

Taking the Mandalay Express from Yangon

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From the dilapidated old capital of Yangon, formerly known as Rangoon, the Mandalay Express chugs its way through the rice fields of Myanmar (formerly Burma) and through a land of 10,000 golden spires to the town of Mandalay, perched on the banks of the Irrawaddy River. Fourteen hours of crowds, chaos and sheer unutterable local colour – surely no other train in Asia has so much to offer.

RIGHT, the bureaucracy involved in catching the train proved almost impossible – but it was worth the difficulties

FAR RIGHT, the Mandalay Express, waiting for the 'off' at Yangon Station; formerly Rangoon, the city was renamed in 1989

HOURS BEFORE DAWN reared its head over the deserted streets of Yangon, the platforms were already filled with figures, camped and silent, queues of humanity awaiting the departure of the grandiose institution that they call the Mandalay Express. Like some demi-god, it lay beyond a fence of barbed wire, a line of 13 orange, white and brown carriages that would carry us along the road to Mandalay, city of palaces and promise that lay just 385 miles (616km) to the north.

'Tickets,' said the man dressed in spotless beige flannels who stood between me and the rapidly filling train. 'You must have a special ticket. All tourists must go with Tourist Burma.'

'Writer,' I explained. 'Special permission. No need,' I said, thrusting forward a well-fingered letter given to me by the Minister of Transport.

The man grew nervous and discussed the unlikely situation with a colleague, who talked to a third colleague. 'Train full,' they said in unison. 'Talk to Tourist Burma.' Were it not for a former naval officer who bought me a local

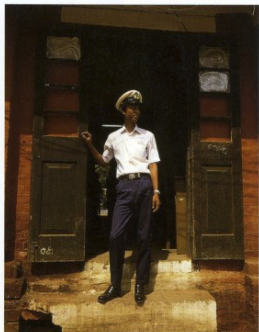
ticket costing less than one US dollar and herded me on to a carriage more crowded than the platform, I should no doubt still be waiting.

And so at 06.00hrs precisely, to the sound of an electric bell and the long drawn out whistle of the guard, I find myself lurched forward, propelled along rusty metal lines towards Mandalay.

Dawn has already come and I can make out glimpses of a world already wide awake, children washing under torrents of brackish water and pariah dogs wandering along the lines used by locals as walkways.

'Yangon,' sighs my next-door neighbour, 'too many people'. As if we don't have enough on board – people on trunks, under seats, on top of carriages. According to

the little handbook on the Burmese Railway proudly presented to me by a railway official, more than 50 million passengers travel on the local railways every year, carrying more than 1.74 tonnes of goods. Looking around, I cannot help feeling that we appear to have more than our fair share of them, and specifically in this carriage.



From Yangon, the train heads north, passing the towns of Pegu, Daka-ku, Penneweg, Pyu, Toungoo, Yeni, Pyinmana, Yamethin, Thazi, Myittha and Mandalay. Construction of the railway line began in 1877 under the Irrawaddy State Railway, subsequently renamed Burma Railways. The first leg between Yangon and Toungoo was officially opened on 1 July 1885, and the second leg from Toungoo to Mandalay was opened on 1 March 1889. On 1 April 1989

the corporation was renamed Myanmar Railways. Yangon (formerly Rangoon) is the beautiful old capital whose dilapidated buildings speak of days gone by. Do not miss the golden Shwedagon Pagoda, the most famous temple in Myanmar. Pegu, a former capital of the Mon people, is dotted with temples. Most famous are the Shwemawdaw Pagoda, the Mahazedi Pagoda and the Shwethalyaung Buddha. Explore them by hiring a horse and cart.

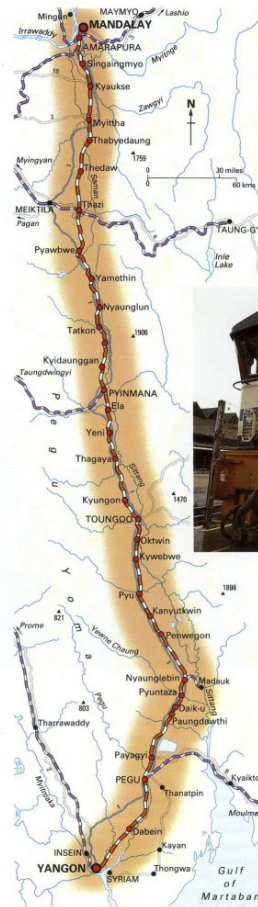
To some extent this reflects hierarchy. Burmese trains have two classes, Upper Class and Ordinary Class. Upper Class carriages have nice, cushioned reclining seats, where government officials and businessmen travel. Ordinary Class has only wooden seats, where the less prosperous members of society travel. Even Ordinary Class carriages, however, are divided into the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. The 'haves' bought tickets three days prior to departure and are in possession of seats. The 'have nots' purchased tickets before the train left by queuing before dawn on the platform and have only the floor to sit on. I am of the latter unfortunate category.

Still, I am in good company, with a monk, a cripple carrying two live chickens, and a soldier brandishing something that resembles a double-barrel shotgun.

By the time I find myself an unoccupied space of floor, we have left the wide open city with its faded, grandiose buildings and somnolent air of decay. Concrete buildings give way to wooden shacks as we thread our way through the suburbs and enter a rural world, a world where the majority of people work the land as they have done for centuries.

As the train settles into a gentle, unhurried rhythm, the countryside unrolls before us, a flat pan of rice fields broken here and there by small hills, each bearing its own white pagoda tipped with a cone of solid gold. For much of the year the land is a sea of green. Now, in March, it is dry and arid, almost desolate looking.

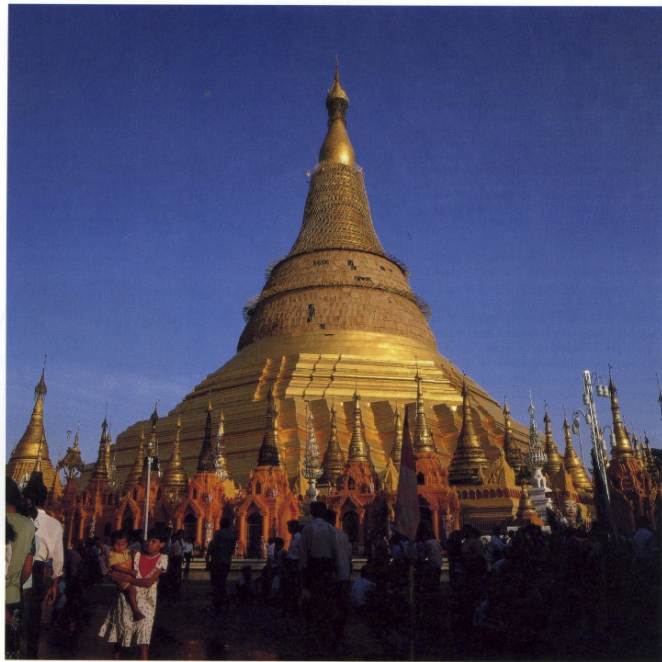
We pass the once great city of Pegu, former capital of the Mon people, several glistening temples rising up from the plain. On one side is the white marble outline of Mahazedi Pagoda and on the other the golden spire of the famous Shwemawdaw (great golden god) Pagoda, 374ft (114m) high and containing two hairs of the Buddha along with one of his sacred teeth.



Fairy-tale Inle Lake, reached from Thazi, has floating gardens made from weed and mud and anchored to the lake floor. It is best seen in early morning when the floating market is at its most active. Pagan, the greatest relic of Burma's former glory, has



thousands of ancient temples dating back as far as the 2nd century AD, scattered over a vast area of arid landscape on the banks of the Irrawaddy River. Most famous are the Ananda and the Mahabodhi temples. Mandalay is a cultural centre, city of gems and home to the beautiful Mandalay Palace and the Shwemawdaw Kyung. Do not miss sunrise on the Irrawaddy River, when boats are paddled over to nearby Mingun. Maymyo, an old British mountain retreat nesting in the hills (a 2-hour train trip from Mandalay) is best known for its horse-drawn carriages and its fresh strawberries. From Maymyo, the train continues to Lashio, which is currently out of bounds to tourists.



ABOVE, in 1889 Kipling repeated an account of the lovely Schwedagon temple: 'It's a famous shrine o' ours... and now the Toungboon-Mandalay line is open, pilgrims are flocking down by the thousand to see it.'

A SEA OF PEOPLE

Along the platform, just a short distance from the Schwemawdaw, crowds of people have gathered to meet the train, selling ducks' eggs, onion *bhaji*, and the 'wackin' great cheroots' that Rudyard Kipling would instantly have recognised. Children rush by, brandishing great pots of water on their heads and on we go.

By the time we pass Daik-u, my fellow passengers are sprawled in all directions, sitting on seats, under seats, and along the passageways, propped up head to head. They include several traders, a young well-to-do family travelling to see their aged mother in Maymyo, two soldiers

and a *shuan* from one of the states in rebellion against the government. One young lady especially intrigues me. Her face is painted with large white sweet-smelling splashes of eucalyptus paste known as *Thanadbar* and she wears a pink T-shirt with 'Porn' written in big letters over it. Most passengers wear the *longyi*, a silk wrap-around material, knotted at the front for men and at the side for women. 'Porn' wears a pair of jeans.

The train locomotive is equally distinctive. 'French,' the driver proudly tells me, pointing to the Alsthom label. It is a diesel. Until ten years ago, steam engines used to huff and puff along the route, but now they are used on goods trains and the odd passenger train in Upper Burma.

'Progress,' says the driver. I reflect sadly on how 'progress' in Burma has meant the removal of great institutions like the steam train, but the preservation of even more outmoded ones like Tourist Burma and the state bureaucracy.

After an hour or so, a little Burman carrying a great plastic sack fights his way through the corridor, stopping at each wooden seat and handing out bundles of paper to the enthusiastic passengers. These are Burmese magazines, romantic novelettes and cartoons, hired out by the hour and the main reason why passengers hardly move for the entire journey.

AGAINST ALL ODDS

Of course there's trains and there's trains. Some are renowned for great engineering feats, others for their history or for the countryside through which they pass. In fact, probably the greatest feat about the line between Yangon and Mandalay has been the ability of the authorities to keep it open despite countless attempts to blow it up (although not recently). When writer Norman Lewis made the journey in the mid-1950s, he did not get much beyond 150 miles (241km) before the White Flag communists or one of the countless other groups of insurgents mined the front of the train and then the back of it, only to disappear rapidly into the jungle.

Burmese nonchalance in the face of disaster has been a hallmark of the railroad in other ways too. At one stage it was going to link Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand, part of a grand design dreamed up by the Japanese during the 1940s and recalled with tragedy in the events of the River Kwai. These days the train simply chuffs up and down a strip of line 385 miles (616km) long, theoretically taking 14 hours and averaging some 27mph (43kph), but generally taking several hours longer and spending a considerable period of time at a standstill.

One reason for this is the number of unscheduled stops called for by a uniquely Burmese method of travel. Rather than taking an expensive horse and cart from the main station to their home or sitting on the crowded roof rack of a truck, the pragmatic locals have come up with an alternative: bribe the train driver to stop at a prearranged spot (pricier) or to slow down near their home so that they can rapidly leap off (cheap).

Nor is the driver the only one on the make. Upper Class carriage conductors are more than happy to sell you their seat and will spend the rest of the journey spread-eagled on the floor. In time of extreme overcrowding, I am reliably informed, it is even possible to pay for standing room in the locomotive.



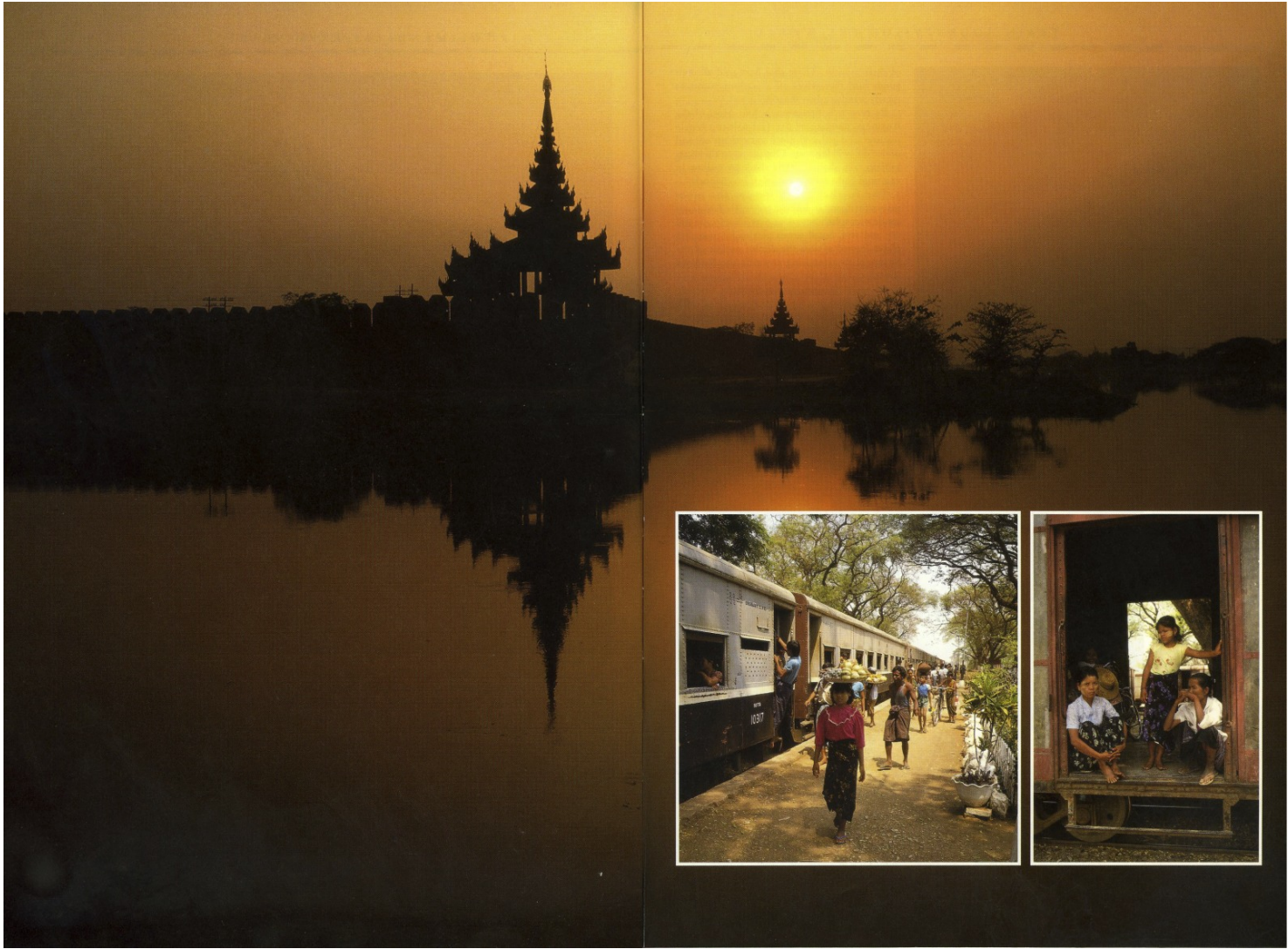
By the time we reach Penwegon and Pyu, the whole train is beginning to resemble a restaurant car. At every stop, more vendors spring on board. One sells an assortment of bottled Coca Cola, sugar cane juice, a ghostly sweet lemon brew called Sparkling Lemonade, and Mandalay Beer. Another sells fried kebabs, another stewed birds.

Already the monk who shares my carriage is lunching on pieces of chicken, vegetables and rice donated by fellow passengers in the hope of gaining merit and paving the way for a better life hereafter. Even the delightfully beautiful girl with 'Porn' written on her shirt indulges in a plate of *sarga-lay-gyau*, a sort of fried sparrow which she eats bones and all. For those in search of other delicacies, fried crickets, doves and glutinous rice served in bamboo or packed in banana leaf are all on offer.

Outside, beyond the crowd of feasting passengers, the train cuts alongside great dried riverbanks, breaking into a landscape that is vast and surreal. A cart moves slowly across the horizon, a lone figure carrying sugar cane pulled by a pair of bullocks, heads held high to the world. Ponies, trishaws and trucks bursting with workers kick up the dust along the winding dirt tracks. Occasionally the people catch glimpses of me, and laugh and wave at the sight of a strange-looking foreigner, sitting on the floor of the carriage, feet dangling out of the train.

At Yeni, the train again slows sufficiently for another drone of vendors to clamber up the sides, juggling trays of fried grass-hoppers and a huge dented teapot, green cheroots sticking out

ABOVE, a pause along the route allows time for refreshment





of their mouths. Those that have sold all their goods hurl themselves off at various points or merely wander up on the roof.

By now it is ferociously hot. Most of the Burmese passengers are fast asleep, gentle features and painted faces stacked up on and under the wooden seats. Outside, even the water buffalo take shelter in the shade or wallow in vast mud baths formed by irrigation channels.

The further north we go, the more mountainous it becomes, with fields of sunflowers splashing colour over a landscape still dry and arid. Small towns pass us by, nameless places framed against the distant outline of the Shaan Hills stretching towards the Salween River.

At every station, small children rush up balancing clay pots on their heads filled with water, covered by a tray and bearing three tin drinking cups. When the train arrives, they run from carriage to carriage selling their precious liquid (supposedly boiled water). But when the train leaves, the remaining water is ceremoniously thrown at the passengers through the open windows as the carriage gathers speed.

PREVIOUS PAGE, the dreaming spires of a Mandalay palace, pointing high above the telegraph wires
INSETS, scenes on the route to Mandalay

ABOVE, as the afternoon wears on, there is little to do on the crowded train but doze in the heat

RIGHT, a watermelon seller outside Pyu Station

FAR RIGHT, a striking golden Buddha in the ancient city of Pagan



By the late afternoon, the interior of the Ordinary carriages resembles an Egyptian camel market, piled high with watermelon skins, empty plastic bottles and betelnut juice. One old man even clutches a ferocious and faintly senile-looking chicken, its feet tied with string, its eyes glazed with vicious stupefaction.

As we pass the town of Thazi, the main junction to Myingyan and Taung-gyi, the first kerosene lamps come to life, smoke drifting muffled through the air. Outside their homes, fishermen waist-deep in water cast for fish, their nets cut by the golden rays of the setting sun.

The carriage conductor celebrates our departure from Thazi by opening a bottle of local whisky or *Abyethpa*. He is joined by the security guard, who has changed out of his uniform into a T-shirt and *longyi*. Both talk in the local dialect.

A HUMBLE LANGUAGE

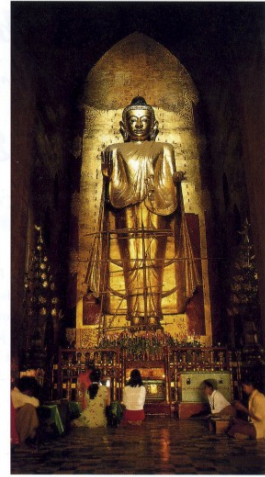
Burmese is a strange nasal language, generally spoken in a soft tone with no apparent emphasis whatsoever. If you imagine some simpleton talking to himself you would probably find a number of similarities. Many Burmese do not speak English. Those that do, use it with a mixture of charm and gregariousness.

'Where do you come from?' asks the conductor, dolloping out a large glass of extremely potent liquor and handing me the most prized piece of food he has in his possession – the inner cheeks of a curried fish-head. On hearing I come from England he becomes extremely excited. 'England war, Myanmar very strong, Bang, bang, Myanmar win', he says, referring to the events of World War II. In fact it was the Japanese whom the Burmese bear, but the British off whom they gained independence. I cannot help admiring the forthrightness of a people who for more than 40 years have been mired in various armed struggles.

As if that is not enough, the conductor coughs, lights a cheroot and as final proof of Burmese superiority adds 'Myanmar girl very good looking. Number one beautiful.' By now we have been joined by a crowd of onlookers, adding bits of advice, offering me cigarettes, commenting on Margaret Thatcher, Liverpool football team and other worldly matters.

'Where you go to school?' says the conductor. 'I went to university,' I reply. 'Oh, very clever, Mr Ben, very clever,' he announces to his friends, who look suitably impressed.

By the time we reach Singaingmyo, the carriage attendant is drunk, along with the plain clothes security guard. I am sitting in a reclining



seat in an air conditioned carriage (despite having only an Ordinary Class ticket) and I have been presented with gifts ranging from a bamboo container of sticky rice to a map and a hunk of sweetcorn. If the train went any further, I suspect I would end up being offered a sleeping compartment.

Half an hour before we arrive in Mandalay, there is a commotion outside. Figures from above leap down from the roof or jump out of the doors, carrying bags stuffed with illegal cigarettes and liquor smuggled from over the border. Their accomplices grab the sacks and are swallowed into the darkness, part of a black market that controls almost every aspect of the Burmese economy and which keeps locals and government officials in ready supply of their favourite whisky (Johnnie Walker) and cigarettes (555).

Within moments of the last one jumping off, we enter the outskirts of Mandalay, home to the famous Mahamuni image, and to the great Irrawaddy River of which Rudyard Kipling once wrote. The conductor is laughing uncontrollably, the security guard is asleep and it is 10 o'clock, an hour before curfew begins and eight hours before my return trip to Yangon.

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

■ The Mandalay Express leaves Yangon twice daily, taking anything from 12 to 18 hours to cover the 385 miles (616km). All tickets must be bought through Tourist Burma, preferably two or three days in advance, and should be paid for in US dollars. The maximum length of stay is two weeks.

■ All visitors to Myanmar must have a visa which can be arranged at embassies or through local tour agents. The maximum length of stay is two weeks.

■ The best time to travel is November to February, when the countryside is lush and the weather cool. Between the months of March and May temperatures reach well above 100°F (40°C).

■ Independent travel by tourists is not allowed without special permission, and you should contact a Myanmar Embassy for further information.

In Britain visas, tours etc can be arranged through Equinox Travel, 12 Beauchamp Place, London SW3 1NQ. Tel: (071) 584 2244. Fax: (071) 225 3894.

In the US, the Myanmar Embassy is at 2300 South Street NW, Washington DC 20008. Tel: 202 332 9044. Or you can contact the Permanent Mission of Myanmar, 10 East 77th Street, New York, NY 10021. Tel: 212 535 1310.