

The Umin Thounzeh (Thirty Caves) situated in Sagaing Hill. The colonnade in crescent shape housing 45 Buddha sculptures is typical to Buddhist architecture.



(Right): Vermillion roofs of the palace inside the royal quarter in Fort Mandalay. Built in 1857, originally as the palace compound for King Mindon Min, the fort was later occupied by the British colonists as Fort Duffrin, the government house. At the end of the WWII, it was incinerated during the fierce fighting between the Allies and the Japanese Imperial Army. (Below): Palm trees and azaleas adorn the massive rampart of Fort Mandalay.



dhism attributes to the warm, gentle and generous nature of the entire population. Violent crimes are rare, gold shops in Yangon and Mandalay hardly require special protection.

My three-week journey starts with a morning stroll along the moat surrounding the Fort Mandalay at the very heart of the city. On my left side, the golden rays in the morning caress softly this majestic vermillion fortress. Gorgeous azaleas entwine at the foot of the wall that mirrors on the still water. On right side, thousands of bicycles make up



the city's rush hour traffic.

With only one and a half centuries of history, Mandalay is an extraordinarily young city. During his throne in mid-19th century, King Mindon decided to realise Buddha's prophecy by establishing a great city of Buddhism at the foot of the Mandalay Hill. Instead of building a city, he literally moved Myanmar's ancient capital to the current site from Amarapura some ten kilometres to the south. Sadly, however, when the British conquered his kingdom shortly after, the palace became the colonists' government house, and the fort was renamed Fort Dufferin.

My passport is inspected at the U-hteik Bridge in front of the Fort's east gate. Military camps and a few villages settling their families still occupy much of the area behind the rampart. A long straight avenue leads to the royal palace at the core of the fort. The entrance is guarded by a cast-iron cannon.

I reach the top of the Nan Myint Saung Tower through the spiral staircase to take a commanding view of the entire royal living quarter and part of the cityscape. Time has washed away the pomp

and circumstance of the dynasty. What left behind are the crimson palaces and other functional chambers sitting calmly amid the fresh lawns and dense tamarind trees like miniatures. King Mindon dismantled his all-wood palace in Amarapura, and reassembled it piece by piece at the current site. But his palace did not outlive himself by very long. Less than a hundred years later, the Japanese installed a military depot here, causing a total incineration by the ally fire. The replication after the war fell far short of the original grandeur, and corrugated iron sheets substituted slates for the palace roofs.

Before concluding of my royal visit, I quench my thirst with the water in pottery jars provided by the roadside at the east moat. Mandalay is a city that retained even its smallest details of the traditional lifestyle. On the way to Kuthodaw Paya (Temple), I happen to walk alongside with a procession of monks in vermillion gowns and black alms bowls – the elder in front, and the younger

at back, all bared-foot. In front of me, arrays of brilliant white stupas in the paya shine in the azure sky, and an ox cart rumble from the distance. As everything converges together, I felt as if Kipling stands by the roadside, calmly observing this familiar scene as well as this strange modern traveller.

Coming to Mandalay is not just paying a royal homage to King Mindon. It's also carrying out a pilgrimage to the mountain to which the great city is due. Like other pilgrims, I scale the sacred mountain with my bared feet via the 1,700-plus-step stairway. Astrologers and vendors fill the sides of this covered footpath, telling fortunes to the devotees, and selling items from Buddha images, ceremonial paper umbrellas, incenses to books, antiques and souvenirs. The perpetual sound of worship from the loudspeakers inundates my ears. The spirit of devotion was in the air.



Three generations join and pour water onto the Buddha's figurine as a way of wishing good luck.