

Merry Christmas 2015!

written by Marcus | 24 December, 2015





We would like to wish all our family, friends and followers a very merry Christmas and hope you have a wonderful time wherever you may be.

A lot of road has passed under our tyres since last Christmas and its been quite a year, but we can't wait to see what 2016 brings!

Tail winds to you all.

Marcus and Kirsty

Moreh to Naypyidaw – Myanmar Part 1

written by Marcus | 24 December, 2015



Myanmar is no stranger to change. It's name for one, (though many people still refer to it as Burma). It's capital city has shifted around the country at least four times. It's been controlled by the Mongols, The British, been an independent democratic nation and a military dictatorship. Now with the first 'fully democratic' elections having just taken place and Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy winning a sweeping victory it's now time for change once again. We were arriving just at the turning point.





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ရွေးကောက်ပွဲအောင်နိုင်ရေး



2016
Calendar
ပြန်လည်စတင်သည့် - သုတ္တံ

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အမှန်တကယ်ပြောင်းလဲဖို့
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ကို ပဲပေးဖို့

Design : indawinawin.com (photo) : kachin
ဓာတ်ပုံ : ဝိသုဒ္ဓိ (အမျိုးသားဒီမိုကရေစီအဖွဲ့ချုပ်)

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Aung San Suu Kyi, the expectation is huge

7th to 21st December 2015

We eventually crossed the border from India with Max, Jens, Morgan and Poreh but being so newly opened for foreigners there were a few teething problems. For instance the Indian immigration wasn't housed in the brand new building marked 'immigration' but instead was hidden in an unsigned compound 1.5km back in Moreh. Our permits hadn't arrived from the travel agent either but the border guards made a phone call and it seemed everything was going to be OK without the paper copies. 30 minutes of waiting while passports were scrutinised and stamped then we were all waved through.



Firm but fair?

Straight onto smooth roads, quiet traffic and riding on the right. A complete contrast from what was behind us.



Good roads and gold road signs



Public transport

Our main worry for this country was accommodation. Officially only hotels with foreigners licences can offer a bed and camping is illegal making things difficult for frugal cyclists. We'd heard numerous stories of cyclists being followed by immigration officers or the police and forced to stay in expensive Tourist hotels at the end of each day. Others had tried to stealth camp but been woken in the night and moved on. But we'd also heard about a network of free accommodation that some people had been successful in using so we were going to try that, and keep looking over our shoulders.



Roadside water urns were everywhere if we got thirsty

I'm not sure how many people are traveling the world on bicycles at any one time but the degrees of separation between all of us are tiny. An encounter with another tourer on the road almost always results in an exchange of "who do you know?" and replies of "oh yes, we met them in Albania" or "he stayed in the same house in Dushanbe". Max is one person who connects many of our traveling chums with several mutual friends showing up on Facebook. He met Reece at the border with Kazakhstan, sold some tyres to Tara in Bishkek and exchanged advice with Pete and Josh through an online chat. It's a small world, but it takes a long time to ride around it.



Max loves to get a tow



Especially if the driver gives out free melons

The unusual convoy of tandem and Max's laden bike with trailer set off from Tamu together having reassured the border guards we'd make it to Kaleya, the next town of any reasonable size, by the end of the day. In reality that was an unlikely target 140km away and so we planned to see how far we got before dark, then look for shelter. Apparently anywhere before Kaleya would be "Very dangerous" according to the guard.



Ox carts get their own lane



Weird bikes draw a crowd

But it was quickly apparent that this was one of the friendliest countries we'd been to. Smiles and waves were plentiful. Kids loved to shout "bye bye!", occasionally followed by "hello!". When we stopped, face painted women and men in 'longhi' skirts were curious but not as invasive as the crowds in India. On that first day we were given coffee and cake as a gift and spent the night in a small catholic church. There was no sign of the dangerous people the border guards had warned us of and no police telling us to move on. So far so good.



The white face paint is made from wood pulp and serves as makeup and sunscreen





Longhis and leather jackets, A classic combination



Kids watching us at a coffee stop





The whole village came to make sure we were comfortable in their church.

Food in the north west of the country was very good. Flavoursome noodle soup and an endless supply of complimentary green tea accompanied each refueling stop. Dinner would be rice with several bowls of meat and vegetables to mix and match as we pleased. Soup was compulsory whether we wanted it or not and often arrived in one large bowl with 2 spoons for the three of us.



Noodles and soup. You did want soup didn't you?

Despite entering the coffee growing tropics we could only get '3 in 1' (instant coffee granules, creamer and 50% sugar) with a range of boastful brand names like 'Super', 'Best', 'No.1' and 'Premiere', or the more modest 'OK'.



Totally tropical



Where do we start?

The universal question response was “OK OK”, which served a similar role as the Indian head wobble, meaning maybe yes,

maybe no. So ordering coffee from somewhere that didn't stock
Premiere, our 3 in 1 of choice, could be confusing:

"3 coffees please"

"OK OK?"

"OK"

"OK OK"



"How do I look?"

"OK OK"

The road turned rough a few km from Kalewa, perhaps marking the end of the Indian funding. We then had two roads to choose from: a shortcut that was reported by Bjorn and Jens to be a sandy nightmare and to be avoided at all costs. Or the main road that was reported to be a hellishly hilly slog to be avoided at all costs. Looking at the map we saw that the river Chitwan conveniently joined Kalewa to Monywa, our intended destination and we'd heard rumours of a boat that could take us there.



The last bit of tarmac before Kalewa



Waiting for the boat in Kalewa



Sure enough, with tickets bought, a large, overcrowded vessel pulled into the sandy beach at 3pm and was heading downstream. Just before it landed a marauding party of several smaller boats charged into the side of it and discharged a crowd of women with plates of food on their heads. There was chaos as passengers tried to get off, we tried to get on with the bikes and the women tried to sell as much as they could to the captive audience stuck on the boat.



The floating buffet

Eventually everyone and everything was on and presumably those who needed to get off were off. We took up a position on the roof and watched the river communities drifting past as our trusty barge steamed back down the river. Two men were stationed at the front of the boat with long poles to test the depth of the shallow river. By night a huge searchlight helped to try and navigate us around the sand banks but we still got stuck twice. All to be expected it seems as we landed at 3am, just 1 hour later than planned. Just time enough for a snooze under a tree before the cafes opened for breakfast.



Loading up

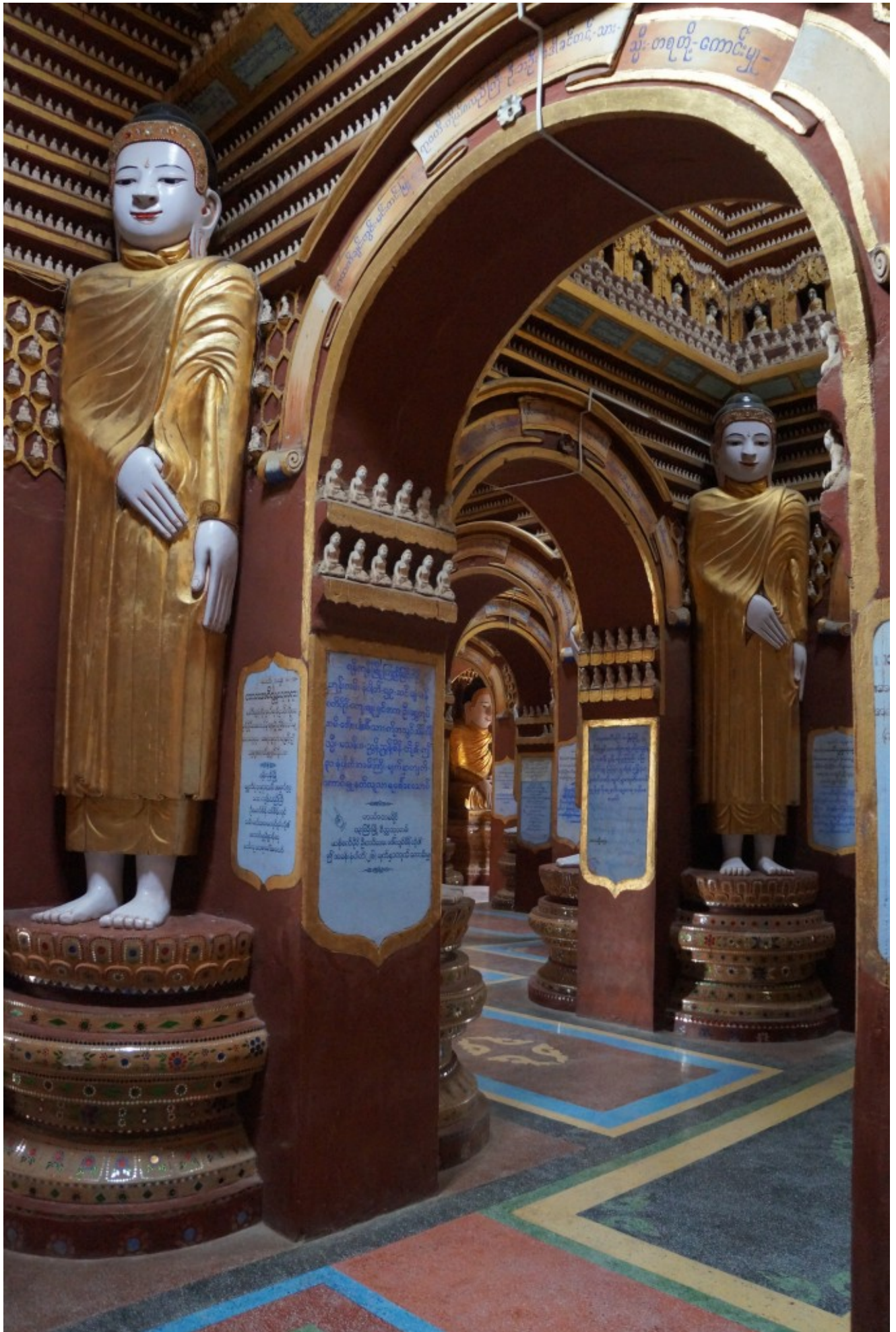


Enjoying the cruise

The visibility of Myanmar's predominantly Buddhist faith is incredibly clear. In every village there are conical, golden pagodas peeking over trees or from behind buildings. Buddha smiles at us all the time, from roadside shrines, from within a temple housing half a million icons or in the form of a huge 130m tall statue standing on a hill outside Monywa. Inside we climbed 31 floors following a set of murals depicting the path to enlightenment. Starting at some gruesome images of hell in its feet up to peace and serenity somewhere near the statue's shoulders (disappointingly not in its head as we'd imagined).



Temple containing half a million Buddha statues (we didn't count them)



Like being Buddha in a hall of mirrors



Thanboddhay Pagoda near Monywa



Thanboddhay Pagoda



31 storey Buddha

After a night amongst piles of cans and plastic in a recycling 'centre' hut we push on to Bagan. This must be Myanmar's star attraction and it feels strange arriving in a town full of western tourists, something we haven't really seen since Kathmandu. It deserves the attention though with a dusty plain punctuated with over a thousand temples and pagodas built over the course of the last thousand years. Climbing to the top of one of these monuments is like stepping into an ancient civilisation. Ornate towers rise above the tree tops. Gold pagodas catch the sunlight. Horse drawn carriages trot along the sandy tracks while farmers in bamboo hats work the land.



Our "rubbish" accommodation for the night



Bagan





We spend two nights in the Jasmine Guesthouse and on the second morning rise early to catch the famous Bagan sunrise. It's a wonderful moment with the early morning mist adding to the atmosphere and dozens of balloons drifting over the plain.



Sunrise and balloons over the Bagan plain



Max enjoys the view



We are not alone

Also staying in the Jasmine are Didier and Kayla who of course already know Max. They chose the hilly route from Kalewa and ran into an immigration officer while trying to find somewhere to stay. He forced them into a taxi to take them to the nearest foreigners' hotel, 60km away. An expensive evening for them and a warning for us.



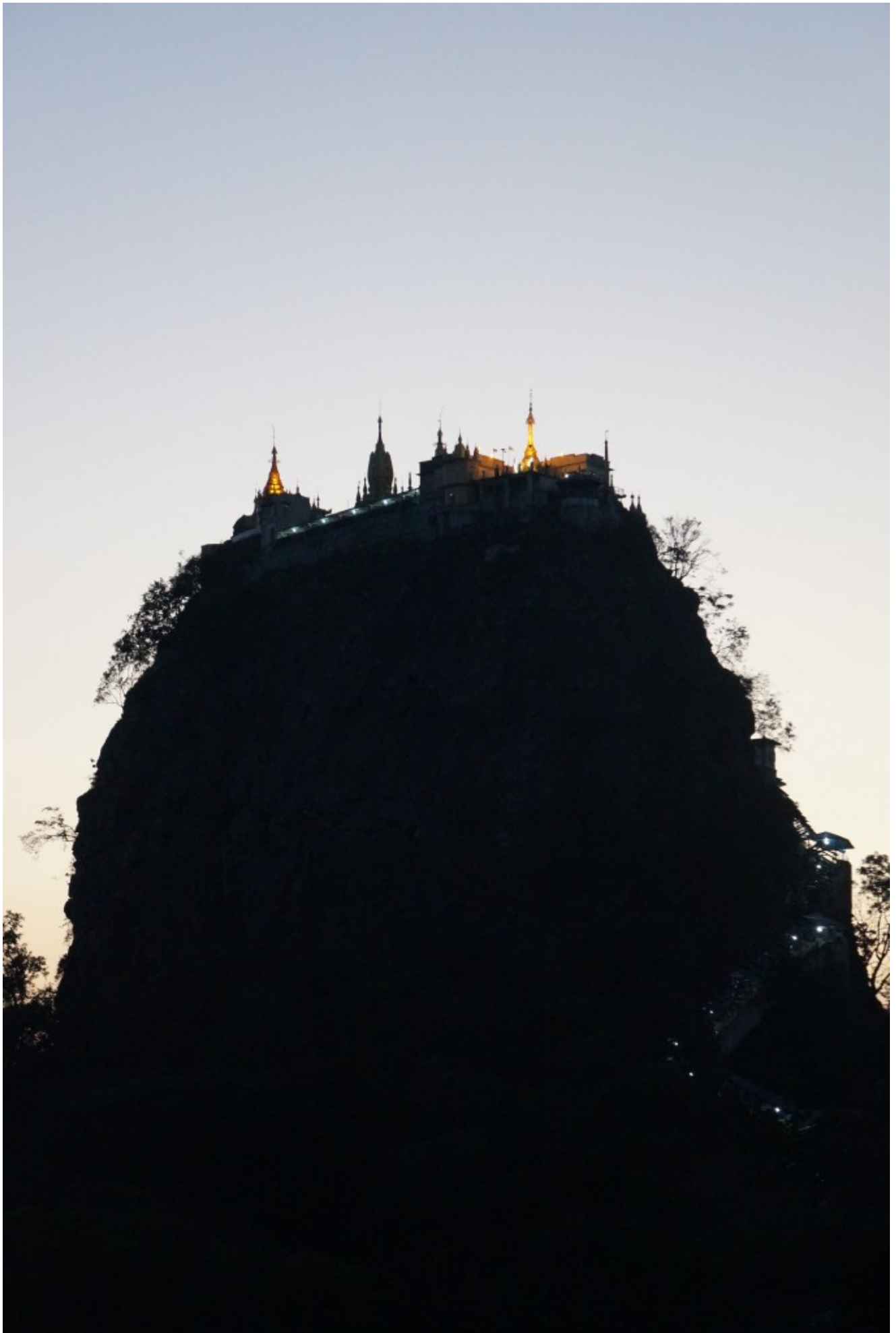
The Burmese love whisky and cigars, especially at breakfast. Being December, the cold season, the temperature is a chilly 30°C most days. The village houses are simple straw-walled constructions, often with a living area at the front with no walls at all which is one of the benefits of living in a country that has no winter. It's an odd experience for us being used to the dark, cold, wet weather that we'd expect back in the UK at this time of year. We don't miss it that much though



Typical Burmese straw house

A rolling desert takes us across to Mount Popa with a steep climb up to Popa village where we stay in a part built building amongst an army of statues. Mount Popa is a volcanic plug that was blown off the top of the adjacent mount Taung Ma-gyi (mother hill). On its top, up 777 steps, is a monastery that attracts monks and monkeys in equal numbers. As well as being Buddhist it also contains temples for spirits known as

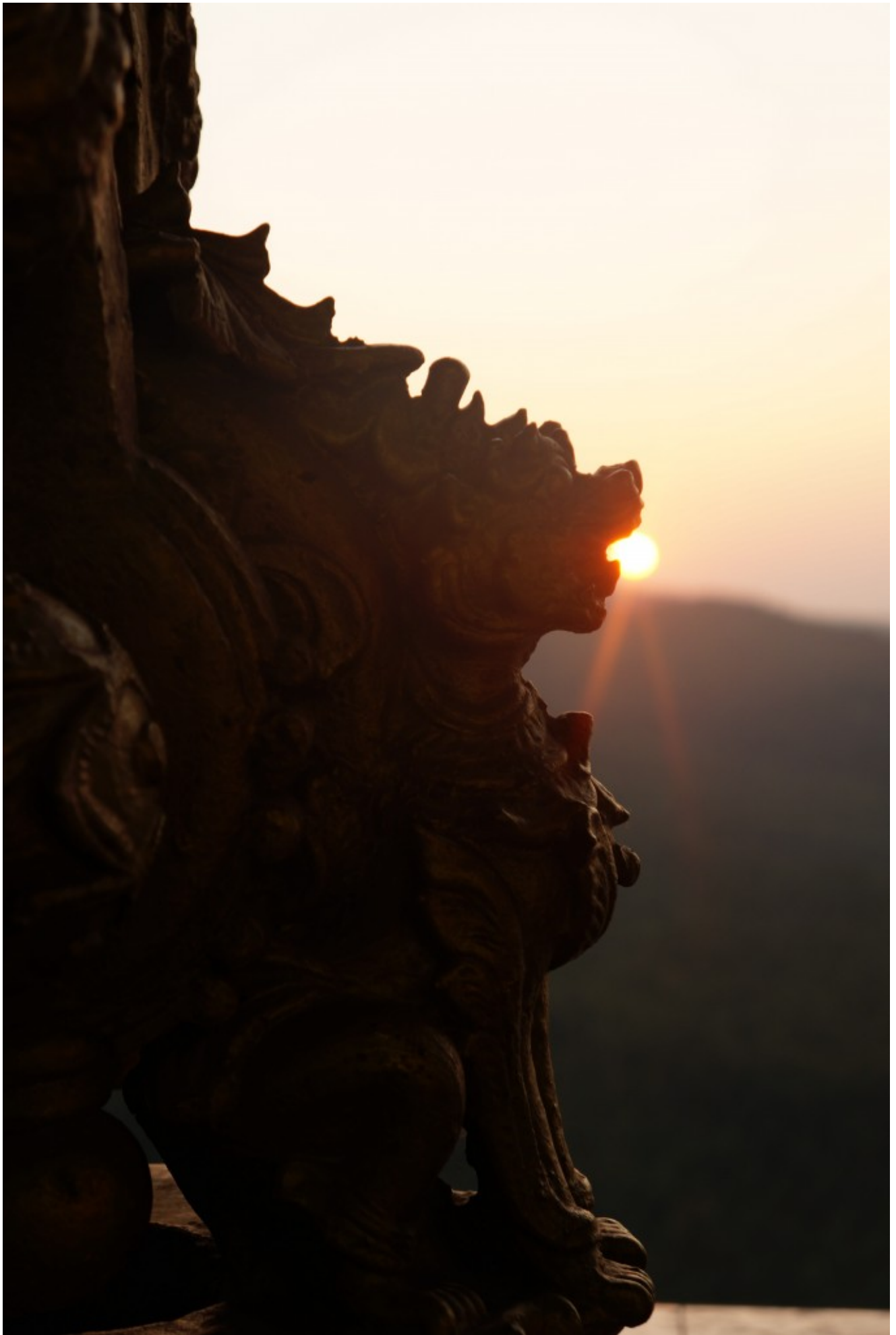
Nats born out of very ancient Burmese beliefs. These are depicted as wax work models that are part amusing, part disturbing and get given money and food to keep them happy.



Mount Popa



One of the Nats, Lord Kyawswa, the guardian of gamblers and drunks.





A monk taking a photo of us taking a photo of him



A monkey with his “joints” – twists of paper containing food



Meditating monkey

It's the morning of my birthday as I watch the sun rise from outside the mountain top pagoda. Then by the end of the day

we're in Meiktilla looking at a barge in the shape of a mythical golden bird that houses a large temple.

We meet a man on a scooter who offers to help us find the local monastery, then explains to the monks that we need somewhere to stay for the night. This is the free accommodation plan that we'd been hoping to try. Sure enough we're shown into a large room and told to make ourselves at home. Some students that are also staying there offer to make some dinner for us rounding off a wonderful start to my 38th year. The room we're staying in is also the TV room and after a hard day of chanting monks like nothing more than watching WWE wrestling and European football while smoking cigars. The sound of the roaring crowd as Chelchester City score another goal lulls us to sleep.



Birthday boy



Golden duck barge monastery

A spine of hills runs down the centre of Myanmar. We were on the west side of it and on the east side sat Lake Inle, another Myanmar 'must see'. The climbing was not too severe and the road surface mostly good so after two days we arrived at where we thought the lake should be. As we headed to the shore there was a commotion in a small booth by the road side. We waved, shouted Minglabar (hello) and sped past. Shortly after a boy on a scooter raced after us telling us we needed tickets. "Tickets to see a lake? You must be joking!". We don't stop, he gives up and we continue on. But not for long. Another scooter catches us up, this time the rider is in uniform and doesn't look happy. "Why didn't your stop?", he asks. We're liberated from \$10 each for the tickets and sent on our way. It seems crazy to charge to get to a lake that is the home to thousands of people but we're left with no choice.





We find a village, Kaung Daing, arrange the hire of a boat for the next day and spend the night in an outbuilding next to a pagoda.



Cosy pagoda

Lake Inle is a huge water borne community. Towns, villages, markets, shops and restaurants are all perched on stilts around the marshy shoreline. On the lake itself there are boats everywhere, carrying passengers, ferrying supplies or being used for fishing. Children paddle themselves to school while their mums head off to the floating market. The arrival of the outboard motor is probably the only thing that has changed this way of life for centuries.



Houses on stilts, Lake Inle



Monks off to collect their alms

The technique used by the fishermen is unique in that they stand on one leg on the bow of their boat and use the other leg to push the paddle through the water. This leaves their hands free to position their nets. It's an extraordinary display of balance and control that presumably results in several dunkings before it's perfected.



Leg rowing on Inle Lake



Fisherman on Inle Lake



Fisherman

The first stop on our boat trip is Nga Phe Chaung Monastery, formerly known as jumping cat monastery. Disappointingly the display of cats trained to jump through hoops no longer takes place as the abbot who trained them has died. The monks who are left must be too busy watching football to have time to train the cats.



Nga Phe Chaung monastery



Jumping cat (retired) at Nga Phe Chaung monastery

The Burmese have an obsession with gold. The pagodas, temples, shrines, statues are all painted and sometimes gilded with gold. On the lake we find a temple where 5 small Buddha statues have been transformed into amorphous blobs due to amount of gold leaf that smothers them. Devotees can buy small squares of 18 carrot leaf then carefully paste them on while saying a prayer. Like many holy sights in the country only men can get near to the statues while women stay at a safe distance and can watch on a TV screen.



Adding gold leaf to amorphous blobs. There's a Buddha in there somewhere.

We stop at various handicraft shops, making jewellery, weaving lotus, hammering out knives, our boat driver hoping to earn commission if we buy some souvenirs. The shop keepers ask us for "lucky money" to purchase their trinkets but the panniers are already full.



Traditional dentist's costume

One of these workshops is being operated by several women with gold rings extending their necks. It looks hugely

uncomfortable but the women force a smile. There is some controversy surrounding this practice as it is largely being maintained to help bring in the tourists but it's not clear whether the women are there willingly. Apparently they earn more money as an incentive but at the cost of a permanent deformity.



Long necked woman



Two generations of long necked women



We quickly move on and the boat driver takes us up a narrow river to view over a thousand pagodas on a small hill. The level of the river is controlled by a series of weirs that have to be negotiated by lining the boat up with a gap in the middle of the wooden dam then opening up the throttle to power us up and over.



Full throttle ahead for the weir.



Stupas at Inthein



Stupas at Inthein

The boat trip was being used to see the sights of the lake, there's no other way to get to any of these places, but it was

also taking us south. We'd brought our bikes and kit with us and asked to be dropped off at Nan Pan at the bottom end of the lake. This saved us a lengthy ride up and round from the north as there was no road down the west side of the lake.



Young boys washing in Lake Inle



Bikes on a boat

From Inle we had to get back over the hills. Our various electronic maps, online maps and paper maps all disagreed about whether there was a road heading in the direction we wanted to go but taking a Google satellite view as our most accurate source we ventured off to see what we could find.

Unlike the road to Inle this one was a bit tougher. In fact it was a lot tougher. Riding up a 22% gradient on a fully laden tandem is an exercise in brute force and determination. I've not tried it to be able to make an accurate comparison but i'd imagine dragging an anvil while turning your pedals through treacle would give a similar sensation. The motivation for staying on the bike and working the cranks is that walking would be even harder.



Steep hills on the road to Naypyidaw



Myanmar: a country with the most smiles and some of the worst teeth. This lady appeared to be cleaning her teeth with charcoal.



What goes up must come down, but really, must we go up again? Yes. And so it continued for 2 days. At the end of each day, the light was beginning to fade along with the energy in our legs as we looked desperately for somewhere to stay. As if by some divine intervention a monastery appeared from the twilight on both evenings just as we needed it most. The monks were more than happy to let us stay, bedding down next to a gaudy Buddha statue with coloured flashing lights burning all night.



Monks make great hosts



Temple accommodation



The last almost vertical climb before Naypyidaw

As well as being very visible, Buddhism is also very audible in Myanmar. Loud speakers broadcast songs, stories and chanting at uncomfortably high volumes from the early hours. Sleeping through it isn't really possible, especially 2m from the speaker, so it ensures we head off early each day.

On the third morning after leaving Inle we descended for the last time and returned gratefully to the plains. The road had existed and provided a scenic, quiet route that few tourists will find, but it wasn't easy!

The road then opened out in front of us into a four lane carriageway, then six lanes, then twelve.





16 lane highway in Naypyidaw. Watch out for the traffic there Marcus!

We were approaching the formal capital Naypyidaw, purpose built in 2006 by the military regime at a reported cost of \$4bn. Most of this money seems to have been spent on an enormous road network as all the roads are vast multi-laned runways carrying very little traffic. After visiting the Uppatasanti Pagoda, an exact replica of the famous Shwedagon pagoda in Yangon only 1 foot shorter, we go in search of the city. It's not there though. The roads lead to empty plots, an occasional park, a 'Hotel Zone' lined with 5 star luxury accommodation. I suspect they have more than a few rooms available.



Marcus in a longhi



Naypyidaw is a bit of a white elephant. And so are these.

Eventually we find a row of shops and restaurants indicating people do actually live here. The government thought that 'if they built it, they will come' but nobody wanted to move from the former capital (and in practice, actual capital) Yangon so only Government workers live here.



An elusive market

That's not entirely true, Burak, our couch surfing host also lives here. A Turk who works for a mobile phone operator setting up base stations he's bemused by his new home. He greets us with "Welcome to the ghost town".



Workers sweeping the central reservation on a deserted highway
Until 2 years ago there was only 1 government owned mobile operator and if you wanted a sim card you needed deep pockets. Now things are loosening up and several companies are clamoring for the rapidly expanding market. Burak's company can't get the network working quick enough to satisfy demand. It doesn't help that in the still volatile north their equipment sometimes gets attacked.



Sugar cane being put through a mangle to make our new refreshment of choice: sugar cane juice.



Sugar cane juice



Burak, our host in Naypyidaw

We spend two nights in his serviced apartment, resting,

washing clothes and maintaining the bikes. The staff are amazed that we are using the pool in 'winter'. We don't make use of the 'KTV' karaoke club next door though. This is very popular in Myanmar and what they lack in talent they make up for in volume. The view from the apartment is a huge, desolate wasteland. "That's where the embassy's will be built, if they ever move from Yangon", Burak explains.

Whether Naypyidaw remains as the capital once the new government takes power in February 2016 remains to be seen, but as a country that likes change anything is possible.



If this little lot wasn't enough for you, there are loads more photos in our Myanmar Gallery.

Silchar to Moreh

written by Marcus | 24 December, 2015



India had conspired with our bodies to make sure our stay was a lot longer than originally planned. But even after a total of nearly three months in the country we'd barely begun to explore it properly. It's so huge and so diverse that we could have spent three years here and still not done it justice. Like a jar of yeast extract, It's somewhere that seems to provoke either a love or hate reaction and we've swung from one emotion to the other so many times. But on balance our experience has been overwhelmingly good.



A Marmite hater

As with any of the countries we've travelled through, it's the people that make it. Yes, the Himalayas were heart-stoppingly spectacular, the Taj Mahal and Golden Temple were exquisite and North East India has been full of surprises, but our memories will be just as full of the characters we've met as the sights we've seen.



Another warm roadside welcome in Assam

We've loved the charming manners of the children, the clipped and precise 'Hinglish' spoken at 10 to the dozen and the ambiguous wobble of the head to answer a question. The industriousness and innovation that is applied to solving a problem, usually using bamboo and string. The devotion and enthusiasm thrown at whichever religious belief they have chosen to follow. But mostly what we've loved is the genuine concern for the wellbeing of the foreign traveller and their delight that we're visiting their corner of the world.



Hanuman temple in Silchar



With 1.2 billion of them, it's almost impossible to get away from the staring crowds which is what puts off a lot of people from coming to India. But from our experience their curiosity is good natured and we never once felt threatened. A smile and a wave is usually returned and after a while they disperse with an endearing farewell cry of 'Happy Journey!'.

On this trip we crossed 10 states leaving 19 others untouched. We will be back to see some more and hopefully very soon.



Worn out rikshaw driver

20th November – 6th December 2015

Our stay in Silchar extended to 12 nights, a result of three holes in my leg left from the exploding saddle sores and the time taken for them to heal up again. It was a chance for some more new experiences though including an introduction to the horrors of the Indian health service.

Lying face down on a stained bed in the College hospital, doctor Hailong was asking me 'Is it paining?' as he jabbed and snipped and squeezed the sores. I was too busy biting my fist to stop from shouting to be able to answer, the only distraction being the cow grazing on a rubbish pile just outside the rusty, glassless window. We later saw another cow ambling down a corridor on the way to the Emergency Department. My sister knows how hard it is to work for the National Health Service in the UK but here the pressure on the doctors, the lack of facilities and apparent disregard for hygiene is totally beyond our most basic level of expectation. After the last of the white gunge had been extracted we grabbed the prescription and retreat to somewhere more healthy.



Leg extract

At the Don Bosco School we wanted to earn our keep so for several days we toured the classrooms with a slide show and a

brief overview of what we're up to and some of the things we'd seen and done along the way. The children were enthusiastic to the point of being overwhelming at times particularly when it came to collecting our autographs at the end.



Don Bosco School assembly



One selfie please Sir!

Alongside the main school there was also the Don Bosco Technical College, a facility set up to help older students with vocational courses. They have a great program that takes school drop-outs from rural villages and puts them through a three month course learning practical, business and language skills. Then at the end they are posted to a job with all transport and accommodation arranged. That could be to anywhere in India but it's a chance to escape the otherwise inevitable move into selling crisps and fizzy drinks in a kiosk or working on the land.



Brother Reggie, head of the Don Bosco Technical College
At the college we took on the English speaking classes on the basis that we know a bit about speaking English. It took a

day or so before we could be understood, given we have such strange accents compared to their normal teacher, Mr Sylvanas, but we were then able to have some great conversations about our cultural differences. Arranged marriages, the importance of their tribes, their plans and dreams after their studies all made for interesting topics. The best lesson, however, was on the subject of their local food which was superbly illustrated by the range of dishes brought in by the group of Manipuri girls we were teaching.



Students from our English class



Home Economics Class with Mr Sylvanas, Sarita, Baby, Anjana and Ajita

By coincidence our teaching turned global as our friend Mr Bisco from The Creative Arts school in Plymouth asked if we could have a Skype conversation with his students. They have been following our journey as part of a travel writing project and wanted to ask a few questions. It was an interesting encounter to compare to speaking with the Indian children but with similar curiosity about Why, Where, When, How Far? Knowing that I have such a critical audience assessing our blog puts the pressure on so I hope I'm doing OK.



A message from Silchar to Plymouth

I'm not quite convinced that teaching will be a new career move for us but having had a few days trying it out we have a fresh view on how rewarding (and challenging) standing at the front of a classroom can be.



It took longer than we would have liked but after nearly two weeks the healing process was at a stage where I could contemplate sitting on a saddle again. However Father Nelson, the Principal, had one last job for us before we could get back on the road.



Nuns on the run. Kirsty with Sister Mary and Sister Salomi



Howzat? Rubbish.

I remember school sports day being an afternoon of sack racing, egg and spoon and perhaps a parents race but at Don Bosco they don't do things by halves. A full week of games and sports had been planned to mark the end of the year taking the form of the inaugural Don Bosco Olympics. The local division of the Assam Rifles had prepared a stadium for it to take place in complete with grand stand for VIP guests, PA system, podium and catering tent. To kick things off there was to be a grand opening ceremony and Father Nelson wanted us to be part of it.



Father Nelson discovers that riding a tandem is harder than it looks



Do the IOC know about this?

With a small boy perched on the cross bar in front of me and another on the rack on the back we led out the Olympic torch to much cheering and applause from the 1500 children surrounding the track. Before that there had been bagpipers, dancing, martial arts displays and a solemn oath declaring that fair play and good conduct would be observed during the games. All very impressive and comparable to our exploits in the opening ceremony of the London Paralympic Games in 2012.



Don Bosco Olympic Opening Ceremony



Assam Rifles Pipers



Relay race, with a biased track where lane 1 always won



The strange game of Koko.



Guest of honour handing out the medals

We could have stayed longer. Our teaching skills could have been improved, I needed to learn all the rules of kabadi, rice and chapati for breakfast had become normal, but the road was calling again. With a goodbye to our new friends I tentatively lowered myself onto the saddle and we span out of Silchar. Just before leaving I told Father Raphael that I would love to show him our city one day but he just smiled and said that he thought that would be impossible. I hope that we can prove him wrong.



Father Raphael's birthday. After a good sing song everyone queued up to force cake into his mouth.

Onwards and eastwards Assam gives way to Manipur via a sandy, potholed road and we're signed and stamped into this new state at a police checkpoint at Jiribam. Manipur has a heavy military presence due to unrest in the region caused by militant groups and tribal quarrelling as such they like to know who is coming in and out. Unlike some of the other North Eastern states there are now no permits required for us to

enter with the controls being actually more difficult for Indian residents from other states.



Hay making



Buffalo



Manipuri line up



Bokul and his family who helped us find lunch in return for helping him with his English

The flat plains can't last for ever and after lunch an ominous sign informs us we are climbing into the 'Hill Zone'. It's in this zone that we stay for the large part of the 250km into Imphal, the capital of Manipur. Along the way the road weaves up through dense vegetation with steep slopes on either side meaning the tent stays tightly packed into the rear pannier. A hammock would be more useful for this stretch but it's not something we have. Instead we find ourselves in small villages at the end of each day and in those villages we find people who want to help us. One night in the home of Chief Lettingthang in Old Kaiphundai, another with three sisters and one brother in Lungba (which involved lots of singing and dancing) and a third night with a 7th Day Adventist Pastor in Charoi Tupul. Each of them looking after us with kindness and enthusiasm and enjoying hosting these strange foreigners on their double cycle. Luckily they all also knew to hold back on the king chillis when preparing the food as these little balls of fire seem to be added to just about everything they cook

here at breakfast, lunch or dinner.



Old Kaiphundai



With Chief Lettingthang and his family. The tie and dress were gifts representing their tribal colours.



More dressing up in Lungba



Our hosts and dance teachers in Lungba



Manipuri loom



King chillis. Approach with caution.

During the day food is available in 'Rice Hotels' and drinks can be found in 'Tea hotels'. We don't see anything that looks like a 'Hotel hotel' though.



We had to wait for the truck to finish crossing as the bridge could only carry one vehicle at a time.



Christmas is coming. The star is very similar to those we saw in Tromso Norway.



Wash day



Bamboo being floated down the river



Up through more jungle before Imphal

It's a challenging road, large parts are unpaved, slow going and with lungfuls of dust accompanying the passing trucks. It

makes for hot and sweaty work with tiger stripes of grime collecting in the crooks of our elbows. Like Jammu and Kashmir there are soldiers everywhere, often marching down both sides of the road but they usually smile when we ride past and dip their rifles. One of the checkpoints was manned by Sikhs from Punjab and we get given tea and water while we stop and chat. Further on at yet another army base they up the ante by bringing out sweet jalebis and samosas too. We explain to the beaming officer the route for our trip and he responds by saying "This is very, very...very...MOST!". Militant highwaymen have been known to operate in this area so the soldiers guard the roads but insist that foreign tourists are not at risk.



A sikh soldier guarding Kirsty



Halt! Who goes there?



Army base above Imphal

After the final 20km climb that is thankfully on smooth tarmac we drop down onto the floor of the Imphal valley and spin into the city. It's the 4th December, the day before Kirsty's birthday so we find a smart hotel, indulge ourselves with a proper shower and dine out.



The streets at night in Imphal



Kerbside stall in Imphal

I think we're both at an age where just to be able to do what we're doing is enough of a birthday gift, at least that's what I tell Kirsty when there isn't a mountain of presents to unwrap in the morning. But as a special treat we stop at the Manjor Mangang MMRC and Unity Park just after leaving Imphal. It's a strange place with an exhibition on Manipuri life, some small churches and temples, a micro zoo and a dangerous looking playground. The governor comes out for a photo with us perhaps in the hope we'll add a review of his park to Trip Advisor.



Scream if you want to go faster



Birthday kuji cake, gulab jamun and chai

After the flat valley floor it's back to the hills and we end

the afternoon perched high in Bangyong at an Assam Rifles base. We find another touring bike parked up by the roadside and near it Arne is sat, a young Belgian on his way to Singapore. Arne has already been given the green light for us to stay at the base so we begin to settle in. However the commanding officer has a better plan and instructs us to follow one of his soldiers. We're led a few hundred metres down the road to a large house where the family have agreed to put us up for the night, perhaps under orders from the officer? By chance it's also the birthday of their son Brooklyn who's just turned 13.



The view from Bangyong



Lamkang Ladies



Bangyong Baptist Church

The birthday celebrations are conducted by the local Baptist Pastor and consist of a prayer meeting with a blessing for Brooklyn and Kirsty. Then fried chicken is handed round in place of the cake that they had forgotten to order. No cake means no singing apparently so we refrain from the usual chorus of Happy Birthday to You. During the prayers it's interesting to hear the Lamkang language being spoken, native to this small tribe, with it's high pitched inflections and changes of pace. The pastor, Jhangvei Khaldon Lamkang, explains to us that the families in the tribe are struggling as the land has been over worked so there is far less yield from their crops. Jobs are available in Moreh and Imphal but they are 60km in either direction and require skills that are hard to learn in a remote village. It means that these meetings are quite intense as everyone has a lot to pray for. It shows how important courses like those run at the Don Bosco Technical College really are too.



Brooklyn, the birthday boy

We have two more climbs before the next town of Moreh and Arne scampers on ahead. The first is long and steady and the second

is a 5km steep grind. It's a strenuous end to India. Moreh is the border town before Myanmar and its significance has increased rapidly amongst cyclists recently.



View from the final climb before Moreh



Until last year there was no open land border between India and Myanmar, this meant that a route like ours across the Indian subcontinent and into South East Asia would have to

include a flight. But now, with a bit of effort and some paperwork it's possible to buy a permit to cross at Moreh. In our case we used a travel agent called Seven Diamonds who charged a fee of \$100 each and sent an email to say that it was Ok to cross on a certain date. Some cyclists have speculated that the permit system is an elaborate scam with border guards and agents all collaborating to fleece hapless cycle tourists but we weren't about to take our chances and risk trying to cross without one. It took two weeks to process so it could be costly in terms of time if we were turned away. For travellers on motor bikes or with a car the costs are huge and have to include an accompanying tour guide for their entire stay in Myanmar so we're thankful that they are a bit more lenient for humble cyclists.

In Moreh we are flagged down by the owner of the Sangai Lodge who excitedly told us about another cyclist staying in his guest house that we should meet (and of course we should stay there too). We expect to find Arne but instead here we meet Max, an Austrian with a longer bike than ours and a lengthy beard that makes mine look like a goatee (blog: https://www.crazyguyonabike.com/doc/?o=tS&doc_id=12372&v=3Dw). He's ridden a lap of Asia from Korea to Japan, across Siberia, Mongolia, parts of China, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Then like us he flew into Delhi rode up to Nepal, across NE India and is now heading through Myanmar to finish the trip in Bangkok.

His 'rig' consists of an unusual full suspension bike with a single wheel trailer following behind. He explains that he is now using his lightweight setup as he sent the canoe home after Russia. For the first half of the trip he hauled a folding canoe on the trailer with the intention of combining roads and rivers for variety. But after only using it a couple of times he decided that carrying the extra 30-40kg wasn't really worth the effort!



Max's maxi-rig in lightweight guise

Also in the guest house are Morgan and Poreh, two French backpackers and later Jens turns up, a German cyclist on his way to Bangkok from Kathmandu. We're all set to cross the border into Myanmar in the morning and the excitement about exploring this new country is palpable. As if to signal that it's the end of the road for us in India we hear that there has been some sort of protest and there is now a blockade on the road to Imphal so we couldn't go back even if we wanted to. Thank you India, it's been a Happy Journey.

WISH YOU HAPPY JOURNEY
PLEASE COME AGAIN
PWD MANIPUR
ଆମିତ ର. ନଂଆମି ଡେଇଁ
ଆମି ନିଷେଦିତ୍ତ ନି ମାଦିଗାଏ



Thanks, I think we will come again.



Our next border crossing awaits