



At the market, locals hawk a variety of daily necessities from betel nuts to gasoline.

THE DHARMA OF BURMA

ON A TREK TO A BURMESE TOWN, ONE CHANCES UPON REAL VILLAGE LIFE AND ITS SIMPLE, CHAOTIC BEAUTY.

BY DESIREE KOH

In a jungle clearing near the town of Thauon Thon, Myanmar, makeshift tents jostle for space and straw mats cover the dirt ground. Women in tribal headgear string fish so fresh they are still flopping, and men with betel-stained teeth roll fresh tobacco with lime juice, black pepper and coriander. In one corner, giant dice tumble in a designated gambling den and on the other side, two roosters battle it out as the crowd tosses kyats (the local currency). Everywhere else, local villagers shop for their weekly supply of produce, household items and other necessities, some having walked for as long as three hours

from wherever they call home.

To get to Thauon Thon, we climb aboard a motorised long-tail boat that zooms across the amazingly serene surface of Inle Lake, cutting a trail through the morning fog. We cruise into a maze of inlets where other boats carry mounds of rice, soil and cattails piled sky high. Later, we trek through scenery alternating between hamlets, agricultural land and forests for an hour and a half, before finding ourselves amid resting buffaloes and unhitched wooden carts – the market's parking lot, it seems. Then, across a sturdy old bridge that has surely borne the load and cares of many generations, I find myself standing amid local natives bustling about the market and others hawking meat, vegetables, the region's ubiquitous rice crackers, gasoline, betel nuts and everything else that completes a Burmese life.

■ Sometimes tumultuous, mostly peaceful

Inle Lake is an oasis of peace in Myanmar's tumultuous Shan state, a vast and untamed wilderness of natives, tribes, rebels, warlords and drug runners ensconced in its undulating and complex mountains. Occasionally, this

PHOTOS: DESIREE KOH

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“ecological” system of rural Burmese life is derailed by the relentless democratic uprisings, often ending in bloodshed and the destruction of entire districts. But one thing remains constant – amid the floating gardens, monastery with jumping cats, ancient stupas, fishermen who row standing with one leg wrapped around the oar and other colourful slices of life – one can always seek refuge here and never have to worry about hurrying along with the rituals of modernisation.

Between fishing, farming (all kinds of crops are grown in the lake), silver crafting and other indigenous industries, the friendliest folk in Myanmar gaze upon visitors from the outside world with fascination (thus giving rise to the brave new enterprise of souvenir hawking). They greet the strange faces that go by with such warm hospitality that you forget about the cool mountain chill that swoops down at dawn and dusk. In fact, you might not even want to remember skyscrapers or the Internet – this might be how it was always meant to be.

Somewhat inaccessible, but the reception is warm

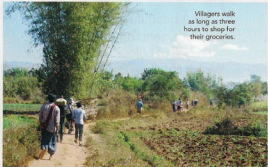
The level of tourism is adequate for diners like Inle Pancake Kingdom in Nyaung Shwe to thrive. Apart from the tourists, one of the few variables of life by the lake is the travelling market. These move around the lake on a five-day rotation, with the one that circumvents the shoreline attracting the most sightseers. We choose to



Rustic Burmese house by Inle Lake.



Fresh tobacco is rolled with lime juice and black pepper.



Villagers walk as long as three hours to shop for their groceries.

visit one of the most inaccessible ones, insinuating ourselves into a routine weekly excursion for the Intha people. They respond with emphatic greetings of “Mingalabar” (“hello” in Burmese), and insist we sample their wares. It is an uncensored glimpse into life as we’ve never known it before. Here, everything is precious and nothing is taken for granted. No part of an animal goes to waste, so you’ll find the head of a carcass swaying gently from a hook at the butcher’s stall. An old woman picks up red bean seeds scattered and half-buried in the dirt, probably spilt from a hole in someone’s sack. Two ladies slurp mohinga, the national noodle staple, until the bowls are sparkling clean. A cacophony of bargaining, cackling, chucking and gossiping lingers, powered by the veracity of human nature. This is truly what they mean by a reality show.

Trekking back, we find ourselves in the company of locals, traipsing single-file on narrow embankments, navigating their way across padi fields. We carry backpacks with mineral water bottles and trail mix snacks; they lug baskets with shopping on their heads or bamboo poles loaded with larger commodities like mattresses and bales of straw tied to each end. The trek into that jungle clearing



Fighting cocks capture the undivided attention of the villagers.

VENTURE OUT



Look ma, no Playstation!



Life is just simple from a young age.

“A beautiful sunset unfurls, sending out a fireball of colour from where it nestles behind the Shan Plateau.”

and back gave us a glimpse into how far we’ve come, and how far progress has left some others behind. Although, I’m not so sure we are in a much better place than they are. My thoughts are interrupted by loud squeals and shouts, and following those sounds, we’re met by the sight of village boys, carefree and happy as they kick a dirty soccer ball across a school field – it definitely puts any Wii sport to shame.

At some point on our journey back, we get lost – there is a split in the trail in three different directions and no matter how many villagers stop to help us, we remain lost until sometime later, when we chance upon our by-then frazzled boatman.

■ Crystal-clear lake and spectacular sunsets

And so once more, we find ourselves gliding on that crystal-clear lake that seems to sprawl forever, mysterious under an opaque sheen. A beautiful sunset unfurls, sending out a fireball of colour from where it nestles behind the Shan Plateau. Nothing is hidden, and nature’s very soul is laid bare for our inspection. There are very few places on earth where such spectacular sights reveal themselves, and we have chanced upon one.



Village transport of the most basic kind.

To get there

Sikair flies direct to Yangon two to three times daily, while Jetstar Airways and Myanmar International Airways offer direct flights several days a week. From Yangon, take an hour-long internal flight on domestic airlines Air Bagan, Yangon Airways or Air Mandalay to Heho Airport, approximately 35km from Inle Lake. Transportation from the airport is best arranged via your hotel at an additional cost. Price and travel time may vary depending on which part of the lake you want to go to (south being the farthest). The only efficient way to get from one point of the lake to another is by boat. Most hotels can arrange for this, or you could negotiate for a half- or full-day rate with a local boatman. Expect to pay between US\$20 (\$28) to US\$30. Make sure your boat is equipped with life jackets and umbrellas, as there is no shelter from the sun during the day.