

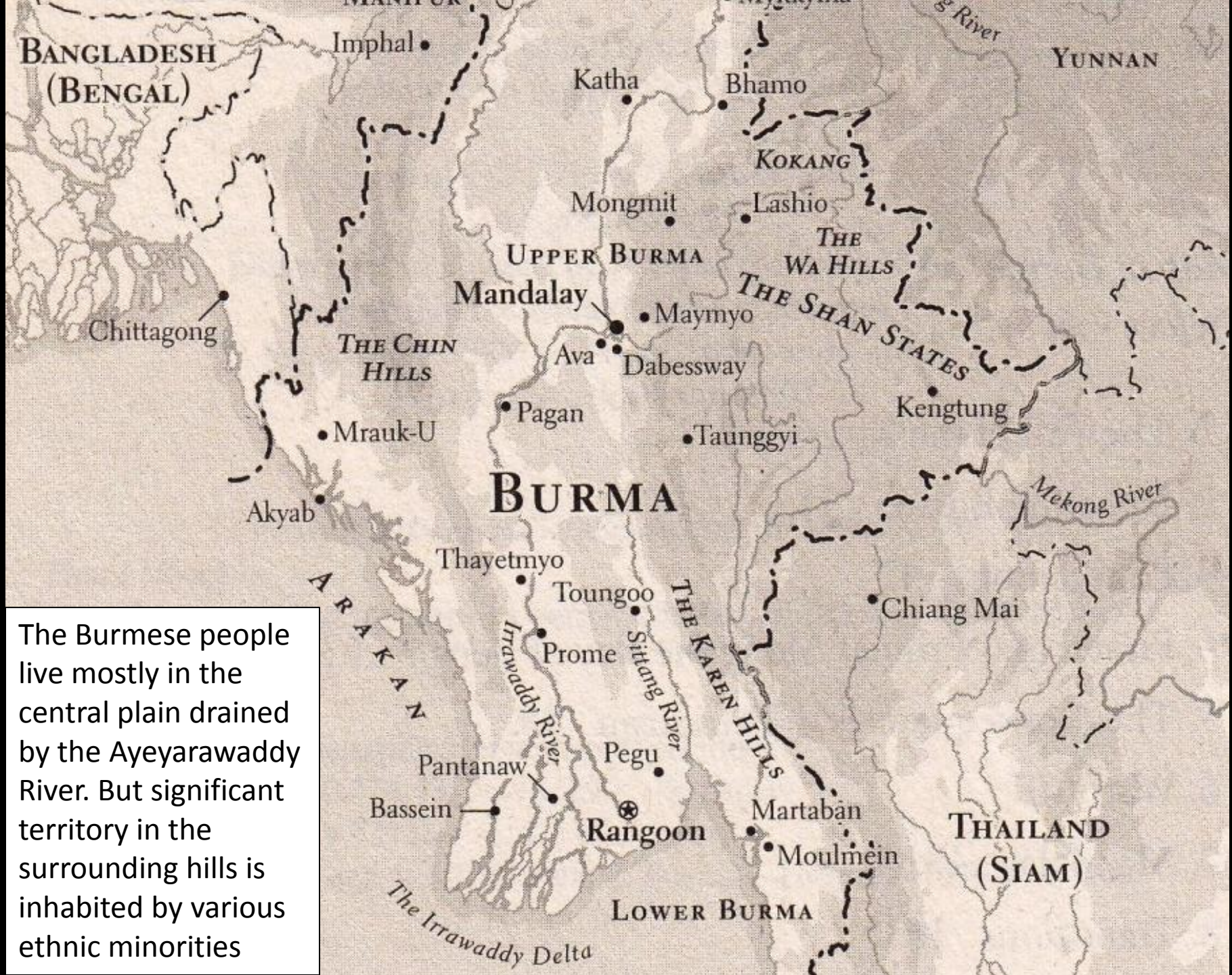
A 2012 Tour of Burma on the Eve of a New Era

**Rory Van Tuyl
Cynthia Johnson
June, 2012**





Myanmar – formerly Burma – is the largest country in continental southeast Asia.



The Burmese people live mostly in the central plain drained by the Ayeyarawaddy River. But significant territory in the surrounding hills is inhabited by various ethnic minorities

THE RIVER OF LOST FOOTSTEPS

A PERSONAL HISTORY OF BURMA

WITH A NEW AFTERWORD ON RECENT EVENTS

"A revelation . . . Represents by far the best introduction yet available to the modern history of Burma. Sad and poignant, intelligent and thought-provoking, *The River of Lost Footsteps* is a wonderfully well written narrative." —WILLIAM DALRYMPLE

THANT MYINT-U



I highly recommend this book by Thant Myint-U for those wanting to learn about the history of Burma.



Inside Burma and Bangkok: A Custom Journey

June 10 - June 24, 2012

Our custom journey was arranged by Asia Transpacific Journeys of Boulder, CO. They did an excellent job, and I highly recommend them.



We visited only the “Top 3” tourist destinations: Yangon, Bagan, and Inle Lake

Kyaw Moe Thu ... “Joel”

Our guide and teacher in Burma was Kyaw Moe Thu (he goes by the name of “Joel”). A black belt in Karate, he dropped out of law school many years ago to pursue the tour guide business.



He knows everything there is to know about the country and is anxious to share it in detail. He is especially knowledgeable about Theravada Buddhism.



This is his perhaps his proudest picture, standing beside “The Lady” Aung San Suu Kyi. He and most Burmese are ardent supporters of her and her party. They have high hopes for a better future under democratic rule..





Welcome to Yangon! Cars are relatively few here. Notice that this car is right hand drive despite the fact the roads are right had travel. This is because they buy used domestic cars from Japan.



Our first stop was the fabulous Shwedagon Temple, the epicenter of the conservative brand of Buddhism practiced by Burmese: Theravada Buddhism. This is the brand practiced in southern countries. Mahayana is the type followed in places like China, Tibet and Japan.



With its gilded stupa topped with precious jewels, the largest ring-able bell in the world, and lots and lots of Buddhas. Tradition has it that actual hairs from the head of the Buddha are housed in a cave beneath the stupa. The stupa itself is covered in actual gold leaf.



This is a place used by many people, such as this family



These worshippers



And these Monks



And these folks
relaxing beneath the
sacred Banyan Tree.

Yangon has a number of British Colonial buildings, all of them standing empty today



Government offices have moved to the new capital city, built at great expense and for reasons no one seems to understand. Conspiracy theories abound.





This magnificent colonial secretariat building is being eyed by an American investor as a possible luxury hotel



Street life is typical, with lots of great-looking food



And ad-hoc restaurants

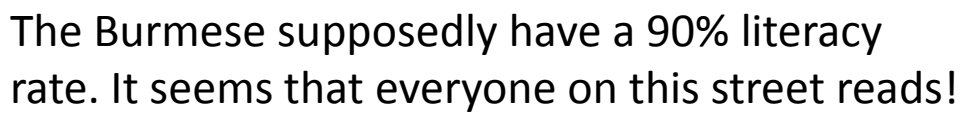



Many exotic fruits for sale



And (as in India) the Betel Nut chaw. Red spit can be spotted everywhere on the streets. But otherwise, it's a very clean city.







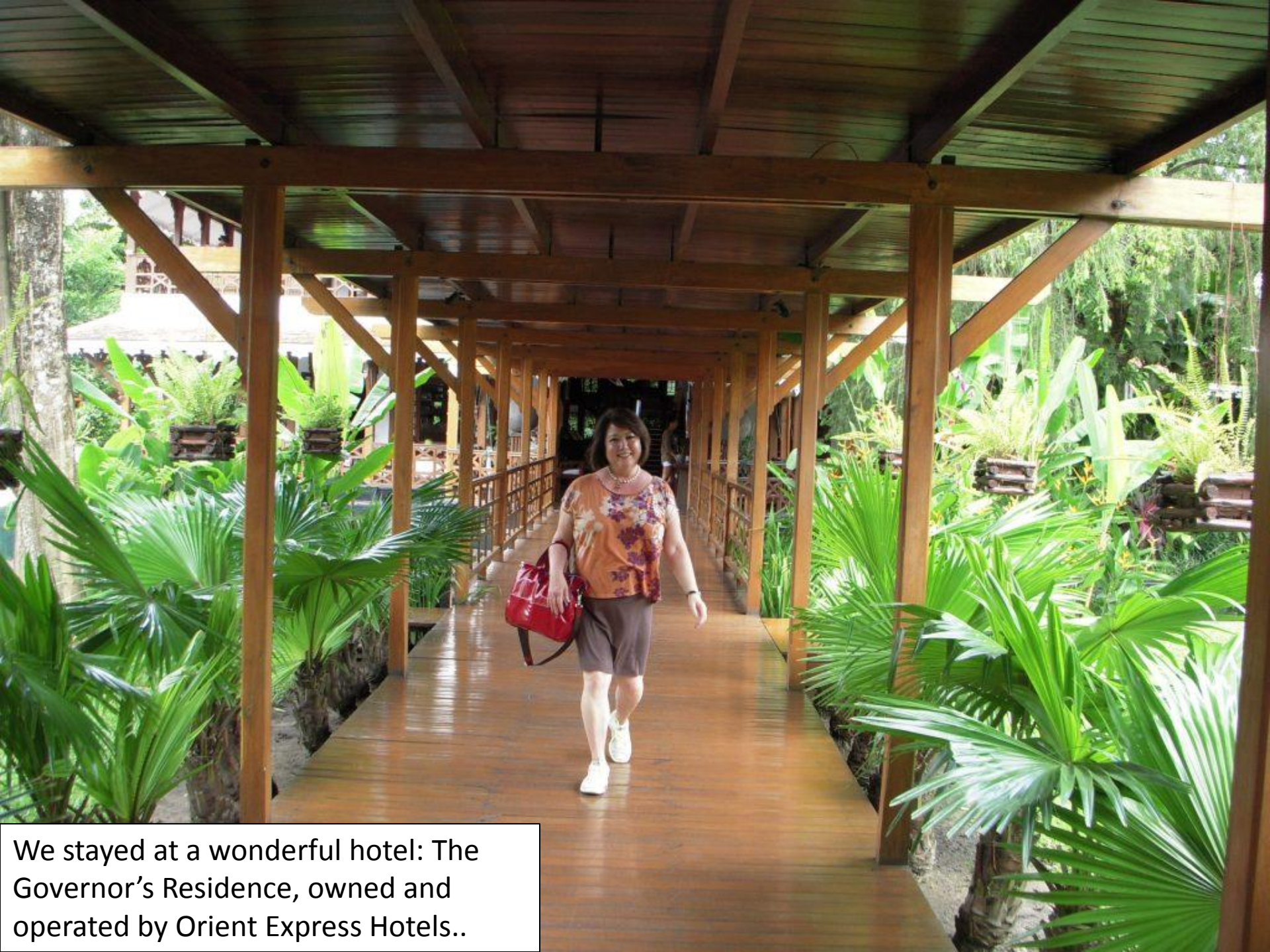
Including young people



And monks



And if you buy a ratty used book, this sidewalk bookbinder will fix it for you.



We stayed at a wonderful hotel: The Governor's Residence, owned and operated by Orient Express Hotels..



With lovely grounds...

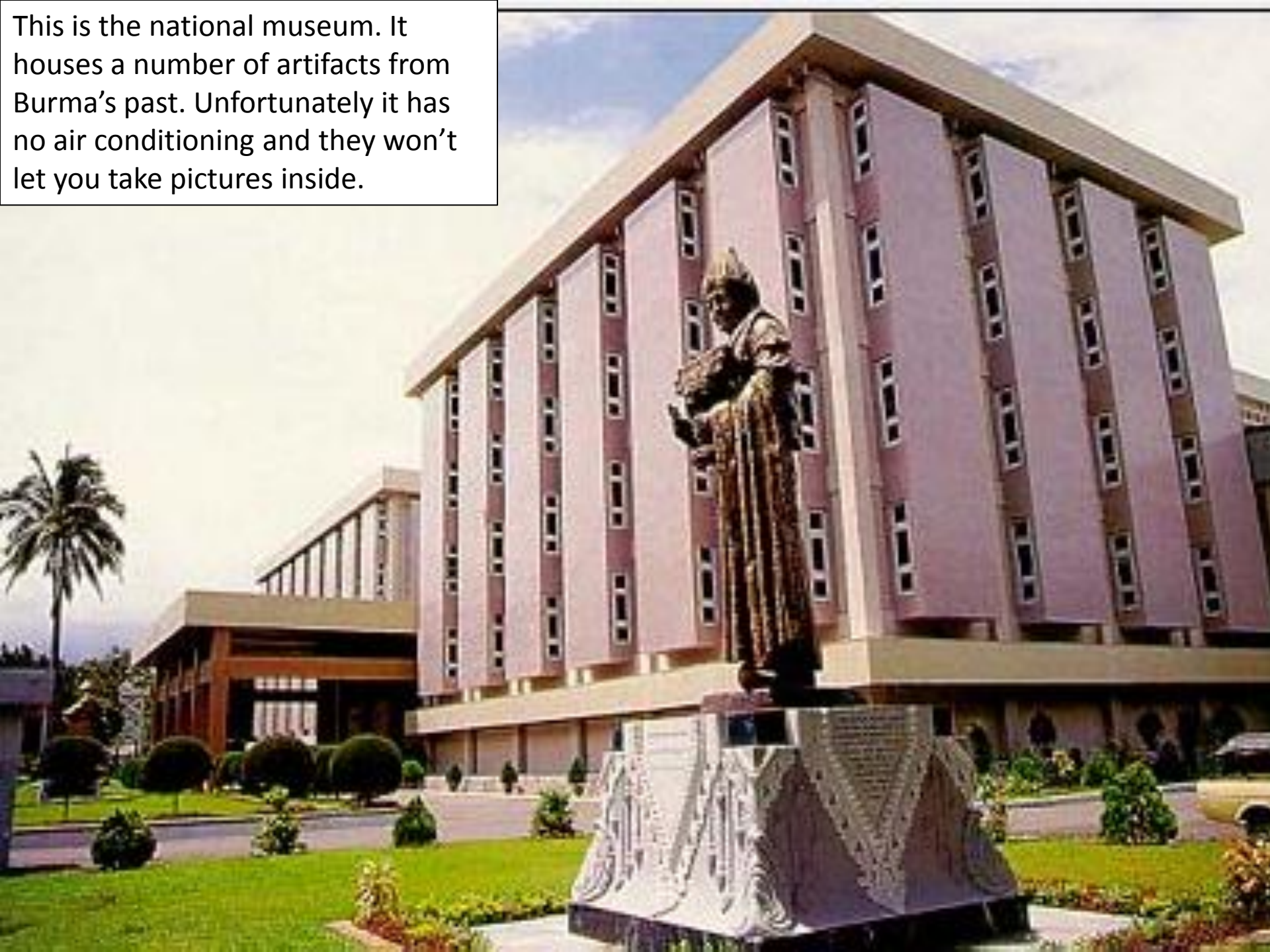


A stunning pool and verandah...



And a fine restaurant

This is the national museum. It houses a number of artifacts from Burma's past. Unfortunately it has no air conditioning and they won't let you take pictures inside.



But I found this photo online. This is one of maybe a dozen or so ornate thrones we saw in the museum. They were used by Burmese royalty in the 17th – 19th centuries.



A banner for the Gitameit Music Center. On the left is a logo with a piano keyboard, a blue circle with a white dot, and a red circle with a white dot. To the right of the logo, the text 'Yangon, Myanmar' is written in a small font. Below that, 'GITAMEIT' is written in large, bold, red letters. To the right of 'GITAMEIT' is 'MUSIC CENTER' in a smaller, black, sans-serif font. Further right is a stylized logo of five circles of increasing size. To the right of that logo is the text 'Gitameit Ho'. Below the main text, there is a 'SUBSCRIBE:' label, an RSS feed icon, the text 'RSS feed', a 'NEWSLETTER:' label, a text input field with the placeholder 'Enter your email address...', and a 'Subscribe' button.

Yangon, Myanmar

GITAMEIT

MUSIC CENTER

Gitameit Ho

SUBSCRIBE:  RSS feed

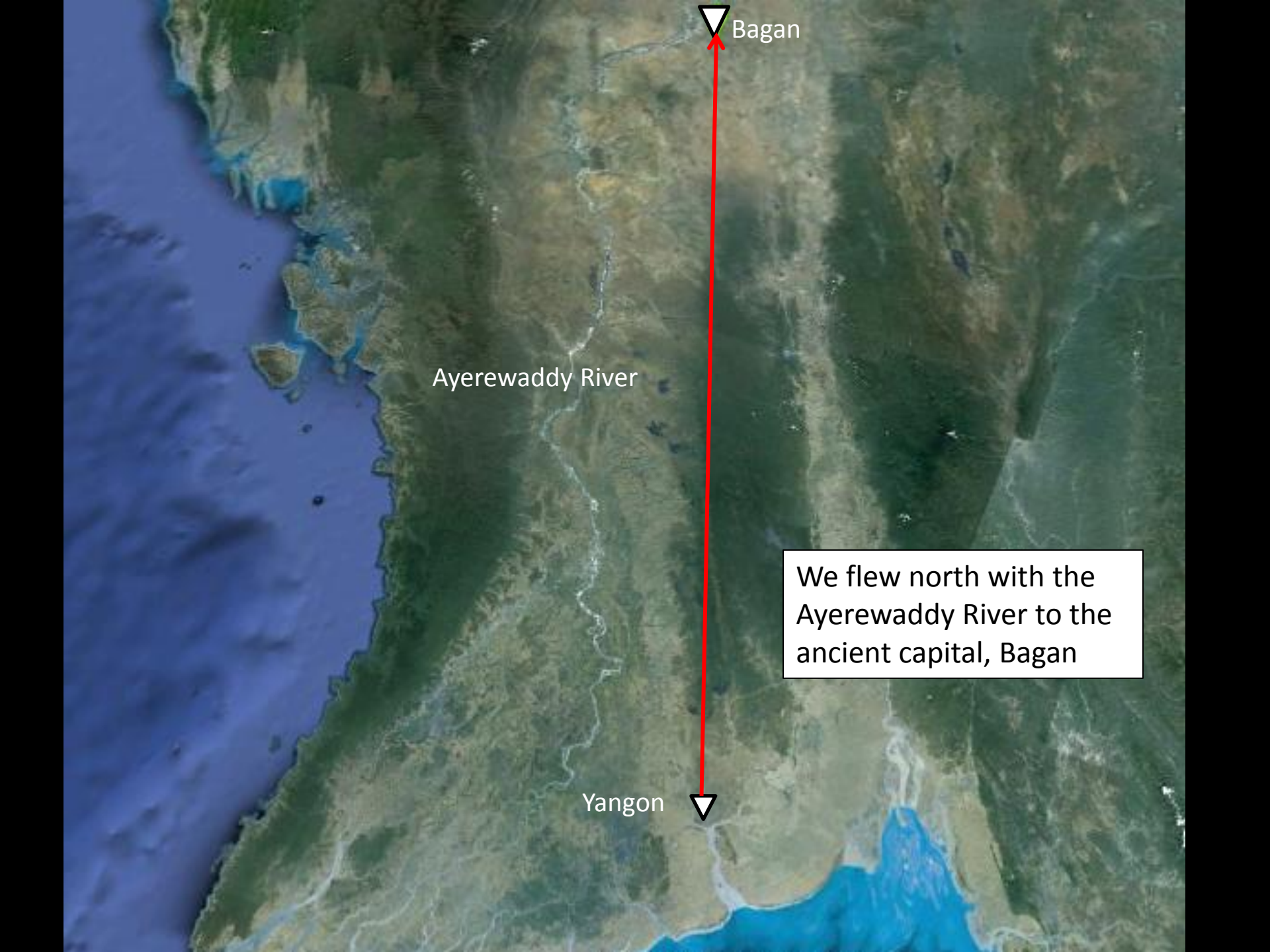
NEWSLETTER:



But one of the most interesting and uplifting sights we saw in Yangon was the Gitameit music center, a music school that acts as a conservatory and college for young Burmese kids. They are quite accomplished singers, and have travelled abroad to perform in the US and Europe. We got to hear them perform a piece in rehearsal... <http://youtu.be/mRFcY26Vskk>



After our introduction to Rangoon, it was time to head north to Bagan, the main tourist attraction in Burma. Here we go on an Air KBZ turboprop!



A satellite map of Myanmar showing the Ayerwaddy River flowing north from Yangon towards Bagan. A red line with arrowheads at both ends indicates a flight path. The river is labeled 'Ayerwaddy River'. The cities 'Yangon' and 'Bagan' are labeled with white downward-pointing arrowheads. A text box on the right contains the text: 'We flew north with the Ayerwaddy River to the ancient capital, Bagan'.

Bagan

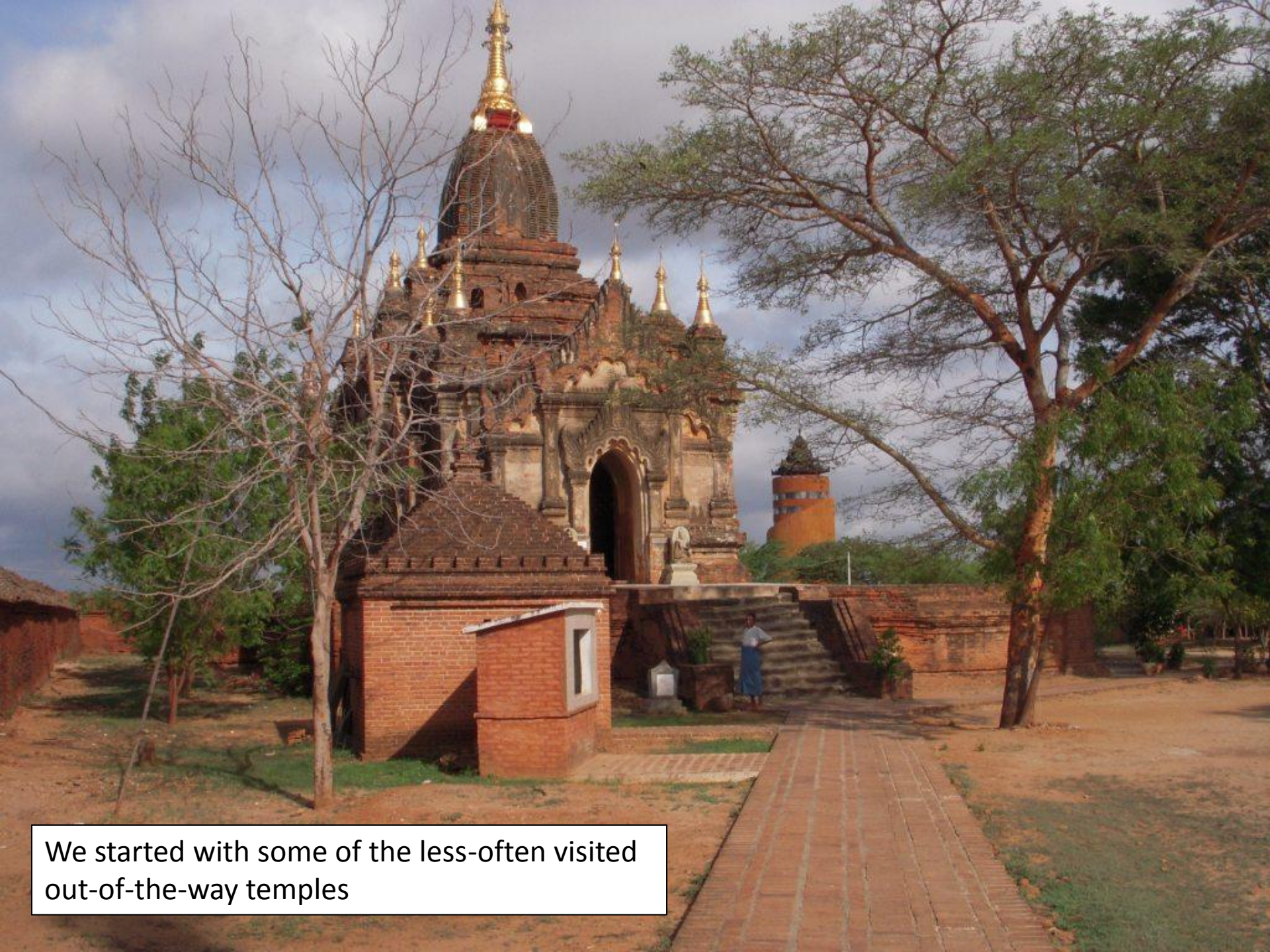
Ayerwaddy River

We flew north with the
Ayerwaddy River to the
ancient capital, Bagan

Yangon

Bagan is known for its profusion of Buddhist Temples, most built in the 11th – 14th centuries.





We started with some of the less-often visited out-of-the-way temples





These were not the largest temples, but they contained some of the best interior frescoes...



Joel described these to us in detail



These have been painstakingly cleaned and restored by modern archaeologists..



And decorate the ceilings as well as the walls...



The frescoes are in the Indian Tantric and Mahayana Buddhist style, which predates the modern belief system dominant in Burma: Theravada Buddhism





Also at Bagan is the “Rosetta Stone of Burma” called the Myazedi inscription. It contains four ancient languages, one on each face, enabling archaeologists to decipher some of the old writings inscribed in the temples.



Some of the larger temples still have exterior decorations from the old days



Such as these Terracotta plaques





And intricate stucco decorations





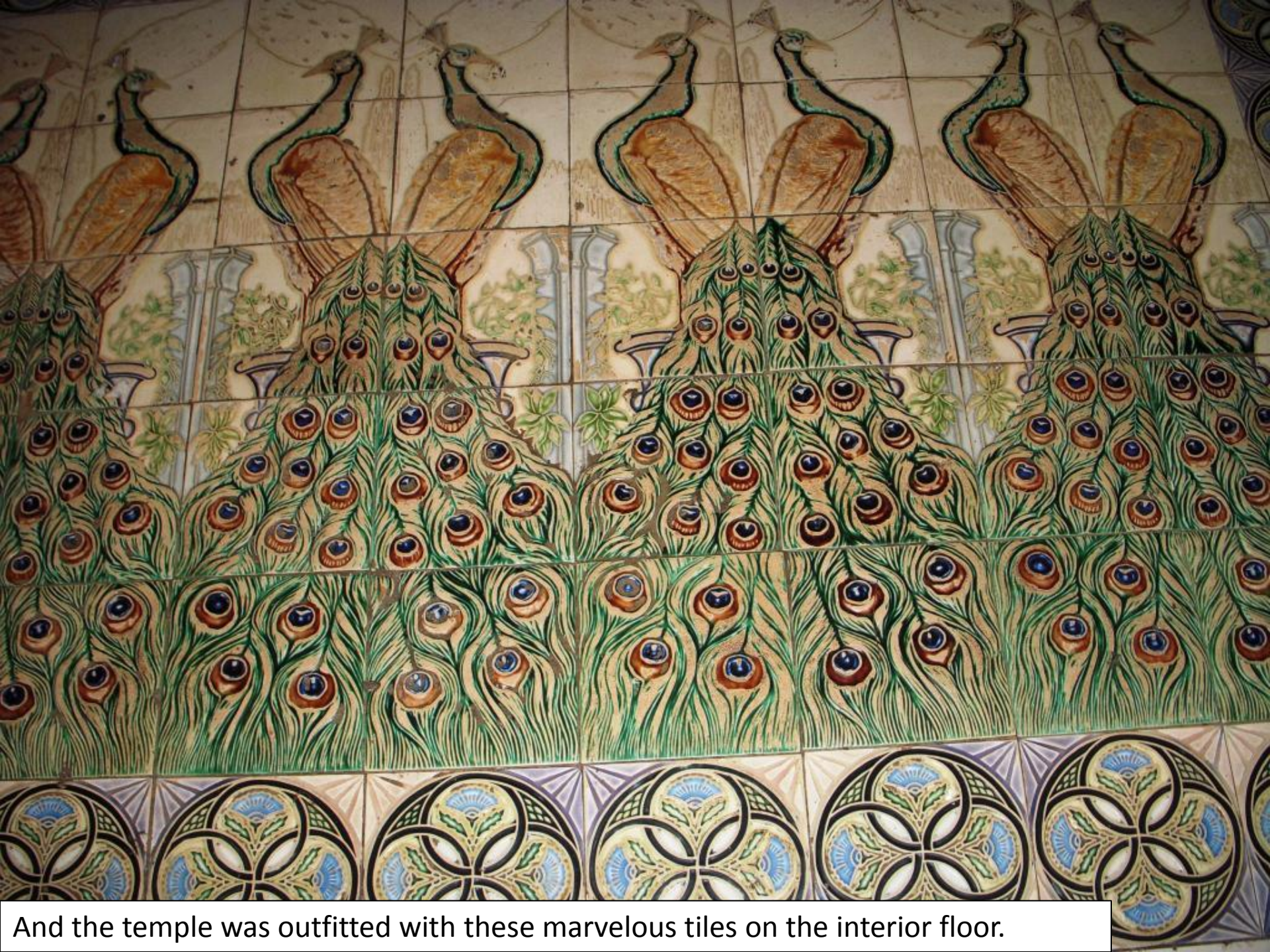
Along with corner stones carved from sandstone, such as this gargoyle-like figure.



The famous Ananda Temple was built in 1105AD and restored after a 1975 earthquake.



The stupa of the Ananda temple was gilded during the restoration



And the temple was outfitted with these marvelous tiles on the interior floor.



The Ananda and several other temples are home to some spectacular Buddhas...



Looming square-jawed Buddhas...



Giant reclining Buddhas



And long-eared Buddhas with Indian-like faces, such as this huge cleverly-designed statue.



When viewed from a distance, it appears with downcast gaze to be smiling



But from a closer angle, the gaze is more direct and the smile has disappeared.



Accompanying many of the Buddhas are Nats, a sort of Burmese Buddhist “Saint” or “Spirit”. Burmese people worship Nats as well as the Buddha.



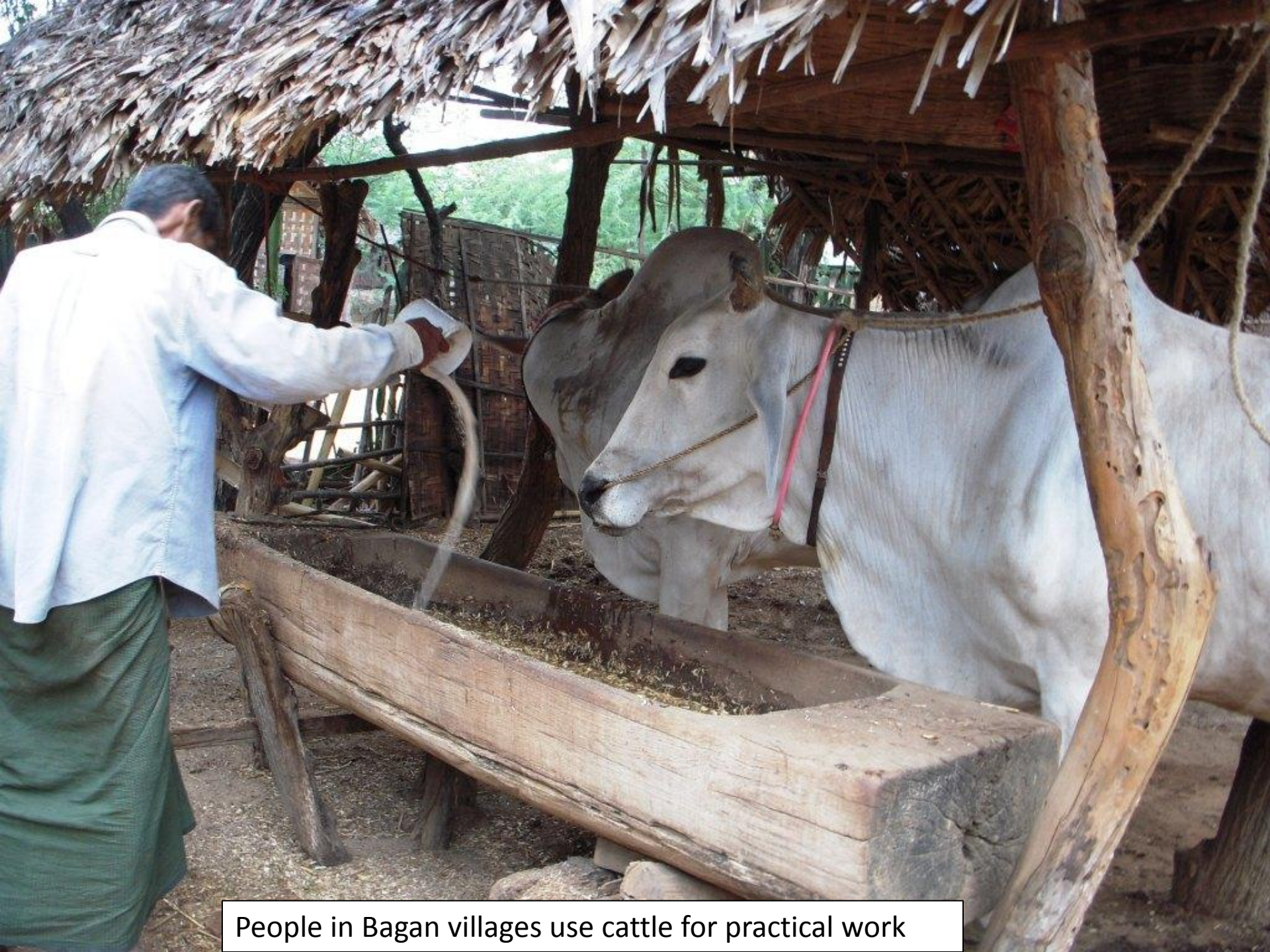
And these temples are actively used by worshipers today.



And by tourists who climb atop for a panoramic view







People in Bagan villages use cattle for practical work



Such as plowing fields



Or comfortable bullock-cart transport



But tourists must make do with horse carts



The village well has been nicely cased in concrete, but water is still drawn by the bucket



And carried on a woman's head



Baskets are used for dry goods



And groceries



Here is a group of schoolgirls on their way home (Remember, they have a 90% literacy rate)



But not all kids seemed to be in school on this day



And some were on a family outing to the temples in the early evening

C 500 mg ပါဝင်သော vicee ကို
ပျော် နှင့် လိမ္မော် အရသာလေးမျိုးဖြင့် ထုတ်လုပ်ထားသည်။



This teenage girl spends her day making woven wood picture frames and selling them to passing tourists

Lacquer



But the finest – and oldest – craft is based on the sap of the *toxicodendron vernicifluum*: Lacquer



From these crude materials come magnificent creations such as this



The process starts by preparing wood strips



Then assembling them to the desired shape



The wood strips are cemented together with lacquer and sculpted into the final shape desired, followed by lots and lots of wet sanding.



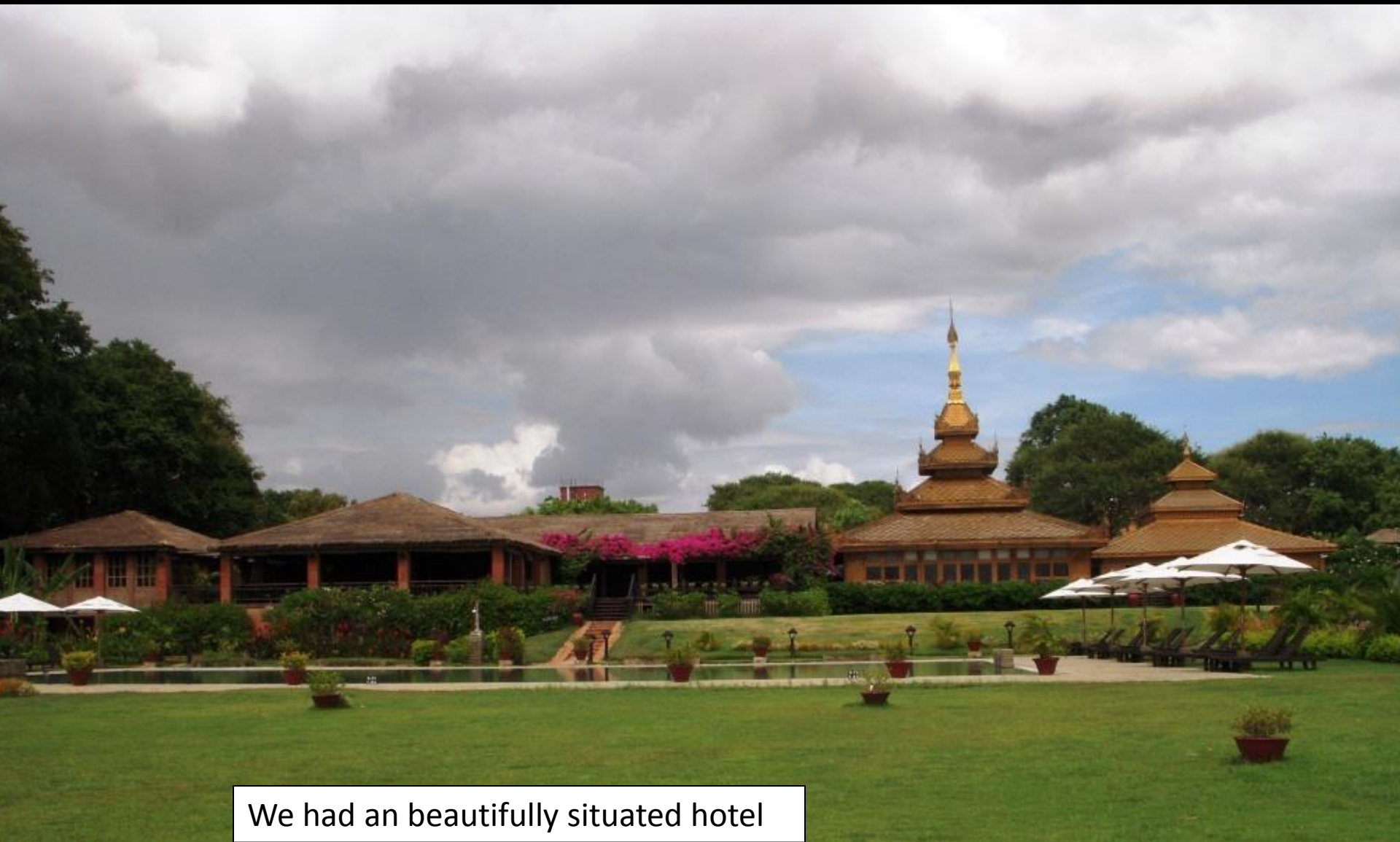
Then comes the real art: Inagio, the removal of layers to create intricate designs



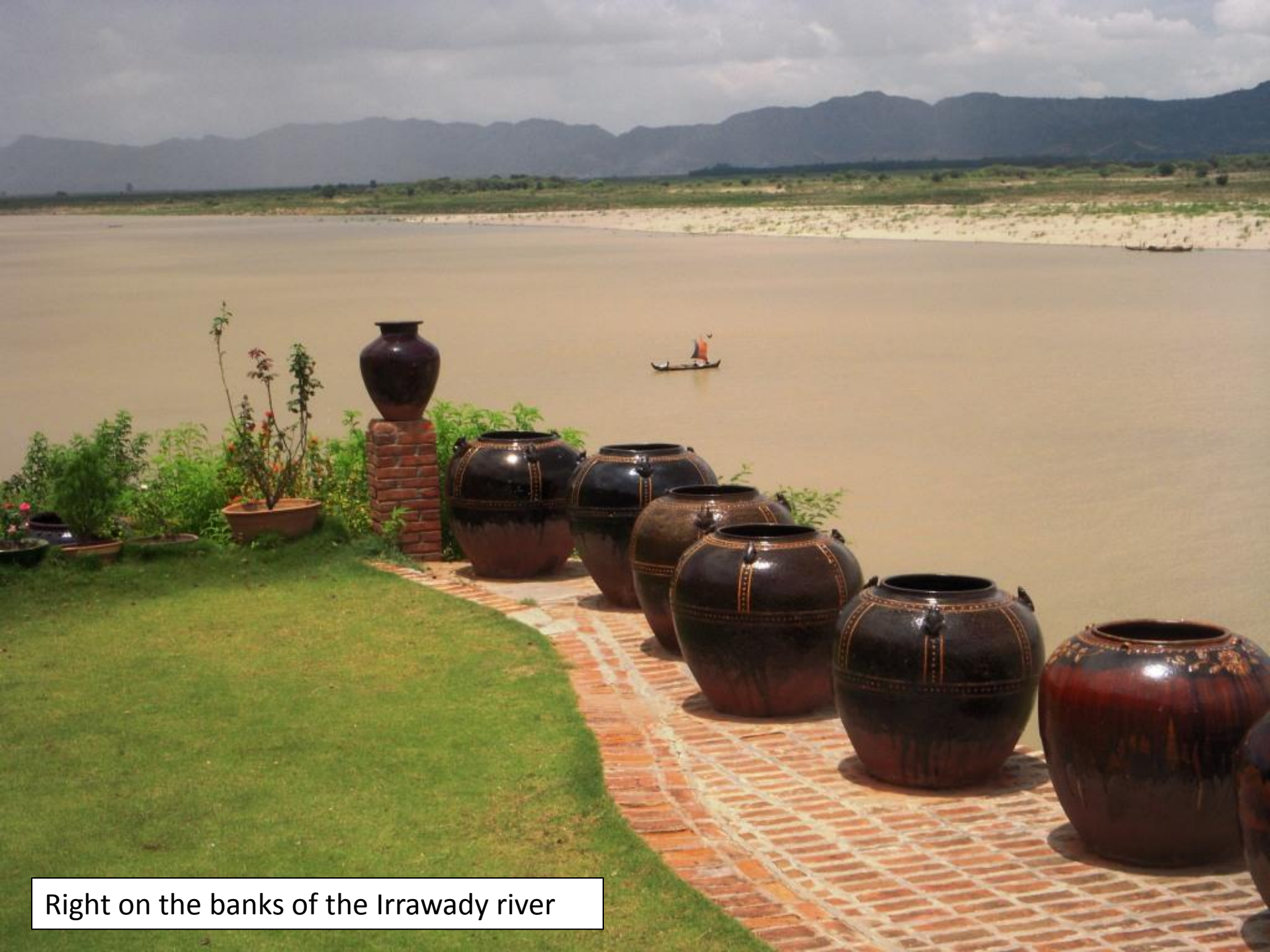
Then the final touches are applied



Voila: the final product!
Sadly, these cannot be legally
imported to the US at present.
Hopefully this will soon change.



We had an beautifully situated hotel



Right on the banks of the Irrawady river



As in most towns, the real action is to be found in the market place



This is a big-time Farmer's Market, with greens...



Chilis...



Lonnnnggg cucumbers



And the Catch of the Day displayed by enthusiastic fishwives



And the truly best-tasting Mangoes in all the world



Chicken parts with the requisite number of flies...



And not-so-cold fish



Here is a seamstress at work using a treadle sewing machine, just like the one my mom had when I was a young boy

And here is the cosmetics counter... **Thanaka** has been used as a cosmetic in Burma since at least the 14th century. This photo shows Thanaka wood (*Hesperethusa crenulata*) for sale in raw form as well as in convenient balls. It's most commonly applied to the cheeks of young women, but this old lady has tarted herself up with heavy Thanaka eye shadow.





After two busy days in Bagan, we bed down by the Irrawaddy before heading to the Shan Hills

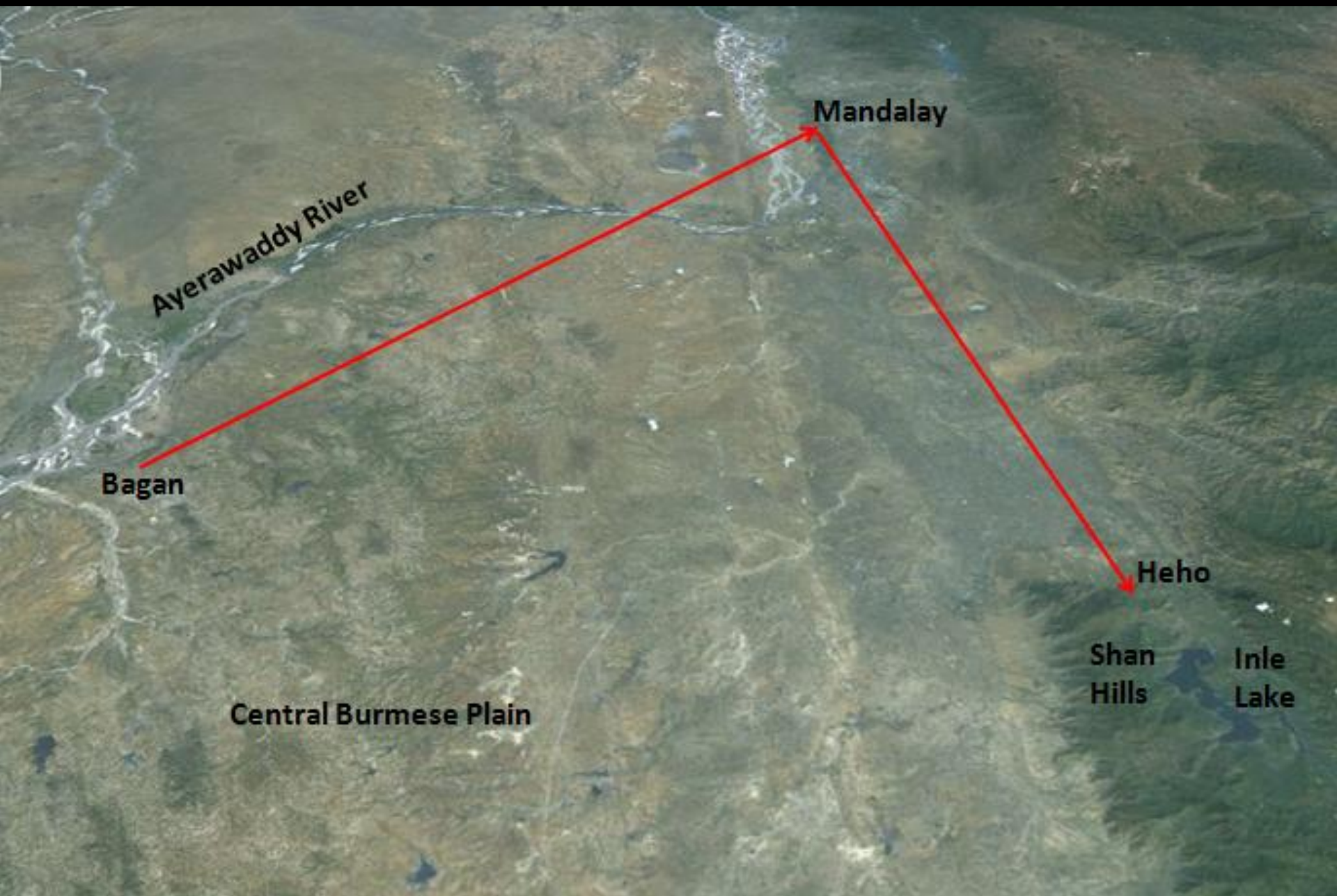
Inle Lake and the Shan Hills



Central Plain near Bagan



We left the flat intensively farmed plains of Bagan...



And flew via Mandalay to the Shan Hills to visit Inle Lake

The Shan Hills



The Shan Hills are cool, green and quilted with farms...



We drove from the airstrip at Heho to the village of Yawnghwe, then by boat onto Inle Lake



We got underway in our fast boat, headed down the canal to the open water of Inle Lake...
To see a YouTube video of Inle Lake click here... [http://youtu.be/ QU_HmBjrbA](http://youtu.be/QU_HmBjrbA)



Here we encountered the first of the Inle Lake fishermen. These guys have an amazing ability to perch on the bow of their boat and row with their feet. This guy performs a virtual ballet of multitasking: rowing, reeling in, de-hooking, coiling line, all while balanced on one foot!



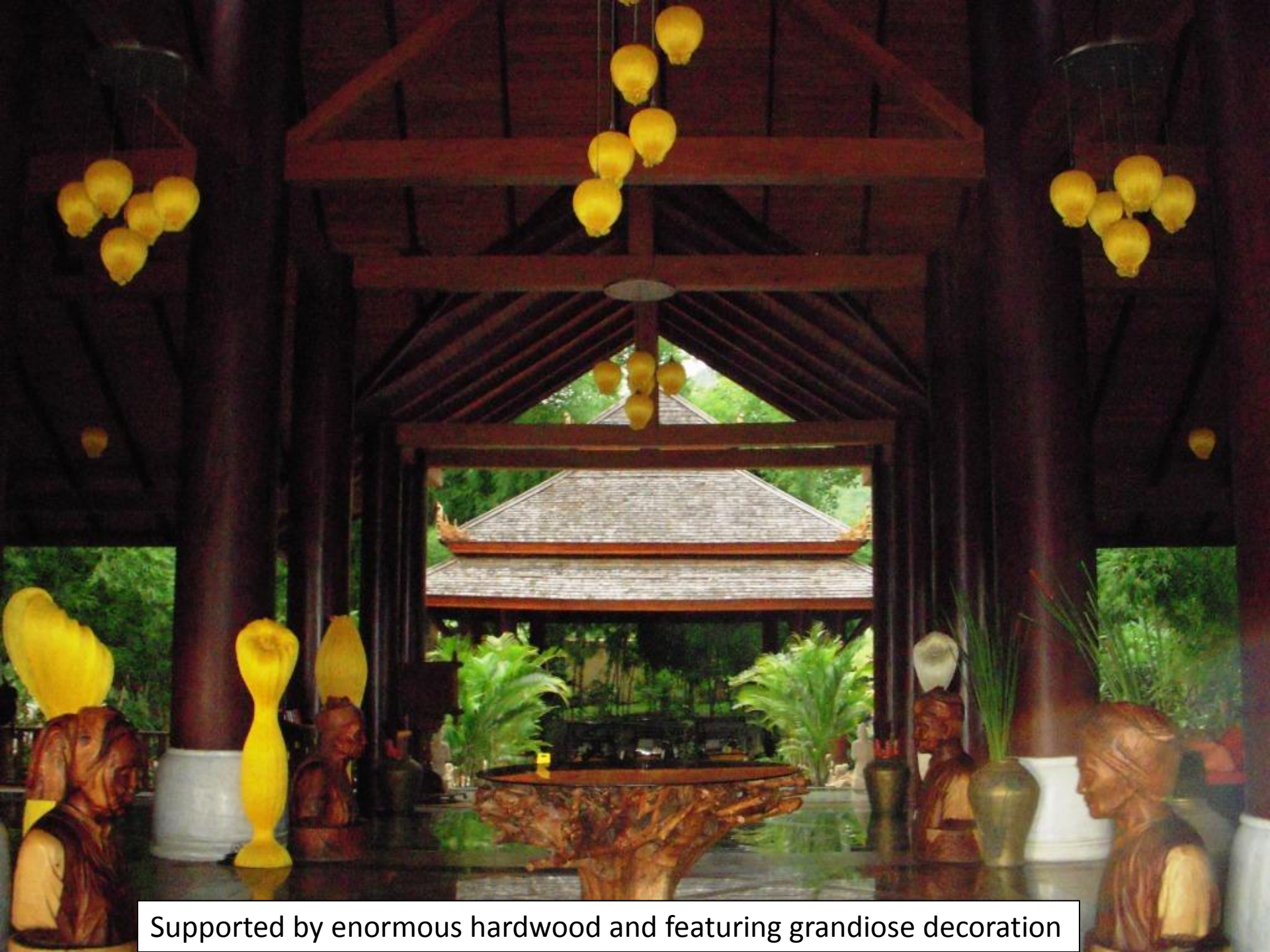
This guy as well...



Our hotel by the lake...The mysterious Aureum Palace.
We had expected it to be a modest accommodation. We were in for a surprise!



The lobby was a giant hardwood pavilion with polished stone floors



Supported by enormous hardwood and featuring grandiose decoration



We were welcomed with cool drinks



And shown to our room. This is probably the most elegant hotel room I have ever occupied.



A round wooden tub and a shower so large it doesn't need a door or curtain.



Aureum Palace Resort & Spa

WELCOME TO AUREUM 20.6.2012

➤ MR RORY VAN TUVL & PARTY

And here is the strange thing...kind of spooky. We were the ONLY guests!



These are the famous floating gardens of Inle Lake. Water hyacinth followed by row upon row of tomato vines.



The tomatoes go by boat to the dock



And find their way in to local markets right away



Our boatman demonstrated how you can actually walk on the substrate used for hydroponic farming



They gather this lake weed material for combination with water hyacinth to form the substrate layer in the hydroponic gardens



Next we visited a village with all the houses built on stilts



Even the Post Office was on stilts



Cheroots

The women roll white cheroots...





The men smoke 'em



Somebody in this village is a big-time orchid fancier. Beautiful plants were all over the place.





But here is the most important building in town: the Mill.



Here they extract threads from lotus



And spin silk



And dye it...



Then weave it into cloth using a human-powered flying-shuttle loom



Here is a sample of the woven cloth



To see a YouTube video of the village and weaving factory
Click here... http://youtu.be/_6ulga4Xzwc



This being a tourist area, there was of course a restaurant waiting for us.



The place featured Italian Food of all things!
And, just like in the hotel, we were the only customers.
We came at the right time of year, it would seem.



Another old-fashioned technology at Inle Lake: Blacksmithing!
To see a YouTube video click here... http://youtu.be/86_IXYmeqSU



These guys start with bars from disassembled automobile leaf springs and go from there...



Near Inle Lake was this strange sort of orphanage/monastery/school



As in any group of adolescent boys, there is the red-hot student sitting up front



And the guys messing off at the back of class. Reminds me of my Junior High School.

People of the Shan Hills



This woman, and the rest of the people in this segment, is clearly identifiable a member of the Pa'O ethnic group.



They wear colorful head wraps, have darker skin than the Burmese, and – thankfully – don't smear their faces with Thanaka.



They carry their babies papoose-style



And mix modern clothes with their traditional headgear. It looks like this guy bought a towel in the bazaar to use as a turban!



Women in the Shan Hills, like the minority tribes of Yunan Province in China, like to carry their loads in baskets slung over their shoulders



Pa'O women from the 1920s [Wikipedia]. They have inhabited the Shan Hills since 1000 BC and comprise just one of many minority ethnic groups inside the borders of Myanmar.

A Country-to-Country Comparison

	Myanmar	Thailand
Population	60,300,000	66,720,000
Area	261,227 sq mi	198,115 sq mi
GDP	\$82.7 billion	\$616.8 billion
GDP/Capita	\$1,300	\$9,400
Ethnic groups	Burman 68% Shan 9% Karen 7% Rakhine 4% Chinese 3% Indian 2% Mon 2% other 5%	Thai (75%), Chinese (14%) Malay (3%) Other (8%)
Foreign Tourists	300,000 per year	18,000,000 per year

Burma –vs- neighboring Thailand: a stark contrast!

This Will Soon Change

United States Announces Steps to Ease Myanmar Sanctions

By Murray Hiebert and Prashanth Parameswaran

July 12, 2012

On July 11, the Obama administration announced an easing of restrictions to allow U.S. companies to do business in Myanmar. ..

The U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Asset Control issued two general licenses:

one authorizing new investment in Myanmar by U.S. firms, and another authorizing the exportation of **U.S. financial services to the country.**

Other sanctions, including a **ban on U.S. imports from Myanmar**, which the country's officials say are desperately needed to boost economic development and create jobs, **remain in place for the time being.**

But Internal Rebellion Still
Plagues Burma

The United Wa State Army

United Wa State Army soldiers and a skull from the Wa headhunting past, ...The Wa exist both in NE Shan State and in SW Yunan Province

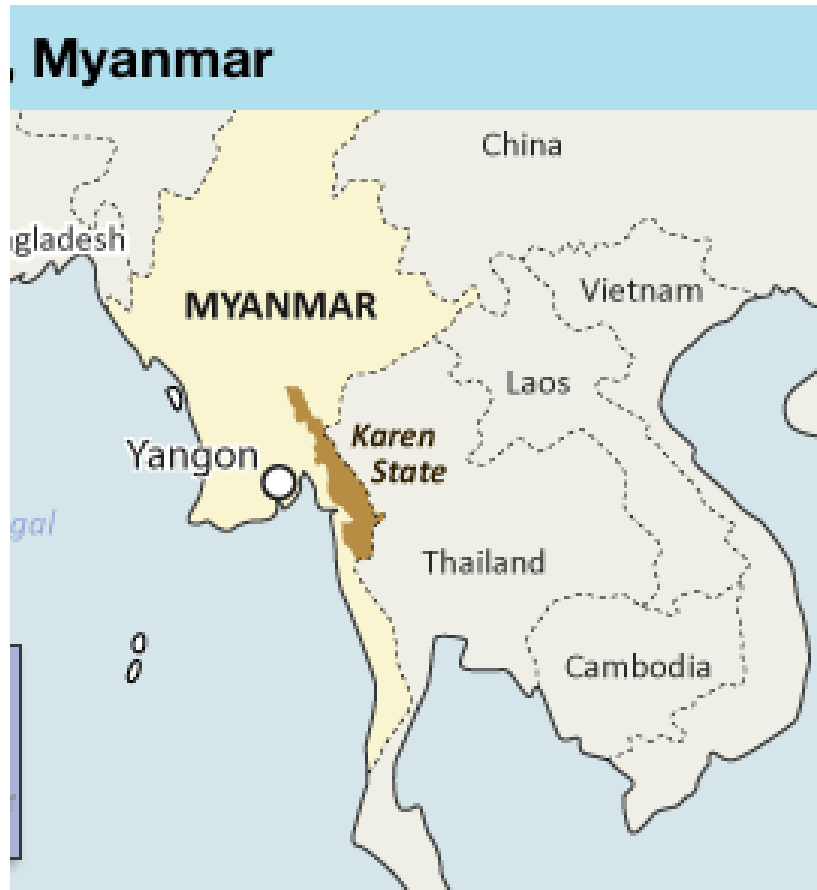


The Shan State Army



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kdYHQ3hNzgc>

The Karen National Liberation Army



The Karen were converted to Christianity in the early 19th century. So they are separated by both tribe and religion from the Burmese.

Burma's Muslim Minority: The Rohingya



Starting with WWII, Burma has been at war since 1941!
 The various independence movements oppose the ruling military junta, as do most mainstream Burmese.

Belligerents	
 Burmese military government (1962–2011) <ul style="list-style-type: none">  Burma Socialist Programme Party (1962–1988)  Union Solidarity and Development Party (2011–2012) 	Anti-junta factions: <ul style="list-style-type: none">  Karen National Union (1949-2012) <ul style="list-style-type: none">  Karen National Liberation Army  Communist Party of Burma (1948–1988)  Shan State Army – South (1964-2011)  United Wa State Army (1988–2012)  Kachin Independence Army
Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (informally allied with the junta until 2010)	
Border Clashes: <ul style="list-style-type: none">  People's Republic of China 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Pa-O National Organization (1949-1991)  Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army  God's Army  Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (turned against the junta in 2010)
	Supported by: <ul style="list-style-type: none">  Thailand^[1]  United States^[2]  Republic of China

Than Shwe and the Tatmadaw: Burma's Military Rulers



The world's longest-surviving military dictatorship rules Burma. General Ne Win led a temporary coup in 1957 in the face of post-independence civil war, then a permanent coup in 1962. Today, his Junta has solidified its grip on the nation and actively engages the various rebel armies while tending first and foremost to the interests of the military and its leaders.

Hope for the Future is with “The Lady”



The Burmese People have invested their hopes for the future in this charismatic leader, **Aung San Suu Kyi**. The 2015 general election will determine whether her party can bring democracy to Burma. And if it does, the challenges for this deeply fragmented nation will need to be dealt with on a political, rather than a military level. It will be a challenge, to say the least!