

Kyauk-Myoung – December 29<sup>th</sup>

I was woken up at 05:00 by the usual clattering and banging on deck.

At 06:00 the engines started on cue but were quickly shut down. It turned out that the fog was so thick that the Captain dared not navigate.

We finally got underway at 06:45, gingerly feeling our way and sounding our fog horn. It was a lovely misty sunrise. I took my first anti-malarial Malarone tablet – at \$5 a pop this is a tricky balancing act.

It was quite chilly at breakfast – clammy would be another description. I tried to warm up by having an omelet and crisp streaky bacon. I limited my fluid intake as we were going ashore to visit a large 50 gallon pot making village named Kyauk-Myoung or Nwe Nyein. There seemed to have been a lot of name changing under military rule.

By the way, we were now deep into the restricted area and had to comply with control timings. If there is a military presence, it is invisible.

At 08:40 we landed, only ten minutes behind schedule. I noted the perpetual haze and thought that was due to the wood smoke being used to fuel kilns. We ascended a very steep set of brick steps to get to the dirt main street of the village. There was a badminton game in progress on the main street.

From the main street, littered with sleeping dogs, we walked up a country lane to the first pot making factory. We watched two men making a rather large clay pot. One man squatted low and turn the base of the potter's wheel. The master potter worked the clay as it turned, smoothing the outside with a long wet stick. He had a flat twine wrapped around the pot at various heights to stop the clay from slumping.

Off to the side there were large pots with fires burning inside them to speed up the drying process. These pots would sell locally for \$9, but would cost three times as much in Yangon, due to shipping and breakage.

Then we visited the huge kilns. They were about fifteen feet high, twenty-five feet wide and about the same depth. The first kiln was still quite warm and pots were being carried out on workers' shoulders.

There was a rather complicated glazing process involving first white glaze and then a muddy brown one that had copper and lead in it. The lead was obtained from recycled lead-acid car batteries and caused a certain amount of lead poisoning. As observed before, none of the workers wore any safety equipment.

The glaze was painted on using an eighteen inch brush made of jute. It was not precision work as the esthetic seemed to require a certain haphazard appearance.

A kiln required twelve ox cart loads of drift wood. Once lit, it would get up to between 1,500 and 1,600 degrees Celsius, the temperature being judged by eye through a peep hole. A kiln lasts between three and five years. It takes two days to fire the clay and then a third day to cool things down slowly. The pots are removed on the fourth day.

We walked up the lane to a second factory where the woman owner was selling smaller pots to a

wholesale buyer. Both buyer and seller were tapping the interior of the pots with long knives using the sound to check for cracks. One pot was sold for \$4 and the man would resell it for \$4.50 to a retailer. The lion's share of any profit went to the investor who was bankrolling the factory.

We walked on to kiln number three that had just been fired up. The piles of drift wood were neatly stacked in front and would be fed in through a small opening at the top of the kiln face.

We saw pots in an ox cart that were stacked with rice straw padding. At the local retailer one of our group bought a nice six inch high green pot for fifty cents. It would be \$15 in Toronto.

By 10:10 we were back on board and watched two laundry parties near the gangplank. It seemed to be a rule that wherever we landed they would be doing laundry.

In the last two days I had seen more evidence that Aung Sang Suu Chi is the odds on favourite.

About half an hour after casting off we were motoring through the Third Defile. The defile is about 46 kms long. Initially, its banks were more defined, but hardly spectacular. We passed three hydraulic sluice gold mining operations. I spotted a very long bamboo raft with two shanties and about half a dozen men on board. About midway the banks became hills and the channel narrowed.

The gorge was carved through limestone rock. In some areas there was a bamboo forest. Once in a while there was a hut and some cultivated land. Mostly, it was quite uninhabited.

At 13:00 we had a glorious treat for lunch – PIZZA. It was a super vegetarian pizza. We all found it to our liking and told the Burmese waiters how great it was. They did not like pizza!

The narrowest part of the defile seemed to end at Male. There was a fair-sized community and a pagoda was under construction. There were two men at the very top adding the last bricks. The building material came up on a zip line.

The Captain spent some time feeling his way through the shallows that were evident from the rippling water. You knew things were tricky when the sounding skiff was unleashed to find the way. The Captain said he was working with between five and six feet of water. At 14:50 we literally bounced over a sandbar.

The wind got up after lunch and the temperature dropped enough that a light jacket was in order. We had been warned that the further north we went, the cooler it would get.

The Ayeyarwady (Irrawaddy) is Myanmar's largest river at about 2,170 kms long and is its most important commercial waterway. From the ocean, it is navigable for 1,600 kms as far north as Myitkyina. But, sandbars make navigation hazardous. Left unsaid, it must vary dramatically between the rainy and dry seasons. For instance, it was now obvious that many of the heavily-laden log barges were well and truly stuck. For many years the only bridge over the Ayeyarwady was the Ava Bridge built in 1934 near Sagaing. Since 1998 others have been built.

At 16:30 we were supposed to have nosed into Kyar Nyat. There were originally two objectives: first, to visit the local market, it being Sunday, second, to view the grave of Captain E.B.J. Vaughan of the 6<sup>th</sup> Punjab Infantry who had been killed by rebels.

However, the sandbars held us up so at 16:30 we went ashore at Zin Chaung, a village of about 170 houses. The people grew peanuts and beans, but their main occupation was charcoal burning – the fuel source being illegal logs.

We walked around the village noting the creosote on the piles of elevated houses. The creosote keeps the ants at bay. Our guide spotted moonshine ( I would not have known it from gasoline).

There were satellite SKYNET dishes and a very crude electrical grid – you just tapped into two bare wires running down the dirt street. There were two water buffalo pegged out for grazing.

There were two tea houses and two 7/11s because the village gets a lot of transient visitors.

We were about 65 miles from the Chinese border to the east and the daring cut lumber into short lengths and strapped it to the side of a motor cycle to run it over the border. The Burmese government tries to intercept and confiscate.

Five young matrons and babies posed up against a rail fence for our departure. The oldest was 28 but all the others were 21 – after age 20 they no longer need parental permission to marry.

The sun was almost down when we cast off at 17:18 to continue our run upriver.

The name Myanmar is derived form the short form of Myanma Naingngandaw. This name was used as early as the 12<sup>th</sup> century. In 1989, the government officially changed the name from the English version of Burma to Myanmar, along with other place names such as Yangon instead of Rangoon.

Since 1000 AD there have been nine different capitals. The eighth capital of Rangoon was changed to the present one of Naypyidaw in 2006.

The 19:30 dinner was a very nice Chicken “Gordon Bleu”. Gordon was cold so he dressed warmly. Several of the group have coughs and sniffles.

We moored overnight en route to Tagoung.

[Back](#)

[Back to 2013 Photos](#)

[Next](#)