

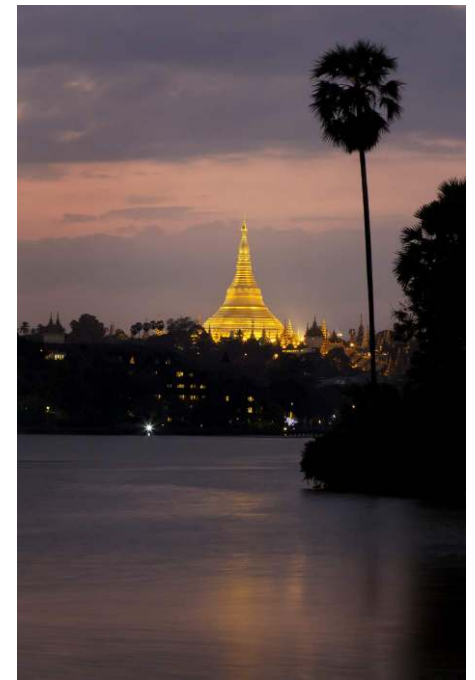
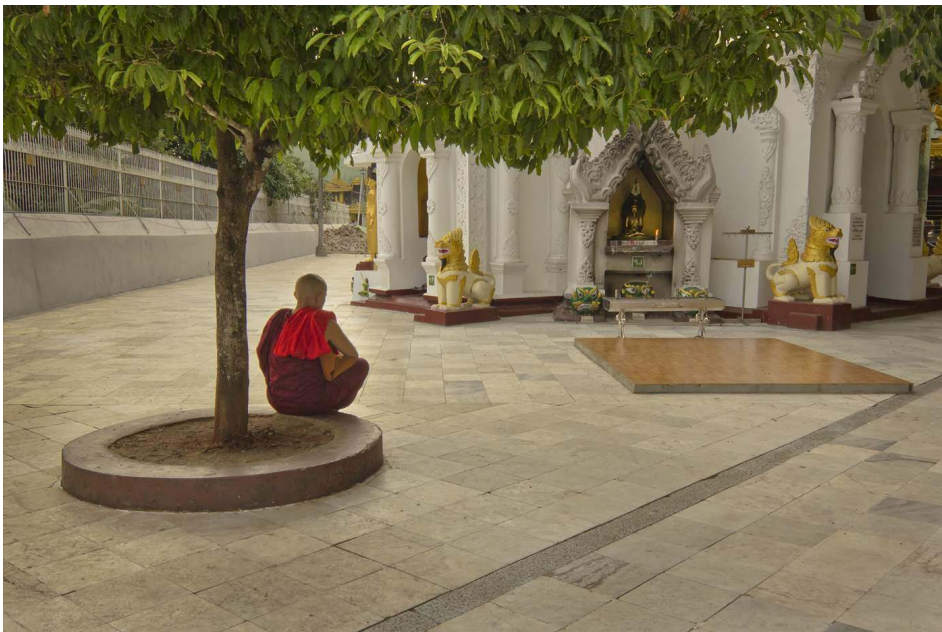
## MYANMAR – What an Experience !

*by Rob Morgan*

Myanmar, Burma - call it what you will, but see it now before it gets over-run with tourists and before the wonderful warm and friendly people of Myanmar get just a little jaded at the sight of us all. It's an exciting time for them and their country and they are keen to share their optimism.

In January-February 2016 I went with Dave Metcalf and Mark Rayner on their first photographic workshop/tour in Myanmar. It was so good I'm going again in 2017. That's how wonderful and different Myanmar is and how much more there is still to explore. Here are some of my images and recollections from the 2016 workshop.

Our trip started in Yangon. The obvious attraction is the golden Shwedagon Temple. It's an enormous public space, full of activity with monks, nuns, families and worshippers. Getting there early is the trick - in the soft light and before the heat and harsh shadows. I went back there again after the workshop, circulating in one direction with one lens, then changing lens and going back and seeing a whole new set of images, then doing it again.





Next was Bagan with its hundreds of temples, both ruined and restored. Where to start? Just about anywhere you turn there's an image: temples, farmers, villagers, not to mention the odd image of Buddha. Our early morning balloon ride was a highlight and it was over all too soon. But the next day we were up early, shooting the sunrise from up high on one of the temples, looking out over scores of other temples, with the balloons passing through. Magic! There is so much more to explore around Bagan (and Mt Popa). Thank goodness next year's trip will include more time in this area. We spent a day out in nearby villages where people were happy to see us and non-plussed to have these strange Westerners taking photos of them.





After Bagan we went by road through a dry landscape to Monywa. I'm not sure if it's on Dave and Mark's itinerary for 2017. Hpo Win Daung caves near Monywa were certainly something different: numerous caves and excavations containing a vast array of images of Buddha, many accompanied by intricate frescos. The next morning we stumbled across a primary school where many of those attending are young orphans who are training as nuns. We were made very welcome. Myanmar is full of unexpected delights like this. Later that day we visited the second tallest standing Buddha in the world. Interesting, but probably not required viewing.



Both upper images: At Hpo Win Daung caves near Monywa

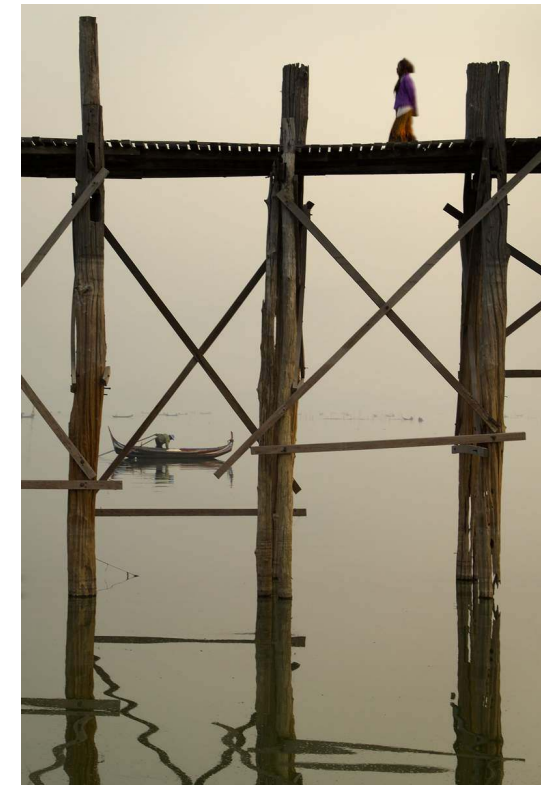
Above: Young trainee nuns waiting for school to start

Far left: Where did this photo tour go wrong? (Actually a very good lunch time stop on the road to Monywa.)

Left: the second tallest standing Buddha in the world.



And so to Mandalay. Again, there were so many fascinating places and activities to see. An old teak temple, for example. The old Mandalay Fort is now an army barracks and hospital, so you can't get inside, but the outside with its moat is an attractive feature. On the outskirts of Mandalay is one of the most photographed locations in Myanmar – the U Bein Bridge, a long teak bridge. In winter the water in the lake is low, providing almost endless opportunities for sunrise and early morning shots, with great reflections. A walk across the bridge reveals panoramas of fishermen and farm workers. We later stopped at a nearby silk weaving factory (and shop!), then back to Maha Ganayon Kyaung (monastery) to watch monks line up for their mealtime. Despite there being a lot of tourists here it is possible with the right lens and right position to get images completely free of them. After the line up most tourists disappeared and we were able to see the monks at their meal tables, through open windows at the end of the meal room. At our own lunch time we explored (by horse and buggy) the nearby rural area of Inwa, just a boat ride away over a tributary of the Ayeyarwady River.



Left:  
Maha  
Ganayon  
Kyaung  
monastery

Right:  
Mandalay  
Fort

Others:  
At U Bein  
Bridge







An early morning flight the next day left us wanting to see more of Mandalay as our bus to the airport (on an elevated road) took us past sublime misty scenes through cultivated fields. The flight took us to Heho from where we went to Pindaya, which is definitely high up on the ‘strange’ register. The town itself is sane and sensible enough, but nearby are the Shwe Oo Min caves which house 8,500 (approximately) images of Buddha, all painted gold. This number is growing as people across the world contribute new ones. A nearby parasol workshop was another delight. Pindaya is high up in the hills and it gets very cold once the sun goes down. The hotel there was memorable for having duplex villas with walls made of little more than wickerwork and rice paper (by my reckoning). The overnight temperature outside dipped to 6.5 degrees, while - despite or maybe due to the electric blanket - it remained a balmy 8 degrees inside our rooms. This is perhaps why Pindaya is not on the agenda in 2017. Which means more time to spend around Inle Lake!

Above: Maha Ganayon Kyaung monastery, Mandalay

Others: At Shwe Oo Min caves and nearby, Pindaya





Inle Lake and the surrounding areas are fascinating. There are the fishermen on the lake who fish while paddling with one leg – and a few who have worked out the money is better by positioning themselves near the hotels and posing doing strange balancing tricks with their fishing baskets. Out on the lake the genuine fishermen had no problem with us approaching and, engines cut, circling them for the perfect one-legged paddle shot. We did this on a few occasions, including early morning when the light was magic.

Around the lake there are several stilt villages where cottage industries are undertaken – so many more photographic opportunities. Another village had a market where locals approach across the lake. Having approached our hotel ourselves from the lake, it was only when we finally left by coach that we realised there was a village nearby, full of yet more potential \$m images.





Back in Yangon we headed across the Yangon River to the poorer area of Dalah. What struck us was how contented the people appeared to be.

We saw so much on this Myanmar trip, but for me there is now so much more I want to see and explore in 2017 with the extra time we'll have in some of the more interesting areas.

If anyone reading this is thinking of coming, do! I'm sure Dave and Mark will mention what to bring, but here's my list of essentials to add to theirs:

- A camera (hey, it is a photo workshop!)
- The camera's instruction manual (even though Mark seems to know the ins and outs of every camera ever made)
- A sturdy tripod. Go on, lash out and get a carbon-fibre one for light weight and strength. Flimsy tripod = waste of airfare and workshop fee.
- A tripod head and connector plate! Trust me, I've left one or both of these behind before now. A cable release to use with the tripod.
- Need to clean a sensor, or lens, or filter? Bring what you need for that.
- A good quality lens. You'll get images to treasure forever in Myanmar.
- A wide angle lens so you can fit in all the Buddhas close up.
- A lens with a wide aperture for low light and for shots with a small depth of field. I love my f1.8 prime 50 mm and 85 mm lenses. Much cheaper than the f1.4 lenses, yet so good in low light.
- A fleece or thick jacket. It gets very cold inland in Myanmar in winter.

Rob Morgan (June 2016)





And furthermore . . .



Above: our kindly and indefatigable guide Kyaw ('Chaw') – a hidden talent !

Below and right: at U Bein Bridge



At a monastery near Inle Lake



A Buddha amongst the ruins at Inn Dien near Inle Lake



A candid shot at Maha Ganayon Kyaung monastery



On Inle Lake



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