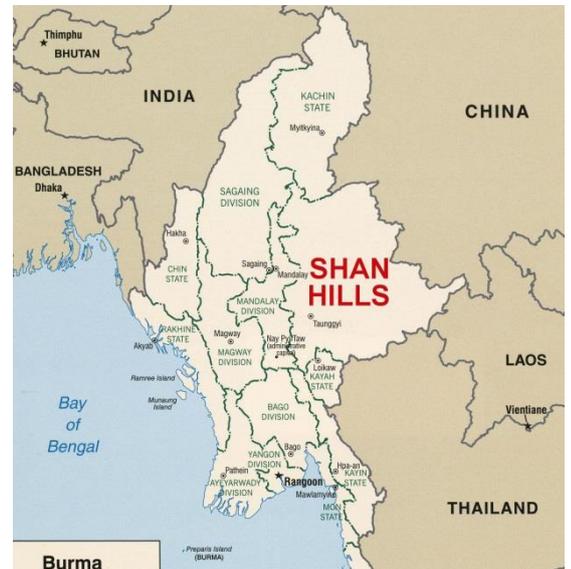


Myanmar Trek



in the Shan Hills of central Myanmar / Burma, November 2014

Myanmar / Burma has recently opened up to more foreign visitors. After decades of military rule, in 2012 there were elections on a more democratic basis, and Nobel Laureate and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi has encouraged responsible tourism, with her party being 'keen to promote the welfare of the common people and the conservation of the environment and to allow travellers to acquire an insight into the cultural, political and social life of the country'.



MYANMAR or BURMA?

The name 'Burma' comes from the largest single ethnic group the 'Bamar'. While Myanmar is a more inclusive name, the military regime changed the official name of the country in the late 1980s without a referendum, and with a mixed response. Today both Burma and Myanmar are used in English to refer to the country.

On our trek, conditions were - as expected - basic, but it was a delight to visit remote areas as yet unspoiled by any form of tourist industry, while also recognising the hardships of everyday life, especially for people working the land with only traditional tools and equipment.

We walked about 15-20km most of the five days, over undulating land, much of which was cultivated but also included pine woods and clumps of huge bamboo. The highest point was about 1,520m. We were walking at the end of the rainy season, and although we had no rain ourselves, paths were boggy and slippery in places. The heat - about 30-35°C - made for humid and sweaty walking!



Our international journey ended in the former capital, and still the largest city, Yangon (previously known as Rangoon) where we had half a day to explore - including visiting the Shwedagon Pagoda.

Myanmar is one of the most devout Buddhist countries, with nearly 90% of the population being practicing Buddhists. Despite being covered in shaky looking bamboo scaffolding for repairs, the gold-covered pagoda was hugely impressive in the evening light.



After a night in a hotel we were up before dawn to catch an early internal flight to the tiny airport of Heho, from where a bus took us on an hour's drive to the start of the trek.

We started off - slightly unexpectedly - in the middle of the cabbage and cauliflower harvest, and over the next couple of days we were amazed by the variety of crops we passed, flourishing in the fertile land our path led us through.



As well as rice to the left and white mustard to the right in the photo, we saw sesame, sunflowers, ginger, chillies, aubergines and maize.

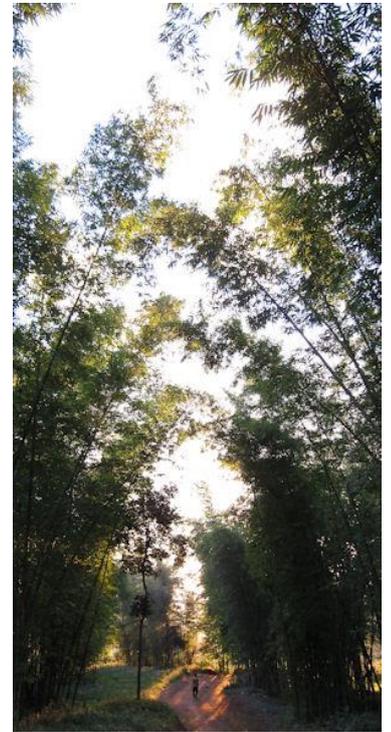


Virtually all the agricultural work was done by manual labour, or using traditional methods and tools. All the fields were ploughed by ox-driven ploughs, and all the crops, like the rice in the pictures below, were being harvested by hand.





On later days, our route left the more cultivated areas for heathland and woods, with pine and towering bamboo offering some respite from the heat of the sun. In places, we had to avoid networks of spider webs hanging from trees, and caterpillars which also dangled down on threads. The spiders were allegedly harmless, while the caterpillar hairs could cause quite unpleasant irritation of the skin.

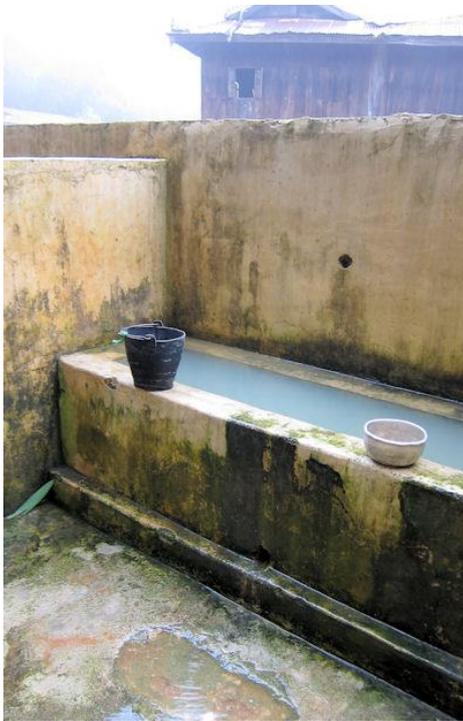


We stayed in monasteries, mainly eating and sleeping in one large room. Some had a generator for a little light, but in some we had to rely on candles and torches. We ate at small, low tables where traditionally people sit cross-legged, always having removed shoes and socks to go indoors.



The monasteries were generally a collection of buildings round a central square. Conditions were basic - squat toilets in unlit shed-like shelters, and, for showering, a tank of collected rain water and a tin can to chuck the cold water over yourself - but even this was welcome at the end of a hot, muddy and sweaty day.





The pictures show typical bathing, toilet and kitchen facilities in the monasteries.

Despite the relative deprivations of the living conditions, what made this one of the most pleasant trekking experiences was the warm welcome we received everywhere. In one village we came across a pre-wedding party outside a family home, and were immediately invited to take tea with the couple and all the family.



The happy couple seemed to remain happy even when their party was unexpectedly gate-crashed by 17 trekkers!

The faces of the people we met will stay with us: the father of the bride, the abbot of one of the monasteries we slept in, a child working in a small coal mine we stumbled across, and the women in whose house we had lunch one day - just a few of the welcoming faces of Myanmar.



Thank you so much for supporting me in this and/or previous treks to raise funds for Teenage Cancer Trust. Thanks to you, there are now 28 Teenage Cancer Trust units in NHS hospitals, with a further 3 new ones in development, and 3 older units being replaced. The charity runs conferences for professionals, and also for young people themselves, and is increasingly working in the fields of research, and promoting better and earlier diagnosis. When I returned from the trek, I was a hairsbreadth away from my target of £4,000 - although well over it if Gift Aid is included. My fundraising page at:

<http://uk.virginmoneygiving.com/trekrise>

remains open, and I hope to be using it again in 2015 for a further trek. Thanks again!

Nigel

NIGEL TURNER

