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SLOW BOAT AROUND BURMA



Balancing fishermen, bustling bazaars, Buddhist shrines and houses on stilts are some of the highlights when seeing this enigmatic country from the water, writes **Yvonne Gordon**

The girl scraped my face gently, applying a layer of thanaka paste onto my skin. The yellow-white powder was one of the first things I had noticed when

I arrived in Burma — nearly every woman and girl has their cheeks painted with the substance, which is made from ground tree bark. As well as keeping skin smooth, it is said to have sun-protection properties. Now it was my turn to try it.

Sun streamed through her bedroom window as she crouched down on the floor in front of a makeshift dresser.

I watched carefully as she sprinkled water onto a big round stone, then ground a piece of bark into the stone to make a paste. She applied it gently to my cheeks and forehead with her hands, then smoothed it with a small brush. We never spoke — she did not speak English — but being invited to experience this intimate ritual felt like the height of a compliment, especially as this visit was unplanned, sparked by a simple joke.

My two friends and I had been on a boat trip on Inle Lake, a freshwater lake in the central Shan state of Burma. We had hired a boatman for the day to take us by long-tail canoe around the lake. We left early in the morning, setting off from Nyaung Shwe village to explore some of the 116 sq km lake.

Our first stop was a morning market

Pole position The acrobatic Intha fishermen use their legs to paddle their boats

on the lake shore. Here, we saw tables laden with jewels made of silver and jade, rows of carved lacquered wooden boxes and intricate carved masks, while in a field behind women sold bundles of wood. At the top of the hill was a glittering complex of gold and white pagodas to explore, many with Buddha shrines within.

Back in the canoe, the air warmed and the sun beat down as we glided along, passing the floating gardens where farmers grow fruit and vegetables on large patches of vegetation. We sometimes diverted from the lake's open water into narrow, reed-lined channels with dense greenery and swamp on each side. We came across the Intha fishermen who stand on the end of their flat-ended canoes, one foot wrapped around a →

→ wooden paddle, fishing with nets and cone-shaped bamboo baskets.

It was on exiting one of these narrow creeks that we came to Helon, a village in the centre of the lake, where curiously all the houses were on stilts.

They were lined up, as though on a street, each separated by a watery channel. Electricity wires were set on wonky tree branches planted into the lake. Our driver, Kyaw Khaung, gestured towards the houses, saying: “My village.”

“OK, your place for coffee then,” I said, by way of a joke. To my surprise, he nodded and soon we were motoring towards a big wooden house, the noisy engine signalling our arrival.

A young woman came down the steps and smiled in welcome. She was Kyaw’s sister — who would later apply the thanaka paste to my face — and although none of them spoke much English, we managed to communicate with nods and smiles.

The house was a large, square teak building set on stilts, with a weaving loom on the bottom level and the living quarters on the first. In the main room we sat cross-legged on the floor while Kyaw’s sister brought green tea, bowls of sugar cane and nuts, and his sister-in-law, nephew, mother and grandmother came to join us.

Inle Lake is a popular sight on the backpacking trail in Burma, which opened up to tourists in 2012 after



decades of military oppression. We were backpacking for three weeks, having started in Rangoon, a bustling city of about 5m people.

We spent a morning there exploring Bogyoke market, a large indoor bazaar with jewellery shops glittering with gold

and jade, and tiny passageways full of clothing shops, each with piles of colourful cloths and silks reaching to the ceiling. In each tiny shop, men and women were cutting and measuring, busily working sewing machines.

Monks in long purple robes wove in and

High and dry
Homes raised on stilts were a frequent sight

The river was black, the sky was dark and there were no lights on the land, just the searchlight from our bow

out of shops, some collecting alms, some shopping, while outside street food vendors sit behind impossibly large piles of vegetables, noodles and papaya. A highlight of Rangoon, now known as Yangon, was Shwedagon Pagoda, a magnificent golden stupa surrounded by small pagodas, shrines, temples and statues of Buddha, all glittering with gold.

Our next stop was Bagan, about 690km north of Rangoon. Here, over a stretch of 67 sq km, there are more than 2,200 pagodas, stupas and temples, dating from the 9th to the 13th centuries — some large, some small, and many crumbling. Hot-air ballooning is popular here, but we chose to explore by bike.

One day we ended up at a tiny jetty under a sign for Burma Boat Club and got chatting to Steve, an American who runs boat tours. He said if we hired a boat, we could join him to watch the sunset at a sawmill on a nearby island.

Steve was with a group of Americans and New Zealanders and we sat on the

beach, sharing beers and swapping travel stories as darkness descended. When the bats appeared, we decided it was time to move on.

We encountered many more boats on our Burmese adventure, some journeys smoother than others. The one I had been most looking forward to was an eight-hour slow boat up the Irrawaddy River, from Bagan to Mandalay. It ended up being much slower than we had planned.

At 5am we made our way from our guesthouse to the river by horse and trap (the local version of a taxi). It was pitch-dark when we arrived, and there were people and porters milling about the river bank, saying their last goodbyes and packing luggage and boxes onto different boats.

We found ours and stepped across the wooden gangway from the mudbank. The boat was long and narrow with two long rows of wicker armchairs facing the river on either side of the open deck.

At 5.30am, with three hoots from the boat’s horn, we pulled away from the river bank into the darkness. The river was black, the sky was dark and there were no lights on the land ahead, just the searchlight from our bow. Soon the lights of Bagan faded away and it felt as though we were in the middle of nowhere.

An hour later, a patch of light faded into the sky on the starboard side. Dawn. Then the stars faded as the sky turned light blue.

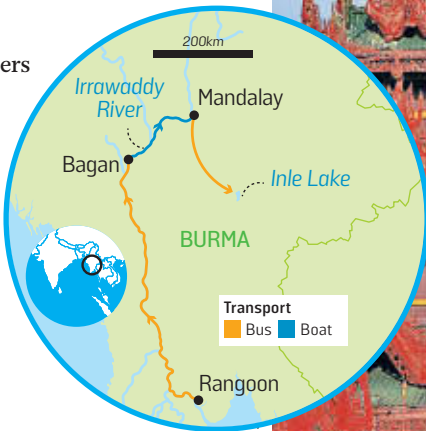
The river became silver in the early morning light, and we could see logs floating in the water and ripples created by a gentle breeze. As we glided slowly along, I could make out small basic settlements on the mud flats.

On board, breakfast was served to the 12 passengers. Soon the boat slowed and veered towards a mudflat. One of the crew was using a long pole to test the depth of the water, holding up his hand and excitedly shouting instructions.

We sat in our wicker chairs nursing the last of our coffee and watched the crewman jump off, wade over to the land with a rope and tie it around a pole, which he then pressed into the mud.

It seemed that we had stopped to enjoy the sun rise and inwardly I thanked the universe — and the captain — for the opportunity to see one of the most perfect daybreaks of my lifetime. But, no, that wasn’t it. “We have trouble with engine,” said a crew member. We were stuck and we were going to have to change boats. Whenever the next one came along.

We sat waiting, still tied to a pole in the mudbank, until a larger, noisier boat — more of a ferry than our romantic cruiser — came charging alongside. There



were about eight people aboard and soon we “newbies” were recounting our tale of being “stranded” up the Irrawaddy.

We swapped travel and life stories over more coffee as we motored along the river, the flat mudbanks stretching for miles.

We passed barges of logs and some fishing and gold-mining canoes — this is gold-mining territory and many of the mudflat settlements are a temporary home to miners.

The further we travelled, the greener the land became, the mud was replaced by grass and trees along the banks.

On our boat a bell rang often — it was the captain telling the engine room to slow the boat down. The river was shallow and full of sand, so we needed to avoid running aground, a frequent occurrence here.

The boat weaved its way upriver, picking a path through channels and dodging the sandbanks. We saw the sun set in a fiery blaze and later that evening we finally arrived at Mandalay.

We saw nearly everyone from the boat again during the trip, bumping into them at guesthouses, at markets or at dinners in other cities, prearranged by email. Burma was not always easy to travel in but it was the series of fascinating boat trips and the unexpected people we met that left a lasting impression.

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Golden wonder
Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon and, top right, its giant Buddha statue; below left, Gordon has thanaka paste applied to her face

How to get to there

Burma was a British colony until 1948. The country was under oppressive military rule from the 1960s until 2011. In 2012, a tourism boycott was lifted, but continued military involvement in government means much of the country is still off limits.

It is recommended that tourists spend only money that goes directly to the people, rather than organisations connected to the government or army.

A tourism infrastructure is still being developed, with more hotels and services being built. With the recent election of Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy party, how much power the military hand over remains to be seen.

GoHop (gohop.ie) has return flights from Dublin to Rangoon via Heathrow and Doha, from €750 per person, or via

Amsterdam and Bangkok from €790pp, including taxes and charges. We stayed in hostels and guesthouses — from \$20 (£19) to \$30 a night for a twin room — which are basic, but most have wi-fi. All the main tourist centres have hotels.

Highlights include Inle lake, known for its floating gardens and stilted villages; an Irrawaddy river tour; Bagan, on the banks of the Irrawaddy, which has 2,200 temples, stupas and pagodas, many of them covered in gold, and Burma’s former capital, Rangoon, with its colonial architecture and temples.

For an organised tour, Explore (explore.co.uk) has a nine-day Essential Burma trip from €1,768 per person, or check out Intrepid Travel’s Best of Burma tour, from €1,925 per person (intrepidtravel.com).