IN THE NAGA HILLS OF BURMA

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For about a year now, the country of Burma has been in the news. In its struggle to establish a different kind of government, civilian instead of military, the country has erupted in demonstrations and protests. Scenes of marching crowds and armed soldiers, of shouting and shooting, have been filling our television screens. Many people watching probably gave it little thought. It happens, after all, in so many countries with less than democratic governments. But as I watched, I was filled with amazement. The crowds marching along the main streets in Rangoon, thronging the pagoda steps, milling about the market-place and across the campus of Rangoon University, couldn't hide their familiarity. I had been in all those places, and I could still recognize them—after twenty-seven years. How could so little have changed in a capital city after so long a time? It gave me the feeling that time, not to mention progress, had stopped still in Burma.

My own visit to Burma had been an intended short ten-day stay. In fact, I was there for almost two months. In retrospect, I remember a thoroughly enjoyable holiday—but there were some rough patches! Though it was a very poor, even primitive, country, the people were without exception welcoming and pleasant. At the beginning of my stay, I knew no one; then, gradually, people would introduce themselves, and these people would introduce me to their friends, until, by the time I left, I had a wide circle of acquaintances.

During my first few days, I behaved like any tourist. I visited the pagodas, especially the fifteenth century Shwe Dagon Pagoda which, as it is built on a hill rising some 400 feet above the city, dramatically dominates Rangoon. In the shops lining the long flight of steps leading up to the pagoda, I found some charming old market weights, fashioned into animal shapes, such as a cockerel or a lion. For twenty-seven years, these little weights have kept fresh in my memory the enjoyment of that day in the sun, rummaging through dusty baskets set outside the shops, with the gleaming golden pagoda towering above me.

I roamed around the bazaar, or market-place, where, at an open-air stall, I found what became my favorite meal: a substantial bowl of rice gruel, redolent with ginger and topped with delicious, sweet, golden-brown, crisp fried onions. The fragrance alone
made me feel ravenous, and I felt much sympathy with the young monks in saffron-
colored robes, who would also come and sit at the tables around the food stalls. They
were so young, and so obviously hungry. But if they themselves were willing to bend
the rules, the stall-holders were not! The monks were ignored until the required sun-
rise to sunset fasting period was over, and only then was food brought to them.

I also visited the campus of the University of Rangoon, and it was here that I
made friends with two people who were to have a significant influence on my stay in
Burma. One was a Burmese girl called Myung Tha, who was doing some assistant
teaching at the university. With her, I was able to explore the city of Rangoon in a
far more interesting way than would have been possible alone. Alone, for instance, I
would never have ventured on a bus, not only because I wouldn't have known where
they were going, but also because I seriously doubted their ability to reach any des-
tination at all – ancient, rickety, dusty, and crowded both inside and outside as they
were.

The other was a fellow Briton, a girl who was doing post-graduate studies at the
University of Rangoon. Ann and I struck up an immediate friendship, and soon dis-
covered a mutual interest: we both wanted to travel in the remote interior of Burma. Ann spoke Burmese, and had the contacts to make such a trip – but did not want to
go alone. I had had plenty of experience travelling in the jungles of South-east Asia,
as well as climbing in the Himalayas, but without the language or contacts could not
make such a trip. Together, however, we could – and did.

Everyone thought we were crazy – from the immigration officials who granted
me a visa extension to Myung Tha, who was, I think, beginning to regret having introduced us. Burma is a very mountainous country, and most of the population lives
in the flatter coastal areas and the central basin. Apart from certain well-travelled
routes, for example, Rangoon to Mandalay, few Burmese want to travel into the inte-
rior of their own country. The hill areas are populated by the tribal peoples – the
Karens, the Kayahs, and the Shans on the eastern side, the Chins on the western side,
and the Kachins in the north. In addition, the names “Chin” and “Shan”, for example,
are comprehensive names, since there are many tribal groups within these areas. Most
of the tribes exist in harmony with the local government (which is under the control
of the government in Rangoon). But there were sporadic outbreaks of rebellion a-
gainst the Rangoon government, some quite nasty, and it was this which caused every-
one to fear for our safety. However, most of these reports came from the east, and
we were going west, so we remained undaunted!

The plan was to travel northward, along Burma’s western border with India, to
the Naga Hills (see map). In the mountainous north-eastern part of India lies the constituent state of Nagaland. The hills extend across the border with Burma, and the tribespeople living on the Burmese side are known as Nagas. (In the early part of the eighteenth century, the entire area was under Burmese rule but was taken over by the British as they extended their empire).
With nothing to delay us, we soon set off. The first part of our journey was accomplished quickly by jeep, the road following closely the windings of the wide Irrawaddy River. At Monywa, we transferred to a ferry boat on the picturesque Chindwin River. From bow to stern, port to starboard, the boat was packed: men, women, children, animals, bags, baskets, and a cargo of green-skinned coconuts. Having once travelled on a boat packed with sacks of malodorous dried fish, I felt the coconuts were a big improvement. In the comradely close confines of the boat, it was impossible not to make friends with everyone on board. We were invited to share meals, snacks, and straw mats. The older folk on board were happy to practice their rusty English on us, for it was then some fourteen years since independence, and in Burma, unlike neighboring India which has nearly 200 languages, the English language had not been found necessary as a unifying factor.

After several days on board, we were happy to get back onto land again, although, for Ann especially, the happiness was short-lived. From Kalewa our transport changed to mules as we entered the hills bordering the Chindwin River valley. Our collective experience in riding animals was the twelve hours I had once spent travelling by elephant in Assam. After that, I felt a mule had to be easy. But Ann never really came to terms with her mule. She just hung on indomitably till the end of each day.

Our route wound steadily northward, passing through Kalemyo and Homalin on our way to the village of Singkaling Hkamti in the Naga Hills. At night we were able to sleep in plain but serviceable government resthouses, perhaps left over from colonial days. The scenery was increasingly spectacular, range upon range of heavily forested mountains, part of the easternmost extension of the Himalayas. At daybreak, as the clouds lifted and the sun rose, the early morning hooting of gibbons, swinging unseen through the dense forests, could be heard echoing and re-echoing across the valleys.

We were beginning to need all the distraction we could get. Sights and sounds, food and rest-stops, all were welcome. Our calves were getting rubbed raw against the flanks of our mules, and the outsides of our legs were crushed and bruised every time the pack mules decided to stampede ahead on the narrow paths, most of which were little more than horizontal tracks worn across the side of a hill. On one side of such paths, the mountain went vertically up, and on the other side, it went vertically down—and the animals always chose to walk on the outer edge of the trail. Our guide assured us that this was safer and that we should let the mules choose their own pace and path. We appreciated the assumption that we might have been doing any other than this. In fact, during the whole two weeks that we were on mule-back,
the mules gave no indication that they considered us any differently from the other loads they were used to transporting. In spite of all this, we arrived at our destination, stiff and sore, but safe, and looking forward to visiting the Naga villages in the area.

Basing ourselves in one of the resthouses, we journeyed on foot between the villages. They were built in clearings on the hillsides, clusters of simple thatched huts, raised on stilts above the ground so that the animals (mostly cows and chickens) could shelter below. The women and children were all dressed alike in sarongs, some fastened at the waist, some at the chest. Some of the men wore sarongs, Burmese style, but others wore their native loincloths. For warmth on cool mornings and evenings, blankets were slung round their shoulders, and many of the women carried long shawls or stoles, which they used, not only for additional warmth, but also to carry their babies or toddlers on their backs. The blankets and shawls looked home spun and dyed, as did the loincloths and most of the sarongs; but there were some sarongs that testified, through their bright colors and flowery patterns, to their origin in some far off market. For decoration, bead necklaces and earrings were popular with both sexes; the women also wore brass bracelets in various designs, covering their arms from wrist to elbow, while one boy was obviously proud of his wide horn bracelets, circling each arm above the elbow. Some of the villagers also had facial markings; for the women, these comprised a mark on the forehead remarkably similar to the Chinese character for "woman", and vertical lines, five to eight in number, running from mouth to chin. The men also had the chin markings, plus lines zigzagging from the jaw straight down the throat to join another zigzag line encircling the neck. All these markings were drawn on the skin, not tattooed.

The Nagas daily lives were very simple. Cultivating the rice and vegetable fields took most of their time in that hilly terrain. In addition, their villages were without running water, since they were built high in the hills. Taking the long, hollow bamboo containers down to a stream, filling them with water, placing them in large baskets which were carried on the back supported by straps across the forehead, and bringing them back uphill, was a daily chore. A large bamboo filled with water is incredibly heavy, as I found out when I tried to lift one, and failed—much to the amusement of the young women down at the stream that day. As a part of their lives since childhood, they were adroit at hoisting the bamboo containers, and carrying them up the steep mountain.

Several of the older men and women were walking about carrying foot long lengths of bamboo, from which they would occasionally drink, using a much thinner
length of bamboo as a straw. On enquiry, this turned out to be rice wine, and, of course, we tried some. The following day, and for the next week, I lay in a semi-conscious state, from which Ann thought I was never going to recover. It was not due to the potency of the wine, since I had had little more than a sip. The nearest doctor was a week's journey away, so, whatever the malady was, it had to work its own way out of my system. And by the time it did, my visa was close to expiry, my legs were as weak as water, and I still had to ride a mule out of the jungle!

Despite this experience, it was with regret that we said good-bye to our Naga hosts. Cultivating their land, caring for their animals, bringing up their families, spinning cloth, hunting in the forest: the relaxed and cheerful Nagas that we met seemed to have a pleasantly stress-free existence in beautiful natural surroundings, at peace with themselves and their neighbors.

By the time we arrived back in Rangoon, my visa had already expired, necessitating another trip to the immigration office. Receiving yet another visa extension turned out, however, to be a mere formality. The large group of friends who came to rejoice over our safe return also escorted us to the immigration building. I daresay there has never been so much merriment in a government office anywhere as there was that day, so great was everyone's interest in our experiences among the Nagas.

As my plane soared above the city of Rangoon a few days later, and the land of glittering golden pagodas, green forests, and winding rivers receded into the distance, I took with me many happy memories. Within a year of my departure came a change of government, and that new government has remained in power all these years, up until the disturbances of this last year. Probably in all this time it has been impossible for a foreigner to make such a journey as the one we made. I consider myself privileged to have been able to do so, and hope that one day soon the country of Burma will return to its former state of open friendliness.
On a crowded ferry boat

Thatched huts in a Naga village

A group of Naga villagers
Domestic chores begin early for Naga children.

Facial markings for Naga women.

The bamboo wine container is a constant companion for older Nagas.