

April 2013

Dear Friends and Family,

Diversity of ethnic groups, religions and landscape characterized my visits to Indonesia and Myanmar in February and March. Both the peoples who arrived by water to the Indonesian archipelago and encountered mountainous terrain (especially including volcanoes) and the peoples who arrived overland in Myanmar (also with largely hilly terrain) are still actively chewing betel nut and producing and eating rice. Women in both countries typically dress in a local fabric wraparound skirt and a western blouse or

t-shirt.



One country is predominantly Muslim, the other predominantly Buddhist, both with

relatively short histories of independence from former Colonial powers (Dutch and British respectively). Both with extreme contrasts between modern cities with full amenities and other communities still living much as they have for centuries in traditional dwellings and practicing ancestral (animist) customs with the conspicuous addition of satellite dishes and motor scooters.

In Indonesia I visited parts of Java, Flores, Sulawesi, Kalimantan (Borneo) and Sumatra and for so large a country (3000 miles east to west, 240 million people on perhaps 20,000 islands) in one 28 day visa one can only do highlights. As always, it is difficult to select which of the highlights to share with you.

On Java active Bromo Mountain, one of three volcano cones within the barren crater of an even more ancient volcano is presided over by Mt Semeru, the tallest mountain, at 12,130 feet, in Java and also still

active. Descending the 7000 feet from the base of Bromo to Probolinggo is the most intensive steep slope agriculture I have ever seen, even more so than in Madagascar and Ethiopia.







On Flores the sheer beauty of the vegetation



and water views, the three different colors of the crater lakes of Mt Kelimutu (you can only see two at a time) and the visit to Rinca Island to see the Komodo dragons in their natural habitat were highlights. The dragon will even attack a buffalo and then track it for the two days it might take it to die from the poisons contained in its saliva.







In addition to the terraced rice fields (in both countries), on Flores there are rice fields laid out like a spider web using a unique process of dividing the available land among the residents of the village using wedges of a defined number of degrees (recalculated periodically as family sizes change).



Weaving is the primary handicraft here, especially ikat cloth where the yarn is pre-dyed in sections to create the ultimate pattern. I finally saw a pattern board in a village on Inle Lake in Myanmar for how this is accomplished. I have always wondered, having seen the technique in several countries. I bought this scarf from this betel-chewing weaver.



Mosques appear about every 500 feet throughout the country, rural or urban, and have widely varying architecture. In addition, prayer rooms (musholla's) exist in every public facility such as gas stations, schools and restaurants. Even on largely Christian Flores the fishermen and merchants are mostly



Muslim. (Indonesia has the largest Muslim population of any country in the world).



On Sulawesi I focused on the Toraja people who are known for their boat shaped highly decorated (painted designs plus buffalo horns) structures (with a similarly decorated but smaller structure opposite



for the storage of rice) plus the elaborate graves with tau tau (carved effigies) of the deceased. The graves are often in hollowed-out rock faces or where no rock exists in ornate mausoleums of more substantial construction materials than the



residences of the living.





The Toraja are primarily Christians, but the funeral traditions have survived, although other ritual killings and sacrifices have disappeared. I bought a pair of small effigies from the carver of this couple.

The buffalo is the symbol of wealth and power and an albino buffalo costs as much as the Toyota van in which we were riding.



We passed through many bamboo forests and I saw just how useful the tree is, from major building projects to musical instruments!



On Kalimantan I spent three nights on a klotok boat on the Sungai Sekonyer river visiting Orangutans in Tanjung Putang National Park. About 5000 of these red-haired cousins of ours live in the 600,000 hectare preserve and are the only apes present outside of Africa. Perhaps because I am physically clumsy and afraid of heights I was mesmerized watching them swing on vines and branches through the tree tops (they don't leap like monkeys) often with a child clinging to its mom's back or front. They definitely hang their entire body weight from one



hand or foot and they reminded me of the aerial acrobats I saw the prior month at the circus in Agadir! The extended arms and legs seemed to be part of the vines and tree trunks. They live to be ~60 years old and females have a baby ~ every 8 years which is dependent (nursing) until about age 4.





They become adult and sexually active about age 12. I saw one mom of over 50 years with a 2 year old in tow (I thought she looked tired!). There is a dominant male in each territory of about 5 to 8 km. Meet Doyok, he weighs about 100 kg, is about my height and has a very large normal growth on his neck called a cheek pad. The males' bodies change and become very muscular in their late teens. The orangutans peeled the bananas before eating them and when eating pomelos (like our



grapefruit) they spit out the seeds and pith. They build a new nest of twigs and leaves in the tops of trees every night! The Orangutans are endangered primarily due to the loss of their forest habitat to

agriculture, especially palm oil plantations. These photos are taken at three different feeding stations in the park where rehabilitated, and wild, orangutans come periodically to feed. They are served fruit and Nido milk with sugar. Each station feeds once per day.



A fascinating business in the Port of Kumai is cultivating birds' nests for export to China (as in birds' nest soup). The skyline is filled with multi-story buildings with recorded bird calls which are home to thousands of swifts which build their nests, a % of which are collected each 2-3 months. By the way, the sister of my boatman was the cook on the boat and I ate fabulously not only 3 meals a day but a snack every time I returned from a forest visit.





Sumatra is the second largest of the islands, after Kalimantan, and I had time for just a tiny taste of tea growing (with the fabulous addition of ginger, cinnamon, star anise, lemon grass and brown sugar made into a local “ginger” tea), rubber plantations, and Lake Toba, at 1700 square km the largest lake in southeast Asia, and a very popular destination for Sumatrans to escape the heat of the plains. In the middle of the lake is the island of Samosir, almost the size of Singapore. Some very interesting histories

of various kings' dynasties are memorialized in stone carvings and graves and stories told through



traditional dances.

The

people are primarily Batak ethnically (probably with origins in Myanmar and Thai hill tribes) but speak 5 different languages! They are primarily Christians and also take their graves very seriously.



Myanmar was the second destination and I wanted to focus on hill tribes because I had not visited them when living in Thailand. Since the elections of 2010 the country is increasingly accessible for tourists. In eastern Shan State based from Kentung (pronounced Cheng Dong) you can take day hikes to various hill tribes (guide mandatory) with a required return each night to town. These remote villages retain traditional lifestyles and work at subsistence agriculture and as pastoralists. I visited the Palaung who



believe they are descended from a prince who married the youngest of 7 silver fairies in heaven. Their



belt, made from Thai coins and processed by a silver smith, symbolizes the fairies. Silver bracelets on the upper arms signify wings to fly away and join the silver princesses. When not working in the fields the women are active in handicrafts. This weaver is the same age as me.



This is a generally Akha area but I also visited a small (19 houses) Ana village where we rested at the Shaman's house and distributed the useful gifts we had brought – shampoo, tiger balm, band aids and balloons for fun! Here the women permanently stain their teeth with indigo, it is not betel! The village has a spirit “house” where arriving visitors should commune with the spirits and ask permission to visit.

Also there is a hunting house where the men gather before and after the annual hunt. In general, it is believed that all plants and animals have spirits and one must pay attention to them.



Along the way we also met up with Akha women and fortunately had a few practical gifts left over for



them.



It is said of Kentung that if there were any more monasteries there would be no place for people to live!



School is out for the summer, but these children are at the monastery learning Shan history and



literature.

There is also a mosque in Kengtung and interestingly the sign for the women's entrance is also written in



Chinese.

Of the 20 days I spent in Myanmar, all but six were spent in Shan State. Every Shan village has a monastery which is built before the village is established and there is interdependence between the monks and villagers. Traditionally in Myanmar every boy serves a period of time as a novice monk, from as little as a week to some years. When entering into the novitiate a major procession/ceremony is held



and the boy is dressed in the style of ancient princes, rides on a horse, and they have a grand feast. This parade had about eight novices plus their assorted families and villagers.

Then he shaves his head and embarks on a regime of meditation, labor and one meal per day.





At the Mahamuni Pagoda in Mandalay there is a constant stream of these celebrants. Only men (and boys) are allowed to rub gold onto the Buddha (which is now covered with six inches of pure gold!).



Each family group gets about 3 minutes for the men to go to the Buddha while the rest of the celebrants watch and pray in a special area. The groups arrive non-stop all day long! I also visited a gold workshop where workers successively pound the gold into thinner and thinner sheets (in total about 4 hours of pounding to get to the required thinness) which are then packaged and sold to be rubbed onto

Buddha's.





In case you are wondering, there are also nuns.



When I was in a small Shan village on the Dotowady river I saw the photos of the man of the house in his princely garb and in his monk's garb. It was common to see these photos in houses.



This particular village was accessible only by the river or the once daily train to Mandalay. The houses are on stilts but have either a separate “spirit house” or an elevated portion of the main house where “spirits” are worshipped. This was very similar to Thailand, and in fact the Shan and the Thai (Siam) are generally the same people.

The lovely town of Hsipaw is on this river and I was fortunate to be able to

visit the “palace” of the last Shan prince of this region, Sao Kya Seng who vanished during the 1962 military takeover. His Austrian (now American) wife, Inge Sargent, wrote *Twilight Over Burma: My Life as a Shan Princess*. The book is no longer banned in Myanmar and has been translated into Burmese.





There is also a lovely mosque in Hsipaw and generally there was at least one in every sizable town.



Life along the Dotowaddy (meaning small river) seems very peaceful.





The buffalo are treated well, as they work hard on the land and are almost like a member of the family. In addition to vegetables and rice there are also pineapple and orange plantations.





The monasteries of Shan State often have beautiful interior decorations and are many hundreds of years



old.

Together with Buddhism there is also in Shan State devotion to 37 prior “gods” called Nats and there are temples to these in many regions. Along the highway is Shwenyaung Pin, the shrine of spirit, where you take a new car to be blessed.



I was fortunate to happen into a village when the youth were volunteering to build an addition on the monastery and the elder men and women had prepared a traditional meal for the monks and villagers. This was my first view of the beautiful skin of these octogenarian women who carefully protect their skin from the sun using thanaka.



In addition to a variety of ethnic groups I also got to visit many artisans. In the Inle Lake area there is a village that specializes in making rice crackers. These two women make 1000 crackers every day. And



in another village were young women rolling cigars, for which Myanmar is famous. Coincidentally each young woman also rolls about 1000 cigars per day! I also saw paper being made from the bark of mulberry trees and, of course, lots of weaving. I had not, however, known that you can weave from a single thread that is found in the stem of a lotus flower. It is a very laborious process to create the thread and these



weavings are very expensive!



There are 84 villages along the shores of Inle Lake with a population of ~ 100,000 people. Agriculture is extensive on floating gardens (plus fishing of course). The bamboo poles anchor the gardens into the lake bottom. All access is by canoe, for planting, weeding, fertilizing, harvesting etc. Likewise the village “streets” are almost all water. The fishermen on Inle Lake use a single oar and wrap one leg around it to both propel and steer the canoe. This leaves their hands free for handling nets, etc.



What about transport and roads? Not everything in Myanmar moves along water (although a lot does). There are many amazing roads, especially to the former hill station towns, that remain from the British years and also a working rail system, which



I rode from Pyin Oo Lwin to Naung Pain, 4 hours away, especially to cross the Gokteik Viaduct trestle, 318 feet high, built in 1901 by the Pennsylvania Steel Company. At the time it was the second highest railway trestle in the world.





Each area seems to have its own local version of tuk tuk and everywhere there are the collective vans.



Although there was some heavy equipment, a great deal of road repair and construction work is hand labor with crews made up of both men and women.

Many of the roads I was on were the main routes to China and the majority of the traffic was semi-trailers, often overloaded, with fruits, vegetables, rice and cement going to China

and manufactured products, rice and cement coming from China! These were very hilly routes, thus very slow going on all the switchbacks.



You must be wondering by now where are all the Buddha's? Well, of course I saw thousands, 8000 alone in this one cave where a Pa-oh lady (wearing the traditional towel on her head) is standing.

In Thailand, depending on what day of the week you were born, "your" Buddha was in a particular sitting, standing or laying position. My Wednesday morning Buddha is standing and these Buddha's in Wat In in Kengtung were called traveling Buddha's by my guide and seemed to well represent me.





One other parallel with my time in Thailand was the early morning exercise regime that urban Myanmar residents seem to adopt, including machines along public rights of way, group exercise activities and walking paths.

This was a particularly beautiful morning on Kandawgyi Lake overlooked by Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon.



I hope this letter finds you well and until the next time that my traveling Buddha's and I are in touch, I send my love.

*Marilee*