

Magic of Mysticism

Dave Stamboulis is enchanted by the spiritual relics and beliefs of Burma, where people cling to faith because they have little else to rely on.

I went to Myanmar feeling rather dubious and slightly guilty. After all, when was the last time the real leader of a country told tourists that they should stay away in order to show solidarity with the local people? I was reminded of a journey to Tibet years before. It's a stunningly beautiful country, but a plethora of human rights have been squashed, religion oppressed, and a culture obliterated. Yet the Dalai Lama had urged travelers to go to Tibet, see for themselves what was going on and to form their own opinions. Bearing that in mind, I caught a Thai Airways flight to Rangoon International Airport, where not a single other plane sat on the tarmac.



Despite Aung San Suu Kyi's pleas for visitors to avoid Burma (there is even discord over the country's name), I had come to see how things were. More specifically, I wanted to learn about Burmese mysticism, to learn whether Buddhism was still flourishing, and to see how much faith people had left. In Tibet, despite the fact that the Chinese had razed monasteries and forbidden people to own Dalai Lama photos, among other things, one would still find scores of pictures of His Holiness hidden away in every home, and monks eager to shuffle a visitor to unobtrusive nooks where they could talk about their culture and religion. In spite of all the horrors that the Tibetans have endured over the years, pilgrims still make the pilgrimage around holy Mount Kailash in the far west of the country. Kailash is considered the spiritual centre of the universe, and a *kora*, or perambulation around the mountain, is said to gain a person enough karmic merit for 13 lifetimes. I was awed by the fact that some pilgrims would prostrate themselves on hands and knees for weeks around the mountain, crossing snowfields, rivers, and boulders armed only with basic hand and knee pads to soften the abrasion. I thought that any people capable of such acts of faith could endure anything.

Arriving in Burma, I was told to change a mandatory US\$200 into FEC's (foreign exchange certificates), one way that the military regime puts foreign currency into its pockets. Wanting to avoid giving money to the generals as much as possible, I gave the Customs official a \$5 bill, and he dropped the amount to \$100, stamped my passport, and gave me a copy of the local English daily, *The New Light of Myanmar*, which listed, in very bold letters at the bottom of the page: **People's Desire: Oppose those relying on external elements, acting as stooges, and holding negative views. Crush all external and internal destructive elements as the common enemy.**

Welcome to Burma.

A young man in a tattered T-shirt and fancy dress shoes drew up next to me just outside the terminal and offered his services as a taxi driver. He led me to a battered old vehicle which sputtered to life and lurched towards downtown Rangoon. My driver introduced himself as Coco, and, spotting my copy of the *New Light*, said, "Oh, I see you have

a copy of our local paper, the 'New Lies of Myanmar.'"

As we made our way towards the city, Coco apologised for the state of his car (which kept stalling every 10 minutes or so), and filled in the time teaching me a bit of Burmese. "*Mingalaba* means 'hello,' *chezubeh* means 'thank you,' *yadala* means 'is it possible?' but don't bother asking this because the answer will be no."

In spite of the brutal reputation of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), I was quite hopeful about divining the country's spirituality through its ancient traditions of astrology, fortune-telling, and spirit worship.

The former strongman and head of the ruling party, General Ne Win, had an obsessive interest in *yedaya chay*, a system of numerology, which eventually led to all sorts of bizarre policies, resulting in economic ruin. Like many Thais, Ne Win believed that the number nine was very auspicious, and in 1987, he suddenly declared all 35 and 75 *kyat* banknotes to be invalid, and replaced them with 15, 45, and 90 *kyat* notes, all except for the 15 being divisible by the number nine, thus effectively wiping out the savings of countless citizens overnight.

Win also heeded an astrologer's warning that change would come from the right. Fearing a political change and trying to subvert the prediction, Win decreed overnight that all cars would now drive on the other side of the road, leading to accidents and mayhem. Ne Win also demanded nine-foot ceilings for new buildings and ordered air pilots to circle airstrips nine times before landing.

I chatted with Coco about superstition and religion in Burma, and he explained a few local beliefs which he said everyone followed. He said nobody would clip their nails at night because this might anger ghosts, nor would they leave shoes or slippers lying upside down, as this would ensure bad luck. Chefs refrain from hitting the side of the pots they are cooking in with the ladles, because to do so would be the equivalent of hitting one's parents in the head – like the old childhood singsong from the West, "Step on a crack, you break your mother's back."

Intrigued, I asked Coco where I should go to witness acts of faith and superstition, and he advised me to head over to Shwedagon Paya, the largest and most revered pagoda in all of Burma. Coco said that



In another four months, they would change from white robes to yellow, and continue sitting and staring for six more months, and then they would supposedly be able to fly.

I should go at dawn in order to avoid the five-dollar charge levied on foreign visitors, money that would go directly into the ruling party's pocket.

At dawn Shwedagon is a series of towering golden stupas, all swathed in gold and bathed in surreal light. Legend has it that the temple was built on the site where two Burmese merchants brought back eight of the Buddha's hairs, which he had given to them 49 days after receiving enlightenment. The hairs were enshrined in a golden chedi and a temple built on the spot by the Mons somewhere between the 6th and 7th centuries.

In the wee hours of the morning, Shwedagon was a bustling world unto itself, with monks sweeping the high steps leading to the giant stupa, locals coming to make blessings for their families, and soothsayers appearing out of the shadows to ask if they could be of assistance. The south and east sides of the temple were crowded with vendors selling good-luck charms, and pilgrims congregated around small shrines that flanked the main stupa. These shrines represent different days of the week and one's day of birth determines one's planetary post.



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Junta Does Disney

The magical temples of Bagan, one of Myanmar's greatest attractions, are in danger of being done over like a modern-day Disneyland if the ruling generals have their way. The junta is in the midst of building a gigantic viewing tower right in the middle of the 1,000-year-old stupas and terraced pyramids.

The government says the tower will protect the structures from the constant traffic of visitors climbing them to get sunset views, but UNESCO officials and archaeologists the world over are saying that the ugly concrete tower totally defiles the ancient surroundings.

In addition, the Burmese generals are being charged with haphazardly building new replacement temples for some of the ruins, based not on any kind of historical evidence, but according to 21st century notions of what a temple might look like, notions that scholars charge may have come from the cinema or television.

Local tour guides have commented that the new tower actually mars the landscape and sunset views that the Bagan area is noted for, but of course none of their input has been made public, as the official line in Myanmar is "no comment." Perhaps some inauspicious numbers are the only thing that can stop the construction.



A woman who spoke good English asked me what my date of birth was, and without calculating informed me that I had been born on a Saturday and must therefore go to a specific shrine to make a blessing (upon returning home, I laboured over a set of calendars to discover that she was right). She offered to be my guide, and we wandered over to a corner of the temple, where a monk was chanting as a young couple lit joss-sticks and poured water over each other to ensure prosperity. Nearby, another family was receiving advice about nutrition from a medicine man. He warned them not to eat watermelon and eggs at the same meal, nor lime and milk, or mix a mangosteen with sugar, as all would surely cause food poisoning.

As the sun rose into the sky, my attention was drawn to three women in white robes, who positioned themselves in the center of the pagoda, folded their legs into the lotus position, and stared directly at the sun. With their free hands, they rotated beads, and seemed to be chanting under their breath. I asked my guide what they were doing, and she told me that they wanted to fly. They had been coming to Shwedagon for several months now, staring at the sun for three hours a day. In another four months, they would change from white robes to yellow, and continue sitting and staring for six more months, and then they would be able to fly. In no position to argue with their beliefs, I crept close to the pilgrims to take some photos. They didn't even seem aware of my presence and, despite the fact that it was a good 30 degrees plus in the direct sunlight, they neither sweated nor squinted, and continued praying while I snapped away.

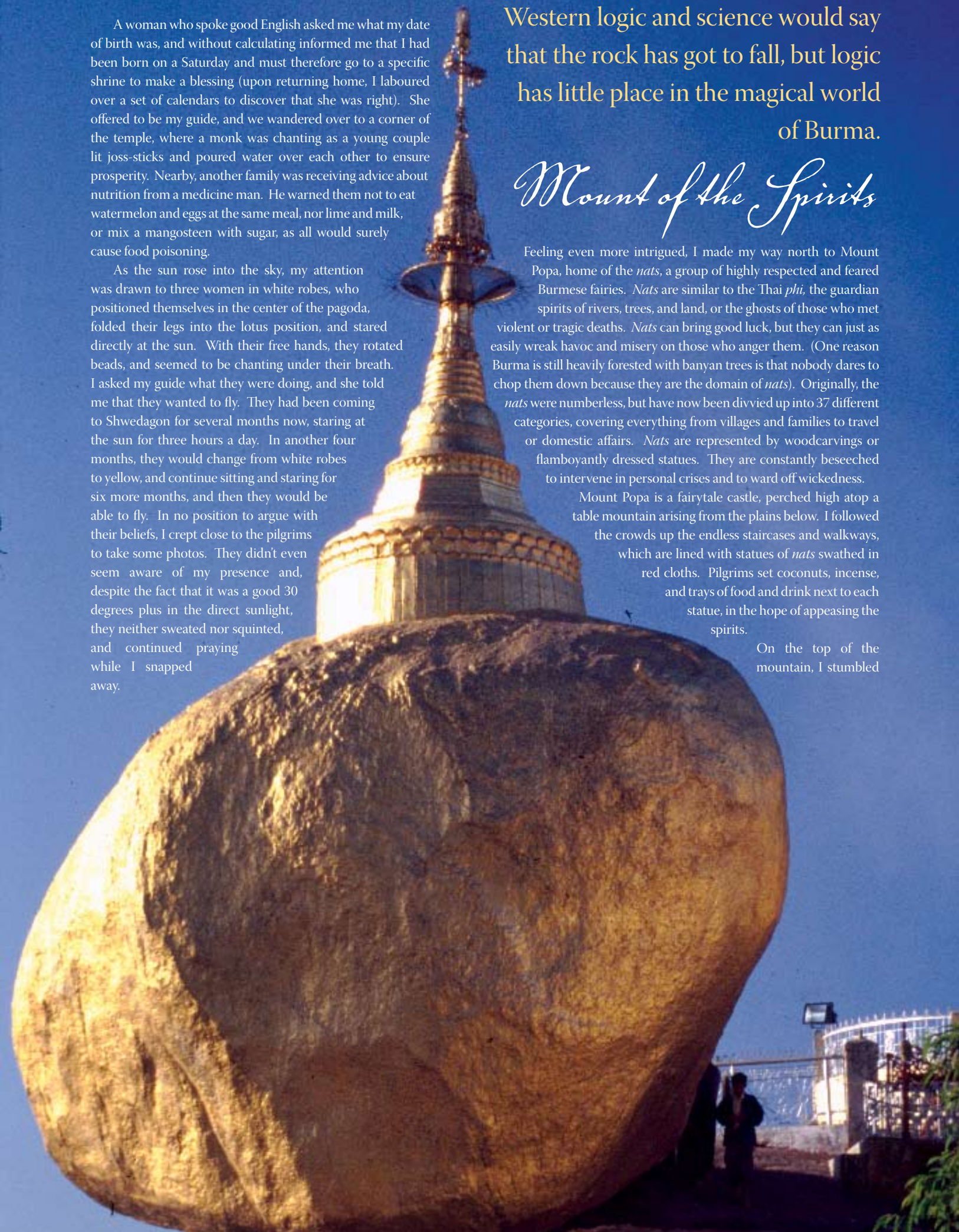
Western logic and science would say that the rock has got to fall, but logic has little place in the magical world of Burma.

Mount of the Spirits

Feeling even more intrigued, I made my way north to Mount Popa, home of the *nats*, a group of highly respected and feared Burmese fairies. *Nats* are similar to the Thai *phi*, the guardian spirits of rivers, trees, and land, or the ghosts of those who met violent or tragic deaths. *Nats* can bring good luck, but they can just as easily wreak havoc and misery on those who anger them. (One reason Burma is still heavily forested with banyan trees is that nobody dares to chop them down because they are the domain of *nats*). Originally, the *nats* were numberless, but have now been divvied up into 37 different categories, covering everything from villages and families to travel or domestic affairs. *Nats* are represented by woodcarvings or flamboyantly dressed statues. They are constantly beseeched to intervene in personal crises and to ward off wickedness.

Mount Popa is a fairytale castle, perched high atop a table mountain arising from the plains below. I followed the crowds up the endless staircases and walkways, which are lined with statues of *nats* swathed in red cloths. Pilgrims set coconuts, incense, and trays of food and drink next to each statue, in the hope of appeasing the spirits.

On the top of the mountain, I stumbled



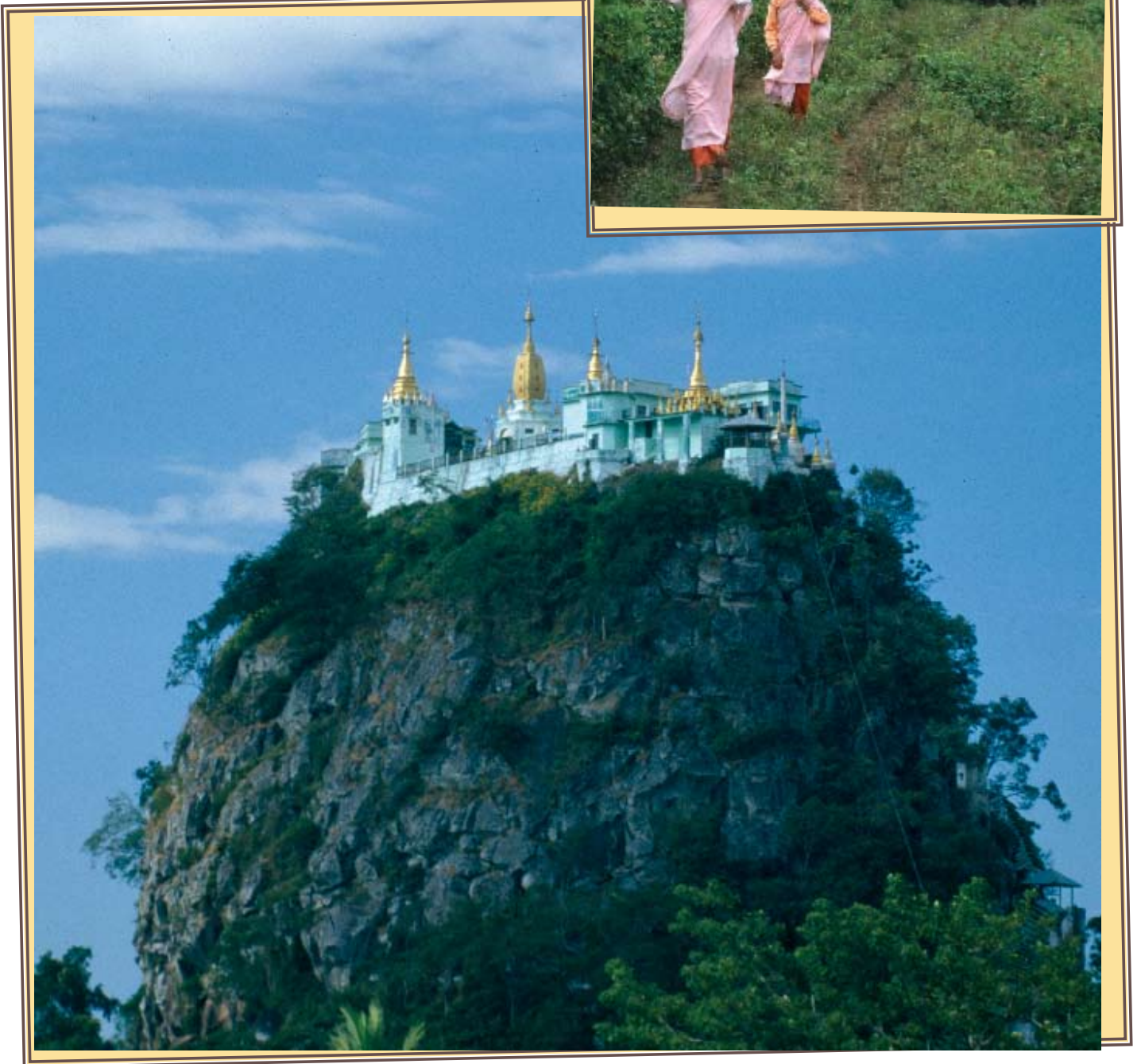
across a *gadaw pwe*, or private spirit celebration, taking place in a small room packed with several families. A woman known as the *nat gadaw*, or spirit wife, sat in the middle of the room, her hand clutching a string of beads and her eyes rolling back in her head. She was drenched in sweat and moaning in a low voice. At some point in the proceedings, this spirit medium selected one of the men in the room, and slowly passed her hands across his abdomen.

Soon, the man's eyes began to roll back in his head, and he suddenly started to shriek and froth at the mouth. Within minutes, he got up and started to dance, a slow and rhythmic gyration. The energy in the room was electric and it felt as if the lightbulbs would blow out at any minute. As if he were a rag doll being tossed about in the wind, the man was suddenly propelled across the room (in my notebook, I later wrote that "he had been flung across the room," as opposed to "he flung himself"), where he crashed into a wall and then collapsed.

Minutes later, he came too, looking totally exhausted. His friends came over and began to tell him what he had done and what he had

happened. He looked at them with a mixture of amazement and shock, like a drunk who had a blackout the night before, only to be told of his escapades in the morning. A woman near the door came over and told me that the man had an important journey coming up and that the *nats* had paved the way for him; ensuring that all would be well.

Needing a bit of fresh air, I stepped outside and wandered into an empty courtyard which had a series of small cells in its corner. In one of the cells sat a woman who was laying flowers and herbs out in a geometric pattern, chanting and hissing as she worked. When she saw me at the door, she beckoned me in with a gnarled and bony finger, but I had seen enough for the day.



Buddhist Bedrock

My final stop in Burma was Kyaiktiyo. Kyaiktiyo (pronounced *chakchyō*) is another highly revered check point on the Burmese pilgrim route. It sits in the south of the country, and is a giant boulder, some seven meters tall, leafed in gold topped with a stupa and perched on the edge of a high cliff. At first glance, the golden rock looks set back just off the edge of the precipice, but upon further inspection, I found that there is actually a very large space separating the rock from the earth, almost completely encircling its base, save for one small spot. In fact, if one runs a thread underneath the rock, it will pass completely across, leaving the astonishing realization that the rock is not completely on the ground. It looks as if the boulder is not much more than a gust of wind away from plunging to the valley far below.

Yet this being Burma, I had come to expect the uncanny. It is said that the golden dome of Kyaiktiyo is held in place by a hair of the Buddha, received by King Tissa from a traveling hermit. The hermit told Tissa that he should enshrine the hair in a boulder that resembled his head, and in fact, Kyaiktiyo comes from the Pali script meaning “pagoda carried by hermit on the head.” Western logic and science would say that the rock has got to fall, but logic has little place in the magical world of Burma. I did know one thing though; with all the Buddha hairs scattered around the country, it’s no wonder the poor fellow went bald so fast.

Pilgrims exerted themselves ascending the path to the top, and I took comfort in the observation that all faiths, no matter where and what they are, seem to put their holiest spots in high places, as near to the gods as possible. And as elsewhere in the world, it appeared that the rich didn’t have to work as hard to reap the divine. A group of young men waited at the base of the mountain, guarding over a fleet of sedan chairs, prepared to carry the wealthy up to the top on their shoulders, for the princely sum of about Bt200.

From the top of Kyaiktiyo, I watched the sun descend over the Salween River, languidly flowing here all the way from the Himalayas, actually from Mount Kailash. Despite the lack of political freedoms,

ethnic strife, and other calamities that have affected the Burmese over the years, I took great solace in realising that Burma, or Myanmar, had a luxurious untouched and unchanged secret world, one that the generals would never be able to take away, and one providing hope to millions of people.

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Travel Basics

Visas: Required, and will set you back \$20 for 28 days.

Way to Go: Travel in Burma requires a bit of decision making. To get to all the major spots (Mandalay, Bagan, Inle Lake) involves overnight travel on some of the worst transport in Asia (although new aircon upgrades do the Yangon-Mandalay run). Buses only leave for destinations at night, seats are lumpy, roads are bad. The train is better, but you are putting money into the junta’s pocket, though buses are privately run. Flying is also an option, but Myanmar Airways has one of the world’s worst safety records, and is also a government cash cow. Air Mandalay is the way to go, although Air Bagan (now considering international flights direct to Bagan) is another option.

Where to Crash: In Yangon, soften your landing by dropping into the White House, where you can chill out on the rooftop garden, surrounded by potted plants. The manager has been THE source of info for incoming travelers to Burma for years. Rooms run \$5-15. It’s located at 69-71 Kon Zay Dan St. Tel: 240-780.

Mystical Itinerary: Start off at the most revered pagoda in the country, Shwedagon Paya, in the heart of Yangon. Follow the locals advice and go just before sunrise to avoid paying the foreigner entry fees (which go straight to the government), and to see all the folks doing weird things like going into trances and learning how to fly. Then head north to the thousands of magical temples in Bagan, and hire a bicycle to see them. You’ll avoid the crowds and feel like you’re starring in an Indiana Jones movie. Mount Popa is a half day from Bagan. Try to time your arrival for a *nat pwe* (spirit festival). Myanmar’s other major pilgrimage spot, Kyaiktiyo (Golden Rock) is accessible by bus from either Yangon or Bago. Disembark at Kinpun, and start walking like the pilgrims do (or be a lazy bastard and get carried in a sedan chair all the way up for \$7!).