

# REPORT TO THE COUNCIL OF THE GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY OF NEW SOUTH WALES ON THE STUDY TOUR TO BURMA, JANUARY 1996

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*Tour Leader*

In January 1996, a group of 23 people under the leadership of Stephen Codrington undertook a two week study tour to Burma (Myanmar). This was the first time that the Geographical Society had ever organised a Study Tour specifically to Burma. In 1982, a study tour to China led by John Shaw spent a few days in Rangoon en route to Kunming, and a study tour led by Stephen Codrington (to China) also spent a few days in and around Rangoon in 1986. By all accounts, this recent study tour was most successful, giving the participants a rare insight into this country which many regard as one of the most reclusive in Asia - 'the Albania of the Orient' as it has been described.

Travel to Burma is regarded by many people as 'politically incorrect' at present. This is based on fears that foreign tourism to Burma will bring in funds that will be used to prop up the military government - a regime that many regard as illegitimate and certainly oppressive. This issue was discussed well before departure at a Council meeting of the Geographical Society of New South Wales and again at a Traveller's Club meeting. On both occasions, it was agreed that history shows us that the most effective way to weaken a repressive regime is to break its monopoly on information by bringing in new ideas. A study tour by well informed outsiders such as this group was thought to be an excellent way to introduce such new ideas, and this proved to be the case. Wherever possible, private hotels and private tour operators were used so that there could be no suggestion that the group was supporting the business activities of the military regime.

The land content was arranged through a Rangoon-based private tour operator run by former employees of the state-run Tourist Burma with whom Stephen Codrington had previously worked. The company was Euro-Asie Voyages, and this company gave the group an excellent price which was virtually wholesale. The air content was arranged through San Michele Travel who arranged an excellent group air fare through Thai Airways International. Extensive background and preparatory notes were prepared by Stephen Codrington, and a pre-tour meeting was held so that members of the group could meet each other and to provide some additional background to Burma's culture and situation.

The itinerary followed by the group was very similar to that advertised before the trip departed. The final programme followed by the group was as follows:

Tuesday 2nd January: Flew Thai International Sydney to Bangkok. Transferred to the Rama Gardens Hotel for overnight accommodation.

Wednesday 3rd January: Morning free. Afternoon flew from Bangkok to Rangoon (Yangon) on Thai International. Visited the Kabaye (World Peace) Pagoda in the suburb of Mingaladon for an introduction to Burmese Buddhism before transferring to the Euro-Asia Hotel. A welcoming dinner was held at either the Lonemalay Restaurant (noted for traditional Burmese cuisine) in the Royal Lake Park, accompanied by a display of Burmese music and dancing.

Thursday 4th January: After driving through the streets of Rangoon, stopping to view the Independence day parade, the group drove cross country by private coach to Prome (or Pyi or P'yay), a distance of 285 kilometres (5 hours and 30 minutes) on a very good highway by Burmese standards. The first stop was at a roadside shrine where our bus was blessed together with the other cars travelling. There were several other stops for views of ploughing rice fields by water buffalo, religious displays, village life, rice harvesting and selling - and a flat tyre! We arrived at the ancient city of Sri Ksetra in the mid-afternoon, inspected the ruins and museum, and then travelled by ox-cart to the Bawbawgyi Pagoda, the prototype of all Burmese pagodas. The overnight stop was at the Mingala Resort in Prome.

Friday 5th January: Travelled from Prome (Pyi, P'yay) to Pagan (Bagan) by private coach, a distance of 400 kilometres which took about 13 hours on a good tarred road. Along the way there were stops to see 'volunteer labourers' working on the roads, mass irrigation projects, and small towns such as Aung Lan and Taungdwyngyi. We visited the Shweaungdaw Pagoda, one of the very few groups of foreigners to have done so, and were invited into the monks' quarters to talk. We then visited another archaeological site of an ancient city - Beikthano before proceeding to see the sun set over the Irrawaddy River at Magwe, and then driving on to Pagan. The overnight stay was at the Bluebird Hotel in Pagan.

Saturday 6th January: Full day exploration of the Pagan archaeozone of temples and pagodas. Morning highlights were the West Petleik Pagoda, the Lawkananda Pagoda overlooking the Irrawaddy River, a lacquerware factory, the spectacular Dhammayazika Pagoda (including views over Pagan from the roof of a small nearby temple) and Minnanthu village. After lunch, which was across the road from the famous Shwezigon Pagoda, a visit was made to the Shwezigon Pagoda and the Kyanzittha Pagoda before going to the banks of the Irrawaddy River at Buphaya to experience typical riverside life. Overnight again at the Bluebird Hotel.

Sunday 7th January: Travelled from Pagan (Bagan) via Mount Popa to Mandalay by coach, a distance of 350 kilometres which took about 11 hours. The first stop was at the Kyaukpadaung markets and then the spectacular volcanic plug of Mount Popa. Progress from Mount Popa to Mandalay was slowed by illness on the part of several members of the group which we attribute to one of the lunch time dishes at Mount Popa. The hotel for the next three nights was the Power Hotel in Mandalay.

Monday 8th January: Morning excursion by river boat along the Irrawaddy (Ayeyarwady) River to Mingun, a beautiful little village which is also site of the world's largest intact bell and Burma's largest ruins, the Mingun Pagoda which was destroyed by an earthquake. Other highlights in Mingun were the Buddhist Infirmary for the elderly and the Hsinbyume Pagoda. After returning to Mandalay and having lunch, the group visited a weaving factory, a stone carving workshop, U Bein's Bridge and finally the Kaunghmdaw Pagoda on Sagaing Hill. Overnight at Power Hotel in Mandalay.

Tuesday 9th January: Morning excursion to Maymyo (Pyin Oo Lwin), a former British hill station where transport is still by horse and stage coach. Highlights included the Botanical garden, the old colonial buildings and the Pwegauk Waterfalls. After celebrating a member of the group's birthday at a colonial hotel, we returned to Mandalay and spent the afternoon beside the Irrawaddy River watching buffaloes hauling teak logs from the river, at the Mandalay Palace walls, and at Mandalay Hill which overlooks the former royal palace grounds. Overnight at Power Hotel in Mandalay.

Wednesday 10th January: The group left Mandalay for the long drive to Inle Lake (Nyaungshwe), a distance of 300 kilometres. The trip took some 12 hours because of a long uphill sector of 120 kilometres climbing on to the Shan Plateau. Stops en route were made at the markets in Kyaukse, Meiktilar, the chilli growing area of Thazi, Kalaw, and several small villages in areas of forestry and fuelwood gathering. After arrival at the Hupin Hotel for the overnight stay, the group witnessed a dancing performance by a local group of Shan people.

Thursday 11th January: The morning was spent on an excursion by piroque (motorised canoe) on Inle Lake, seeing the leg rowing fisherfolk, vegetable and flower cultivation of the Intha people on floating islands, cheroot rollers and weavers in Ywama village, as well as the Phaungdaw U temple. After lunch, the group drove to the state capital of Taunggyi, where visits were made to the town centre and to the markets. The overnight stay was at the Taunggyi Hotel.

Friday 12th January: After an early start, the group drove through Aung Ban to the spectacular Pindaya Caves. After an inspection inside and out, the long drive down off the Shan Plateau began. Several stops were made in small villages, and a school visit was completed at Ye Ya. At Thazi, the group caught the overnight express train to Rangoon (Yangon).

Saturday 13th January: After arriving in Rangoon (Yangon) at about 7 am, the group transferred to the Euro-Asie Hotel to have breakfast and a morning rest, although several members of the group

took the chance to walk around the streets of central Rangoon. In the afternoon, a tour of the Bogyoke Aung San (Scott) Market was undertaken. Most of the group then on for a visit to the famous Shwe Dagon Pagoda, although a few members went to listen to Aung San Suu Kyi speaking to the assembled crowd outside her home in University Avenue, re-joining the group at the Shwe Dagon Pagoda. Being the final night of the trip, the group had a drink at the Strand Hotel and then proceeded to dinner at the recently renovated Inya Lake Hotel.

**Sunday 14th January:** In the morning, a tour of the colonial buildings of central Rangoon and Chinatown was conducted followed by a visit to Royal Lake and Chauk Htat Gyi (the world's largest reclining Buddha) before proceeding to the airport and flying to Bangkok on Thai International. Overnight at the Indra Regent Hotel, Bangkok.

**Monday 15th January:** Morning free in Bangkok, and afternoon departure for Sydney on Thai International, with arrival in Sydney early the next morning.

During the study tour, participants were asked to evaluate their tour experiences on the basis of their educational value according to a five-point scale:

- 1 = very poor, well below expectations and/or largely a waste of time
- 2 = poor, below expectations and/or not very useful
- 3 = good, average, as expected, okay
- 4 = very good, above expectations and/or quite useful
- 5 = excellent, well above expectations and/or extremely useful

The results of this evaluation were as follows:

<b>RANGOON</b>		<b>DRIVE TO MANDALAY</b>	
World Peace Pagoda	4.1	Kyaukpadaung Market	4.9
Show at Lonemalay Restaurant	3.3	Mount Popa	4.3
<b>PROME &amp; DRIVE TO PAGAN<sup>1</sup></b>		<b>MANDALAY<sup>3</sup></b>	
Drive Rangoon to Prome	4.6	Silk & cotton weaving factory	2.7
Sri Ksetra & ox cart trip	4.7	Stone carving workshop	1.8
Shwe Yaung Dao Pagoda & monastery	4.1	U Bein Bridge	4.0
Beikthano ruins	3.0	Sagaing	3.3
<b>PAGAN<sup>2</sup></b>		Maymyo Hill Station	4.7
West Petleik Pagoda	3.9	Buffaloes hauling teak beside river	3.9
Lawkananda Pagoda	4.0	Mandalay Hill	3.3
Lacquerware processing factory	3.5	<b>INLE LAKE<sup>4</sup></b>	
Dhammayazika Pagoda & view	4.3	Excursion on Inle Lake	5.0
Minnanthu Village	3.7	Taunggyi Markets & town walk	3.3
Shwezigon Pagoda	4.1	Hill pagoda over town	2.5
Ananda pagoda	3.7	Pindaya Caves	4.2
Sunset at Buphaya Pagoda	4.3	<b>RANGOON<sup>5</sup></b>	
		Bogyoke Aung San (Scott) Market	3.8
		Shwe Dagon Pagoda	4.1
		Central Rangoon City Tour	3.1
		Chauk Htat Gyi Reclining Buddha	3.2

<sup>1</sup> Wonderful street scenes in Rangoon and the villages

Great trip on the ox cart

Monastery and meeting monks was good. The ruins were the best of the trip

The ox-cart ride was just wonderful - a real highlight

Eventually enjoyed the ox-cart. Archaeological ruins a little disappointing

Ox-cart was wonderful

<sup>2</sup> Would like less time at Buphaya

Sad about the age of the girls and the conditions at the lacquerware factory

More modern pagodas a little disappointing. Felt a little uncomfortable in the village

I have real problems with the village excursion. I thought our visit was intrusive, patronising and offensive. Perhaps people could give money to UNHCR or UNICEF rather than giving gifts and

creating expectations among village children. I'm not criticising any of us for giving, but the whole nature of our visit struck me as the West visiting poor natives and I would rather not have gone under the circumstances we did, as I feel we were helping to create a monster.

The monster has already begun- notice the billboards for cigarettes and alcohol and Japanese and Western commercialism. Sadly it is probably inevitable

- 3 I would have preferred to take the bus and the lift to the top of Mandalay Hill rather than walk. I hated the monkeys at Mount Popa. I was uncomfortable with the poverty at the buffalo site. It was excellent to have the opportunity to go for a walk at the U Bein Bridge. I would have liked more time to walk all the way across to the pagoda. It would have been nice to have had more time to see more of the town, to explore more of the relics of the British presence. The stone carving was not informative and there was nothing suitable to buy. Why did we go there? I would have liked more time at Maymyo to enjoy the architecture and to have a Wells Fargo ride.
- 4 I would like longer on Inle Lake with more time at the lake markets. I would have liked a whole day on Inle Lake, and to have two nights there rather than a night at Taunggyi. I question whether a three hour drive to Pindaya was worth it. I loved the spectacle of Pindaya. Everything was excellent and most educational All excellent
- 5 Better to offer more free time. More time was needed at the Scott Market I don't like Rangoon I would have preferred to have more free time although I really appreciated the flexibility allowed to me to leave the group and go and see Aung San Suu Kyi speaking.

A similar evaluation of the accommodation and services was undertaken using the same fine-point scale, and the results of this evaluation were as follows:

CITY / HOTEL	Cleanliness and comfort of hotel	Standard of service in hotel	Food in this city
BANGKOK Rama Gardens Hotel <sup>1</sup>	4.5	4.5	4.7
RANGOON (Yangon) Euro-Asie Hotel	2.9	3.2	4.2
PROME (P'YAY) Mingala Resort <sup>2</sup>	4.5	4.3	4.0
PAGAN (BAGAN) Bluebird Hotel <sup>3</sup>	3.7	4.3	4.8
MANDALAY Power Hotel <sup>4</sup>	3.8	4.0	3.1
NYAUNGSHWE (Inle Lake) Hupin Hotel <sup>5</sup>	3.8	4.1	4.2
TAUNGGYI Taunggyi Hotel <sup>6</sup>	3.0	3.8	3.2
RANGOON (Yangon) Euro-Asie Hotel <sup>7</sup>	2.9	3.2	4.2
BANGKOK Indra Regent Hotel <sup>8</sup>	4.7	4.4	4.4

- <sup>1</sup> Enjoyed the pool  
Nice grounds. Although near the airport it was quiet  
Good to have the morning at leisure at hotel  
Very nice to have such a lovely pool and time to swim in it
- <sup>2</sup> Service was enthusiastic if not efficient  
Main light in room not working, not fixed

- Enjoyed the hotel - quite charming  
Great accommodation and surroundings  
No hot water  
Excellent room, very good hot shower, nice food and great atmosphere - terrific  
How wonderful to arrive at this hotel  
No hot water. Hooks on walls would be useful  
Lovely site. Individual cabins very nice.
- 3 Poor drainage in bathroom. Floor dusty  
Service was very enthusiastic  
Toilet leaked, bathroom floor wet  
Good value  
No hot water in thermos or in every shower  
Smell of sewage inside room and outside hotel  
Room centre light not working  
Excellent food both at hotel and evening dinner overlooking Irrawaddy River. Very nice touch  
Hooks on walls would be good.
- 4 No hot water for two days. Took forever to get to ground floor  
Very nice hot water and excellent bathroom facilities  
Good to have several days at this good hotel
- 5 Great dance show at hotel. Good to have time for a long walk  
No hot water  
Dancing excellent. Great food  
Dancing was a wonderful addition  
Pillow too hard. Dancing great!  
Delicious lunch. Bad design of bathroom floor (all the same level including shower floor) - as soon as I started using the shower, however slowly, the water spread across the floor. Towels were very thin.
- 6 No hot water (5)  
Accommodation in guest houses nearer Pindaya might be preferable  
Lighting very poor. Wrong tap labelled hot  
Had a good proper shower recess and very good hot water  
Bathroom dirty  
Truly foul hotel like the worst in Russia  
Bed very comfortable. Bathroom very indifferent  
Good room service; man prepared our beds AND cleaned our (white) shoes. Poor light in bedroom, okay in bathroom  
Poor lighting in a very cold room (2)  
Poor heating but plenty of spare blankets
- 7 I quite like a 3-star hotel like this- had some local character. Hot water okay  
Drinks at Strand Hotel and meal at Inya Lake Hotel much appreciated  
Well organised, helpful and professional  
Hotel dreadful
- 8 Handy location (4)  
Ideal for shopping, but Rama Gardens was a better hotel

Finally, the services of the guides were evaluated according to the same five-point scale:

GUIDE	Knowledge of the guide	Clarity of guide's communication	Helpfulness of guide & transport arrangements
RANGOON, PROME, PAGAN Wynn	5.0	4.7	5.0
MANDALAY, INLE LAKE, RANGOON Tun	5.0	3.8	5.0

At the conclusion of the study tour, participants were asked for their overall comments. At that time, some participants had left for other destinations, so the results below show the feelings of the 20 people remaining for the homeward flight.

Overall, the study tour was:

Very poor, well below expectations	Poor, below expectations	Fair, as expected	Good, better than expected	Excellent, well above expectations
0	0	1	10	9

In terms of value for money, the study tour was:

Very poor	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
0	0	0	8	12

The duration of the study tour was:

Too short	About right	Too long
1	19	0

Would you be interested in coming on other Geographical Society study tours in the future?

Yes	No	Maybe
16	0	4

Is this your first Geographical Society study tour?

Yes	No
10	10

Overall comments by the tour participants included:

- A great trip and most interesting. Burma was not as poor as I expected. It is the most different country I have ever visited.
- Overall, the tour was great with an interesting and pleasant group of people who integrated well. I had had serious doubts about travelling with a group as it certainly inhibits personal choice and freedom of movement and my main objective was to gain an interview with Aung San Suu Kyi. It was my own fault that I hadn't organised this before but I was advised by Foreign Affairs to wait and do it through the Embassy in Myanmar. However, we took off so early on Thursday morning that I had no chance to telephone or write to her and then at my next chance, at Mandalay, I was continually frustrated by the poor telephone service. We were both very conscious, too, of not wanting to place the whole group or our guide in any embarrassing situation. Oh well....! The travelling certainly became an endurance test on several occasions. Given the state of the road system too much was attempted per day and the most enjoyable days were the ones when we had a chance to relax and unwind a little in the evening before the next day. The lack of the mystery I had perhaps romantically anticipated in Burma was compensated for by the delightfulness of the people and some unforgettable sights. But no elephants!
- A little too long on the road. Little time to socialise as it was so late to bed and early to rise.
- Where very unusual groups of people live, I would have enjoyed a longer stay. Wood carving instead of stone would have been preferable. It was a marvellous idea to visit Burma before the floods of tourists.
- If possible, reduce the travelling time (though difficult, I know). Ask people to pack less in smaller cases to make it easier all round. Spend longer at some places. Some positive points: great leader Steve; very good tour guide, kindly and good tempered group. I really enjoyed the trip and would not have missed it. It brought a lot of my reading into perspective.
- In hindsight the trip would have been improved with less time on the bus and allowing more free time for people to do their own thing.
- Very interesting, but so much to take in such a short time! It was the right length for endurance but travel difficulties made for too little time for recollection. Luggage size should have been specified. Buses need to be provided for European height and breadth. A good time to visit Burma.
- More time to explore on one's own would have been appreciated.
- Very well organised with no hassles for us, although maybe lots for Stephen!

- Thank you Stephen for the really terrific tour. I really enjoyed it. I felt everything was well above my expectations: the standard of accommodation was, by and large, excellent for this type of country; the food (again with only a few exceptions) was terrific; the organisation of the whole trip was outstanding. Everything ran smoothly and the group certainly wasn't inconvenienced in any way. Here are a few things I feel might have improved the trip: (1) More free time, so that people could do what they were most interested in. This also leads to less tension among the group as people are able to get away from the 'herd'. As the majority of people on the trip were very seasoned travellers, people would be quite capable of entertaining themselves. (2) Cut down the amount of time spent on the bus. I feel one of the legs such as Pagan to Mandalay or Rangoon to Pagan could have been improved by flying. The additional cost would not have been too much and would have made the trip more comfortable. We could then have spent more time in Pagan, and had time to walk, hire a bicycle or horse cart, etc, to look around and get more of a sense of the place. (3) Skip Taunggyi and stay on the lake near Pindaya Caves. This was a beautiful area- small, peaceful and manageable. I feel it would have been better to stay here and give people free time to walk around and look at the village area. (4) More opportunity for exercise. However, please don't take any of this as negative. These are improvements that, in retrospect, were my ideas. I felt the trip was excellent value and I admire your patience, sensitivity, co-operativeness and endless enthusiasm. I think you did a really marvellous job, often in tricky situations, and I very much appreciate your efforts on our behalf. Many thanks.
- The trip was excellent, and my expectations were high too! Most meals were very cheap and often very tasty.
- The tour leader and the guide should insist on punctuality so that scheduled events do not have to be omitted. With such interesting rural scenery, it was a pity that the view for eight people (four windows) was obscured. Tun's strong accent and the distortion caused by the microphone, unfortunately, prevented us from receiving some very interesting information. Nevertheless, I loved seeing Burma through Tun's eyes and I am very pleased to have visited this interesting country before 'modernisation'.
- Stricter timing was required for people returning to the bus after sightseeing as continual delays inconvenienced those of us who were punctual. The bus used for the tour was a bit small for the number of people on the tour. In all, it was a great tour but I would avoid so much bus travel next time.
- It would have been useful to have a map for each of us showing our route, with towns and larger villages, so we did not have to share maps. As Burma was my interest, I would have preferred a night in Maymyo rather than the time spent in Bangkok.
- At times, the days were very long in terms of travelling time. Maybe some specific lengths of time could have been set for stops in the early days as some people needed to be more careful with departure times. Overall a great trip - well done!
- Fewer very long days on the road in a row would have helped - perhaps a flight from Pagan to Mandalay would have allowed more time to explore Pagan. It would help if people kept to timetabled departures and stops while on the road. This would reduce travelling time and allow a little more free time at the stopovers. I would prefer a night at Pindaya instead of Taunggyi. For the Rangoon city tour, an option of doing this on foot with a sketch map showing places of interest would be good. These comments notwithstanding, I thought the tour and the programmes of activities were excellent.
- Thank you VERY much Stephen for providing this opportunity- an excellent time to go before hoards of tourists are unleashed on Burma, changing the people from their happy, smiling, laughing character into something less innocent and appealing, and before a lot of new building or rebuilding and westernisation takes place, destroying some of the local character and history forever. It was also greatly to our benefit for Stephen to have known Tun and Wynn as they are obviously so knowledgeable, enthusiastic and extremely capable. We also owe a lot to the care and consideration and skill of the driver! I was not at all put off by the smaller, more basic hotels - a bit of local character is all part of the feel of a country - I don't expect to retreat into first class US-style accommodation each night. However, it is nice when the hot water works. The rural experiences of seeing the villages and agricultural activity is exciting for city-based people like us from a country with agriculture on huge acreage with mechanisation. We all enjoyed the special meal and building for my birthday lunch at Maymyo - thank you so much for organising this.
- The tour was simply packed with interesting places and experiences. A wonderful experience. Any improvements can only be made in the light of circumstances sometimes beyond the control of the tour leader. For example, the line of command from Mr Wynn to Mr Tun through Stephen

would have been difficult to negotiate sensitively and this was understood by the group. Some suggestions include more free time to explore and less time on the road. Related to these points, give the group limits for exploring and keep to these, arrive each night where possible for a pre-dinner drink, miss some places such as Taunggyi, and have fewer visits to pagodas. The trip was brilliant - well organised from Sydney and very well run. A super group- all interesting as individuals. It was a highlight as an overseas experience; thanks a million Stephen.

While on the trip, participants wrote daily diaries on a roster basis. These writings were compiled and issued to tour participants in the form of a 49 page book.

As several members of the group remarked on the study tour, "there is nowhere in the world like Burma!". Most members of the group would undoubtedly agree with John F. Cady's comment in his book *A History of Modern Burma*: "The country casts a kind of spell over its friends, which they cannot break even if they would".