GOLDEN MOMENTS
Discovering Burma's gilded temples and mysterious backwaters | p17
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 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...
of the river, the flat mudbanks stretching for miles. Our boat was long and narrow with a lot of room beneath it. It was quieter than a ferry, but we felt safe. We turned to see the Irrawaddy fade away and it felt as though we had moved on.

5am was early, but we were in the middle of nowhere. We sat waiting, still tired from our night on the sea. The river was silver in the early morning light. We could see several small pagodas, shrines, temples and statues of Buddha, all glittering with gold.

On board, breakfast was served to us in our wicker chairs. The sky was pale and blue. People we met that left a lasting impression.

The river was black, the sky was dark and there were no lights on the land, just the searchlight from our bow. We were in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of the night. We were about eight people aboard and soon the river was silver in the early morning light. We could see several small pagodas, shrines, temples and statues of Buddha, all glittering with gold.

We saw nearly everyone from the boat again during the trip. Bumping into them at guesthouses, at markets and on the streets. Each person was special, the series of events, the conversations, the moment of opportunity to see one another.

How to get to there

Burmese gold. The golden wonder of Shwedagon Pagoda, from the sky, the flat mudbanks stretching for miles. The Irrawaddy River, the flat mudbanks stretching for miles. Our boat was long and narrow with a lot of room beneath it. It was quieter than a ferry, but we felt safe. We turned to see the Irrawaddy fade away and it felt as though we had moved on.

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