

Travel and Adventure: The pagoda and the kiss

by Robert Ragaini

YANGON, Myanmar - The Shwedagon Pagoda sits on a hill above the city of Yangon like a gigantic Hershey's kiss. The pagoda, however, is not wrapped in tinfoil. It is sheathed in gold and tipped with a 76 carat diamond.

WRAPPED IN GOLD - The golden tower in the center of Shwedagon Pagoda is shaped like a Hershey's kiss. The pagoda, however, is not wrapped in tinfoil. CNS photo by Robert Ragaini. HOME ON THE SEA - The Silver Whisper anchors off the island of Penang in Malaysia. It is one of four luxurious all-suite ships of Silversea Cruises. CNS photo by Robert Ragaini.

BIG BUDDHA - An immense reclining Buddha fills the Chaukhtat Gyl Pagoda in Yangon. CNS photo by Robert Ragaini. BARE FEET, BIG SMILES - Even at the Shwedagon Pagoda, girls just want to have fun. CNS photo by Robert Ragaini. SEE FOR YOURSELF - John Gray has been leading sea canoe excursions on Phang Nga Bay in Thailand since 1989. He has extensive knowledge of the ancient limestone mountains and the secret lagoons inside them. CNS photo by Robert Ragaini. Eighty-two small shrines surround the incredible gold dome, each enclosing a sculpture of the Buddha. Forty prayer halls tower over a marble terrace, some with elaborately carved teak roofs, others with gold-leafed towers. The Shwedagon Pagoda is all this and more.

The cruise ship Silver Whisper docked in Yangon (formerly known as Rangoon), the capital of Myanmar (a.k.a. Burma), on Feb. 17 for the first of three nights in the troubled former kingdom. Passengers descended from the luxury liner into a country stifled by a military dictatorship. There was some debate about whether we should be there at all.

The weather was like spring when two of us stepped onto the marble terrace of the Shwedagon Pagoda. Around us, Buddhist pilgrims stood with astonished eyes. Others knelt in the fabulous prayer halls or touched their heads to the ground in front of their own special prayer posts. Oblivious to them all, Buddhist nuns in pink robes and monks in dark brown walked purposefully to who knew what duty.

By noon, the heat had risen dramatically. The terrace was getting the attention of our bare Western feet. So we taxied to an excellent Thai restaurant and spent the hottest hours of the afternoon in a nearby park. Then to Chinatown and the Third World welter of the outdoor food market. Finally, we returned to the Shwedagon to see the pagoda illuminated at night. It was a deeply satisfied couple that wearily returned to the ship.

For most passengers, the cruise to exotic lands and the numerous shore excursions were the reason they were on board. For some, the ship was the reason. Suites - there are no cabins - on the Silver Whisper are luxurious and spacious. The multilingual staff, professional and friendly, soon felt like family. Meals equaled those in the finest restaurants. I loved all that, but for me it was the excursions.

On one, an early morning flight took 23 passengers north toward the upper Irrawaddy River. As the small jet descended, a flash of gold leapt out of a flat, dusty plane. Then dozens of temples pinpricked the underbrush. It was the ancient city of Bagan.

More than 2,000 pagodas populate the 16-square-mile architectural zone of Old Bagan, a fraction of the number that existed 1,000 years ago. Today they still can be found everywhere, alone and in clusters. Most are relatively small, with rust-red domes and elaborately decorated portals. They are a mixture of the sacred and profane.

At the Shwezigon Pagoda, shops selling mass-produced tourist trinkets, but with a Burmese bent, line the walkway. Just past the final stall rises a magnificent, gold-covered dome. In front of it a woman kneeling in prayer was almost trampled by postcard vendors. Little boys in monk robes shyly held out alms-collecting bowls while a Burmese couple, easily in their late 80s, slowly walked to a prayer hall. Surging around them, tourists listened to guides loudly explaining the religious significance of the structure.

The group from the Silver Whisper journeyed from one collection of temples to another, stopping on the way at villages, museums, a lacquerware showroom and lunch in a new four-star hotel. Of the thousands of pagodas, a few, like the Shwezigon, are considered special for their architecture, size, ornamentation or opulence. But the deepest impression came from the number still standing and the fact that even the most modest is beautiful.

Earlier in the cruise, the Silver Whisper had docked at two ports in Malaysia and one in Thailand, where someone was waiting for me. John Gray moved his kayaking business from Hawaii to Phang Nga Bay, near Phuket, in 1989.

"I was interested in Asian limestone," he said. "Especially the sea caves of Thailand."

What he found was a tranquil bay strewn with limestone towers and mountain ridges millions of years old. They jut upward abruptly, their bases eroded, leaving stalactite-dripping shelves of rock overhanging the bay.

A long-prowed boat sped Gray and two of us from a mainland dock to a sandy island cove where he tossed a yellow inflated rubber kayak into the water. We settled in the bow while Gray, all 6 feet, 4 inches of him, sat behind and paddled into a hole in the island's wall.

Suddenly we were floating in total darkness. Gray flicked on a flashlight and swept the beam over a colony of bats clinging to the limestone walls. When light appeared at the end of the tunnel, we emerged into a grand amphitheater open to the sky, surrounded by cliffs - a magic lagoon totally hidden from the outside. We visited three that day, laughing at the antics of crab-eating macaque monkeys in one and paddling around mangrove roots in another, watching mud-skipper, fish that breathe both on land and in water, struggling across mud flats.

Thai entrepreneurs soon recognized the potential in Phang Nga Bay that Gray had discovered. Now thousands of tourists ply the bay in sea canoes identical to Gray's.

"I feel sorry for them," my friend said of the tourists whose guides knew nothing of the geology, the history or the wildlife of the bay that Gray shared with us. "They're missing so much."

I felt sorry for them, too. They weren't returning to the Silver Whisper.

IF YOU GO

Silversea Cruises (800 722-9955, www.silversea.com) sails the world in four ultra-luxury ships. Featured are exotic destinations, explorations ashore, art and culture, cuisine and comfort.

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The Four Seasons, Singapore (800-819-5053, www.fourseasons.com), one of the city's most celebrated hotels, is highly recommended for a pre- and post-cruise visit.

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John Gray Seacanoë (66-76 254 505-7, www.johngray-seacanoë.com) offers customized kayaking, starlight tours and multiday tours in Phang Nga Bay on Phuket Island, Thailand, in Vietnam and the Philippines.

Thaung Naing Win (95-1 727 247, e-mail thaungnaingwin@gmail.com) is an excellent English-speaking guide to the Shwedagon Pagoda, Yangon and elsewhere in Myanmar.

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