

We are continually surprised by life. We never expected to visit Bangkok, Yangon, or Bagan. So when we visited in March-April for 4 weeks, we never expected to return. Now that we have spent twelve more weeks there, we will never think never again...including working in Alaska!

Dottie had a temporary (1998 fall semester only), full-time, 4th grade teaching position at the International School Yangon. It is an American school associated with the American Embassy. Her 13 students were from eight different countries. They were also on the upper end of the academic continuum. It was a very positive experience.

A teaching couple (Mike and Kathi Adams) that we taught with in 1976-1979 in the Indian Oasis School District, Tohono O'odham Nation (Reservation), Sells, Arizona, now have positions at the International School Yangon. Mike is the elementary school principal and has other system-wide responsibilities. When we were co-workers, friends, and neighbors living in Sells, it was called the Papago Reservation. We spent a lot of time with Mike and Kathi during the summers in Tucson.

To celebrate our 35th anniversary, we took a 2-week guided tour of Thailand (formerly called Siam). Then we flew over to Yangon, Myanmar (formerly called Rangoon, Burma **) to visit our friends for less than \$180 per person more. The cost of the Thailand tour, including most meals, four star hotels, and four flights in the country, was almost as cheap as a regular coach, round-trip, airfare from Tucson to Bangkok.

** In 1989 the names of some cities, rivers, the country, itself, was changed. Some changes were justified because they corrected the British spelling and pronunciation of native language names. The most prominent river is the Ayeyarwady. The British recorded it as the Irrawaddy River; "wady" means "river" in Burmese. Some name changing, like Burma to Myanmar, has caused confusion and misinformation. The United States government does not recognize the current government in Yangon as the legal government. As a rebuff of that government, the U. S. government still refers to Yangon, Myanmar as Rangoon, Burma.

WHY GO? Myanmar is one the last remaining places to catch a glimpse of vanishing Old Asia -- of men and women in traditional longyis (long, almost ankle-length skirts) walking beside golden pagodas and dilapidated colonial buildings, carts or plows pulled by oxen, vintage vehicles and trishaws on the streets. Shiny, well-maintained cars, trucks, and busses built during World War II are still on the streets: marvelous bodywork. A visit to Myanmar is somewhat like taking a time warp to the 1950's.

OUR FIRST TRIP to South East Asia (MARCH 8-APRIL 4, 98): The first two weeks we spent in Thailand on a group tour. It was hot and sometimes humid, but a very rich experience. We now think that a tour is the way to see much of Asia since we are so unfamiliar with Asian cultures and languages. It was not at all like doing Europe or Australia or even the Gambia (West Africa) where so many people can speak English. We spent considerable time in Bangkok, and also went to Ching Mai, island of Phuket, and Ching Rai (where we boated on the Mekong River in the Golden Triangle area simultaneously saw Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar.) The hottest part of the Thailand experience was at Phuket-- VERY, VERY hot and humid. We were there for two days and Dottie spent part of one day in a fairly notable national park that is in the island's interior. It didn't matter - it was STILL very hot and humid. Saw a lot of unusual animal life and tropical vegetation. She made the trip with another couple in a tuk-tuk. A tuk-tuk is like riding in the back of a pickup truck with a cover. Actually the trip up and back was interesting since they took back roads and had a chance to see things tourists don't generally see. Lew opted for drinks at the bar and air-conditioned comfort.

After the Thailand tour, we overnighted in Bangkok and flew to Yangon: about a 45-minute flight. (There is a 30-minute time difference between Thailand and Myanmar. Yes, 30 minutes.) Myanmar is a whole different country. Not nearly as sophisticated, but the people speak much more

English than Thai people. (Burma was under British rule from 1887 to 1948.) Myanmar people are glad to see Westerners and will strike up a conversation with you as we found out over and over.

Our hosts' cook and housekeeper were friendly and eager to talk to us. They haven't done a lot of traveling but have heard stories about the USA. We attended several softball games in which students from the International School Yangon played. That was fun. We saw many pagodas (temples) and stupas (shrines without openings). Our hosts also arranged (flights, guide, and driver) for us to visit Bagan. More about Bagan later.

We began our trip home at 5:00 PM on Thursday Yangon time (about 7:00 AM on Wednesday Tucson time), and we arrived at home on Saturday night about 11:00 PM. Korean Airlines unilaterally changed their schedule and our return flights (Bangkok to Los Angeles via Seoul, Korea) requiring us unplanned hotel stays in Bangkok and Los Angeles

OUR SECOND TRIP to South East Asia (Sep 23-Dec 14, 98): Most of our time and observations were in the capital city of Yangon. This time we flew on United Airways from Tucson to Bangkok with stops in Los Angeles and Tokyo, Japan.

DICEY TRAVEL: We got our visas to enter Myanmar in Bangkok, Thailand. Getting the appropriate entry visa to work in Yangon was not an option because it usually took at least four months. Use your imagination!

OUR MYANMAR DO'S AND DON'T. Don't wear shoes (or even socks) into temples, ruins of temples or any religious shrine. When visiting holy shrines, it's best to wear rubber thongs or sandals that can be easily slipped on or off. (The chewing of betel nut, common all over Asia and a tradition in Myanmar for at least 1,000 years, even though it has been banned by the government. Walking barefoot on old cherry-red splotches of chewed betel is not always avoidable.)... Do not touch anyone's head (even a child's) or point your feet at someone, as both are considered rude.... Do get a massage.... Do take a battery, pen-size flashlight, toilet paper, good balance, and a steady nerve on day trips because some "toilets" have no electric or other light, paper, or a "throne" to sit upon: just a door and a slot in the floor.... Do avoid areas where public protests and demonstrations are taking place; in the past, such events have been broken up with lethal force. The government still controls only about a third of the land, so don't stray off the beaten tourist path, particularly in the Highlands (Chin State) and in the Delta areas (Mon State and Taninthaya Division.) Myanmar is divided into 7 states and 7 divisions. We perceived no difference between states and divisions regarding size and population. You figure!

In Bagan and rural areas, we, ourselves, became the sight to see. When in an ancient pagoda in Bagan, a group of Chin (most were in their late teens or early twenties) was excited to see a "white" person. They took many photographs of us with their group with their cameras; they smiled and bowed to express their satisfaction at meeting us. They had traveled to Bagan to see and pray in Bagan's ancient pagodas.

Myanmar is called the "step-child of South East Asia." Neighboring countries are more modernized. The country's ruling generals are caught between (1) keeping the country closed and tightly controlled and (2) luring foreign investors and tourists. Some luxury hotels are losing money. Their owners would close them, but the government will not allow it. So they only open one or two floors for business and close the rest.

Myanmar was entirely closed to tourist for years, and, of course, areas that not now controlled by the government are still closed.

As a tourist, you cannot cash a personal check. Visa is almost the only credit card you can use. You can only use it to get local currency and only at certain banks: about 30-minute wait after getting to the front of the line and beginning your transaction. No computer monitors are in sight. A teller takes your passport and your visa card (or travelers checks), and they circulate from desk

to desk where entries are made in ledgers. Finally, the teller calls your name, and you sign your name in a ledger, and you get a hand full of kyat or FECs. The most important step is making sure you get your own passport back.

Most Burmese don't use banks. Banks charge a 2% to 3% service charge on each deposit and for every check you write on your own account.

GEOGRAPHY: On the east, Myanmar has borders with Thailand, Laos, and China, and on the west it borders on India, Bangladesh, the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea (eastern Indian Ocean.) The country can be divided into two geographic regions: the northern (Himalayan) mountain and tropical forest area including the relatively flat delta. During the monsoon season, vast areas of the country turn into a flood plain.

CLIMATE: The high humidity in Yangon reminded us of one of the primary reasons we bought our home in Tucson. Quoting from page 11, "The New Light of Myanmar," dated December 1, 1998: "Yangon: Maximum temperature on November 29 was 33.3 °C (92 °F.) Minimum temperature on November 30 was 24.5 °C (76 °F.) Relative humidity at 0930 hours on December 30 was 84%. Total sunshine on December 29 was 4.5 hour (estimated.) ... The total rainfall since January 1, 1998 was 1901 mm (74.84 inches) at Yangon Airport, 2117 mm (85.35 inches) at Central Yangon. ..." From Lew's "dairy" on October 21: We are looking forward to the end of the rainy season. Daily we don our Teva's (rubber sandals designed for canoeing) and carry an umbrella. (We learned to keep up with umbrellas after loosing a few while living in New Orleans, 1968-69.)

GOVERNMENT: Most tourists stay away from Myanmar because of its military government. Quoting the "The Arizona Daily Star," page 2, December 22, 1998: List of Free countries Gains, New York (AP) ... "The survey said that worst countries for freedom were Afghanistan, Burma, Cuba, Equatorial Guinea, Iraq, Libya, N. Korea, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Turkmenistan, and Vietnam. ..."

PEOPLE: The government does not control the entire country; a complete census has not been taken since the country won independence from the British in 1948. Approximately 75% of the about 50 million people live in rural areas. Yangon has 3 to 4 million residents. Mandalay, the second largest city, has about 800,000. Four smaller cities have a population of less than 300,000. Theravada Buddhism is the practiced religion of about 85% of the population. Buddhists are much more "content" living in meager situations and having few material things than we are. About 5% of the population is Christian.

The government recognizes 67 ethnic and tribal groups. Burmese (or Burmans) make up about 65% of the people. Other ancient ethnic groups include Shan 10%, Karen 7%, Rakhine 4%, and Chin, Kachin, and Mon about 2.3% each. (Source: Lonely Planet's Myanmar, 6th Ed., 1996.)

Some women wear yellow "make-up" on the cheeks and forehead. Made by grounding the bark and stem of the thanaka tree, the yellow "make-up" is a traditional symbol and natural sunscreen. We saw how it was made.

LANGUAGE: To us, unlike some oriental languages, the Burmese language is pleasant to hear when spoken or sung. It can be written in block style (type-print) or in its traditional style, which looks somewhat Arabic.

SIGHTS: Generally, communities are clean: not a lot of litter to be seen. Yangon is a planned, beautiful city. You can't go far without seeing a pagoda or some other religious shrine. Tropical trees, bushes and flowers are everywhere you look. Yangon has wide, grand boulevards that are lined with gray masonry walls that gracefully extend out of sight. Walls surround each property along the street mark the boundary of each compound. A compound could be a large home and servants' quarters, several smaller houses, or a business. The compounds have ample, beautiful trees, scrubs, flowers, and other colorful vegetation year round. Finding a business address

located in a compound is a challenge to the most informed and wise taxi drivers. Many homes and other structures are made of woven bamboo that can last about seven years.

A local asked me, "How big is your compound (in Tucson)?" I explained that my home has no wall around it, so it would not be called a compound, but the house has 2400 square feet on an almost one-acre lot.

We often rode around Yangon, usually in a taxi, and we were conscious of the sights. Some living situations were pitiful, yet we saw few beggars. We wondered, "Either the poor don't beg, or we were in the wrong places to see it." "What happens to desperate people?"

Street vendors are everywhere. Some enterprises are elaborate; others reminded us of a child's lemonade stand. Some offered only soda, candy, and few other regular, packaged store items. Some offered ready-to-eat food: vegetables, meats including deep-fried fish, fresh breads, and fruits. Some had a few stools; some had small, low tables; others required you to stand. Some looked and smelled very tempting, but we never saw how they cleaned plates and utensils used by others.

OTHER SOUNDS: The city of Yangon is visually pleasing, but sometimes the sounds and smells are less enchanting. Enterprises, and households that can afford it, have their own gas-engine electric generators. Because power plants can not produce enough power, the city is on a power-sharing schedule: some area of the city is always without power. A typical day at the Adams household was: power provided 9:00 PM - 5:00 AM, off 5:00 AM - 9:00 AM, on 1:00 PM - 5:00 PM, and off 5:00 PM - 9:00 PM. Mike and his servants were quite proficient in gas-engine electric generators.

(Dottie had several outfits made by a Chinese tailor; she and her sisters used sewing machines with foot treadles. Other tailors, some operating on the sidewalk, did the same.)

When the power is off downtown, it is really noisy. Many small shops and teahouses have generators on or near the sidewalk. In heavy traffic, you hear a lot of honking and the whistles of traffic cops at major intersections.

Sometimes, even in the better residential areas, open ditches along the streets carry what appears and smells like raw sewage. The military government is doing a poor job maintaining the roads, water, and sewer lines. Broken sidewalks and broken pavement is everywhere.

CRIME AND CAR SAFETY: Crime for personal (nonpolitical) gain is virtually nonexistent. Neither the Buddhist culture nor the oppressive, military government allows it. Even with some ragged driving, the traffic moves slowly and harmoniously. We never saw a car accident. You can easily pull out of a side street onto a primary street. When vehicles broke down, often they were not moved off the road. Drivers and summoned mechanics worked on the vehicles where they stopped, causing traffic to move around them.

As in the USA, you travel on the right side of the road, and traffic moving opposite direction is on your left. However, many or most of the vehicles are used cars imported from Japan where you travel on the left side of the road as in England and Australia. So, in Myanmar, the driver sits on the right side of the car with a good view of pedestrians, but not good view of traffic traveling in the opposite direction.

BAGAN and MANDALAY: Bagan (may be spelled "Pagan" in some sources) is the most amazing thing in South East Asia. It has about four thousand stupas and temples in a wide area with virtually no other structures in the area. Most were built in the Eleventh Century. On our first visit to Myanmar, Mike Adams had arranged a visit for us to Bagan. During the fall, when most of the certified school staff traveled to Jakarta, Malaysia, for their regional, professional conference, we returned to Bagan. (We did not want to "tinker" with our single-entry visas.) This time we did it

without a guide. Mostly we just walked and marveled. Our hotel was on the Ayeyarwady. We took several private, yet inexpensive, boat rides. The "outboard" engine was a modified V-8 automobile engine that hung just inside the stern with about an eight-foot shaft for the propeller. (We have photos.) We surmise that the only reasons that Bagan is not one of the wonders of the ancient world is: (1) it is in South East Asia, (2) it is not a tourist-friendly country, and (3) few westerners have seen or heard of it. It certainly qualifies in our minds. On our second trip, we also traveled to Mandalay; we arranged for a guide because it is the second largest city in Myanmar. We would have wasted a lot of time there on our own.

FOOD: After about one month we began to miss real American style food. American food is there, but it is expensive and, for us, a taxi ride each way. Taxis were plentiful and very cheap.

Breakfast at the hotel came with the cost of the room, and it was almost American: fruit juice, fruit, bacon, toast, tea or coffee, and eggs any style. The fruit juice and fruit cups were often sweet, and often we could not figure out what it was. We usually skipped lunch. The hotel's dinner menu was European (American), Burmese, Indian (Asian), Chinese, seafood, and fast food. Anything you ordered was flavored with the same local spices. The cook was Indian.

TELEVISION: We watched a lot of news on TV. There were five English speaking channels on satellite TV: CNN-I (CNN international from New York and Atlanta), CNBC-Asia (from Singapore), the Australian channel, MTV-Asia channel (from the Philippines), and the Cartoon Network channel. Also we had a French channel (direct from France), a Japanese channel, a Chinese channel, a Malaysian channel, and finally, the government's Union of Myanmar station on channel 0 (zero.) Unlike NTSC TV's (used only in North America and Japan), PAL TV sets have channels zero and one, and they have a higher definition than do NTSC TV's. The government's channel only operated a few hours each day. During first hour of the day, it always broadcasted propaganda: "news" that would not be news anywhere else. It began broadcasting at 7:00 AM and signed off at about 9:00 AM; it resumed at 4:00 PM and signed off about 9:00 PM. Evening programs were entertainment including local people, cultural events, movies, or government propaganda. Occasionally American movies were aired with the sound in English and subtitles in Burmese. When government speeches were aired, locals went to the many video shops in mass.

On October 19, while Dottie was at school working, I watched the 1998 Super Bowl (Green Bay vs. Denver) that I had taped for Mike and had sent to him soon after the game. Mike did not get the tape until he returned in August 98 to begin the Fall-98 semester. Fortunately for me it was one of the few memorable, close super bowls in the last 10-15 years.

I was starved for American sports, but mercifully, I was spared having to watch the Yankees win the World Series. One or two professional American football games that are played during the weekend are re-broadcasted, without commercials, on Monday nights Myanmar time.

NEWSPAPERS: Getting real printed "news" was not easy. About twice we bought an issue of the "International Herald Tribune" which is comprised of articles from the New York Times and the Washington Post and published in Singapore, Paris, and elsewhere. Unfavorable articles about Myanmar were cut out before you could purchase it locally. We made several trips exclusively to buy the paper and were unsuccessful because they had not arrived from Singapore, sold out, or en route ("being cut up.")

LEW'S COMPUTING in Yangon was difficult. Mike and Kathi have a recent model Macintosh and agreed to let me use it in their home. I carried two external SyQuest drives and eight removable SyQuest cartridges (including all the files I intended to use). Electric power was the problem. As well as dealing with scheduled power outages, city power, when available, had only 30 cycles per second. That was too low for my SyQuest drives to operate. (The drives rarely reached sufficient speed, revolutions to operate. Power in the USA is about 60 cycles per second.) After wiping out several cartridges, I resigned myself to do much less. After years of being virtually dependent on computers to do all my writing and research, it was tough to choose another means.

Lew: While Dottie was working at school, I read, walked, and did limited computing. I read "Red Giants and White Dwarfs" on the evolution of the universe, "The Spirit of 1787" on the evolution of the U.S. Constitution, "The Gifts of the Jews" by James Cahill, "My Burma" by U Ba U who was the first President of then democratic Burma (just after British rule ended), and several other bits and pieces on Buddhism and South East Asia. At Christmas Dottie gave me "This Century" co-authored by Peter Jennings, so I've got plenty to keep me busy.

SOUVENIRS: Dottie took lots of photographs on both trips. In Yangon, we bought six watercolors: scenes of Myanmar. We had a set of four framed here, and now they hang our living room. While walking in Bagan we bought another watercolor which is replica of ancient, religious art, and we took a photograph of the artist. The watercolors, postcards, books, and gifts from Dottie's students are great souvenirs.

WORDY: This "newsletter" is wordy, but it's hard not to be a teacher and real complicated stuff was not even explained: visas, mail, paying bills by proxy, "The New Light of Myanmar" newspaper, etc.

OUR PLANS: Our focus has been on the 22-year old home that we bought about 15 months ago. We were out of town for 5 of the 15 months. We have done quite a bit ourselves, but contractors have done most of the "trades" work. We want to get all work that requires a contractor done before we commit to other responsibilities. We are replacing ten single-pane, picture windows with energy efficient, dual-pane glass within the next two weeks. When our home is in premium order, we, or at least Lew, will seek enjoyable employment: a wide range of options.

Drive the ALCAN Highway from Tucson to Anchorage again, maybe! To visit our Aleutian and Anchorage friends, definitely!

Teach in Alaska again, maybe. We still have most of our Aleutian and Arctic gear and about 25 boxes of teaching materials after throwing out about 25 boxes.