

Mandalay Hill has every reason to be sacred. In front of the breezy observation deck at the summit is the panorama of Myanmar’s central plain, traversed by the mighty Ayeyarwady that irrigates the boundless green fields and nurtures thousands of villages along its shores. Even Buddha fell in love with this fertile land, and prophesied a city at the foothill. As I am going to embark in a river journey the next day, I follow the Myanmar tradition by pouring small cups of water over a Buddha figurine at a shrine to wish myself luck. I must do so at the post of my astrological sign, I am told, and the number of cup I pour must be one more of my age.

“Come you back to Mandalay, where the old Flotilla lay: Can’t you ‘ear their paddles chunkin’ from Rangoon to Mandalay...” Kipling’s ditty is the ultimate inspiration for my seeking flotilla experiences on the Ayeyarwady. Who could have thought that the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company was once the largest riverboats fleet in the world? Although the Scottish company has ceased to exist since the independence of Myanmar, the routines of inland river navigation carry on. Flotillas no more, thousands of government and private vessels still transport tens of million of passengers and countless cargoes each year throughout the country’s waterways.



I arrive in the jetty before dawn for the Mandalay-Bagan Express Ferry. The pier has already turn into a bazaar under moonlight. On one side, porters rush the last piece of cargo onboard. On the other, travellers garner their last-minute snacks at stalls lighted by kerosene lamps. I jump across the springboard, and am greeted by the Myanmar crew onboard. They might never comprehend this traveller, who has come from afar just to realise his Irrawaddy flotilla dream, albeit no longer the legendary Scottish captain in kilt and the Indian crew in turbans. Diesel has replaced steam



(Above): A man in traditional sarong stands on the Ayeyarwady ferry. Until quite recently, the Ava Bridge in the background was the only bridge spanned over the Ayeyarwady. Transportation between both shores depend heavily on ferries. (Right): Home from market via the U Bein Bridge. The teakwood bridge spans 1.2 km across the shallow Taungthaman Lake some 10 km south of Mandalay. It was built by U Bein in the mid-19th century when the capital of Innwa Kingdom moved to the nearby Amarapura.



to propel the boat.

The boat sails pass the town of Sagaing in crepuscule. Twice being the capital of central Myanmar, one during the 14th century and the other 18th, the town is said to host some 600 monasteries and nunneries, many of which seclude in the dense woods in the Sagaing Hill on the west bank of the Ayeyarwady. The Hill and the monasteries in the mist has not yet awaken, only the sound of the boat motor disturbs the dreams of sleepers inside. The first aurora of the day already casts onto the high bluff. Pagodas embedded in the lush forest shimmer like golden bells on holiday trees. But soon the sun rises over the treetop. The universe wakes up in the sea of light. Gulls hover above the fishing sampans drifting along with the gentle waves, the silhouettes of the on-shore temples flicker on the golden ripples.

Ananda Temple(left on right) and thousands of stupas (above) dominate Bagan’s skyline.



If there is one place representing the quintessential Myanmar, Bagan should well deserve the title. Not because of its much longer history than those of other ancient cities like Sagaing or Amarapura, its unique architectural treasure is also unparalleled in the world. When King Anawrahta was converted to Buddhist in 11th century, he started building a city of temples and stupas by the east bank of the Ayeyarwady big bend. However, he might have never foreseen what architectural legacy he left to the humankind. Marco Polo visited here two centuries later, and was stunned by the sheer number of edifices tightly packed within a small area. He astonishment by the city's splendours and craftsmanship is evident in his 1298 chronicle, in which he called Bagan "*one of the finest sights in the world*".

In a cold and breezy morning, I pedal my bicycle under the twilight in search of a sunrise vista point.

A network of sandy paths connects the few thousand ancient architectures, turning the area into an immense museum without boundary. In spite of its world-class archaeological and architectural significance, Bagan does not belong to the UNESCO World Heritage list, thanks to the politics. This might nevertheless be a blessing, for this hidden gem could otherwise be spared from hordes of tourists. Those who have come a long way to appreciate this wonder, however, would certainly enjoy the privilege to wander around this 40-square-kilometre archaeological zone, and scale most of the structures without restriction.

At dawn, I pose high on the terrace of a nameless redbrick stupa, savouring the descriptions by Marco Polo. In a distance, the majestic white Ananda Temple dominates the Bagan skyline, soaring higher than the mountains in its backdrop. Under its shadow, arrays of smaller stupas cluster around the Temple like soldiers accompanying

their general in the battlefield. Time and disasters have taken tolls on these monuments. Bricks have loosen, plaster fallen. Yet these stupas never topple. They have stood and will continue to stand to witness the evolution of human history.

But Bagan is not an open-air museum for the local people. It is the land they are rooted, the very home in which they grow, live and die. To me, it's a unique locale where ancient relics mingle with daily life in modern time. Each building, habitant and activity under the sun is an integral part of the Bagan landscape. Indeed, below the terrace, peasants drive white oxen and plough lands between clusters of monuments. Descending from the stupa, I say *Minglaba* (Hello or Blessing) to a group of jolly women harvesting soybeans in front of the towering Htinominlo Temple. During my journey, I am always attracted by the grace of the Myanmar women for their kind and friendly nature, their elegant sarongs and the unequivocally Myanmar cosmetics of *Thanakhar*, ground from the *Thanakhar* tree barks and smeared on faces as astringent and sunscreen. I am not content to be an observer. I share their works by joining in among their laughter, even though I realise that daily labour isn't a joyful event everyday.



(Above): A woman in Thanarkha, an universal cosmetic in Myanmar. (Below): Chilon, a woven rattan ball with a flair of volleyball and football, is Myanmar's national favourite sport.



Bean harvesting in front of the towering Htinominlo Temple. Bagan is not an open-air museum to the locals. It is the very home they grow, live and die.

