The Exceptional Myanmar Experience

By Paul Sarno

My 2011 Southeast Asian travel experience revolved principally around the guiding by me and my wife Anita of seventeen, primarily American, senior citizens around Myanmar.¹ For nine days, we visited the commercial capital of Yangon,² Bagan, the capital from about 870 to 1200, Mandalay, the second city, arts center and last royal capital and Inle Lake, the northern Shan State home of leg rowers and floating gardens—all for the astonishing price of $1280 per person (only transportation to and from Myanmar excluded).

The tour concentrated on three aspects: a well-grounded understanding of Burmese history, religions and culture as provided by my four lectures⁴ given during the long bus rides to and from the airports for internal flights, an appreciation of its classical music, dance and marionette arts as many of our meals were accompanied by live performances of artists in those media and an appreciation of the cuisines of the country via meals in local restaurants and the five star hotels in which we stayed plus a visit to a Mandalay teashop at which we sampled the unique strong Burmese tea served with condensed milk and sugar added in quantities as the drinker desires. All supplemented by the constant insights of our local guide Myo Win Myint.

The highlights included an extended stay at the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon, the holiest site in Theravada Buddhist Myanmar, the ancient temples of royal Bagan, Mt Popa, the home of the indigenous animist spirits, the Kuthodaw Pagoda in Mandalay where the Buddhist Tripitaka (Bible), as revised in 1871, is carved into 729 large stone tablets, the Pindaya caves in the Shan State, home to thousands of Buddhist images of all sizes and hand positions⁴, the aforesaid leg rowers (usually fishermen who row the boat with an oar wrapped around one leg so they can see where they are going), floating gardens where vegetables are grown directly on vegetation platforms on the lake. The group also observed the ancient arts of lacquer ware, silk and cotton weaving, stone carving, gold and silversmithing. But perhaps the ultimate delight was the visit to the nineteenth century Yangon synagogue hosted by our tour organizer, the Samuels family, five of about twenty Jews left in Myanmar, and the final dinner at which my invited Burmese guests, a film writer and producer, an art gallery owner⁵ and a lawyer/librarian and their sons interacted with us in a lively and informal manner. Overarching all of this was the Burmese people (the real reason one travels the twenty-four hours to arrive there). They are uniformly warm, polite, funny and so anxious for you to understand their country. A simple “Mingalaba” (on greeting) and “gesu tin bah deh” (when thanking their omnipresent acts of kindness) smooths the path to real insight and avoids the temporary annoyance at ever-

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¹ I use Myanmar as the name of the country formerly called Burma as the present government has reverted to its traditional name in Burmese before British colonialism arrived.
² Formerly Rangoon.
³ As many of the readers of this article know, this was my ninth visit to Myanmar and since college days, I have studied and taught extensively about it.
⁴ This site was selected by the group after arrival, demonstrating the flexibility of the tour operator.
⁵ There are many in Myanmar now, exhibiting numerous styles of oils, water colors and some sculpture.
present attempts to sell you more handicrafts than you could ever add to your luggage. All in all, the nineteen travelers experienced nine days they will long remember and many already are planning a return.

Paul Sarno will be teaching in Sarasota about Southeast Asian political systems at Pierian Spring Academy for six Tuesdays (2 hours each) commencing February 21, 2012, more details at http://www.pierianspringacademy.org.

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6 Unlike some other Southeast Asian people, the Burmese do take no for an answer.