

Memoirs from the Rice Tree

A Life Sentence

The road to Mandalay can take many twists and turns, but eventually one can get to where they want; sometimes it just takes a little more time. Such was the case when I made my way to Mandalay, Burma.

The expected jungle did not appear much to my disappointment, but rather a vast, sparse and almost treeless landscape. This was not the Mandalay that I had expected, at least not from early Hollywood films. The Mandalay below me appeared more like something out of the arid Southwest of the U.S. Still, I had little choice, but to make do as I had made decisions early on and would now live with them.

But plans are meant to be altered. There are no bad decisions, after all, often times bad decisions make for good stories and a feeling in me hinted that this trip had the makings of adventure and hopefully fond memories. What lay before me, was something only fate could determine, but I was of the mindset that all would be well.

Lack of any Burmese words nor contacts were not a detraction, but just a hint of what would become some hiccups along the road. After all what is a road trip if not for a few surprises along the way. Little did I know that I would have my share of dips, turns and challenges like I've never had before. Sometimes, no plans make for interesting stories.

The city of Mandalay was a large unpaved series of connecting dirt roads with no visible street signs, not that it made any difference to me. The only thing remarkable was that strangers stood out among the locals and at that time, strangers were few and infrequent. Still, I took quick notice, but dismissed any discomfort and hailed a cab and trusted that the driver would take me into the center of Mandalay. He did. I can only assume that he took me to a small residential hotel because it was conveniently located next to his taxi stand.

But all was well and after checking in, found myself sitting with a solo traveler from Japan. There are a few brave young Japanese who seemed to have broken away from the herd mentality and gone solo to places seldom visited by their compatriots.

Kimiko was from Osaka and worked in convenience store all her life, never took a vacation of any notoriety nor had many friends. Still, she mustered up the courage to travel alone with no guide book or companions. I liked her style immediately and we had a lively conversation.

“Mandalay is interesting, especially Shwedagon Pagoda and Scotts market, but if you want solitude and peace of mind then go by ferry to old Bagan and sit alone on a stupa facing the

setting sun. There are thousands of stupas of all sizes and in difference states of repair all built thousands of years ago. If you listen carefully, someone or something may reach out to you.”

Kimiko’s last comment resonated with me as I believe that there are no random choices that one makes; each is determined by fate or so I like to believe. That I am now somewhere on the Irrawaddy River in Burma going up river to a place I did not know about two days ago underscores that belief.

And so, I found myself on a very slow boat heading to Old Bagan, another place where I knew no one nor had ever heard of before. Often times, the most interesting journeys are solo trips. Every experience is unique unto itself and the getting there is just the first step and meeting fellow travelers or locals along the way sometimes pave the way to life long friendships.

Meeting Ms KK in old Bagan was auspicious and it was meant to be.

While riding a cheaply made, rented Chinese electric bike, I made my way from pagoda to pagoda. First passing a few monolithic giants of red brick that seemed to radiate the sun’s golden rays and then clusters of smaller stupas of varying sizes like tiny Bhodi trees whose seeds were scattered from its mother.

As I rode among one group of stupas to another, I noticed a large pagoda with a golden collar on its spiral. No other pagoda stood out like this one and I soon found myself heading off the asphalt and on to a sandy road. As I approached the base of the structure, I noticed a slight figure in a red sarong and long black hair running in a direction that indicated that we would meet.

Ms KK was a vendor of paintings that she and her artist father sold. While her father was nowhere to be seen, Ms KK was number 7 in her cue of vendors and that I was to be her designated customer and possibly her only customer for the day as I saw no one else near the base of the pagoda.

Her English was decent enough and she shared the history of the pagodas. At one time, there were over 13,000 but disrepair, earthquakes and time all took their toll on these amazing Leggo like brick structures that were built by hand, brick by brick.

Looking around, it was evident that everything in Old Bagan was and still is being built by backbreaking man power. No construction cranes were visible, no tall buildings, only bamboo lattice work that hinted of an emerging building.

Ms KK confirmed what was evident. Before becoming artists, father, mother and children would earn a living of a few cents a day breaking large rocks into smaller aggregates by hand. These would be used to make roads. 45 cents a day didn’t go far so selling even one painting a day might have meant a comfortable living with enough money to purchase fresh produce, chicken and other necessities at the weekly open markets.

While I had no knowledge of the financial structure in such a poor agrarian economy, I soon learned that life there was a hand to mouth existence. There were no excesses. No tv, no refrigerators, no cars, not even permanent roofs over their heads, but rather a series of faded blue tarps.

Ms KK did her best to sell me her art work. It was something I had little interest in, but sensed that if I did not buy anything, she might not be able to feed her family that day. I was of the mind set like many before me. "Never pay the asking price. You must bargain." And so I did, but there is a fine line between bargaining and crossing that line. I crossed the line without being aware and settled for exchanging three original hand painted paintings for a few dollars.

After money was exchanged. We chatted for a long while. No other customers came to the site. I was to be the last that day.

"You know, Ms KK, I feel quite comfortable here."

"Yes, you come back later before the sun sets. We can go to another stupa overlooking the Irrawaddy and watch the sun go to sleep."

"Yes, I like that idea and with that thought in mind, I headed back to the asphalt road and made my way to the open market.

Time can pass quickly even where the pace of life is slow and where thousands of years have passed with little sign of change. Old Bagan was like that and soon, with a bag of raw peanuts, I found myself once again near the golden collared pagoda.

Ms KK was waiting there and motioned me to a single stupa near the river's edge. We didn't speak much, but sat in parallel silence while munching on an occasional peanut.

I had never felt so much at peace where the sound of silence was only matched by the warmth of the setting sun.

"You know Mr. You were a tough customer."

More silence. Those words cut me to the quick especially since she had earlier invited me to meet her family and to have tea together. I've never forgotten those words. I had never forgotten her generosity and graciousness in welcoming me into her home. I was the Ugly American embodied.

I said nothing. We watched the sun settle below the mesquite like trees and beyond the horizon. The gold, orange and crimson colors reflected in the few clouds could not be matched anywhere nor could it be captured on canvas. I sat mesmerized yet full of guilt.

Before parting after sunset, I did hand Ms KK another \$20 bill to allay my feelings of remorse. As friend Archie was fond of saying, “The easiest way to solve a problem is with money.”

I took photos of Ms KK and before leaving promised to one day return to Old Bagan and pay a visit to her.

Several years later, I did return. While she was no longer at the golden pagoda, a family member called Ms KK on her phone and within a few minutes she arrived on her motorbike along with her young son. She now had two children, a girl of 6 and a boy of three.

“Papi, thank you. You promised to return and you did.”

I had kept in periodic contact with her through email and Google translate. Together, the three of us drove to her new location. Things had changed with the military government firmly entrenched and with legitimate leader Sung Aung Kee winning a lopsided victory at the last free elections. It was starting to get tense for the population.

In the cities there were nightly curfews and the military patrolled the streets to arrest all offenders.

Still, the people remained resilient and welcoming. There seemed to be a stalemate with the military and the people, but now new restrictions were being made on tourists as well. No more walking on the pagoda and going off the beaten path to explore on one’s own. Gates were locked, but because Ms KK was a caretaker of a pagoda, she held the keys to the gate and I was again privileged to enter a pagoda to now watch a sunrise among a forest of two thousand stupas emerging from the morning mist, but this time in the company of her two young children. More than just experiencing this ethereal sight was to be in the silent company of this family.

That evening, I was invited to share a meal with her extended family of 14 in their simple home with a blue tarp roof. The entire family prepared and cooked a meal extraordinaire, but it was not to be shared. Tradition held that as an invited guest, the family allowed me to eat alone while everyone watched. Unnerving as it was, it was not my first experience with this practice and so I graciously accepted the food that was offered.

Here I mention why I am no longer a vegetarian. When traveling abroad and when invited to participate in a meal, I eat what is offered and so it has become customary for me to eat whatever is placed in front me whether it be insects, water buffalo, chicken, pork or any combination of unidentifiable food. When invited to a home for a meal, no greater reward is given when enjoying a meal with or in front the family. Showing appreciation goes a long way in establishing friendships when language isn’t readily available.

Upon leaving Ms KK and her family, I left a sizable monetary gift to get their roof fixed before the next rainy season. Ms Carolina had taught me well and that was to show acts of kindness at every opportunity for one may never pass “this way again.”

In this instance, it would not. Conflict broke out in demonstrations when president Aung Sung Kee was again imprisoned and her legitimate election win null and voided by the military junta who then installed themselves into position. The gate quickly closed on Burma. Fighting broke out with machine guns, canons and tanks verses sling shots and rocks.

One poignant message revealed how the military, all sons of Burma, were entering homes at night, shooting people on sight and arresting young men to serve in the military and to kill those who opposed the junta. Not only adults were killed, but women and children as well. Ms KK and her family feared for their personal safety and it quickly became apparent that no one, even through peaceful mass demonstrations would be safe nor would any country come to the people’s aid.

My regular emails to Ms KK became fewer and fewer. Monthly monetary support over the last few years from Ms Carolina and I was soon ground to a temporary halt. Soon, it all came to a stop. I received no further word from Ms KK until yesterday.



Her younger brother emailed me with this message along with a photo which has been blurred for her protection.

“How are you? KK will always remember you. She has been arrested for politics for a long long time. KK asked me to write. I am her youngest brother. There are only three children left at home, so I am writing to ask for help. She had been sentenced to 22 years in prison. She was imprisoned without any guilt.”

I know that Ms KK was not an activist. She was just another faceless victim for the junta who is trying to pit loyalist against the masses and doing this by destruction to the heart of what binds the Burmese families together. The strategy is designed to drive a stake to the core of the families; separate the women from the children and the rest of the family and hold them hostages.

While I may not have many more years ahead of me, I pray that I will have the strength, the endurance and the resources to be able to continue to help this one family in whatever way it takes. As my young Malaysian friend Champ said, “you make a life by what you give.” Maybe

there is a way to make a difference in the life of this one family. I will not abandon them. I will continue to support them and wait for a future reunion.

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