

Quiet flows

*“This is Burma,
and it will be quite
unlike any land you
know about...”*

Rudyard Kipling
Letters from the East
1989

Text and
Photographs by
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*Sunset looms over the Irrawaddy
where seagulls sing and fleet
Quiet flows the river to the east
streaming to the far-away sea...*

Once upon a time, this idyllic folk song brought a child's imagination to a dream-like wonderland. At the time, I only knew Irrawaddy as a river in a distant country named Burma. But the sunset,

the seagulls, and the serene river has haunted in my dreams ever since.

Sandwiched between the Indian subcontinent and Indochina, Burma has long been the backwater of the region. The country emerges from a complete oblivion in people's minds mainly due to its much charming and charismatic Nobel Peace Laureate Aung San Su Kyi, and the notori-

the Ayeyarwady

ous military government she is fighting against. International sanction in recent decades deepens the country's isolation, shielding it from the sight of the world. The legendary name of Mandalay is degenerated to a casino in Las Vegas.

Even fewer are familiar with the country's official name Myanmar. The name adopted in 1989 reflects the complete severing from its colonial

past. In the native language, Myanmar has always been the official name for the nation. The British colonists imposed the name of Burma in the 19th century when they annexed the kingdom into part of British East India. The name Burma was due to the Burman, one of the largest of the 130 plus ethnic groups in the country. The United Nations has officially recognised the change, even though it is still resisted by some countries like the United



States.

Similarly, the Ayeyarwady River was anglicised into Irrawady by the colonists. So named by its statue, the 2000-km big (ayeyar) river (wady) has nurtured the land and its people since genesis. Gushing down from the southern slope of the Himalayas, streams of snow water merge in the plain, forming the mighty river that cradles the civilisations along its shores. Dynasties flourish, Buddhism thrive. Centres of civilisation like Amarapura, Sagaing, Mingun and Mandalay adorn the magnificent river like pearls on a silver belt.

But Myanmar wasn't always as unnoted as it is today. During the British period, foreigners fantasised a land full of boundless treasures, exotic gems and precious timbers. Rudyard Kipling was mainly responsible for romanticising the land with his numerous poems and correspondences. The sunshine, the palm trees, the pagodas, the temple bells, and the flying fish all come to live under his pen, not to mention his famous lines in "Road to Mandalay" that conjure up fascinations of generations. However, George Orwell was more realistic in his roman *Burmese Days*. The book critical to the British colonial system was based on the personal accounts during his police service in Burma. By the end of the World War II, Myanmar attracted the world's focus again as a grand theatre where allied expedition forces fought bloody battles with the Japanese Imperial Army in the steamy jungles.

Long political isolation and economic sanction hinder developments. However, they also create a benign side effect that not only keeps the country relatively immune from the influence of foreign cultures, but also retains the originality and human touch among its people. Life remains undisturbed in this country despite the rapid developments of the neighbouring country.

Even its capital city Yangon is in no way resembling an ultra-commercialised capital of its neighbour. One January morning, several travellers and I stand alone on the tarmac of Yangon's International Airport. The arrival hall is locked. The doorkeeper scrambles to find immigration officers. But soon I come to appreciate this seemingly under-



Source: CIA World Factbook (<http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/>)

Country Name (English): Union of Myanmar
Country Name (Burmese): Myanmar Naingngandaw
Population: 42,720,000 (2004 est.)
Ethnic Groups: Burman, Shan, and 130 others
Major languages: Burmese
Land: 657,740 square kilometres
Capital: Yangon (aka. Rangoon. pop. 4,383,000)
Major Cities: Madalay, Patheingyi, Mawlamyine
Life Expectancy: 56 years (2004 est.)
Birth Rate: 18.64/1,000
GDP: \$74.53 billion (2004 purchasing power parity)
Currency: Kyat (official \$1/6, unofficial \$1/900)

developed city: parks and lakes make up a large part of the suburb, while high-rises has not yet substituted the colonial houses at the city centre. Men and women in sarongs poise gracefully on their bicycles roam avenues filled not with traffic fume but the scent of magnolia. Adding the beetle-like teakwood Chevrolet buses, it only lacks a British officer in colonial uniform to complete a perfect souvenir picture of the South Asia in early 20th century.

To visit Myanmar is to embrace Buddhism. The religion entrenches so deeply into the country's culture, tradition, mindset that everything I saw, I heard, even the air I breathed, had an unequivocally Buddhist touch. In Yangon, thousands of prayers fill the colossal, elevator-equipped Shwedagon Paya days and nights. This splendid golden wonder of architecture that once deeply impressed foreign travellers like Somerset Maugham, is not only the pilgrimage centre for all Myanmar people, but also where the soul of the entire country rests upon. One day in a restaurant, I watch in TV some men in army uniforms prostrating to the Buddha as piously as anyone else.

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Alas! I later learn, they are exactly the military junta.

Throughout the towns and country, monks and nuns with lacquer bowls and umbrellas roam around their precincts for alms. In Myanmar, giving is not an act of charity but a way of life. The donors in turn receive from the monks blessings that are indispensable to their current, or perhaps future lives. With nearly every man and large number of women in Myanmar having permanent or temporary monastic experience, it is no longer easy to draw a line between a monastic and a secular life. Such prevalence of Bud-



Lunch time in the Maha Ganayon Kyaung in Amarapura. Founded in 1914, the kyaung (monastery) is housing more than 5,000 monks.