

December 2014 – January 2015

BURMA, I MEAN MYANMAR **AN INEXPERIENCED TRAVELLER'S GUIDE**

After 7h30 of a first flight, offered many platters of Indian food delight, we arrived in Deli. 9h awaited us before our next take off (no riming was intended), destination Bangkok. After 3 beers and a chicken curry sandwich; a cosy airport hotel bed embraced us in its waking nightmare, struggling for sleep. Rest was finally found, but not enough. To late, some nervous and tired laughter later and we made our way to a short but knee breaking flight. Nothing could break our spirit, knowing we would land in our much anticipated 2 day stay in the capital of disgrace: Bangkok.

Immigration, bags, toilet, change from pants to shorts, a bottle of water, a taxi and there we were...Zooming through the streets of traffic mayhem. Beeping noises, flashing lights and crunchy smells laid the path to a small, but luxurious apartment for a one night nap before flying of to Myanmar.

We had a couple of hours in front of us so we postponed that so much wanted rest. At the metro station we exchanged an amount of money in a currency witch we couldn't yet divide or multiply by the magic number to understand what we were paying. A second metro station, a walk, thousand of street-restaurants and in an elevator we go to the top floor of an over priced hotel. Time to feel important, sitting on the 32nd floor of an Asian skyscraper while sipping on cocktails of an amount in a currency...

After a couple of drinks, we race back down and hop on to a motorcycle-van-car-bicycle-thing (if anything, motorized imagination must be in the genes here) and there we are; sitting at a table of the famous restaurant *Cabbage & Condoms*. The concept: typical Thai food in your plate and on the walls, well, condoms. Actually, in detail, the name was chosen because; go to the bloody website!

Ok, now bed, we only slept 5 hours in 2 days, so here we g...wait what's this? A foot rub for an amount in a currency...(ok, time to learn how much I am giving away here). We abandon ourselves and lay in a semi comfortable chair getting the best f*** foot rub ever and falling asleep a belly full of cabbage and...no, not that. Going back to our one night home felt like walking on jelly or pudding or chocolate mousse – Damn! I forgot to order dessert. Finally, that much deserved rest - *Rest?* Said my guilty conscience; *you are on vacation you lazy bastard.*

We get up, give the keys back, call a cab; get to the airport and jump (well slowly walk) on to the plane going to Myanmar. You can't really say Burma anymore because of the army and the revolution and...how about you check it out on Wikipedia.

On the plane, a middle aged woman bought an electronic bag scale, a remote control for her phone and a bloody charger, have people nothing before boarding a plane? We land faster than you can say: What, 45 bucks for a charger? And there we were! Myanmar: A country of mysteries, religion, natural beauty and...well loads of stuff.

We get off the plane and walk through the airport which can only be described as a large warehouse. What? A new currency? To paraphrase one of our favourite yellow celebrities: D'oh!

Our cab driver is a very young boy whose hands can't quite grip the steering wheel; at least he isn't drunk! The raw beauty hits us immediately; Bangkok is long forgotten. The baby driver opens the doors to the soaring heat of Yangon (actually only 95°F, but it's December and I am usually wearing moonboots about now). We walk through the streets smiling at every Myanmarian (not sure about that) that crosses our path; they politely smile back at us with their dark red bloody coloured teeth. One man passing by shakes my hand; he seems amazed to meet me, but all I could think of: *Is the hand disinfectant in my back bag or in my coat?*

We get on the bus and look at the breath-taking countryside dancing in front of our eyes, also; there's a monk sitting next to us watching *Lord Of The Rings* and he's bloody loving it! We make a stop for food, arriving at the place, screams and bagging noises can be heard; a cat and a monkey are fighting about a dim sum on the roof (this is completely true). All the waiters and cooks climb the nearest brick wall to get a piece of the action.

Ok, so this is the place where I will eat my first Myanmar meal, I make a little cross sign, even if I don't believe in the all mighty, but there is still a 3h bus trip and a monkey just punched a cat in the mouth on top of the kitchen. So, a little sign of respect to the non-existing Christian God seems like a good move. One last big breath and we dig into our food as if it were fries and burgers. Everything turns out to be fine and I enjoy the rest of the trip. The gods have been good; I owe them one (as long as it is not going to church). It's 21h30; we arrive in Mawlamyine.

Taxi drivers surround us, all looking for new friendships: *Hello my friend*. By the way, still can't say hello nor thank you in their language; so we're still using the good old: *Hello and thank you*.

A bumpy 10 minute ride, and there it is, the *breeze guest room hotel* our first place to spend the night, our 2 time sleeping home, I wonder what kind of secrets this magnificent place holds for us...wait, what? The owner didn't write down our reservation? The guy ends up giving us 40 bucks (which must be everything he owns) to go to the nearest place which turns out to be a bunch nicer than his no window hotel room. The 72-year-old man (looks 70, Asians age well) explains he will be at our place at 7:45 to pick us up for the day trip. Oh yeah, he is also our guide for the day. The rooms of the other place are nice, all tiled up, like a bathroom with a bed, but we get a good night sleep.

The idea is to go to this island tomorrow and see how people live there. We get to the port, there's a boat stacked up as if it was training for the Guinness book of world records.

Actually, one of the best parts of the day; 1h30 crossing with a heavy fellow in the middle of the small ship strapped with a microphone and a tiny-tiny speaker selling some magic potion. Back at home, I spend my time cursing the people who still fall for adverts, and here I am digging into my pocket for a bottle of what surely must be river water, dried up grass and a thick ball of spit from the hefty red toothed salesman. He then applied some on his gums and raised both his thumbs, a big smile showing of the 5 teeth he had left, trying to convince us his potion was the secret to a healthy denture. Maybe the message was; *this will get rid of your teeth*, in any case, I abandon the idea of trying it.

The boat arrives on the other side, we hold hands to get of it while Burma babies jump of that ship like it was nothing. Before we can say: *have you got disinfectant?* We're racing towards the village.

Our guide, Anthony, obviously not his real name, his Myanmar name is...Let's just call him Anthony. He explains the difficulties of the people trying to escape poverty and adapting to democracy. This might sound weird, but poverty is beautiful. The landscapes, the villages, the people are always smiling and waving; the kids even more so. I hear you: *they are only waving and being nice for your money*. This might is true, but I'll keep the illusion of natural human kindness as it felt quite genuine and spontaneous. That said; they did not shy away from my cash.

We got back and decided to watch the sun set from the top of the hill. It was amazing, young Myanmar couples stood there with us, holding hands, looking like a failed 90's boys band. Apart from the weird fashion; it all looked very romantic. No funny business, *no trying to get my hand down there or hard-core sloppy tong kissing*. The youngsters are pure gentlemen, gentlemen with yellow hair and baggy white pants.

Finally back at the breeze hotel for some sleep, wait a minute, who's that German guy in the next bedroom talking philosophy with an Indian...This sounds interesting!

Stefan Hougaerts,
Brussels