

# Burma

November 1985: It's an early morning flight from Bangkok to Rangoon. Overland travel was impossible, all land routes were controlled by rebel ethnic tribes or bandits. Burma's recognized military government had the legitimate leader and National hero, Aung San Suu Kyi, incarcerated.

Having traveled to Burma the year before, I was ready for a shakedown. Clearing Customs, the officer gave a big smile and said, "What did you bring for me?" Opening my luggage, I handed him a bottle of whisky and a carton of cigarettes. Catching him speechless and with a smile on his face, I said, "I need a favor from you." Please get us two air tickets to Pagan. He said it would be difficult, but he would try. We left the airport for Rangoon's finest, the Strand Hotel. The Strand like all of Burma was a mess. Years of neglect was everywhere. At least the room lizards kept the mosquito population in check.

At dinnertime we found a taxi just outside. I asked the driver to take us to a guidebook recommended restaurant. We find the place locked up and out of business. The driver suggested we try the cement boat. Indeed, it was a huge cement boat on Kandawgyi Lake complete with dinner, wine, and a stage show. In the middle of the meal, the waiter came to our table and said, "Mr. Johnson, you have a telephone call." He knew my name? They have a telephone? The call was from the customs officer. He had acquired two tickets for tomorrow morning's flight to Pagan. After making plans to pick up the tickets, I asked how he knew where to find me. He said, I called the hotel listed on your immigration card. They said you had gone to dinner. We only have two restaurants with telephones. This was my first try.

Nothing quite like a Burma Airways morning flight to Pagan. It was an old Soviet Antonov. My seat was permanently reclined, and the belt missing but the plane did get off the ground. As we landed on the dirt strip, the flight attendant, smoking a cigarette, kicked open the front door. The smell of kerosene permeated the air. Departing passengers carry their bags down the retractable stairs, cross the runway to the recently improved terminal. It now has doors, windows, and an attendant. On the other side, the dirt path into the jungle had been paved. We hired a horse cart and driver for the trip to our lodging. A friend I met last year, Ko Sann Htay, was busy with two tourists from Philly but agreed to help us get to Mandalay. He suggested hiring a car and driver for a 200 km road trip. Agreed. Our little red Toyota pick-up came with a rag cap over the bed and a staff of six. We had to hide in the back. Being spotted by the military at a road check would be time consuming and expensive. Dirt roads, black market gas and numerous military checks ruled.

Mandalay back to Rangoon was a 16-hour train ride. The rail car was built of wood, including the facing benches. Ventilation was an open window. Dirt, coal dust and bugs soon filled the car and covered us. At each stop vendors would pass through the cars selling everything from soap to fried chicken. A military officer spotted us. His soldiers moved the people sitting across from us and the officer took their place. In broken English he claimed he had traveled to the United States for training at Fort Benning. We listened to his war stories for an hour before he left with his troops in full knowledge that their leader was a man of the world. Late that night we arrived Rangoon.



Strand Hotel – Rangoon



Pagan – City Gate



Ko Sann Htay, Wife & Son, at home



Cleaning the carburetor



Fuel stop



The road to Mandalay



The road to Mandalay



The Travelers – May Myo