

Myanmar Trip– *December 2016 – January 2017*

Patricia Campion February 2017

Our adventure began just before Christmas 2016, when we said goodbye to our homes and families and set out, bound for Myanmar and a gemmological tour of Myanmar organised by Pauline Jamieson for the Scottish Gemmological Association. A small but international group from England, Scotland, Ireland and Canada, we converged on Yangon on Christmas Day, meeting up at our hotel to discover our new itinerary. Our travel plans had suffered a fundamental blow with the Government closure of Mogok to all foreigners just a few days prior to departure due to local civil unrest. However our trip organisers did a wonderful last minute job of rearranging plans to ensure that we saw and did much to make up for missing out on the famed ruby mines.

We started out that evening with a trip to Yangon's famous Shwedagon Pagoda at sunset. One of the most sacred Buddhist sites in Myanmar and said to house hairs of the Buddha, the complex is large with many elaborate shrines dominated by a magnificent golden stupa. The golden stupa is covered in around 60 tons of gold leaf and studded with gemstones close to the top, the crowning glory of which is a 70 carat plus diamond. The visit was followed by our first taste of the wonderful Burmese food we would enjoy throughout the next fortnight in a garden restaurant lit by gaily coloured lanterns.

Next day we departed for Myitkyina (pronounced My-chee-na) in the north of the country close to the Chinese border. Myitkyina is home to Myanmar's licensed amber markets. Much of the local amber has a distinctive deep red colour, although a wide spectrum of colour was available including naturally green amber. Burmese amber deposits are considerably older than Baltic amber (up to 100 million years old) and the quality and clarity was high, with some very fine specimens containing preserved insects and plants. The market sold a wide variety of jewellery, carvings and beads as well as rough amber. As is true all over Myanmar, traders were friendly and very pleasant but prices were higher than expected due to the proximity of the Chinese market. A local teashop served Burmese tea and coffee, the perfect invigorating pick-me-up for tired shoppers.

We were lucky enough to see a little of the area surrounding Myitkyina, where preparations were underway for the annual Manau Festival, a huge gathering of the Kachin state's many tribes in mid-January. We saw the ceremonial site of the gathering, bedecked with the insignia of many forthcoming attendees and had the first of many lunches on the banks of the magnificent Ayeyarwady river. We visited an interesting local emporium specialising in jade among other things, and got our first glimpse of the many and varied hues available – from magnificent, almost translucent imperial jade through the spectrum of greens, greys and lilacs to white jade and almost transparent 'ice' jade. One downside we experienced throughout our trip was the difficulty of getting bracelets large enough to fit, as the entire market appeared to be geared towards very petite customers.

Leaving Myitkyina, we flew to Mandalay and drove some two hours into the mountains to the beautiful hill station of Pyin U Lwin (formerly Maymyo), the summer administrative capital of British ruled Burma. There we toured the wonderful National Kyandawgyi Botanical Gardens, magnificently decorated for the annual flower festival. The gardens, which flourish in the cooler climate of the hills, date from 1915 and are magnificently laid out around a central lake. They encompass bamboo

forests, exotic orchids, an aviary and plentiful wildlife in the form of monkeys. Central Maymyo also celebrates its colonial heritage, in particular its clock tower. We visited wonderful colonial houses which served as retreats and social clubs for British workers taking a break from harvesting the famed Burmese teak. The liberal use of teak in these beautiful old buildings means their structure is wonderfully preserved, inside and out. The finest example in use in the area is the Governor's House, now serving as a hotel. Visitors to the Governor's house are transported back in time to 1920's opulence, with a swimming pool in the orangery and coffee served on the terrace overlooking the vineyard. Lunch in yet another old colonial club house was followed by a visit to All Saints church, which celebrates its military links and contains many moving tributes to those who lost their lives in World War II.

The road to Mandalay proved itself truly terrifying in places, given its narrowness and steep gradient. The presence of resurfacing works added to the drama, when coupled with heavy trucks and traffic up to three lanes deep at times. This is one of the main routes to China, which accounts for the volume of heavy traffic coming and going round the clock. On reaching our hotel however, the view over the immense glass like moat of Mandalay fort was a calming antidote to the dusty roads just travelled. Next morning we got a glimpse into the world of 19th century Burmese royalty in the reconstructed palace buildings within the fort, formerly the seat of the last independent royal rulers of Burma. The original buildings were destroyed during World War II and the fort is now an army barracks.

However the highlight of the day was our trip into the famed Mandalay jade market – a market unlike any other. Moving at speed through the crowded, cramped space where experts trade jade we were surrounded by frenetic activity making it an unreal but truly exhilarating experience. In the lower octane atmosphere of the surrounding stalls outside the official jade market, pieces of rough jade could be purchased inexpensively. We visited a family run business selling good quality ruby at reasonable prices. The stones had received some heat treatment, but were lively and of good colour and devoid of fissure filling or other undesirable treatments. The shop also stocked nice spinels, peridots and sapphires among other things, as well as a large range of jewellery.

We then met with gem dealers who had travelled from Mogok and were offering a large stock of mainly spinel, peridot, ruby and sapphire. Star ruby and star sapphire were plentiful, with sapphire tones ranging from deep blue to silvery grey and creamy yellow. While some stones were marred by rather crude cutting or damage through poor storage (endemic across Burma it seems), the variety of colour available in spinel in particular was superb. Dealers were always pleasant, adding to the fun of the experience. Even the hotel shop in Mandalay sold stones as well as a wide variety of reasonably priced jewellery.

Other highlights of the area included a morning trip to Mandalay Hill, with its superb views over the city. However it is a beautiful place with a tragic history and its temples and shrines are emotive in their commemoration of those lost in the intense fighting there during the Second World War. We visited the impressive Kuthodaw Pagoda ('The World's Largest Book'), which comprises hundreds of small white pagodas each housing a marble tablet on which the sacred Buddhist scripture, the Tipitaka, is recorded. Before leaving Mandalay we called at a workshop making gold leaf and witnessed the intense manual effort required to produce the delicate gold leaves. Minuscule amounts of gold are pounded by men wielding huge, heavy mallets for hours until the desired

diameter is reached. The noise of the hammering is deafening. Gold leaf is very important to Burmese culture as it is customary to leave a package of gold leaf as an offering when visiting Buddhist shrines.

So ended the first part of our journey and we said goodbye to some of our party as they headed back to Yangon and home. For the rest of us it was on to Bagan, Myanmar's foremost tourist attraction. An archaeological zone consisting of over 2,000 monuments, most being temples or shrines, it extends over 50 square kilometres and dates from the 11th century. Due to earthquake damage, most recently in August last year, most are unsafe to enter, but during our short stay we visited a number of accessible temples and saw some wonderful examples of carving techniques and frescoes decorating these magnificent structures. We learned how the features of statues of Buddha changed over time, as differing tribes and influences came and went in the area. A more recent and less popular departure was the forced relocation of the local townsfolk of Old Bagan to the newly created village of New Bagan in the late 1980's, to make way for the creation of the archaeological zone and the development of tourism.

The view over Bagan, from temple tops or balloon rides is breath taking and best appreciated at sunset or sunrise. We also made the most of the stunning sunset during a cruise on the Ayeyarwady river. Even though Bagan differed from our earlier destinations in being tourist focused, the local traders and children were extremely pleasant while engaging us with their souvenirs and practiced sales patter, tailored specifically to the British visitor.

A highlight of Bagan was a visit to a local lacquer works where we were fascinated by the intricacy and artistry required to produce such exquisite craftsmanship. As lacquer ware production is time consuming, labour intensive and hence comparatively expensive, its future appears under threat. Household goods previously made of lacquer are now replaced with cheaper plastic, and locals prefer to work in the more lucrative tourist industry. This is a trend the government is keen to reverse by promoting heavily sponsored apprenticeship opportunities. We certainly hope the incentive is successful and the craft of lacquer work continues into the future.

Our tourist trail continued to Inle Lake, to which we arrived in the cold and wet tail of a typhoon. Hence we resorted to visiting a local winery and sampling its produce in the interests of keeping dry. Unlike beer and rum, winemaking is in its infancy in Myanmar, developed with help from French and German winemakers. While currently only serving the local market, Myanmar hopes to commence wine exports in the not too distant future.

The rain stopped the following day and the clouds gradually lifted as we explored the lake by boat, revealing the most spectacular mountain scenery reflected in its waters. During our day afloat, we saw fisherman using their distinctive conical nets and locals gathering harvests of waterweed for use as fertiliser in their 'floating gardens'. We visited floating villages, with houses built high on stilts and boats tethered underneath. We saw vegetables grown suspended in 'fields' of floating water hyacinth islands, up to two meters thick, their air sacs acting as floatation devices. The area is awash with local crafts people; cigar makers, silversmiths and lotus weavers being among those we visited. The silverwork is very fine and filigree like with distinctive styles adopted by each local tribe. The quality of workmanship is high and the results very wearable, even for tourists.

Lotus, being the sacred flower offered to Buddha, was historically woven into cloth worn only by monks. However recently the weaving industry has expanded and become more secular. The weavers we visited produced a dizzying array of wonderful textiles of many colours and styles, all woven by hand on traditional looms. They also catered for western tastes, combining lotus fibres with silk (both local and Chinese imported silk) resulting in wonderful fabrics and scarves. In the afternoon, we took time out to leave the main tourist trail and climb to a monastery high above the lake which afforded spectacular views and gave us some much needed exercise.

Then it was on to the last stage of our journey, back to Yangon and the serious business of gems. We commenced by visiting the Gem Museum which afforded a wonderful oversight of the many rich treasures of Myanmar. Below the museum were three floors of gem emporia which we eagerly delved into. As well as ruby, spinel and sapphire, the shops of the emporium stocked a wider variety of stones, encompassing deep green peridot, pale but very clean aquamarine, all manner of quartz and even some tanzanite. Colourful zircons and sizable rutilated topazes of interesting cuts were also plentiful. As elsewhere in Myanmar, prices were on the high side and considerable negotiation was required to secure a bargain. Many of us appreciated the colour zoned or bi-coloured unheated sapphires, considerably paler than the famed Burmese blue, but prices were prohibitive. However a highlight for all of us was the discovery of mushroom tourmaline – a remarkable phenomenon which occurs near Mogok. The ones we saw were grey to pale pink in colour and we also managed to unearth wonderfully colourful cross section slices.

Our time in Yangon encompassed visits to the famed Mogok Street where many gems are traded and a whistle stop tour of Scott's market, another huge emporium with a very substantial gem selection. There we got our first real chance to have a look at a huge selection of Myanmar golden pearls amongst other treasures. The emporium yielded some wonderful jewellery as well as green sapphires. In Yangon we also got the opportunity to trade ourselves and perching on stools on a street corner, we were instantly surrounded by dealers offering gems for sale. Their stock was again ruby, spinel and sapphire, both rough and polished, with some wonderful but rather pricey zircons. Acquisitions from here tended to be rough samples.

After a brief look around Yangon's colonial centre, our time in Myanmar culminated in a visit to the war cemetery of Taukkyan, just outside the city. The cemetery holds the graves of over six thousand Allied and Commonwealth servicemen killed in World War II as well as memorials 27,000 more who could not be found or remain unidentified. It was tragic how young most were at death and reading the poignant inscriptions on memorials made for a very emotional experience.

Throughout our trip we were wonderfully looked after by Duncan Baker and our guides Ted, Deda and in particular Thazin, brought the history of Myanmar to life for us. Duncan's expertise and wide experience was invaluable in smoothing our path into Myanmar's gem world and giving us so much local insight. It was a pleasure to meet them all and the knowledge we gained enriched our experience of this beautiful place. And so all too soon our adventure came to an end and we departed with wonderful memories and a stone or two to keep us company. One thing we were all agreed upon, if Mogok reopens we will be back and so it was not goodbye but 'au revoir' to our hosts as we left this lovely country with its fabulous treasures and wonderful people.