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Taking On a Totalitarian Travel Experience

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A controversial trip into surreal Myanmar brings real-life monopoly money, scattered stupas, and cat tricks

According to a documentary I watched before visiting Myanmar, Buddhist monks at a monastery in the northeastern part of the country have devoted their lives to teaching resident cats to jump through hoops. As actor Martin Sheen solemnly narrated, the saffron-robed monks coaxed their nimble felines into flight. No Buddhism expert, I took Sheen's word that this peculiar ritual held deep spiritual significance, perhaps leading to enlightenment through the Zen of hoops.

Or perhaps not, I concluded weeks later as I encountered Myanmar's answer to Siegfried & Roy at their monastery on the shores of Inle Lake. Kitty-cat hoop jumping, as one bemused onlooker called it, seemed less a spiritual exercise than a time killer in this pariah nation.

Second only to North Korea as Asia's most isolated country, Myanmar (known as Burma until 1989) has been run since 1962 by a brutal and incompetent military junta responsible for massive human-rights abuses. The ruling State Peace and Development Council suppresses all forms of dissent, routinely jailing and torturing opponents.

Meanwhile, the army conducts ethnic-cleansing campaigns that include murder and systematic rape against the rebellious populations of border regions. Hundreds of thousands of Burmese displaced by decades of conflict and ongoing political repression continue to live in refugee camps in Bangladesh and Thailand.

Not exactly a model regime, and not a place where ethical tourists should be spending their money, critics argue. Foremost among them is Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, under house arrest in Yangon (formerly known as Rangoon) for leading the democratic opposition. She has called for a tourism boycott until the junta allows the candidates democratically elected in 1990 to form a national government.

Other boycott advocates argue it is difficult to avoid patronizing government-owned tourism services, and point out that forced labour is sometimes used to construct the minimal tourism infrastructure. Visitors must also buy a minimum of US$200 per week in Foreign Exchange Certificates, tourist "monopoly money" required to pay for government-owned hotels and transport. By purchasing FEC, tourists provide Myanmar's regime with valuable hard currency.

Is visiting countries like Myanmar then tantamount to supporting their evil regimes? Perhaps, but to limit one's choice of travel destinations to countries run by palatable governments would render much of the planet off-limits. For me, it is humbling to witness firsthand how people survive in countries that deny basic freedoms. I also like to believe that increased contact with the outside world may remind people in closed societies like Myanmar that they are still a part of the global community.

In Myanmar's case, the easing of independent-travel restrictions over the past decade has created more opportunities for ordinary Burmese to earn a living from tourism. Visitors are no longer required to join package tours operated by state-owned Myanmar Travel & Tours. They can now choose to patronize privately owned guesthouses, travel agencies, restaurants, transportation services, and handicraft shops.

There is also a way around converting the officially required sum into FEC, as I discovered at Yangon Airport's foreign-exchange counter: bribery. An entrepreneurial immigration official assured me that I only needed to purchase US$100 in FEC for my three-week stay if I offered her a US$10 "personal donation". Normally, I would refuse, but in this case I was happy to condone corruption if it meant putting a few greenbacks in her pocket instead of the regime's coffers.

Entering Myanmar is like travelling back in time. Yangon, the dilapidated capital, has changed little in appearance since the British departed. With its crumbling colonial-era buildings and wide, tree-lined boulevards, this sprawling city of four

million on the Irrawaddy River delta evokes a less frenetic era. Traffic is light compared to other Southeast Asian capitals, and no air-conditioned mega malls or gleaming skyscrapers sprout up like muscular monuments to urban progress.

Instead, the golden 98-metre-high dome of the magnificent Shwedagon Paya dominates Yangon's skyline. Myanmar's most sacred and enduring symbol, Shwedagon is a dazzling maze of stupas, pavilions, and bells. Experiencing sunset there as families gathered to worship and meditate remains one my most vivid and beautiful travel memories.

Thanks to the regime's incoherent and xenophobic economic policies, what was once the rice bowl of Southeast Asia is now the region's economic basket case. The boom that transformed other capitals into ultramodern neon jungles is nowhere evident in Yangon. There is not a designer-knockoff emporium, electronics bazaar, pirate CD shop, or McDonald's to be found. After dark, blackness envelops the potholed streets, lit only by the cooking fires of night markets where men wearing traditional longyis, still required by law, and women in colourful sarongs sell produce and socialize by the curb.

Predictably, contact with the outside world is discouraged. There is no CNN or MTV, and Internet access is restricted, likely for fear that the populace might learn how other nations perceive its leaders. Sending an e-mail from my hotel involved submitting the text to front-desk staff for later transmission. Not surprisingly, most messages never reached their intended destinations.

Although Myanmar's isolation offers visitors a fascinating glimpse of Asia's past, for the Burmese it means missing out on modern Asia's economic prosperity. For that, they can largely thank former dictator Ne Win, who died in bed on December 5, 2002, at age 91, while I was watching amazing cat tricks at the Inle Lake monastery. After seizing power in a 1962 military coup, Myanmar's ruthless "puppet master" launched the country on his so-called Burmese Way to Socialism, a xenophobic, paranoid, and puritanical platform that resulted in a ruined economy and mass poverty.

"Number One", as Ne Win often referred to himself, was also intensely superstitious. On the advice of his personal astrologer, he suddenly demonetized the country's currency twice in the 1980s, wiping out the savings of millions of citizens overnight. He then reintroduced notes in denominations of 45 and 90 that added up to his lucky number, nine (4 + 5 = 9).

On another occasion, the dictator interpreted his dream as a sign to amend Burmese traffic laws. Vehicular chaos ensued as a bewildered nation of drivers was suddenly forced to switch road sides. Ne Win's luck finally ran out in the early '90s when he was forced into retirement by his junta colleagues. His final years were spent in a mansion on the shores of Yangon's Inya Lake; ironically, with a view directly across the water into the home of his archnemesis, Aung San Suu Kyi.

What was peculiar about Ne Win's death was how little coverage it received in Myanmar's state-run press. The New Light of Myanmar, the regime's English-language mouthpiece, buried the news in the back pages. Evidently, this event was less noteworthy than the usual fawning editorials and staged drug busts. In the sham war on narcotics, the generals are said to profit handsomely from exporting what they claim to destroy.

I did not even hear the momentous news until a week later, when my Shan State trekking guide mentioned the passing of yesterday's strongman, adding that he was denied a state funeral because his successors wanted Myanmar's most despised figure to go as quietly as possible into that good night.

The farther I travelled inland from Yangon, the more surreal Myanmar became. After a gruelling 24-hour bus ride I reached Mandalay, the former royal capital. The name itself evokes romantic notions, and the city retains traces of past grandeur, but not even its enormous walled palace, surrounded by a fairy-tale moat, can offset the drab tackiness of the omnipresent Chinese-style buildings, part of China's plan to transform Mandalay into a cheap package-tour destination.

Bagan, nine hours downstream by Irrawaddy riverboat, retains the sense of timelessness rapidly disappearing in Mandalay. Thousands of stone temple ruins, some dating back more than a millennium, populate Bagan's vast plain like landing-site tents pitched by cosmic invaders. Life here flows at a leisurely pace, as horse-drawn carts vie for space with bicycles along the maze of dirt paths that crisscross these massive monuments to past glories.

Nearby is Mount Popa, often described as the Mount Olympus of Myanmar because it is home to Myanmar's most powerful nat ("spirit"). Nats were originally associated with trees, hills, lakes, and fields, and nat worship, which predates Buddhism, remains enormously popular among Burmese despite official efforts to disparage it as animistic. Standing on

Mount Popa's summit, surrounded by temples, nat shrines, hyperactive monkeys, and joyous pilgrims, I could understand the attraction: far wiser to align one's destiny with the spirits than to believe in the empty promises of ruling men in uniform.

As is so often the case when I travel, a casual encounter with a local can personify the state of a nation. In Myanmar, her name was Jun Jun, and she was helping out at her family's Bagan restaurant during a midterm break from Mandalay University. Chatting in excellent English under the glow of the thousand-year-old temple that dominates the restaurant grounds, Jun Jun explained how important graduating with a degree in law was to her. She looked forward, she said, to helping resuscitate Myanmar's justice system, a dangerous aspiration in a country where the government wages war on its own people.

Aware that Burmese are often punished if caught discussing politics with foreigners, I tried politely to shift the conversation, but Jun Jun was not afraid to speak her mind. I later heard that her university was closed during a periodic crackdown on colleges and universities, long considered hotbeds of dissent. In the paranoid minds of Myanmar's leaders, Jun Jun's generation must represent the ultimate threat: freedom from fear.

ACCESS: There are no direct flights to Myanmar from Canada. Most visitors fly in and out from Bangkok or Chiang Mai in Thailand, or stop over en route to the Indian subcontinent from Southeast Asia. Canadians can obtain four-week visas, extendable up to 28 additional days post arrival, from Myanmar embassies and consulates abroad, or in Ottawa at 902/903--85 Range Road, The Sandringham, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 8J6 (phone [613] 232-6434/46).

Myanmar authorities are hesitant to issue tourist visas to writers, journalists, editors, film producers, or photographers. If you happen to be any of the above, it's best not to state so in your application.

Canadian Friends of Burma (www.cfob.org/) raises awareness about the political, human-rights, and socioeconomic situation in Burma and how it pertains to Canadians.

The Online Burma/Myanmar Library (www.burmalibrary.org/) is a comprehensive source of on-line information on Burma.

The New Light of Myanmar (www.myanmar.com/nlm/) is the on-line version of Myanmar's official government newspaper, noted for its high propaganda quotient.

The Burma Project (www.soros.org/initiatives/burma/) and Free Burma (www.sunsite.unc.edu/freeburma/index.html) feature human-rights-oriented information about the country.
