The First Trip To Burma.

Dear Fanny,

Call me idiot. From the very first moment I arrived in Burma, I made mistakes. I changed a good portion of my dollars at the airport; even the government-appointed moneychanger raised her eyebrows when I said I wanted to change 120 dollars. She then kept a straight face and gave me 50% of the value that was waiting for me on the streets. I walked out of the airport and into the hot sunlight....

It took me a long time to decide to go to Burma. I was afraid to go--no, not of the local people or their government, but of my own, and what they would say of me. At last, I heard that my aunt had gone, and this gave me the courage to try. I flew in from Bangkok, following the usual route of the backpackers today. In the airplane, looking down, the first impression was of the dust. I think one can often get a feel for a country by the dust--or the lack thereof--one can see. Those that have covered up the dust under grass, trees, and even pavement seem to be more "developed"— but I should not use that term.

In this manuscript, I will try to remove all "feelings", and stick with bare description. Probably impossible, but I will try.

The taxi driver who took me to the train station and who was kind enough to buy me a ticket said that the exchange rate was $1 for 900 "kyats"--not the $1 for 450 kyats in the airport. He was very distressed to hear this news. In buying the ticket, he made negotiations with the clerk behind the barred window, who now appeared to have the power of a judge. I did not dare say anything to him, but just sit quietly, waiting. The driver went off, with a tip in his pocket. Before leaving the US,, I had collected many small bills ($1, $5, $10) for use in S.E. Asia. They proved to be very usefull in travel situations, but the people there always wanted new, clean and crispy money; the old bills were rejected. I walked into a teahouse. The tables were very greasy, but the people there were unintrusive. Not speaking a single word of the local language, I pointed at some 3-day-old deep-fried spring rolls, and some tea, and waited. The rolls were cut up with scissors right before my eyes, and the flies brushed off. The tea was very good; it was the local variant of "chai", such as is found all over India, Thailand, and elsewhere in S.E. Asia.

The Burmese are very polite, and they do not harass you. In the train station, the under-stationmaster let me sit in his waiting room for a few hours, as the time for the train to Mandalay dragged by. I stared at maps, drowned in wild plans.

Before fleeing to the north and Mandalay, the train squeezed its way through the railside slums that permeated Rangoon. The tracks were narrow-guage, and the train rocked back and forth, even at a slow speed. The slums came right up to the tracks: shanty-houses perched over the untreated waterland, filled with wild weeds looking like hyacinth, and mixed with all kinds of filth. Outside one house, the way to the outhouse was an old plank over the gray waters, to a few plastic sacks stitched together, so as to screen off the toilet from the train passengers. Plastic wrapping waste was everywhere. After half an hour or so, the train escaped--and I mean, "escaped"--Rangoon, and made its way north, as the glorious stillness of a tropical evening stole over the land.

Burma is a very "north-and-south" country; it is very long, but since so much of it lies in the Irrawaddy River basin, one has the feeling of being in a perpetual flood-plain. Mile, after mile after mile of flat land, with the eternally unchanging village landscape of 500 years ago, rolled by, as pigeons flew home in the dwindling light, and the passengers turned their attentions to the newly illuminated landscape of the train carriage. I looked out.

The fixtures in that railway carriage were symbolic of almost everything in the country--old, very worn, lovingly maintained, and expected to last for another generation, or more. I suppose that a country that exists under so many foreign embargoes would have to make the best use of whatever was available. The seats could recline back, the plastic coverings were torn off by time and constant use, exposing the metal skeleton of the inner chair, and every seat was taken. The train carriage wobbled over the narrow-gauge tracks, as vendors made their way up and down the aisle. Once again, I ate the three-day-old, deep-fried spring rolls. They were cut up with scissors, and left on a very obviously unwashed plate. I had no idea how to ask for anything else, and perhaps there was nothing else to eat. Many passengers had extra shopping bags, stuffed with food for the night's journey. Next time, come prepared....

The land outside grew fainter and darker, allowing the imagination to wander. I wanted to dream and think about what would come next, but I could not. I woman sitting next to me, just accross the aisle, wanted to talk to me. She must have been in her late 40's, her youth eroding away like the surface of a London monument in winter's rain, and otherwise nondescript. What struck me about her was her forwardness. From the very beginning, she wanted to talk, and as the conversation progressed it became obvious that she was looking for something from me. What was it? Her name was, I think, Cherry, so I instantly began thinking of Julia, in Herrick's poem. "Cherry ripe, ripe, ripe/ Come and buy them...." But she was no Julia (as I imagine Julia to be). She wanted to practice her English, as so many people do in Asia, but there was more. Was she looking for a quick husband? No, I don't think so. Anyway, the night was long and Mandalay was far away, so we talked accross the aisle. Soon, she asked the person sitting next to her to change places with me. That was forward! In Asia, such things are just not done. We continued to talk. Didn't she think others would criticize her for talking to a foreigner--and a man, at that--on a crowded train? Oh no, she didn't care about that. So, the night went on.

She was preparing to emigrate to the US, to a part of America where many Burmese people tended to congregate. (It seems that immigrants like to settle in places where there are many of their own fellow countrymen.) She seemed to have it all figured out, except that she was waiting for that last piece of paper from the INS. The train went on; by now, the countryside was totally obscured, and I could only imagine waht lay outside. She asked me what my travel plans were, and I told her. I wanted to travel up the Irrawaddy River, not down, like so many other foreign travelers. So, she said, let me show you parts of the city in Mandalay before you go on. I was too cowardly to refuse, and thus began a strange sequence of events over the next few days in Mandalay.

When we arrived at the station in Mandalay, her family was waiting for her, and I felt like the stray dog that was picked up on the last day-excursion. She met her folks, and then she presented me. Perhaps I should have "disappeared" at that time, but in the Third World, for a foreigner to "disappear" is very hard, unless the police do it for you. We returned to her home.

Mandalay has its streets arranged in rows and columns, which in a Third World city is very useful (the alternative "spaghetti" is very hard to deal with). The roads are packed, there are no

rickshaws (like in the old movies), but there is something like a teddy-bear sized pickup truck, with benches running down each side. They are blue, and they are everywhere. The old royal palace sits in the middle of the city, like an enormous, derelict old manor house, surrounded by the walls and moat, and beyond that, the city life goes on. Since Mandalay is popular with the tourists, there are many of the "Lonely Planet"-type guest houses available. I got dug in, and then Cherry and her family rushed me out to lunch in the city's only Chinese, "dim-sung" snack restaurant. It was huge, a mausoleum of a place, with polished stone floors, round tables, and able to handle any large lunch or wedding function. By now, I was getting concerned. Why such hospitality? I was sure that something would be asked of me, and soon. Anyway, they brought out all kinds of snacks, and we ate. Later on, we went inside the old royal palace. The foreign tourists who come to Mandalay assiduously boycott that place, as it serves as the garrison base for the army. We went inside, and I felt nervous. The inner word was so different from the busting universe outside. Yes, there were soliers inside, but they were quiet. Families went on with their daily life. It looked more like a run-down housing complex than anything else. The palace was there, but it was not striking. The grass was long and tufty and and the feeling of the place un-remarkable. We passed out into another part of the city, and with it, the bustle. The part inside fell away into the land of dreams. We did some other things, and looked at some stores selling rubies, then I returned to my guest house.

Rubies? Yes, Burma is famous for its rubies. I had imagined that the rubies there were a deep red color, and the size of pigeon eggs. Well, that was not the case; they were small, flakey things, looking like lentil-sized flakes of red glass. Yet they charged exhorbitant fees for such flakes. I think that rubies are vastly over-rated! Yet, people come from all over to get them and take them home.

Next morning, as I was having breakfast, talking to the two French tourists sitting nearby, someone sat down at my table. I did not look up at first, but when I did, I was astonished. No less than three feet from me sat a woman who must have been Indiana Jones' sister. I say that because she looked like that, not some soft tourist (like me). Adventure clothing, the casual, yet very experienced demeanour, that indescriable sweep of her hand over her forehead to keep the hair out of her eyes. She was French, so we began talking in French. I had long ago despaired that such as Indiana Jones' sister ever existed, so it was a pleasure to be able to actually meet one, and have conversation. She invited me to join her group on a driving trip somewhere in western Burma, but as I had already bought my boat ticket north, I had to decline and see her go. Bad move.... I later wondered, and still do, as to where such people live, where they can be found, and most of all, why I have been unable to see many of them. (I have the ability to find people who do not look and behave like her. It may be necessary to move in a different circle of friends....)

That night, I could not sleep. There was a monastery very near the guest-house, and all night, the abbot or one of the monks would read and chant from the Buddhist scriptures, using a large loudspeaker. The sermon went on all through the night hours, and the sound floated over the neighborhood with no letup, save when he drew breath. (As I write this some months later, I prefer the sound of the imams in Niger calling their people to prayer).

The next day, Cherry helped me to get the boat ticket to Bhamo. If only I had listened to reason and hired my guesthouse to get it for me! We did get the ticket, but had to run around to various offices, stand there in respectful suppliance, and then be told that it was to be had somewhere else. In the end, we put down the $54 at a ticket window on the riverbank, and were told to return later on that day. All you can do is to trust.... We wandered around Mandalay, doing I remember not what for some hours, and then had dinner.

Cherry had cooked some of her own dishes; with them in hand, she took me back to the "dim sung" restaurant, and commandeered a small function room. The usual surplus of dishes was ordered, and we ate. The atmosphere was tense--at least, for me, it was--and she asked me if I liked her dishes. I told her that I was very nervous about all her kindness, and what it might mean, and this made her cry. However, after that was past, and we were eating some more dishes, she dropped her idea on me. Here we were, all alone in some KTV/function room, and she asked me if I wanted to buy some of her rubies. So... that was it. All that "relationship-building", so she could sell me some (presumably) black-market rubies. I looked at the KTV machine, and imagined that there were some cameras in it, and some plain-clothes or army policemen outside, waiting for their move. However, it was not fear, or caution that directed me; the rubies she was letting me see were pathetic chips of "I know not what", which did not excite my eyes. I said no, ate some more dishes, and the dinner wound down. Then, we went back to our homes.

I had agreed with Cherry to see her when I came back through Mandalay, to see how her immigration affairs were going. That night, I was in another guesthouse, and barely slept. It was in the depths of the night, about 4:00a.m., that the taxi-driver came for me, and took me to the jetty. The dusty roads had made me very afraid of eye infection (conjunctivitis), so as we went on down the empty roads, I tightly closed my eyes. I tried to forget the night before, when I had wandered aimlessly through the streets and dusty markets of Mandalay, asked for help from a very kind bicycle-rickshaw driver, who ate dinner with me, and then took me to an eye-clinic, and an even nicer eye-doctor. I was disoriented, depressed, and despairing. I tried to forget all that, as I got out of the taxi by the Irrawaddy, and walked down the gangplank to the floating ticket office and the boat.

Here, and here only, is where the trip really began. The floating boat-platform was brightly lit up, people were coming and going with all sorts of baggage, and there before me was the river boat. It was a "three-decker", built in China, and it sat there quietly as supplies for the various river ports along the route were loaded on. I was shown to my cabin, did not like the door-lock, was moved to another room, got in, locked the door, and shut myself off from the world around me. For three days, this boat was home, and the cabin my refuge. At first, it had seemed that $54 was an exhorbitant amount to pay, but now, in hindsight, it was one of the better purchases in my life.

After about two hours the boat pulled away from the dock. There was a slight vibration throughout the boat, but I paid no attention. I just wanted to get away from the noise of Mandalay and the memories of the past few days. I stayed inside for a little longer, and then came out. We were now making out way up the Irrawaddy River.

This river is the very backbone of Burma. It runs up and down the whole main part of the country. However, the water does not flow very fast, it gradient is almost imperceptible, and it has the air of a river the moment it reaches its delta stage. How languid is the Irrawaddy! Everything seems to pass by so slowly, so slowly. In fact, the current is fairly fast, but the width of the river, the almost total absence of visual references like floating objects (except other boats), and the extreme murkiness of the silt-laden waters make it very hard to gauge the speed of the current. The Irrawaddy never revealed its inner face; I never saw the bottom. It seemed to be one everlasting, languid bargeway one bend away from the still, waiting sea.

The boat had about ten cabins on each side, towards the front, and I think most held two beds. In the very front was a large room that served as a Karaoke TV room; sometimes, one could hear the blaring of KTV music or dubbed kung-fu movies. There were no "middle-class" berths. In the back, around the loud diesel engines, were the common berths. They were white-painted areas on the hard steel deck, each about 3 x 6 feet in area, where the local people traveled. No mats, nothing. The bugs, the noise, the heat of the day or the chill of night would all erode your spirit. The toilets were the usual "squatties" found all over Asia, except the that they were perpetually flushing, the brown river water momentarily turned transparent as it flew out of the pipe into the toilet bowl, before turning brown again. The crew had the bridge and perhaps some space behind it; before the bridge was a row of deck chairs that looked imperially over the river ahead; it was a day or so before I had the courage to ask if it was all right to sit there, and found it was open.

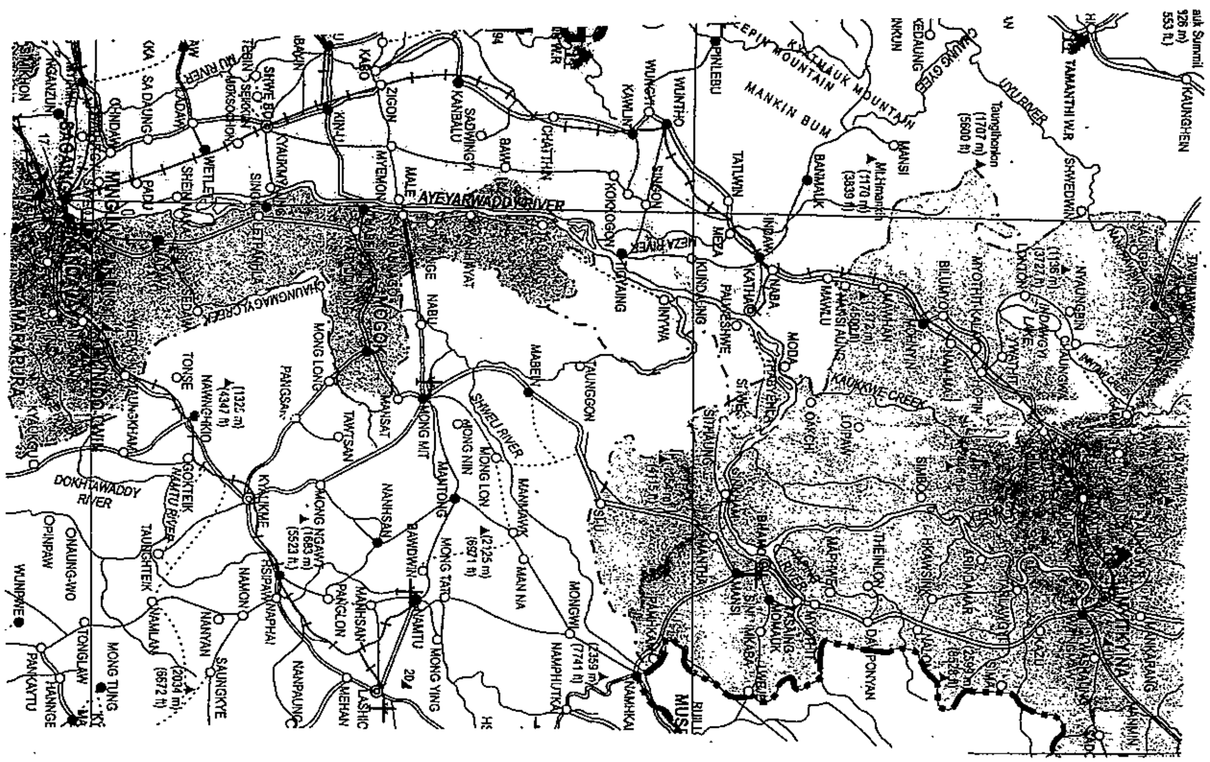
In the middle parts of the boat was a lot of open space, which was filled with river freight and some vending booths. These booths sold the usual snacks, dried potato chips, powdered milk tea mix, and travel necessities. Towards the front of this deck (the middle) was a galley that served a small range of stir-fried dishes, soups and tea. I soon learned how to order up vegetable stir-fried dishes. These meals helped to make some noticeable breaks in a pattern of life that now became constant, like the constant throbbing of the diesel engines. Breakfast, lunch, dinner, and some excuse to come down again in the evening broke up the day, spent either in the cabin, or looking out over the rails at the passing landscape, or in the freight area. I must admit that I was very unsocial, and kept to myself a lot, reading, sleeping, or just looking out. Yet, that was what I really needed then.

The dominant impression of the Irrawaddy is that of being on a mirror, between two skies. The muddy waters, the absence of any firm horizon (apart from the banks), and the sky above gave this impression. We were suspended in a sort of "visual eternity", a visual limbo, as we wandered up the river, now following this direction, now following that way, to reach our next somewhere. To either side, the river bank rose up or else smoothed out, depending on whether the water was cutting the bank or laying down sediment. The river banks were very high--about ten or fifteen feet--and I wondered how someone who fell into the river would climb out. That would be impossible, unless he swam across the river to the other side, or swam downstream several miles to the next bend. Nothing changed; the river in this

was the dry season, when brown, tired dust covered everything, the banks were very tall over the boat (it seemed), and the land was prostrate in exhaustion. It was a perfect place to relax, and read books.

In fact, I read a lot. The Irrawaddy journey was the perfect place to read books that few would venture to read on other occasions, such as Bede's History of the English Church, or Longus' and Chloe, or the words of Sappho. I was particularly upset that so much of Sappho's manuscripts were destroyed, for she seemed so far ahead of her time, and her words occasionally delicious to read under that hot, languid Burmese setting. I would read in the cabin, holding my breath and keeping silent like a young fawn in the grass when someone went by, or in the early morning or late afternoon, when the sunrays were beating up on the other side of the boat. Everything was determined by the sun--or rather, the avoidance of it. In the hot tropics, the only thing you can do is avoid the hot sun, whenever possible. I had a large bunch of bananas, packs of biscuits, bottles of ice tea (all warm now), and other snacks--and a map of the river, which I often looked at, to try and estimate how far up the river we had progressed. I knew better than to ask the crew, "Where are we?"

The boat went very slowly. After a day or two, I estimated the speed at 13 miles per hour. That was about as fast as a bicycle. Look at the map: from Mandalay to Bhamo the journey is three days; from Bhamo to Myitkyina on another boat it is another day. Here is a rough map:



Along the river bank were the navigational markers. These were white-painted balls, possibly made of canvas, with "wings" on them (like the devices on sailing boat masts to show up on another boat's radar screen), and attached to the top of bamboo poles. They appeared on the bank about every kilometer. At first, I criticized the Burmese government for not spending the money to make a decent set of navigational aids, but then remembered that the country had next to no money for much infrastructure development. Even though the Irrawaddy is a major river, it cannot attract the necessary funding. Upon later reflection, I realized that both the government and the people had done a commendable job in using what little funding was around. (Of course, I wish more was spent on infrastructure.) These navigational markers would follow their course on one side of the river, and then would jump over to the other side--why, I do not know. During the day time, I could see them fading away into the distance, and sometimes used them to gauge the speed of the boat, which was very slow.

However, at night the picture was very different. There was a large searchlight mounted on the roof of the bridge, with the control handles inside the bridge itself; at night, this light was used to locate the next navigational marker. The boat's progress was slow at night, as it was difficult to see where the next marker might be. At times, there were two or three channels to choose from, and of course there were the sandbars. Sometimes at night, I could hear the rasping sound of the hull going over a sandbar, the silence of the engines in idle, and then the shaking as the crew tried to reverse the boat off the sandbar. On one night, the boat was forced to tie up to the bank and await the dawn, and better visibility. The searchlight's beam was very thin, electric-arc white, and drew in the moths for miles. Not only would the insects fly up against the glass part; they would dart in and out of the light-beam itself, arriving out of nowhere like Caedmon's sparrow, but instantly disappearing into the oblivion like a meteor seen for the first time. The crew had to be on their toes during the night watches, as the river gave away no secrets, or any facts about herself: by day, the surface refused any glimpses into the heart of murky water; by night, the whole river tried to hide herself, and at times even the navigational markers disappeared.

I loved those night visits to the upper deck. I could not sleep well: there were many thoughts passing around my mind, the engines always vibrated the ship, my imagination was in overdrive (how I wish I had put away my fear of being seen writing down notes, as well as my laziness, and recorded everything that I saw or felt, this whole three-day trip being a "stream-of-consciousness" of epic length in my mind!), and there was so much of interest to occupy me. I went up on deck two, three, even four times a night, at different times of the night, as the river passed by in the darkness, the stars rotated in their paths above me, and I sped through the universe, utterly freed from any sense of belonging to this earth or being on the ground. These evenings were the closest I will ever come to the feeling of passing through outer space, as if I were actually in it. That is the unique quality of the Irrawaddy--you are completely detached from earth, horizon, or sky, and float in both elements at once. I paced up and down, back and forth on the deck behind the bridge, looking into the distance at pinprick forest fires that glowed afar like dying embers in a fireplace (until you came closer, and saw thin lines of fire licking their way across a hillside), staring fixedly at dim objects on the deck, or else throwing back my head and looking into the eternity of the stars. How beautiful they were! Even now, I can

close my eyes and imagine myself on that deck. It was a kind of limbo, a kind of oblivion, for although all the visible signs of time passing by were there, I felt utterly detached at brief moments. At times, paradoxically, I would look east in hope of seeing the smudge-gray lightening in the heavens, telling me the dawn was coming.

These three days were a unique time to experience oneself as being totally cut off from the rest of the world. There was hardly a sight of modern life, save the river-traffic that passed by, going up and going down. In fact, some days later an airplane flew over, and I asked myself, "What is that?" Seriously. Although the Irrawaddy was a major waterway, the view from the deck was into the past, perhaps 500 years into the past.

The countryside was dominated by three things: the green forest, symbols of the Buddhist religion, and agricultural activities. There were many trees around in general, although in places the land was denuded. The trees were not enormous, as all the good lumber trees had been taken. Still, people were looking for the big trees, for a steady procession of barges loaded up with teak logs came down the river, their "long-tail" engines thumping and clattering, making a noise which could be heard long before and long after they had passed us. The Irrawaddy was indeed an artery; the teak logs were the lifeblood of the nation, flowing south. At various points, there were log depots on the river banks. They were the open warehouses, as it was, of the produce of the local forest, brought to the river by elephants, tractors, and trucks. The only sign of anything modern was a yellow logging crane, surrounded by hundreds of logs, waiting for the next boat. The traffic seemed to flow south. (Indeed, it wasn't until I came to more northern parts that the log-traffic seemed to go east and maybe north-east by trucks.) Some of the log-barges were huge; the teak logs must have been five or six feet in diameter, they were stacked high, and the barge rode very low in the water. In the front were workers holding black-and-white painted bamboo poles, marked for each meter. They would plunge their pole into the muddy water, and their assistant would give a hand-signal to the bridge to say they were "all clear". Sometimes, the barge would have a pilot-boat ahead, roving back and forth, poling the river for a good channel. These boats also had "long-tail" engines, and were very noisy, and seemed hard to manage (yet they were experts). Very few boats seemed to have more "modern" engines. Indeed, on both the Irrawaddy and Mekong rivers, the boats had a long, sagging-in-the-middle look (like the Oscar Mayer "weinermobile" vehicle), they used the long and loud "long-tail" engines, and they were everywhere. A family's whole life took place on these boats, and they made the country run. As the region gears up with the new "super-highways" that will radiate out from Kunming, I hope that the traditional river traffic will still have a place, for it is an integral part of the identities of Laos, Cambodia, and Burma. I could say more about boats here, but I will hold, to move on to the second point.

There were many symbols of the Buddhist religion in Burma, and certainly they were clearly visible from the river. The "stupas", which look like "Hershey's Kisses", and were painted white, or white-and-gold, were very common. I think they held the ashes of famous Buddhist abbots and monks. Some were twenty or so feet high; others towered up fifty, or even one hundred feet high. In a country where money was very scarce, much effort and maintenance was devoted to them. It seemed that every village or hamlet had a "stupa", as well

as a small monastery. The Buddhist religion was taken very seriously here. Early in the morning on the first day, incense was burned and a bunch of leafy twigs were placed in a metal vase which was tied to the forward flagpole, so as to bless the boat's journey up the river. The bright saffron-orange clothing of the monks was very distinctive in a landscape where greens and browns predominated.

As for scenes of agricultural life, it was these that occupied my interest for hours, as the boat made its way up the river. I have no idea what life in Burma was like, save for what I saw near the river banks. In the three days to Bhamo I saw only a few trucks, no cars, a few bicycles, and some ox carts--the ones with big wheels and wide axles. Fishing was fairly common. Fields and cultivation did not stand out, for some reason. In one place, a work crew was splitting firewood. The logs were cross-cut, then split into quarters and tossed a little distance away. Next, someone else took the quarters and split them farther. With each step, the wood moved closer to the river-bank. There seemed to be no hurry. In many places, the land seemed half asleep; in certain river-bank flats (which were sometimes very large) the sense of desolation and total isolation from the doings of the general world was powerful. Perhaps the center of village life was out of sight of the river traffic. At certain points, there would be a jetty for a river-crossing ferry--another "long-tailed" boat packed with local passengers. The river is long, the land is vast, the sun is hot, in the dry season (now) the leaves are covered in dull-brown dust, and travel under almost any circumstances is slow and tiresome. Nothing was in a hurry, which is why I recommend any boat passenger to bring along many books, buy a cabin ticket, and take the time to think about many things along the way. Otherwise, travel would be a miserable affair.

There were fresh-water dolphins in the Irrawaddy river. I had heard about them; they were supposed to be very rare. At most times, I would keep half an eye out for them. In time, they were spotted, in small groups of two to five. They appeared in the invisible horizon that was meant to bound heaven and the river, black shapes which broke the dream world's mirror, breaking the illusion briefly before falling back into the silver eternity they came from.

Every so often, we came to the larger river towns. The Mandalay to Bhamo ferry was vital to them, as the boats brought heavy supplies and many staples. Vegetables, rice, mechanical parts, powdered tea and other snack foods, cement, and other unknown commodities were piled up in the central part of the middle deck. As soon as we docked, the unloading crew would come on board, with shirts draped on their shoulders, to haul off the sacks. At first, I was afraid to get off the boat, and stayed inside my cabin; later, I went out with some people to drink tea in some riverside tea-house. Some villagers sold food from their canoes. Remember, this was not a tourist boat--they went downstream from Mandalay. This was a working transport boat. As soon as the heavy bags were carried off, new cargo from the jetty was loaded on board.

What went down the river? I already mentioned teak, but there was also bamboo. It was cut into lengths of about ten feet, tied into bundles, the bundles were joined, and enormous rafts were put together. These rafts must have been over one hundred feet long and thirty feet wide. At the corners, there were stations for a long sweep paddle, so as to direct the raft as it followed the current's pleasure. A family or work crew would join up as much bamboo as they

could, or else team up with another family. One or more sun shades, similar to those found on a sampan, were placed on the raft, laundry lines were strung up, and the raft went down the river. The crew would return home on the next ferry boat. Like everything else, they seemed to float on an unseen horizon, placed between two worlds. They were yet another reminder that we were totally cut off from the rest of the world, and its doings. I drank powdered milk tea, ate at the canteen (the same dish of vegetables), and spoke to few people. It was, in a way, comforting to live in so detached a way in this laid-back country, and especially on this boat, which seemed so removed from everything else. There were two French tourists--two men--on the boat, and we did not say anything at first...just a few nods. However, after a day or so, we began to talk; at about this time, I "discovered" the deck chairs on the bridge deck. We sat there together, looked at the approaching scenery in silent contemplation, and shared the usual travel stories. After another day, we got off the boat together with someone else, and had tea in a river-stop tea house. Time on a boat can allow aloofness to evolve into some form of communication, and there were stories to share. The two French men slept in the 3rd class area--on the open iron deck with its painted off areas for each person. I think they were brave, as the people they were traveling with had almost nothing at all, and the stress of eating snacks when they had none would have been too hard for me; I liked the secluded exclusion of the cabin. The insects would have driven me crazy, as well. I would deal with the insects by getting ready for bed in the dark, so that the bugs would not see the lights, and want to come in.

I traveled this way for three days, reading books, looking at the map, and enjoying the passing countryside. Most foreigners pass down the Irrawaddy river to Pagan, but few go north to Bhamo; this trip was certainly worth it--after the Kobe to Shanghai boat trip, this was most probably the best water journey I had ever made. I recommend it to people who are not too "soft". Just bring enough books and snacks, buy a cabin ticket, have no urgency in your timetable, be very patient, know that Bhamo is not the end of the line but a resting place for more, and enjoy being totally disconnected from the larger world. In Burma, you must be patient. Also, have your guest house buy you the ticket in Mandalay for you--it is easier!

At the beginning of the fourth day, we arrived in Bhamo. Clouds of dust blew off the river banks, and I knew something was lacking. For the most part, I believe you can estimate the poverty or lack of infrastructure in a given place by the extent to which loose dust has been controlled. If there is a lot of dust, then the area is poor. If the ground is "clothed" in vegetation, or even concrete pavement, then that area's development is better. The boat tied up to the bank, and the boat's heavy plank was thrown out. However, all the passengers had to climb, crawl, and scramble up the steep riverbank--now exposed by the dry season--and be very careful getting to the top. Small footholds had been chopped into the earth, and people went up in single file, some carrying heavy bundles. It was not easy. In short, there was no jetty, perhaps because the difference in riverbank height was so great, and because there was no money for a real place to get off the boat. A strong wind was blowing, and dust blew everywhere. At the top there were several taxi drivers (for this place was some distance from the town itself), who operated horse carts having narrow-width "cart beds", and large wheels. I went with the two French men, and they negotiated the fare; they were more

assertive than I was, and after a few minutes of bargaining arranged the fare. By now a strong wind was blowing, and the talc-powder fine dust was everywhere. I was very afraid of getting dust in my eyes and getting eye infection, so for the whole journey I hunched over by small travel bag, my eyes tightly shut closed. The two French men thought this was strange, but even though the wind sometimes calmed down, I kept my eyes shut. Getting sick in the middle of nowhere, with almost no medical infrastructure available, is a terrible thing. You might ask, "Then why travel in places like Burma?". To this I say, some things are worth risking for, but even out in the farthest ends of the "developing world", one should take precautions.

In time, the powder-dust became packed earth tracks, and then pavement. We stopped at a ticket office, but it was closed. Someone said to just show up at the jetty the next morning for the next boat to Mytkyina. I was too neurotic withing, but said nothing. Once again, I ways with the two French men; they went to another hotel, but I stayed at the one recommended by the "Lonely Planet". This hotel was a bit pricey, but after three days on the boat, and no courage to shower in Irrawaddy river water, I needed a place to clean up in. Two or three days in the rough, and then a day in relative comfort, to recover myself. The philosophy of travel in middle-age is somewhat softer than in my twenties: in Africa, I was crazy in the pursuit of travel. After cleaning up and sending out the laundry, I wandered around Bhamo.

Once again, I found the experience of wandering around a strange city on foot, in a place where I knew nobody and where I was an "outside oddity", to be a difficult experience. All through my life, I have traveled best as the "flash observer"--that is, as one looking out of the bus, train, or boat window at the world passing quickly by, and making my observations, assessments and feelings in a few seconds. I have avoided personal contacts, in-depth relationships, and ongoing friendships. The sum of my travel knowledge is a myriad of mental snapshots, which when taken together and sythesized over time, form the bedrock of my travel experiences. I love the land, the geography, the infrastructure, but not so much the city, the society, the social networks: the journey, with its traveler's pilgrimage, its "joy of the journey", its unfolding views I appreciate, but not the destination, finding a community at road's end, the contentment of objective reached and a new city to explore. In any case, I wandered around Bhamo as a lost sheep, looking for a place to eat, as well as some jewelry shops; I was hungry, but also wanted to buy some bracelets for my sister. The jewelry stores did not have what I wanted, but after walking about, window-shopping after nothing, I found the restaurant I sought. It sold "Shan-style" food, and I went in for dinner.

One thing I like about the roadside eateries and restaurants of Burma--and indeed, of much of South-East Asia--is the way they serve their food. Each dish is cooked in a large pot, the pots are ranged in order on a table, and the customers can walk down the line of pots, lift the lids, and see clearly what is available. No need for menus here. People might criticize me for being so illiterate, but with so many languages in the region, where to start? Besides, I have seen one character in every culture, one who has little or no language, and who is able to get by on a survival level--the "village idiot". If you are willing to accept this character (played out appropriately, mind you!), you can "muddle" your way through many situations, and in many countries. Any way, I ate, and the food was delicious. The two

French men showed up again and we ate, but at different tables (we were very fragmentary people). They wanted to take the land route from Bhamo to Mytkyina, but I suspect they were blocked (the route was being rebuilt for the coming "super-highway" from Kunming to eastern India). I drifted off and went back to the hotel.

Very early the next morning, I took a bicycle taxi to the new river-boat station. This one had run-down concrete steps to the river, or at least, near it. Nobody was around, it being 4:00 a.m. After standing around a while, a man came out from his house and started talking to me. To my delight, he spoke Chinese, and the relationship greatly improved as we had something to talk about. He had been in Burma for thirty or forty years, had married a local woman, and had a few children. He invited me into his home, where his wife made some noodles. All of a sudden, the trip became personal and interesting. Having another language, a "third language" when traveling is very helpful, and makes life more hopeful. I have spoken to Chinese people in Portugal, used very basic Russian in Vietnam, French in many places--and Chinese here in Bhamo. To avoid having to speak your own language, or the local target language, when trying to communicate with a stranger is very liberating--both of you are equal, for nobody is linguistically superior. Anyways, we talked. I wondered how he met his wife, how he found work and made a living, and how his children were raised in the bosom of two cultures. It was a two-storey house, with concrete floors and wooden walls--open, airy, and still. The family was getting up. Humidity, the encroaching vegetation from outside, the feeling of "plenty in simplicity" were in this house, which became more and more visible as the grayness of dawn lit up the world. I don't remember everything we talked about--I was glad to find someone Chinese with whom I could have a real talk. His daughter spoke reasonable English. Later, the father got me a ticket on that morning's boat to Mytkyina, since it was his boat.

This boat was very different from the boat from Mandalay. It was like a "souped-up" canal boat: long, thin, with bench room only, one deck with a roof cover to stack light baggage on, a powerful engine, and very fast. During the dry season, Bhamo is the highest a larger boat can go, so the smaller boats have the advantage for some of the year. They make the journey in one day. We left at 7:00 a.m., and after some extra loading, went up one channel. This boat must have done 25 or 30 m.p.h., compared to the 13 m.p.h. of the other boat. River spray often flew into our faces, so the plastic covers were put down on the sides. If a person wanted to go to the toilet, he had to squeeze through an opening just forward of the middle part of the boat, climb carefully up until he was standing on a very narrow pathway that ran down the side of the boat. The pilot would not slow down, so he had to move down the outside of the boat, at 30 m.p.h., just above the water, holding onto the railings attached to the roof of the boat. These railings were not very firm. I went back. One false step, and I would be into the river. I passed over the drone-shouting engines. Just next to the tiller bar was a screened off stall--only three feet by three feet--with a hole in the bottom. The Irrawaddy river raced by at the speed of imagination, and seen through the slop hole, it was hypnotizing. I looked up. The bellow of the diesels, the air ripping by, trying to blow off my hat, the receding waves, the addictive pulse of power and speed were wonderful. This could easily have been the Mekong as the Irrawaddy. I ceased to dream, but started to shout my "stream-of-consciousness" dreams into the wind, where they were whipped away into the greater oblivion.

I shouted. "I like the smell of diesels in the morning! They smell of victory." That, and similar stuff. I gathered up a large spittle in my mouth, and in the relative stillness of the toilet shelter, let it drop down into the hole. For a moment it hung there in almost-perfect stillness; then it fell down and at a certain moment it just--disappeared into the infinity of rushing water. As for me, I cautiously made my way back to my seat.

The character of the Irrawaddy changed. Two or three times, we passed through a belt of limestone, part of the great limestone empire of mountains and hills which show themselves throughout southern China and South East Asia. The channel became narrower, and the hills, which often lurked out near the distance, now hemmed in the boat. Other boats, usually with the "long-tail" engines, passed clattering by. Some used just one of their three, enormous, gimbal-mounted, "long-tail" engines, leaving the others to balance horizontally in idleness; others had to use all three, blasting the whole valley with their unmuffled clatter-clatter-clatter. I would hate to be the oilman whose job it was to look after these engines. The sun was still strong, and I hid on the "safe" side of the boat, under the coverings. Sometimes, there were dangerous rocks in the middle of the river, and the pilot weaved his way among them.

Along this stretch of the Irrawaddy there were river-gold diggers. They ran small operations. A high-pressure water pipe would bring water up from the river to a higher gravel bank, where the workers would blast the gravel with the hose water. On the river's edge were screened gravel-sifting platforms. Some workers had small "dredge-boats", about fifteen feet long: a small dredge boom would bring up buckets of gravel from underwater and dump it onto the screens, where the workers would pick out anything interesting. The gold-diggers worked in small groups. It was here, in the landscape of mid-upper Burma, that the nature of humanity changed... changed in a very fundamental way. Life became coarser, more rough, a place where anything might happen. Some of these people who lived in and around the forest and the mountains carried Burmese swords, had a tougher-looking feel to them, and bore that feeling about them of the rough frontier. I don't think there were many solitary gold-diggers out there. I think someone said that the real bosses of these operations did not work there, but would come by every week or so with a briefcase to pick up that period's gold-pickings. As the boat moved further northwards, I could sense a change in the land, its character, the unseen events happening out of sight of the river traffic. Joseph Conrad talked about this in his work "Heart of Darkness"--the unseen forces at work in the people, the very soul of the land through which the river passed. What, exactly, did I see? Nothing. What, exactly, did I perceive? I saw only this... that prostitutes from the logging camps were riding the boat, saying nothing, just being there. A new species of flower growing on the fern-covered rocks told me I had entered a new ecosystem, so to speak. They were belwethers of great and unseen forces at work in the unseen depths of the land. As for me, the eye for small details, a rampant imagination, and the ability to draw creative conclusions (a story from a few pollen grains, a tuft of threads, a few bars of music hummed in the utter darkness of an alley at midnight) are all that matter. Do you follow me, here?

At some point, our boat got stuck on the sand-bar outside a village jetty. It took a while to get unstuck. Some passengers got off, to complete the journey to Mytkyina by bush-taxi. The Irrawaddy river made a great bend to the east, and I stayed on board to the end.

There is one detail I forgot. Lunch. At about the half-way point in the day's journey, we passed a large open area of sandy ground, far from any large villages. Set out on the flat area were two restaurants, designed for the river-boat lunch business. All the food and drink one could want for lunch was there, with plastic chairs, a tent without sides covering everything, and stoves and stalls. The place must have seemed very unusual during the "off" hours, just standing there, but now it was busy. In a preview of what was to come, a plank was thrown out of the boat, the far end biting into the sandy riverbank slope, but only halfway up the slope. The passengers had to manage for themselves as they scrambled cautiously up to the top. The food was all right, but here was a perfect monopoly.

Going on.... When we finally arrived at Mytkyina, there was no jetty! There were a few planks, spanning some rocks, that pointed to the shore, but constant use by heavily-loaded cargo carriers had sagged the planks. All who walked to the shore got their feet wet in the water of the Irrawaddy river. I did not want to do that, as it would ruin my shoes; going barefoot was out of the question. As for asking someone to carry me over, I saw I was rather big (as a westerner), and I was afraid of being dropped. People laughed, but some were a bit angry with me, as they wanted to carry me, and I was trying to avoid talking to them. At last, I took off my shoes and went on the planks very slowly. My bags were not heavy, as I had deliberately come to S.E. Asia with a small bag. (Regardless of the size of your luggage, you will fill it up. So, why not have a small bag?) I dried my feet with my socks and went on.

Mytkyina is the most northern major town on the Burmese railway system. It was as far north as I could go. I would have liked to do more, but that part of Burma was "closed". Of course, that is the most interesting part of the country. Remember, Burma is a very "long" country, covering many climate zones, peoples, and other interesting things to see. For those who want to do the "northern loop" when traveling around Burma, it is an essential place to pass through--there is no other way, unless you want to re-trace your way back down the river. Infrastructure is extremely basic, and options are rather few. However, I had the feeling that, in a brief period of historical time, Mytkyina would change radically, becoming a stopping point for one of the major arteries coming out of Kunming. Now, it was sleepy, oh so run-down!, and shrouded in the darkness of a winter night in Burma: that meant it was cool.

The first priority was to get a train ticket down to Mandalay, about one day's journey to the south. There was nowhere I saw to buy a ticket, and I had no idea of how to navigate the bureaucracy. Wait for this person; come back later; return tomorrow. However, one of the officials, who spoke English, came up to me. He had been put on the job, as he knew it well, and did it well. In the night time, many of the railway workers had flashlights, which they only turned on for brief flashes, such as to see the time, or identify someone. It made me think of fireflies courting each other reluctantly. Since he spoke English I was relieved, and agreed to come back early the next morning. I wandered the streets in the now-familiar ritual of lost and hopeless drifting, trying half-heartedly to get supper, and not really liking the choices. There was a Kashmir-cuisine restaurant along the main neon-light drag, so I went in, and ate. The hotel was soul-less. Double-glazed windows, heavy false-velvet curtains, "rubberized" curtains (there is a giveaway, there), ancient cigarette-

butt burn marks on the carpet which had been swept countless times, a bath-tub with faulty plumbing, an air conditioner, dim lights, the feeling of being in a place that had nothing to do with the outside world, or even being a part of it. I have spent a lot of time in such rooms, in public toilets, in bus station waiting rooms, and should write a review of them all for future road travelers. The air was still, and when I turned off the light, I became "frozen" in a kind of eternity.... I thought about the coming journey. Only hours later, my alarm rang and I lit the candle. The whole hotel was asleep, and not one light burned. I wandered down the passageway and down the stairs, down to the reception desk, like a lost Florence Nightingale in a new ward. Nobody stirred. The clocks, from five different global times, clicked and told the wrong time. After a few minutes I woke up the night watchman, and he let me out, as so many of his kind had done, and thought me crazy: it was 4:00 a.m.!

Another day, another journey, another pre-dawn patrol. I walked cautiously down the street I had only seen for the first time six hours ago--also when it was dark--and turned at a certain place. The early shift workers were going somewhere (who cares where?) on their bicycles, and a few shadowy dogs looked at me; I felt nervous. I walked, or rather felt my way down the tracks to the end of the station platform, got on, and entered another darkened world that was rapidly filling up with people--hundreds and hundreds of them! It was still the utter dark of night, and the crowds for the train to Mandalay were gathering. I went in nervousness to the office appointed the night before, but there was no one I knew there. After an unmeasured period of time, someone helped me. The friend of last night was nowhere to be seen. Around me, the glow-worms flashed more rapidly. I followed the new man to another side of the station and saw the ticket room, and almost a thousand people waiting to buy a ticket. My helper spoke to the man behind the bars, got sent somewhere, then back, then on, then back again, and got the ticket. Let me tell all future travelers through Mytkyina: if you want to move on, and out, you need a helper; I had two. I retrieved my passport and then the ticket. At this time, the helper from the previous night showed up. I think I had not been good to him, but I had been afraid of spending another 24 hours in Mytkyina trying to get a ticket out. How ephemerally vital are tickets! He showed me to the seat, encouraged me, and showed me another kind face, another beautiful heart of the Burmese people. I told him, in no uncertain terms, to expect a total change in the life of the railway station in about five or ten years, as trains passing through from Kunming on their way to Mandalay and then Rangoon would make the place busier. Several minutes later, I left Mytkyina in great relief.

Like the Irrawaddy river, the Burmese rail system is mostly a north-south affair. It is a narrow-gauge system, travels slowly, stops at every chance (to the delight of countryside vendors), is very run-down, hot, almost obsolete yet running--and staffed by some of the kindest conductors and service workers I have seen. There were no beds (I think they had all been taken--if there were any), the seats were hard, and I grew tired of staring at my feet. How would I pass the night? The countryside swayed past us at an excessively leisurely pace, the forest reaching right up to the train itself. Sometimes the forest was gashed open, where a fire had passed through; the teak trees grew out of ashes and a few weeds that had somehow escaped. The people of S.E. Asia often let fires burn each year to keep the low-level vegetation under control. At first, there were not many rice

fields to be seen in this part of the country--mostly forest and the occasional small village. The sun was up, climbed higher, made us all hot, went down, and disappeared. The vendors sold the now-familiar deep-fried spring rolls, cut into pieces with old scissors and covered with red-pepper sauce. Outside, were steamed rice snacks, with the rice in six-inch bamboo tubes. Other vendors sold fruit, cold noodles and their condiment in small and tautly-inflated plastic bags, betel nuts (yuk!), chicken joints all roasted, and soft drinks. My seat was protected for me when I went to the toilet, which was a lot. I was bored. As I had done on the boat earlier, I looked down the slop-hole at the railway line flashing past below. The wooden railway sleepers passed by, too fast to be seen clearly. I let the urine fall through the hole, staring closely at the ground. Due to some "stroboscopic effect", the falling drops of urine were "slowed down" and could be seen as individual, round, yellow drops, slowly passing through the hole. It was mesmerizing. I cannot remember if I spoke to anyone, as I have gone on so many trains. One of these scenarios emerges: first, nothing is said; sometimes the usual questions are asked, which lead to a dead-end; or, the talk is fruitful and goes on for a long time. It grew dark; I should have felt the press of bodies, the sticky dampness of sweat, the cocooned entrapment of the moment, but I was too far gone in thoughts a thousand miles away.

The miracle happened. One of the conductors told me to get off the train at the next station, which I did. We walked up the platform, already filled with the surge and eddy of people riding changing places with people waiting for a ride, and got on the train again. There was a blue-cloth deck chair! It was placed crossways, between two carriage doors, in an otherwise crowded "hard-seat" carriage. The conductor locked my bag to the rack, gave me a blue neck-pillow, and let me be. For Burma, this was the height of luxury and of kindness. I wish to say very plainly that the Burmese were an extremely kind and polite society to me. Yes, not everything was perfect, but they were good to me. I was tired, but happy to be here. The night continued, my water-bottle fell over and rolled around, unseen stations came and went, and the windows, all opened, let slightly cooler air wash up and down the carriage. It was very noisy: the couplings had no padding, the iron wheels clanked and clicked over the tracks for hour after hour, people's feet brushed lightly over my legs as they stepped over me in the darkness. The door before me was wide open--anyone could have jumped or fallen off the train in the night--and nobody seemed to mind. Perhaps the common-sense of self-preservation makes people more rational than they are in other places. Still, to be a young parent with a young child would have been a trying experience on this train. I was so happy that people were being kind to me like this. Was it because this trip, up and down the upper part of Burma, was the fulfillment of a dream that had been in my heart for several years? I think so. On every map of China, there was Burma (Mian Dian) in the lower-left part of the map; every time I looked at it, the blue line of the Irrawaddy and the red line of the train line made me "hungry" to go there. So, here it was at last. "A dream fulfilled is a tree of life"--and this tree was growing up quickly and well, all in the space of about one week. That night was a dream where I did not fall asleep, and a vigil in which what I saw were shadowy, dream-like visions... all interspersed with the bright, solitary florescent lights of obscure railway stations, and the noise of the carriages, like high-speed steel glaciers passing through the geologic ages of a single night.

I never really slept, so I never really awoke. I opened my eyes and got up out of the chair to look at the countryside. At that exact moment, the train passed by one of Burma's very famous "stupas", and there it was, clearly visible from the deck chair, looking out of the open door. This "stupa"--I think it was in Saigang, not too far from Mandalay--must have been three hundred feet high, was painted a bright white, and could be seen for miles. Anyway, the rest of the journey took a long time, as the train went very slowly the last twenty miles into Mandalay. I found a guest house, and hid myself in it, as I was afraid of bumping into Cherry in the street.

All this, from the beginning in Rangoon until now, had taken about one week. Travel in Burma is not easy, and the infrastructure is constantly straining under the pressures of a partial international boycott. How things run is a bit of a miracle. The burden of merely "existing" in hot places like Burma, and perhaps India too, is really hard, and it takes careful planning to get through a day's goals, let alone the day itself. I can't even remember what I did in Mandalay that day, save buy snack supplies in the best grocery store in the city. I did this because running around cheaper stores was a drain. I just wanted to walk into the store with products that were guaranteed clean and safe, put down the money, and walk out. Period. I also asked the hotel to get the next boat ticket, this time down river, to Pagan. Lest any of you wonder why I did not spend more time in Mandalay, doing the "usual" tourist things there (that is, viewing temples and "stupas", taking day trips to the cluster of nearby satellite cities, and climbing the hill overlooking the city), my answer is that I wasn't interested. I don't like walking about in my bare feet, as I afraid of the parasites; the sights do not really catch my attention--not even the big bell of Mingun. It is the land I like, land seen at a glance. As for the people, what would I say to them? I also could not rest as I had that harried feeling, that restlessness which always drove me on.

The next day, I got on the boat, and spent most of that time going down river to Pagan. There is no doubt that the "sweet" part of the river, from a jaded traveler's point of view, was the Mandalay to Bhamo section. I like it because there just were no other foreigners to look at (save the two French men), the land was sleepy and quiet, and everything was unique. The part going down to Pagan is famous for all the "stupas" and other Buddhist monuments one can see from the boat. However, there were not as many as I had expected there to be. I ate the same food, read some book, and minded my own business. People in foreign countries tend to cluster into "like-minded" groups, and those who do not "fit in" are often automatically excluded. This mechanism of society is still working when in a foreign country, and perhaps more so than when in the home country. It can be useful when one wants to be alone, but is tragic when one wants help. There seemed to be a fair number of tourists from Europe. Were the Americans boycotting, or afraid to come? I must admit, it took me a long time to get up the courage before coming, and I am glad I did.

At the jetty in Pagan, there was the usual crowd of taxi drivers trying to persuade the tourists to take their vehicle, and go to their recommended hotel. Some had horse-carts, and others had bicycles with mini-sidecars attached to the right side. I wanted a hotel that was far away from the "tourist hub", and the driver often asked me to go to "another" hotel. I stuffed five dollars in his hand and said, "Just go!", and he shut up quickly. The hotel, and a few others, were some distance away from the jetty, but they were quiet, and clean.

The most important factors in choosing a hotel were security (a good lock on the door and windows), a decent shower, peace and quiet to be left alone, and extra services such as "ticket-buying" (in many of the "developing" countries, having someone else do the paperwork for you is a major help in staying peaceful and sane).

Two things I forgot to mention: the "area fee", and about small bills. The Burmese tourist authorities have treated the Pagan area as a "mini-country", in that every person who arrives there must buy a pass, a "visa" as it were, to get around and see the ancient sites. I think it was ten dollars. There were no exemptions, and it had to be paid in dollars. Concerning dollars, I found that it was very useful to have a large bundle of crisp, new U.S. dollars to use when traveling. Many tickets had to be paid in dollars, taxi fares were expedited with a few dollar bills, and so on. Of course, much of the usual financial commerce that a tourist does can be done with the local "kyats", but there were times when dollars were needed. If you go, bring lots and lots of 1's, and 5's, and 10's, and 20's. No change is given, so have lots of small bills. I found that each type of bill was useful for a certain range of tasks. The tourist with lots of money is not "king", but the tourist with sufficient small bills. Old bills were avoided as if they were fake money.

Most people go to Pagan to see the thousands and thousands of old "stupas" on the dry plain. I never saw them. Instead, I treated the night at Pagan (or rather, the village outside the "tourist part" of Pagan) as a rest-stop. I read, ate various types of ethnic food, and slept. The hotel staff were astonished. I just wanted to finish my "travel loop" (I like to travel in "loops" and circles over a given country, so as to avoid having to retrace my steps); I wanted to return to Rangoon and fly back to Bangkok. Looking at the bookstores, and making judgments about the menus in the restaurants, I could see that many of the tourists who were coming to Burma were from Europe, especially the Scandinavian countries, France, and Germany. I ate many papayas and melons, and drank "smoothies" made from them. In the past, I used to criticize my students for not eating the local food, and for eating their own country's food when away from home, but I was doing it too! So, I will shut up, here. The narrow roadway from the hotel to the restaurants was in darkness, there being few lights, and the restaurants themselves were subdued. Perhaps this was the result of taking lodgings in the quiet part of the tourist zone: but, this was what I wanted. Diners eyed each other from a distance. The food was cold, and calmed you down, and that was enough. Not far away, the few businesses that offered services like basic travel goods, wood-carvings, body massage, and the like began; not far from the hotels complexes themselves, the poverty appeared in gradations, getting stronger and stronger. You may wonder why I didn't go to the ruins: it was like going to Xi'An and not seeing the Terracotta Soldiers (Bing Ma Yong). I just was not interested, and didn't want to do it because everyone else was doing it. However, the Burmese people were helpful in that they did not force views on you as to what you should do, or should see.

The next morning, I took a bus to Pyay, which like most of the other trips in Burma lasted the day. The roads are very narrow, in deference to their "ancestors" in the English countryside, and driving through Burma is like passing along the lanes of a huge plantation, or some English squire's country holdings. Of course, everything is "tropical". The road infrastructure was being pounded to pieces, and there seemed to be little money to keep things going and operational.

However, there was some development aid from other countries in progress. This was usually in the form of funding for bridges and reforestation projects. A number of countries have contributed to the needs of the "developing" world, but in East Asia, the one that stands out is Japan. I saw many projects that were funded by them, over the course of my travels. We passed through an oil field, but much of the infrastructure was really run-down. Alongside the road were many palm trees. Some had ladders tied to the trunks so that the workers might go up easily, and at the top where the branches met the tip of the trunk, there were small rubber buckets. Was it palm wine, or palm oil? Some fields had hundreds of these palm trees in rows; otherwise, they grew along the boundaries between fields. The earth was a rich red, and with rain, the land seemed reasonably fertile. Of course, this was towards the end of the dry season, and everything appeared tired out and covered in reddish dust. However, for traveling it was good. We made reasonable progress that day, stopping at another point-and-eat lunch place, filled with spicy, adventurous food.

Pyay was yet another road stop (although there is a famous temple there, and it is on the Irrawaddy river). If I come back to Burma, I would like to take the boat up river from Rangoon to Pagan. The next day, I continued on to Rangoon, to await the flight out of Burma.

The highlight of those two days in Rangoon was the guest house, the "Motherland Inn 2", somewhere on the eastern side of the city. The staff there were really friendly, the place was cheap, the food was all right, and the rooms comfortable. I would certainly want to go there the next time. However, what really made this place stand out was the sapphires they sold. Burma is famous around the world for its rubies and other gem stones, and the markets are full of places to buy them; however, the gems are outrageously expensive, and they are rather small. I think jewels are grossly over-rated as a luxury worth having. They were sometimes good to look at, but to buy them was a whole different question. The "Motherland Inn 2" solved this problem, by selling three-carat sapphires (about the size of a large pea) for three dollars each! The stones were very flawed, and had "cloudy" marks within them, or else were scratched. I bought one, and hope to get more the next time. After all, if someone looks at a three-carat sapphire swinging from your girlfriend's pendant ear-rings, from ten feet away, they will not know the finer differences. Why spend ten thousand dollars (each) for the jeweler's version?

I spent the remaining time wandering around Rangoon to buy some items for home, which could not be found there--things such as temple bells (think of Kipling, here), a field hoe for digging, and other hardware for my new house and garden. Rangoon is hot, crowded, and very tiring to walk about in: markets, markets everywhere, and nowhere to rest. It was better to stay in the guest house. I visited the "Shwe Dagon Pagoda", which is the ultimate Buddhist temple to visit in Burma; a college student hired himself as my guide, and he took me around the temple, and a park.

The last day, I flew back to Bangkok, in Thailand. By this time, I was tired of Burma, and "things Burmese". However, this trip was only the beginning, and I feel sure that I would like to go back again--go up the river to Pagan, to explore the Shan State area in the east, and maybe to go down the long, thin part of the country in the south-east. Of course, the best part (I feel it is the best) is closed, and that is the far north. I will have to dream.

Fanny, you have inspired me throughout to write this account. I dedicate it to you, dear sister. I hope others will visit Burma!