



# Culture/History

## Burma

After a bumpy 17-hour bus ride, we reached Bagan, which as a Buddhist site, ranks alongside Ajanta and Ellora in India, Angkor Wat in Cambodia, Dunhuang in China, Sukhothai in Thailand and Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka. Bagan was the country's first capital, flourishing from 1,044 A.D., when Anawrahta ascended the throne, until 1287, when Kublai Khan invaded from Yunnan and sacked the area. In a religious frenzy spanning 250 years, as many as 5,000 Buddhist temples and stupas were erected. Today, around 2,200 can still be viewed in varying degrees of repair and decay.

The number of red brick structures strewn across this 40 square kilometers boggles the mind and requires a lot of time to comprehend. Based on designs imported from India and Sri Lanka at a time when these countries were world powers, the structures range from a few feet in size to the equivalent of a football field.

Powerful kings and nobles commissioned the stupas (solid structures usually containing Buddhist relics) and temples (large square structures with arched hallways usually containing Buddhist statues) for religious or merit-earning reasons. Most were constructed of fired red brick and then covered with plaster and decorated with reliefs or colorful glazed tiles. Spirals, often plated or painted in gold, stretch towards the sky and reflect spiritual aspirations.

At least here we could give the pick-up trucks, buses and trains that it takes to get around Burma on a shoestring a miss. We spent eight days wandering by foot and horse cart (paying US\$5 per day for the hire) around dozens of the more famous and well-preserved sites. Even so, we hardly scratched the surface. To gain a sense of the area's magnitude, we climbed a hundred feet up the steep stairs of the Shwesandaw Paya (stupa). I made my way to each of the four corners of the stupa and, drinking in the hundreds of structures as far as the eyes can see, as countless others have through the centuries, tried to understand the spiritual aspirations of previous generations.

Constant wind keeps this parched, cracked landscape bearable. The temples were constructed so that doors, windows and corridors funnel fresh air through the temples, making for a peaceful respite from the scorching sun. The huge temples, built monumental and impressive by important men, seem to reflect their huge egos. But inside the smaller ones, where life stands still for a moment, I found a place to be silent.

I focused on one simple pagoda, returning day after day to paint the scene. Sitting alone inside a 1,000-year-old temple, below a 20-foot-high Buddha statue hovering on a 10-foot-high plinth, with sunlight streaming in from four doorways, I absorbed the depth of the space contained by the massive arched ceiling above.

Cracked and crumbling remnants of intricate, fragile Buddhist paintings (termed "Buddhist wallpaper" by archaeologists) cover the walls and ceiling, surviving centuries of

weathering and man's abuse. The peaceful 'pings' of bells hanging from the spirals outside complement the cooing doves above the Buddha statues inside, monuments to sanctuaries, which provide refuge and guidance for people traveling along life's bumpy highway. —GREGORY BURNS ■



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