

World Journey from Imabari: The second country, Myanmar

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(Editor's Note: This is a continuing travelogue. Please read about the first country in the April/May Issue #109)

After Thailand, I went to Myanmar. It is located in the western part of the Indochina Peninsula bordered by a lot of countries; China in the Northeast, Laos in the East, Thailand in the Southeast, Bangladesh in the West and India in the Northwest. The capital is Naypyidaw (used to be Yangon). You might be familiar with Burma, which is what Myanmar was called until 1989.

What do you associate with Myanmar? Maybe you have a negative image because of the military government in the past. However, an election took place last November for the first time in 55 years. The Opposition party led by Aung San Suu Kyi won and the government changed. So it is said that Myanmar will change. Many people say that now is the best time to visit Myanmar before it changes. It has a great deal of charm such as many famed tourist spots, natural beauty and kind people. (Of course you still need to be careful and recognize that you are not in the safety of Japan.) I visited three cities; Yangon, Bagan and Nyaung-U.

Yangon used to be the capital and it is the biggest city of Myanmar. There are a lot of restaurants and street stalls in downtown. It is a busy city. Traffic is busy, too. Cars never dropped their speed while I was crossing the street. I thought the road had a priority on cars because of their terrific speed. In Japan, cars kindly stop if I raise my hand. I had to run in haste not to be hit by a car.

Myanmar is a Buddhist country. There are a lot of historic Buddhist sites. I visited one called Shwedagon Pagoda. After I bought the ticket, I took off my shoes and entered with bare feet. I went upstairs on an escalator. The huge Buddhist tower came into sight. It was solemn and majestic. I thought maybe I could have seen it without paying for a ticket. Unfortunately, I couldn't, even though it was in the central area of Yangon. I left there before it got dark and took a night bus. You can enjoy the illuminated tower at night.

The next city was Bagan. It has one of the three best Buddhist monuments in the world. (The other two are Angkor Wat in Cambodia and Borobudur in Indonesia.) There were more tourists than in Yangon, and so were peddlers, taxis and touts for carriages. I took a carriage to my hotel because it was more reasonable than a taxi. When I arrived I was touted to charter the carriage for the whole day. I thought it was tasteful to tour the sightseeing spots by the carriage,

but I choose an electric bicycle because it was more convenient and cheaper. The electric bicycle looked just like a motorcycle. I hoped that the battery wouldn't give out and started a tour around Bagan. Bagan consists of old Bagan and New Bagan. The tourist spots are dispersed around the relatively large city.

Bagan is also famous for its beautiful sunrise and sunset to travelers from around the world. One magazine says that it is the best sunrise spot in the world. I got to the spot at 3 in the afternoon. There were already a lot of people at that time. Many of them had cameras on tripods. So did I set up mine too and waited. After about three hours, I could see the beautiful sunset. The combination of the setting sun behind the historical ruins was splendid. I went to another place to see the sunrise. I got there at five in the morning. There were a lot of people again. This time, the sunrise together with hot-air balloons and



the ruins was glorious. You can ride in the balloons, although I couldn't afford the charge; 30,000 yen.

Finally, I headed for Nyaun-U. There is a beautiful lake called Inle Lake. You have to join the tour organized by a travel agency or a hotel. I took part in the tour and found that the other participants were all Japanese. We got in the boat and enjoyed cruising. We dropped by a souvenir shop on the way and met Kayan people. You might have watched them on TV. They live in the north part of Thailand but used to live in Myanmar. I took this cruising tour because I wanted to see their daily lives there. But all I could do was meet them at a shop. One of them kindly let me hold the ring they put around their neck. It was heavier than I had imagined. There were a lot of fishermen around the Lake Inle. When we took pictures they stood in various poses for us, which they got tips for. I heard that some of them had quit fishing. They go on the boat not to get fish, but tips.

I stayed in Myanmar for a week. Modernization is advancing in Myanmar. Lots of buildings are under construction in Yangon. I know development is good for them. Personally I hope that the good old Myanmar will never be ruined.

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