



# On the Road From Mandalay

TEXT AND ILLUSTRATIONS BY Stephen Harby



Mandalay ... even the name evokes faraway, exotic lands, as expressed in Rudyard Kipling's 1890 poem, *Mandalay*, which inspired Frank Sinatra's 1958 hit *On the Road to Mandalay*:

“Come you back to Mandalay,  
Where the old Flotilla lay:  
Can't you 'ear their paddles  
chunkin' from Rangoon to  
Mandalay?”

Mandalay is the second largest city in Myanmar (also referred to by its British colonial name, “Burma”). Both city and country remain an exotic world apart. Myanmar is one of the few places on the planet that has not been overwhelmed by the tides of global homogenization. Its largest city, Yangon (British colonial Rangoon) is one of the few Asian historic capitals to retain its colonial urban fabric—albeit faded and crumbling. It provides a picture of what Singapore, Bangkok and Penang must have been like during the latter 1800s and early 1900s.

The rich tapestry of architecture and urbanism to be discovered in Myanmar spans over a millennium and ranges from grand stone Buddhist temples and high Victorian British piles to teakwood monasteries and ramshackle fishing and farming villages built on stilts. There have been

I painted **Detail of a Temple at Bagan** (graphite and watercolor on paper, 24x13) on site, using an easel. I carried a huge suitcase during that trip.



COUNTERCLOCKWISE FROM LEFT The Royal Palace, in Mandalay, is a vast complex of buildings in the center of a mile-square island surrounded by moats. It was completely destroyed in World War II and crudely rebuilt in the 1980s. **Royal Palace, Mandalay** (watercolor on paper, 4x6¾) is a quick sketch made in borrowed moments while others in my group explored the site. I didn't even have time for a preliminary pencil layout.

**Shwenandaw Monastery, Mandalay** (graphite pencil on paper, 9¼x8) is my sketch of a richly carved teak structure that was once part of the Royal Palace. It was moved to the outskirts of Mandalay, thus escaping destruction.

I quickly painted **Along the Irrawaddy** (graphite and watercolor on paper, 10x12) while on the deck of a moving river steamer. To avoid going aground, the vessel wove back and forth through a narrow, meandering channel of the broad but shallow river. A man at the bow gauged the water's depth with a bamboo stick.



several ancient royal capitals there in addition to the British colonial one, and modes of transport range from horse cart, river steamer and hot-air balloon to the more familiar modern transports over roads and in the skies.

## VIRTUAL TOUR

An ideal Myanmar itinerary might start in Mandalay, the last ancient royal capital, defeated by the British

in 1895. It offers a rich collection of sites, including nearby Amarapura and Inwa, two other previous royal capitals. The world's longest teak bridge and a 17th-century teak monastery are among the treasures to see there.

Mandalay is a good jumping off point for a trip down the Irrawaddy River to Bagan aboard a traditional river steamer, much like those in regular service during colonial times when the river was home to the largest civil-

ian fleet in the world. It's a memorable experience to glide slowly past one stunning tableau of river life after another: villages of thatched houses; rafts of logs lashed together, reminiscent of Huckleberry Finn; and boats packed with locals. At night the boats tie up at the river's edge, and passengers disembark to be treated to a barbecue among the dunes.

Bagan, reached after several days on the river, is the oldest of

## A DAY ON BAGAN PLAIN



The plain of Bagan is filled with thousands of temples, large and small, built over many centuries to commemorate rulers. While sitting on top of a pagoda, I sketched **Bagan Plain Dawn** (top left; monochrome wash on paper, 7½x12), as the sun rose and the smoke and fog rendered the masses of the temples as silhouettes. Later, as the sun climbed higher and the mists cleared, the forms and details of the temples were revealed by shades and shadows, which I captured in **Bagan Plain Temples** (lower left; watercolor on paper, 9½x16)



the royal capitals (then known as “Pagan”), dating back to the ninth century. It presents a vast dry plain with hundreds of pagodas, stupas (dome-shaped Buddhist shrines) and temples. Their ethereal and varied profiles rise out of the mist and the cover of trees. The best way to get an overview—and a highlight for the courageous—is a dawn ascent in a hot-air balloon.

The next lap on our virtual tour brings us back to the jet age, with a short flight from Bagan to Inle Lake, in Shan State, which is situated in the western sector of Myanmar. The lake is a center of the country’s rural life and crafts, with villages and temples dotting the shores and even built upon rickety stilts above the waters of the 13-mile long lake. The locals are sustained by floating hydroponic gardens

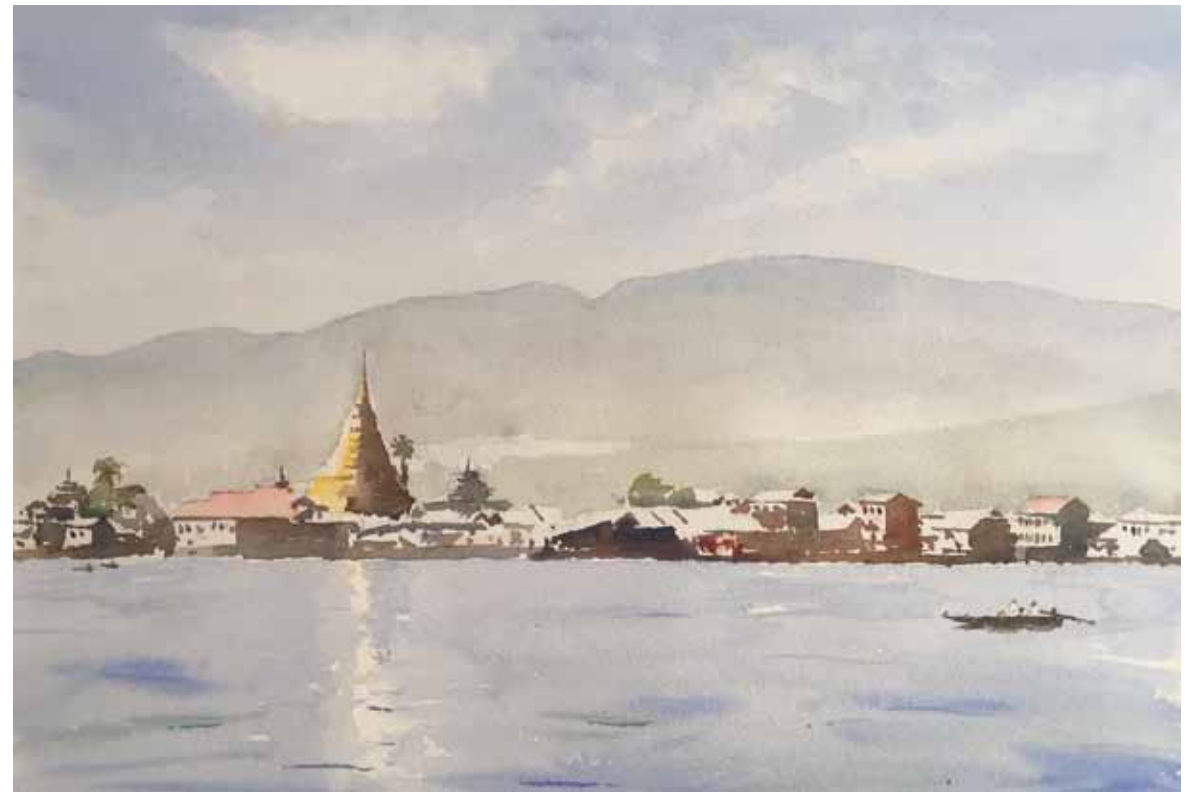
and fishing. The fisherman pilot sleek teak boats while standing, using a foot to brace the single oar. Visitors travel in larger teak longboats propelled by powerful, noisy engines.

The last stop on our imaginary journey is Yangon, which, under the name of Rangoon, served as the colonial capital (the center of government moved in 2006 to a new planned city, Naypyidaw). Yangon is a treasure

trove of grand and crumbling buildings from the British colonial era. A few of these structures have been converted to museums or hotels, but most of them remain in a sort of suspended state of advanced decay, awaiting either the wrecking ball or, it is hoped, a brighter future in which the value of history and heritage architecture is appreciated. Let’s conclude on the optimistic note that

groups advocating preservation of the country’s past are gaining traction in their efforts to educate and legislate for the protection of these treasures. ♣

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**Village and Golden Pagoda, Inle Lake** (graphite and watercolor on paper, 12x17¾) is a studio painting. I used a lighting technique called “contre-jour,” in which the viewer more or less faces the light source. In this case, the light comes from behind the left side of the subject, putting the facades facing the viewer in shadow. The metal roofs and the pagoda’s gilding catch the sun’s glare.



**Pansodan Street, Rangoon** (graphite and watercolor on paper, 5x8), depicts a grand row of British colonial facades on a main commercial street leading toward the shipping jetties along the Irrawaddy River in Yangon (Rangoon).

BELOW  
The building in **1914 Bank** (graphite pencil on paper, 10x7½) was designed in the Edwardian style popular at the height of the power and reach of the British empire. It employs all of the elements of the “high game of classicism,” [Stephen: *Are you quoting this phrase?*] producing a rich tapestry of shade and shadow that give meaning to the forms.

