



A piece of cactus on the door signals the arrival of a new life in the family and, according to the Pa-O tradition, fends off evil spirits and daemons that might be harmful to the child.

Meanwhile, a wisp of smoke rises from the chimney behind the stupas. I follow a herd of sheep to a village entrance. Under the lush umbrella of a huge banyan tree, children sit like a crescent in front of a snack peddler. Their faces tell it all. The home-made snacks are the most delicious in the world. On the main street, cheers erupts as young men kick *Chinlon* – Myanmar’s national sport with a flair of volleyball and football. Further down the road, outside a small grocery store, women gossip and together roll cigarettes with local tobacco.

I am cordially invited into a family home. It is a typical Myanmar style home with wooden and bamboo structure, with the main floor a few feet above the ground. Tea, snack and fruits are offered, family members are introduced, neighbours gather. Smiles are written on the faces, common language is not required.

Sitting on a cool bamboo matt, I sip tea while watching people chat and children play. I ponder the phrase of “gross national happiness” I learnt not long ago. For a person who comes from a country with the biggest gross national product in the world, my sense of happiness is dwarfed

by the peaceful and harmonious lifestyle I experience here and elsewhere in Myanmar. The people of this country deserve neither a military government nor poverty. But where should the country steer toward from here? Would the democracy we transplant from our soil ever flourish on their land? Would the merchandise we export increase their happiness? Would the land cease to enchant with the influx of foreign culture? Should all countries have the same political framework, and share the same set of value? What would be the Myanmar people’s choice if they were given freedom?

When I depart Mandalay for Yangon, I hail a rickshaw from my hotel to the bus station. At the end of the long and exhausted ride on the pothole-littered streets, the rickshaw driver insists to guide me through the chaotic bus station, verify the bus number, and wait under the blazing sun until the bus departs. As I watch him waving farewell with smile through the tinted window of the moving bus, It reminds me Kipling’s famous quote in his *Letters from the East*. Although this is the 21st century Myanmar, it is still quite unlike any land we know about. □



In Innwa, a Buddha is holding a flower bouquet offered by an unknown devotee. A long time capital of northern Myanmar after the fall of Bagan, Innwa was later abandoned in favour of Amarapura a few kilometres to its north. Today, the ruin of this ancient capital offers a quiet retreat from the more touristic Amarapura.

E N R O U T E

ON THE ROAD IN THE FIELD COVERING THE WORLD

Photographer and author J.-L. Gao poses in front of a colourful horse-drawn carriage outside the Pyin U Lwin Theatre. Many readers are keenly interested in what equipment he uses during his journeys around the world. Myanmar was the first field test of his newly acquired, somewhat amateurish Canon EOS 300D digital camera, along with a Canon 17-40mm/4 L and a Canon 70-200mm/4 L lenses. Before that, he was using two manual Nikon's with a few lenses of fixed focal lengths. Ultimately, he thinks, photo equipment would not add values to a photographer's inspiration. While he is often fascinated by the photos taken by himself, he is also frustrated by his lack of literary capability to write, and desperately need help to improve his writing skill.

Many experiences in the enchanting Myanmar have left the author an unfadable memory. On the train from Yangon to Mandalay, he encountered Myo Myo Win, an elderly Chinese-Burmese woman, who was apparently excited in seeing the first compatriot in many years. She offered him food, and chatted as if seeing a long-time missing friend. When he felt asleep in midnight, she often woke up and watched him like a mother watching her son, according to the recollection of a fellow traveller. She later took him to meet her daughter's family in Mandalay.

When the author returned to Yangon, she closed her tailoring stall for a day in order to take him tour the city, China town, experience the vintage teakwood Chevrolet bus, and showed him many aspects of Myanmar life the author would otherwise never see.

Also in Yangon, a middle age man spent hours taking the confused author to different travel agents, and finally secured the author's plane ticket home.



In a Taoist temple in Pyin U Lwin, nuns invited the author to sit and share delicious vermicelli brunch together.

During the two day trekking through the mountainous villages near Kalaw, the guide Charles always took care of the author so cordially. During the overnight stay in a midway monastery, he cooked the most delicious meal the author ever had in Myanmar.

Also in Kalaw, the headmaster of an orphanage ordered all children to perform choir in front of this single audience. They sang so hard, and the voice of these children still lingers in his ears.



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