



Discovering the Golden Land

Nick Page reflects on his travels in Burma.

My first trip to Burma (Myanmar), back in the early 1990s, gave me a taste of a country that has fascinated me ever since.

Back in the days of my first trip, when the country had just opened to the idea of tourism, a non-negotiable seven day visa, exchanging \$US 300 on entry and the obligatory bottle of scotch and two hundred State Express cigarettes to bribe the immigration officials were the norm. That trip was marred by the constant presence of a secret service guide who kept a very nervous eye on any conversations and only allowed me to see what the government wanted. But the lasting impressions were of the wonderful people and amazing cultural heritage.

Following this first trip, I set about enhancing my knowledge of the country by enrolling on a special honours course at Hull University reading South East Asian Studies

My guide proudly said "the Americans send men to the moon 30 years ago, we now have traffic lights, we are catching up quickly".

with Thai Language and taking all the courses relating to Burma. I focussed on economics (Burmese economics was a short lesson as there is no real economy!), social history and politics (in which one could indulge in a lifetime's study). On completing the course and starting work with Audley Travel (then Asian Journeys) in 2000 and being offered the chance to revisit Burma, armed with everything



I had learned about the country during my studies, I was a little apprehensive as to what I would find.

The welcome at Yangon (Rangoon) airport was nothing compared to the dark old days of form filling and bribery, the officials were still dressed in their immaculate uniforms but with one huge difference, they were wearing a smile and had a sense of humour. I was ushered

through immigration in no time at all and my guide was waiting with my personal driver. The aging Japanese imported car was in impeccable condition, obviously polished every Sunday afternoon by the driver. I was whisked away to my hotel, stopping at the newly installed traffic lights with timer count down to green. My guide proudly said "the Americans send men to the moon 30 years ago, we now have traffic lights, we are catching up quickly".

Back on my first visit I stayed in a government run hostel, the sort of place you only have nightmares about, I was flabbergasted when we pulled up at the recently renovated Pansea Hotel. A colonial mansion, located in the quiet embassy quarter, offering the highest standards of service and accommodation, the Pansea is one of a new breed of hotels popping up around the country, that cater for the more discerning traveller. Most of these new hotels are now privately owned with well trained staff. Actually heading out into the city was also an all together new experience and although it had not changed much, I found myself being able to wander freely around the markets and small temples and talk openly to the locals. People also spoke forthrightly about their views on politics and the military, which back in the nineties was unheard of.

They were very curious as to how I viewed their country and very concerned about the image portrayed in the world press.

From Yangon I headed by road to the previously off limits area of Moulmein in the tropical south of the country. The road was not the best I have travelled on but once out of the city the only traffic was the occasional ox cart. Arriving in Moulmein in the late afternoon and going to Kipling's Pagoda to watch the sunset over the Salaween River is one of those experiences that will live with me forever. I did not see another tourist the whole time I was in Moulmein and, as in Yangon, the locals were



extremely open and friendly.

As the trip progressed, (Pagan, Mandalay, Inle Lake and some other more off the beaten track areas were all on my itinerary) in each and every destination I found locally run private hotels and restaurants that were of a standard that really surprised me. Not everything is five star but most were characterful and all were clean, with en-suite facilities and manned by attentive staff with a genuine concern that I was enjoying my stay.

In all areas I found the people extremely friendly and thanking me for visiting their country. They were very curious as to how I viewed their country and very concerned about the image portrayed in the world press. Everyone I spoke with, and not all were involved in the tourist industry, were pleased that visitors were returning to the country and able to go back dispelling some of the myths. On our part, Audley Travel try to use

only privately-run establishments and would urge any travellers to eat in some of the smaller locally run restaurants that ensures a distribution of income to the local people.

All in all, the entire trip was a resounding success. The country I fell in love with all those years ago was still the same unspoilt land of amazing natural beauty, temples and pagodas, festivals and quirky towns. However the thing that really stays with me is the new found openness of these most friendly people (and of course their new traffic lights).

Travel File

If you are considering travelling to Burma, Audley can tailor-make an itinerary or you could join our escorted small group tour, Classic Burma.

For further details please call our South East Asia specialists on 01869 276 200.