is it music to Burmese ears? There's a slight chill in the air and mist drifting across the lake.

After breakfast we take to the piroques. Five comfortable wooden chairs are arranged in single file down the narrow hull and umbrellas have been thoughtfully placed by each chair as protection against sun, wind, spray, or what you will. These boats seem to have been constructed along conventional western boat building lines but others that pass us appear to be simply giant teak logs, hollowed out, like dug-out canoes. The sight of us all is hilarious and brings to mind pith-helmeted European explorers being transported along dark African rivers by trusty natives.

Our boatman is a skilled leg-rower and manoeuvres the craft away from the landing by supporting himself on one leg while with the other wrapped around the oar he guides and propels the boat. Safely away, he starts the outboard motor and we gather speed. The breeze is bracing and Ken, breasting the wind in the prow, with Carol behind him, dons his life jacket for warmth and then tries to use his umbrella as a shield.

We stop to look at traditional leg-rowers moving gently along and at fishermen with conical nets specially adapted to the shallow waters of the lake. On again and we begin to pass serious cultivation. Marshalled rows of climbing beans, red chillies in profusion, trellises heavy with cucumbers, laden tomato plants and expansive plantings of asters: pinks, mauves and whites. And they are all floating! Their support and nutrients come from platforms, bamboo based and then built up with water weed, sand and fertilisers. Our boatman rolls

some small sections over so that we can see the roots and foliage growing lushly in the clear water. An allotment costs about 16,000 kyats (\$US160) and, with care, will be productive for twenty years. The farmers' houses are anchored to the lake bottom by bamboo poles and thus are fairly stable but the gardens can be moved and towed to other areas of the lake. Here it is possible to move house AND garden. We drift up and down these watery paths, wondering at it all.

Forward again at good speed. Suddenly, in a narrow section, it appears that we are about to collide with several other boats. Hands reach out to grab our boat. hands full of goods for sale! This is part of the floating market. We are entreated to buy: books of tattoo patterns, woven hats, small silver boxes, carved figures, opium weights, umbrellas... Selling pitches range from the irresistible smile to the incredulous sigh of disbelief that we could resist such bargains, to the recital of the matchless virtues and quality of this never-again-to-be-offered-for-sale merchandise. It is expected that every tourist will administer an injection of cash into the local economy. So hard to get away.

We press on again along a widening canal.....

And then I see, through half-closed eyes

San Marco's golden dome arise....

No, no. This is Asia. But there is a strange affinity between things the world over and what we are seeing is the Phaung Daw Oo Pagoda. It is amazing what edifices men erect to some god while the common people live in squalor. Could the Buddha's smile be a trifle smug?

Inside the pagoda the sanctuary is off-limits to women but men are busily pressing gold leaf onto the image. Mr Tun assures me that Burma is actually a country of great equality and it is only in this area of religious belief that the barriers exist. High on the pagoda walls there is a painting of the Royai Barge as it used to grandly cruise the waters of the lake.

Enquiring for the 'pleasant house' some of us are directed outside. Three little piers extend out over the water with a covered area at their ends. Two men hurry along the left hand pier only to be called back by our little mechanic, doubled up with laughter and giggling.

"Monk, monk!" Three categories here: men, women and monks. These conveniences deserve a three star rating. Ozone fresh, fully air-conditioned and automatic flushing they even provide a delightful view of fish and fully open water lilies below.

In the surrounding village stallholders are keen to sell us their goods and weavers are at work at their looms. Commercially-minded, they demand money for photographs.

The trip back to Nyaungshwe village is accomplished full-throttle and lunch is taken at the Hupin Hotel. Before leaving on the bus we have time for a quick look at the village. There is an interesting line of sausages hung out to mature on a rope line and a delightful barber shop with wonderful carved teak chairs.

Then on to Taunggyi, which is the headquarters of the north-eastern military command and also known as a centre for smuggling activities and opium distribution. The climb up from the lake is steep but recent roadworks have developed a one-way system so that there are no electrifying confrontations between upward and downward traffic – an interesting comment on the power of the military to accomplish things.

The town has an air of considerable prosperity and commercial enterprise compared to most other centres, and there is an amazing variety of imported goods in the shops and market. All the same it is a singularly unprepossessing place and even the view is spoilt by haze. One fascinating little cameo is the local dental surgery, its window full of gleaming crowns and sets of dentures. Inside, beside the chair, hangs the ancient drill which is powered by what looks like the original Singer sewing machine treadle mechanism. May the patron saint of all travellers preserve us all from experiencing dental emergencies here!

Most of the group visits the Wish Granting Pagoda on the top of the hill overlooking the town, and then we drive to the Taunggyi Hotel. Can there be anything worse than a partly-built hotel in a far-flung Russian city? The architects of the Taunggyi Hotel must surely have derived their inspiration from such a building. The bedrooms are cavernous with a cheerful stripe of dark brown, painted by a

workman with severe astigmatism, along the base of the walls. The bathrooms are co-ordinated to this colour scheme, their cracked tiles and crooked amenities adding a certain *je ne sais quoi* to the overall ambience. A faded laundry list decorates the wall informing the guest that a lady may have a brassiere laundered for 20 kyats while a girdle (darn it all... I left mine at home!) is a bargain at 10 kyats. The pervading cold seems to have seeped through the walls and into the very mattresses.

At dinner a brave attempt has been made to serve the dishes with style and Naida's avocados are passed around with little yelps of appreciation. And there's still a little of that plum wine!

- Janet Wilson

Friday 12th January 1996 - Taunggyi to Thazi

Stephen said that Taunggyi in the past few years has been transformed from a simple town to a bustling place boasting a wide main street lined with many buildings under construction. It was a hive of activity from people in the markets and speeding along the roads. Many of the signs were in English.

Having collected some money from us for a Taunggyi Anglican Church which he and Margaret Wright had found the previous evening, Stephen presented it to the minister at about 6:20 am - evidently a barely sustained existence.

Early morning mist hung across the mountain folds and distant fields. A line of burgundy clad bare shouldered monks was observed being led through a village by two of them who shouldered a long pole upon which were hung their eating vessels.

The landscape was very like Australia's, especially that of the Cootamundra/Wagga Wagga district. Many crops were grown, and lots of homes were being constructed of bricks laid between timber. This was a much wealthier district.

A large lake at the entrance to Pindaya was surrounded by substantial homes and clean streets, which gave the impression of a comfortable, secure economy in the district.

Approaching the pagoda complex of Pindaya Caves, the whole hillside was seen to be dotted with gold tipped pagodas. At the main complex, the overlapping layers of corrugated iron roof of the covered way (in various stages of rust) seemed like a snake's scales as it went in an uneven line to the cave at the top.

The 64 kilometre five hour journey to Thazi afforded another opportunity to view the valleys and rolling hills seen two days before. There was a brief, unexplained visit to Ye Ya primary school. Vanessa Arndell presented her gifts of pens and stationery as did some other members of the group. The extreme simplicity of the unlit, unpainted primary school building was slightly bettered by the larger building. All children were learning English and could say 'thank you' for sweets and pens given to them

– Wilga Pruden

After an unexpectedly cold night, we travelled in the hills above the flat alluvial country along parts of the famous Burma Road. If only roads could speak what stories of heroism and defeat, of torture and survival could be revealed. The road wound tortuously around bends that only an experienced driver, like ours, could casually negotiate. The Burmese road rules leave passengers wondering if they will see the day out. All traffic, coming, passes on the left hand side where the passengers alight. As the bus is a right-hand drive and the driver can't really see what is happening on the left hand side, it fell upon our wonderful mechanic to get passengers off safely. The first stop after leaving Taunggyi was to make a donation to a small Christian church struggling for survival among the pagodas of the devout Buddhists.

Travelling along roads in an unknown land is like looking at a kaleidoscope. Every turn of the road revealed an unexpected scene. The country opened out into fields of grain, with workers harvesting. Another turn showed a patchwork of fields sown with grain, vegetables and flowers.

Cherry trees flowering among the evergreens gave the scene an English countryside air. Zebu cattle worked in the fields, at times water buffalo were seen wallowing in water holes after a hard day's work. At almost every turn there was something to see – a truck with one wheel off the road, its load of potatoes shored up – a wait while a section of road was blown up; when the dust cleared we negotiated the debris.

A visit to an underground shrine (Pindaya Caves) was, perhaps, the highlight of the day. Paths meandered among over 8000 Buddha images, large and small. These were donated from the 14th century on and are still revered.

A small school was visited where the children showed an interest in our group, some speaking remarkably good English. A donation of equipment was received with enthusiasm. Then on the road again to end our journey with a train trip. The train had come from Mandalay and we joined it at Thazi for an overnight trip to Yangon (Rangoon). We all reclined in our seats and dreamed of the events of the past ten days. What wonderful dreams!

- Irene Richards

We had an early start, beginning with a call into the Anglican Church at Taunggyi with some contributions from our group for the parish needs.

A foggy, rough and winding road gave way to bright sunshine at Pindaya. We passed a cluster of dozens of cone shaped pagodas near the entrance to the Pindaya Caves. Climbing up about 100 steps we entered a most interesting cave housing 8094 Buddha images from various ages and places. The caves were enormous underground caverns with limestone formations. Buddha images were made of various materials in many sizes.

We arrived back at Aungban for lunch and to pick up one of our group who had been unwell. We were only about 65 miles from Thazi but on account of the road conditions the journey would take about 6 hours. A visit to a primary school on the way was most rewarding

and the gifts of pens, pencils and calculators we made to the needy teachers and children were most welcome. We passed groups of youths and girls carrying gravel for road works and learned that they earned about \$US0.50 per day. This would be cost of travel in the cramped open buses from one village to another.

At 8:30 pm after a pleasant Chinese meal we boarded the train at Thazi Station for Rangoon. Before boarding the train we presented the driver and mechanic with gifts and expressions of our thanks for their help and co-operation. This finished the bus portion of our conducted tour ably led by Dr Stephen Codrington and assisted by our guide and interpreter Mr Tun.

- Ric Holliday

Saturday 13th January 1996 - Thazi to Rangoon

I awoke before dawn to hear the sounds of village life outside the train - a beeping horn to announce 5 am, amplified chanting, and the crowing of roosters. The spaciousness of the compartment - better than Business Class on a Boeing - compensated somewhat for several hours of having been jostled about in all directions at once (as if we were in the back seat of the bus again), the din of jangling metal magnified by the opening of the door which a zealous employee re-opened as soon as Ken tried to close it, and the cold draught through grilled shutters. Wilga looked like a bandit in her measures to keep warm - her peaked cap down to her eyebrows, a T-shirt over nose, mouth and neck, a yachtsman's wind jacket, the green loose cover from her seat commandeered to cover her legs.

We peered through dust-smearred windows at a misty, smoky morn - family groups huddled around breakfast fires, others on bullock carts plodding into the fields for another day's work. The sun rose at 6:40 as a golden red disc, like the yolk from a brown egg (but don't all eggs in Burma come in pairs?). A scattering of slim whitewashed stupas assured me I was still in the same country. Graham shocked us with another of his 100 decibel coughs - sounded like reveille at the T.B. clinic!

Suddenly, denser greener vegetation, palms and banana trees, a sports stadium, queues for buses, and we were in Yangon (Rangoon) again, on time.

Back to the Euro-Asia Hotel with its steep, narrow, Amsterdam-like steps, for a morning's R & R – washing, sleeping, unpacking, visiting the Gem Museum perhaps.

In the afternoon, a chance to shop-til-you-drop at the Bogyoke Aung San (Scott) Markets – especially textiles, jewellery and lacquerware – small shops crammed with goods, which soon started to look the same. “Wha' coun'ly?... Vely chea'... You buy plesen'?”

Snag! The bus wouldn't start outside the Try-Nightie church and we were in a hurry to reach the famed Shwedagon Pagoda while the light was adequate for photography. If only we had our old cramped blue bus back again with our endearing mechanic. With hardly a rustle of his red-green shot silk longyi, Mr Tun had organised a fleet of blue 600cc Mazda taxis – another local experience! Jim sat next to the driver, his long white Western legs jammed up against the dashboard. These taxis obviously had orders to make up for lost time – high revs, high speed, overtaking, swapping lanes as we chased uphill – was this the Mount Panorama circuit at Bathurst? The Yangon Grand Prix?

Another barefoot climb to the pagoda – but there was a difference – an escalator (Mandalay Hill and Mount Popa take note). The Shwedagon is the jewel in Burma's crown – the central stupa is about 100 metres high, built with over 8000 gold slabs, its tip decorated with diamonds, rubies, sapphires and topaz. It is one of 100 or so buildings (stupas, pavilions, administration) in this whole compound, dating from the eleventh century. On the perimeter were the four stairways, each with flower stalls; small shrines where people anointed Buddha's head or placed gold leaf; simple ablutions blocks, monks reading nearby in silent isolation; a class of girls chanting scriptures to learn them by heart; on the main white marble promenade, individuals and family groups kneeling in simple unselfconscious devotion, some fingering a string of sandalwood beads like a rosary.

Two indulgences of Western lifestyle for our last night in Burma – drinks at the very proper, restored Strand Hotel, and a buffet dinner

at the modern Inya Lake Hotel about half way to the airport. In the bus, Phil said "Have you heard the rumour? It's a five hour drive, it's on top of a hill, and we won't get there for sunset!". Here, Stephen made a presentation to Mr Tun – for his good humour, his unobtrusive skills in organising things to run smoothly, his responsiveness to our needs and suggestions, his calm manner in making other arrangements when things came unstuck. He has been one of our friends for the last ten days.

– Christine Edwards

The day began as we hurtled towards Yangon (Rangoon) from Thazi aboard the not-too-appropriately-named Mandalay-to-Rangoon express. In our Upper Class carriage, the reclining seats were comfortable, but for those at the front, leg room was limited by the bulkhead, and stretching was a little difficult for the long-legged.

It was quite cool and most of us wrapped ourselves in anything warm which was to hand – a towel, in my case. The trip was very noisy and bumpy, and in spite of the fact that derailments are common, we proceeded safely.

The sun rose over villages and the rolling landscape which became visible when the metal window grills were raised. Breakfast was served by the stewards on the train – eggs, toast, coffee, tea. The stewards were a little nervous and asked Mr Tun if he could do the negotiating, but he insisted that they do it. At Yangon Central, with luggage removal streamlined, we joined a new bus to take us back to the Euro-Asia Hotel. After showers we went our separate ways: some to the Gem Museum, some rested and others wandered the streets of Rangoon. I walked along Strand Road, passing the British and Australian Embassies, and into the Strand Hotel hoping to see a little of its old colonial splendour. What a disappointment! It could have been any hotel anywhere, as it has been refurbished to an international blandness recipe. My wanderings took me along many side and back streets, noting some imposing colonial buildings, and others not quite so grand. Many were in various stages of neglect, as were some pavements, where to look up could court disaster. People

were engaged in activities on the footpath such as selling sweets, betel, water, foods, and providing services such as typing.

When I looked into the Immanuel Baptist Church, I was invited to join a wedding reception in their hall and was plied with ice cream, cakes and drinks.

Faded letters on a building dated 1932, built by an Indian merchant, read RANGOON BANK, but it now houses, among other things, the Internal Revenue Department. Opposite, in an identical building, I noticed a small sign – ART GALLERY – so I went into the neglected and decaying place. The floor tiles throughout were in excellent condition – don't tell Federation house renovators about them! On the first floor was the rusted and partly dismantled wrought iron life cage, with a few planks over the gaping hole in the floor. The whole of one wall was missing, with a view into a debris-filled internal courtyard.

However, the art gallery was a surprise. It occupied two still intact rooms (still with the beautiful decorative floor tiles in perfect condition), and very good paintings of Burma in Western style oils and water colours. Western-style art was introduced into Burma in the 1920s when two Burmese artists returned after studying in England. The manager offered me tea and introduced me to "one of Burma's most famous artists". I admired his paintings – he is obviously good. He talked about his career as teacher in the International School, and said that now he spends most of his time in his studio. He also told me that his daughter is one of the country's up-and-coming singers, so I noted her name and walked to a music shop to buy her latest tape for 140 kyats. She has a sweet voice, and sings an Eastern version of Western background music.

After lunch back at the Euro-Asia, we boarded the (new) bus for a (for some) frantic souvenir buying trip to the Bogyoke Aung San (Scott) Market. Here is where we missed 'old faithful'. When the new bus refused to start, we hired a fleet of "sailor's cars" to drive us to the Shwedagon Pagoda. Four of the group, however, decided to go and hear Aung San Suu Kyi speaking at her weekly meeting at her house at 54 University Avenue. This proved to be an exciting interlude, mingling with the large crowd in the road, and they had time to visit the Shwedagon Pagoda after all. The main Western

entrance stairway included an escalator for one of the sections. The huge stupa is said to hold eight of Buddha's hairs, and is suitably richly decorated with slabs of gold and thousands of precious stones. It is surrounded by more than 100 other buildings – smaller stupas, pavilions and administrative halls.

A very enjoyable last evening in Burma was spent with drinks at the Strand Hotel, followed by a delicious smorgasbord dinner at the Russian-built Inya Lake Hotel, where Mr Tun was our guest of honour.

– Margaret Wright

Sunday 14th January 1996 - Rangoon

The most hazardous event for the day was ascending and descending the four to five flights of irregular stairs (occupational health and safety regulations do not exist in Burma) at the Euro-Asia Hotel in Rangoon, where the unprofessional reception staff sat in the guests' seats watching a TV set in front of which perched a most extraordinary neon-lit decorative Buddha image.

The city bus tour confirmed the world-wide trend to 'modernise' by replacing old buildings, some of which had some architectural merit, with characterless concrete high-rise edifices – probably no alternative with limited funds and rapidly increasing urban population.

One hoped for a glimpse of the Rangoon River but our only waterscape came with a view of the Shwedagon from across Royal Lake from the elaborate Karaweik Floating Restaurant. Stephen nearly joined in the soccer game near here.

I guess the 72 metre Chauk Htat Gyi biggest reclining Buddha in Burma, seen through the supporting iron girders was pretty impressive. Dick Wilson felt a bit of 'cross-dressing' had taken place as this Buddha had red finger and toe nails, and a very effeminately painted face with blue eye shadow (on which pigeons perched), glass eyes designed by a generous Chinese benefactor, perfect red lips and pencilled eye brows. This Buddha certainly did not evoke the serious religious

respect of previous Buddhas such as those at the Shwedagon. We did enjoy reading the information on the soles of his feet.

Whilst here some of the group risked having their futures predicted by a local palm reader. Marie's astrologer didn't get it right at all! To the disappointment of the ladies, the promised shopping stop didn't eventuate and instead an early lunch was partaken at the Mya Kan Tha Restaurant, a once gracious residence whose pleasant house facilities comprised a complete bathroom with bath.

Our really persistent shoppers forewent lunch to take a taxi to the Scott Markets to purchase beautiful lengths of material, marionettes and sequined padded wall panels. The airport departure was accomplished without problems despite red tape predictions about leaving Burma.

- Vanessa Arndell

After the 7:30 am knock up at the Euro-Asia Hotel I checked that my bed companion of the previous night (a gecko) was no longer in a position which could have resulted in him being squashed. I went down for a rather late 8 am breakfast.

Over breakfast some group members changed excess kyats for American dollars with each other and we hit the road at 8:55 am. With our faithful bus crew once again with us we embarked on a tour of Rangoon. We were to see highlights of the city including colonial buildings and a quick trip through Chinatown.

We pulled up at the edge of Independence Park, next to the Sule Pagoda. Standing in the park is the Independence Monument. Buildings around the park included City hall, the High Court Building and Immanuel Baptist Church. Group members wandered freely around the park and buildings, taking photos and stretching those legs.

The next stop was St Paul's State High School for boys and on the opposite side of the road we could see the Secretariat Building which is currently undergoing restoration. Next was a brief stop at that much mentioned hotel, the Strand. The group made use of the very

Western, exceptionally pleasant house and a touch more shopping was done. The necklace looked beautiful, Monica!

Moving on, we stopped at Kandawgyi (Royal Lake) and took a pleasant walk by the Royal Garden Restaurant and Karaweik (The Royal Barge Floating Restaurant). Then it was off to visit the Chauk Htat Gyi Reclining Buddha image, which was built some time after 1970. It was interesting to watch a tired group look with envy at Buddha's stretched out position. The restful nature of the image was easy to notice as he is reputedly the world's largest reclining Buddha. Some members of the group became a little mystic at this point of the trip and one even had her palm read. I hate to give away secrets but I am happy to report that Marie will have a long life and will outlive her husband!!

A final delicious and well priced lunch at the Mya Kan Tha Restaurant (Emerald lake) and then we were airport bound. We passed through to departure stage with ease and everything went very smoothly. We left Rangoon just half an hour late and enjoyed a quick flight to Bangkok.

A very comfortable coach drove us into the city and to the Indra Regent Hotel. But though both the coach and the hotel had luxury on their side, they lacked the charm of many experiences of the previous twelve days. However, I don't think anybody didn't enjoy the luxury - everything in moderation!!

We were in our hotel rooms by about 8:30 pm and made plans to meet again by 3:00 pm the next day. People went out shopping, organised tours and said goodbye to another extremely enjoyable day.

- Phil Brown

Monday 15th January 1996 - Bangkok

At leisure until departure from the lounge at 3:30 pm. A proper breakfast at 8:30 am, western or eastern style according to one's fancy. Tropical fruit, cereals, fruit juice, pastries, hot or cold meats, salad, toast, Chinese soup, fried rice.

Marie, Irene and I went out together shopping. In corridors surrounding the hotel is a great range of shops – but not very attractive for purchasing. The three of us with Naida and Ric went to a jewellery store with Thai silks. Irene bought silk and Marie blouses and handbag. We returned to the hotel at 1:30 pm to get ready for our departure.

The weather was unpleasant – moderately hot but the air was filled with pollution, especially from cars. The streets were crowded, but fewer poor people were visible than five years ago – but this after all was the tourist strip. There were many street stalls with a fair standard of cotton and synthetic up-to-date (“in”) clothes and gear (e.g. mesh belts).

All of our party have been shopping, obviously a pent-up need not able to be met in Burma! Evening was spent at the airport. The group seemed very satisfied. The three who went to the Palace enjoyed the trip. The shops met others’ expectations.

- Elise Lindgen

The Indra Regent Hotel gave us a quick, comfortable night. The group came down in twos and threes to have breakfast by 9 am. We were in the centre of the shopping area, and everyone shopped. Silks, rings, ties and much more helped lighten our money load.

Bangkok is too crowded, smoggy and polluted, but it is full of interest. The train runs straight across the main street and a bar comes down to stop the traffic. Where else does a long goods train disrupt central traffic? We were all ready to return to Australia after our wonderful jaunt to Burma.

- Naida Holliday

The last day overseas was relaxing for all except Nan. She had arisen with the sun and made off for a week’s journey north to Chiang Mai as a prelude to a trip to Angkor and a week in Vietnam. The rest appeared for breakfast on the Indra Regent terrace around the same time – as late as possible! Only two kinds of outings were planned – three went on a tour of the Royal Palace while the rest disappeared

into the market area around the Indra Regent. So much shopping to be done in such little time. However, Vanessa managed to buy a Thai silk jacket that should stun the Parkes community and Dick and Janet were measured up for what seemed like a whole new wardrobe. Robbie "did" the uncrushable Thai silk material shops in between the T-shirt hangouts, the warbling bird-man and the toy outlets.

It was a real advantage having access to our hotel rooms until departure, which was at 3 pm from the Indra Regent. The unusually quick coach trip to Bangkok's international airport left us with plenty of time for individual processing and then ... the wait!

But when one is coming home after such a successful trip because of a great group of people, superb leadership in Stephen Codrington, generally well-planned itinerary, and a magic country, even an airport wait is worth it to arrive back in Sydney and home for most of us. For the rest, Elise transited to Brisbane on the same plane, Dick and Janet missed their Canberra connection, Jack and Jan and Margaret still had the Canberra trip to make, Irene would take even longer to return to Bega and Vanessa and Richard had yet to get home to Parkes. A wonderful two weeks was had by all!

- Monica Thom

Tuesday 16th January 1996 - Sydney

What a relief to get off the aircraft and stretch our legs. The usual scramble for duty-free, followed by queues at Immigration and at the luggage console. Patient explanations to the Customs/Quarantine officer about our souvenirs and then outside to organise transport home.

But wait! As we all dispersed and went our separate ways we didn't have a chance to properly farewell all the wonderful new friends we had made on the trip. This in itself is a good reason to have a reunion - the sooner the better!

- Richard Wilson