

Myanmar, the pearl of Asia, the charm of the ethnic groups

As I crossed the centre of Yangon¹, I saw from the window the buildings typical of the colonial period, the splendour of the various pagodas which dominate the city. In this very first moment, I felt the kindness of the population who live here and the traditional and mystic atmosphere which still predominates this world.

I walked around the old town through some of the narrow streets, passing by colonial buildings and looking for a famous restaurant where I could taste typical Burmese food. I stopped before an external façade and I saw it for a while, wondering if I had found the right place: *“It should be this. Let’s go! Oh it’s amazing”* I exhorted while admiring the rooms inside in a well restored and decorated room. This room followed the traditional architecture and design of the city. I spent a pleasant night waiting to visit the city and its monuments the next days.

The Shwedagon Pagoda is one of the most important places in Yangon for its people. Flanking the entrance, locals sell flowers, traditional dresses and holy objects. As one walks on the floor around the pagoda one is astonished and enshrouded by the beautiful atmosphere. People come here on the occasion of their birthday, to pray, or to study. During the visit, one sees different celebrations before the holy figures and in the small temples around the Pagoda. The population of Myanmar attend this place wearing clothes on the basis of the celebration they participate in and based of the ethnic group which they belong. Every statue, and small monument has a different significance in the Buddhism tradition. The flowers offered to the holy figures and the myriad of colours of the dresses wearing by women seemed to dance and mingle with each other forming a festival of lights.

Under the Bodhi tree, some students sit on the floor preparing for their exams. Following an ancient legend, in this place, people pray so that their wishes are fulfilled and for approaching enlightenment, and also students prepare for their exams. This tree stands on the roots of an ancient tree where Gautama Buddha achieved enlightenment during meditation.

At both side of the main entrance, in the south part of the pagoda stand two colossal leongrifi which are nine meters tall.

At the end of the visit before I take a taxi to the old town where have a lunch in a typical local restaurant, I discussed with two local young women about the beauty of the temple and the significance for Myanmar citizens. *“Yes, this is for us the most important place in Yangon and one of the most important in all Myanmar”*, *“It represents a landmark and help us to better face the daily challenges”*. One of the women replied to me.

I walked around the old town feeling a traditional atmosphere and admiring the typical colonial buildings, some of them well restored following local customs, others in an urban decay. These decaying buildings are still worthy of notice as they conserve the fascinating architecture.

The colourful streets are now filled with manifestants protesting and showing their disappointment at the coup. On their faces one can read the wish of democracy and to move away from the military regime of the past years. They are afraid of coming back to the nightmare already lived. I remained astonished presented with these events and the first question that comes to me is: *“How can things like this still happen in 2021?”*. It is hard to find an answer to this question and a solution to the atrocities. It seems that some people living in the world do not care about the population and what they represent in their state. The lust for power knows no borders.

After a short walk, I reached the Botataung Pagoda where inside one can closely see Buddha’s Sacred Hair Relic. Inside, the structure reminds one of the slices of a cake whose golden walls and ruffs are decorated with beautiful holy figures, bucolic images, and traditional objects.

The visit to all these monuments left me with many memories about the cultural richness of this city and kindness of people living in the capital of Myanmar. Their faces express the happiness of leaving following their own traditions and the wish to maintain their culture. It is sun set when I left this place and the golden setting sun reaches a terrace upon which I stood and admired the city of Yangon with its golden pagodas reflecting in the sky, the new and colonial buildings.

The following day, before reaching the airport, I visited the National Museum, where I met two students, wearing traditional long coloured dresses, with whom I had an interesting conversation about the development of Myanmar and the importance of conserving their traditions, *“Yes, our country is amazing and full of art which deserve to be seen and appreciated. We are very happy to see foreign people interested in our*

¹ The capital of Myanmar

cultures. We are open with all of them wishing to live or visit our places. “We think that our traditions are as important as the development”, one of them told me.

The flight to Mandalay took-off on time and I landed there in the evening. I reached the old town with Su, who was born in Mandalay, but she moved to the capital to study and work. During the trip we discussed about different topics and she kindly tell me many things about the living in Mandalay, in Yangon and in the villages. She gave me the opportunity to get to better know the population and open my minds to the origin, lifestyle, tradition and customs of the various ethnic groups.

The city is overlooked by the palace constructed between 1857 and 1859 following the traditional architecture, which uses wooden material. By the temple, situated at the top of the hill, beside the wall around the palace, one can admire a beautiful landscape of the city and a stunning sunset. At the foot of the hill and on the way to reach the top stand different pagodas and their lights, in the evening, can be seen from far away, which come together with the course of water around the palace and its walls, give a lovely and magic show.

Starting from the main entrance of the palace, visitors are welcomed by the Great Audience Hall, used for the official ceremonies and receptions, then can see the Glass Palace which was the king’s private living area. Around it stands various smaller buildings with the same architecture. Unfortunately, the ancient buildings were destroyed during the second World War, but were then rebuilt in 1990s. The only remaining originals from the ancient times are the Royal Mint and the Watch Tower where one has a magnificence view over the citadel and the various old wooden and new constructions forming the Palace. I stepped down from the top of the tower and walked outside the citadel under a beautiful sunshine reflecting on the various long typical dresses of women and on the roofs of the palace.

In the afternoon I reached by car the Ubein bridge, the longest and most ancient teak bridge in the world which, notwithstanding the huge quantity of visitors, still stands its fascination. I would advise to visit the site not in a rush so that one can take one’s time, and to walk on it to the other side of the river. At sunset, the green landscape around, the yellow colour of the sunshine, the orange, red colours of the sky and the brown colour of the bridge stand harmoniously together, creating a fairy-like and relaxing atmosphere. One of the best places for taking pictures of the bridge is at the bottom of it where you can capture the rays of the sun reflecting on the water and on the wooden pillars of the bridge.

I came back to Mandalay for spending the night before moving the following day to Bagan. Before the flight to Bagan, I visited the Mahamuni Temple where is situated a statue of Buddha, that is 12 feet and 7 inches high, to which only men can approach. This is one of the five portraits of Buddha in the world taken during his life. He is represented in the seated posture of relaxed composure. In this place one can see how much local people are devoted to Buddha, as they approach and touch the statue. In their faces one can see a sense of relief which one seldom meets in the other temples and Pagodas in Myanmar.

In Mahamuni Temple returns the “*leit motiv*” typical of the other pagodas and temples, namely, the brilliant colours of the women dresses which dominate the scene and harmoniously dance around other enshroud the area, creating a magical world. The view of such people recalls one the characters of novels and fairy tales.

My car to the airports was waiting for me outside. While crossing the city different memories of Mandalay and Yangon drift through my mind and make me think a lot about my first impressions of this country. In Mandalay, smaller and less developed than Yangon one can taste foods typical of the various regions of Myanmar well cooked and served, admire many monuments of the ancient reigns, original and fairy-like landscapes and experience the kindness and traditions of people living here. Myanmar² is a treasury amid the major Asian countries which had in the last decades a very fast development and where it is not easy to find and experience the traditional way of living and customs.

Years of harsh military regime and events which are happening now show a joint population whose freedoms, history, traditions must be preserved and respected. The sacrifice which some people are doing nowadays will remain and be remembered in the history of this country. In my opinion, those people who are dying during the protests against the military regime are heroes whose images will remain ingrained in the memories of the population. While in this city, watching these protests, one seems to have stepped back to ancient Greek civilisation where people sacrificed themselves to protect the population and give them hope for the future. I think that the international community should deeply appreciate those people, in Myanmar, but also in other countries, who die for defending freedoms, peace and protecting respect for human beings. I believe it should be created a worldwide day in memory of those people who sacrifice themselves for the preservation of freedoms, democracy and peace.

² Together with Laos, although with some differences.

I took a taxi from the airport to the hotel situated in the old Bagan, in the heart of the temples. As I stepped down from the car, I saw in front of me a beautiful temple all lit and resembling fairy images told in novels and fairy tales. My first thought was: *“This place is more beautiful than one could image by reading books or seeing some pictures before coming here”*. I received a warm welcome by young people, while admiring the amazing decorations which recall the ancient architecture and heard the sweet water sound of the river.

A beautiful sunshine welcomes me the next morning while I have the breakfast in a beautiful terrace in front of the river. I read the latest papers about the monuments and I start my trip with a local guide who carefully explains to me the history of this place and describes to me about the monuments. Every temple is different from the others. Each of them has its own charm, history, and architecture. It is difficult to say which is the most beautiful and attractive. All of them entrances you into a fascinating atmosphere, namely, monks, women wearing coloured traditional dresses, sculptures and images painted and carved on and into the walls. Some local people kindly present you their holy objects, dresses and other wares.

Ananda Temple represents the originality and charm of the ancient architecture of the monuments, paintings and statues. The structure of the temple is formed by a cross on the ground level and above it a series of terraces becoming smaller while reaching the top, forming a sort of pyramid. The monument terminates with a gold pagoda. Situated in the middle of the temple at each of the four sides are situated four colossal standing statues of Buddha. The statues have a harmonious shape and it is worth to spend some minutes to contemplate their beauty, and particularly the position of the hands. Before reaching such statues, some meters before, at both side of the vestibules, are situated two smaller statues whose hands tell people to stop, kneel and venerate Buddha. In fact, this is the best place for admiring and venerating the colossal statues. On the inside walls which run around the temple are situated small statues of Buddha and carved or painted different holy images.

It is a delight to visit to all temples thanks also to the kindness of local people around you who sell their traditional objects and dresses, or enter for praying. Nobody bothers you for selling their wares, but they are happy to speak with you and help you.

I took off my shoes before entering to the well preserved Shwezigon Pagoda whose top can be seen from far away. This is the most important pagoda in Bagan and one of the most venerated in Myanmar. According to tradition, this monument contains the frontal bone and a tooth of Buddha. Different holy statues are situated around the cylindrical structure of the pagoda. A hole in the ground full of water at one of the sides of the pagoda reflects the pinnacle through a geometrical illusion. The various colours of the dresses wearing by local people and the golden glimmering pagoda form a rainbow of infinite colours.

“Is there a beautiful view from the top of one of the monuments?”, I query the guide, *“Yes there is, but an earthquake ruined some of the temples and it is not possible to climb up some of them because of the risk of falling”*, she answers me. We ended the trip by admiring the other small monuments on the way to the Nan Myint Tower, which for me is situated too far from the main temples and pagodas and does not allow you to have a perfect and clear view of them also at sunset.

In the evening I celebrated the new year dancing around the fire with local peoples and some girls from Japan and UK. It was an amazing environment of joy, and happiness enshrouded us and it seemed a step back into the old age of the reign. The smiles and faces of local people expressed all the joy.

The following day, I completed the visit to the other temples and spoke with some local people about the life in Bagan. One of the girls kindly accompanied me to a temple ruined by the earthquake, but luckily safe for climbing up and admire a beautiful view of old Bagan and a wonderful sunset. I thanked the girl and she told me: *“We are very attached to old Bagan. Every day I see the various temples, I discover new things. The sun reflecting in the early morning on the temples and pagodas gives us an immense happiness”*.

I leave Bagan the following day for coming back to Mandalay where I have my plane to one of the islands in Thailand. Amazing memories of this place came to me at night before I sleep. During my trip, I met kind people with whom we shared experiences. Their coloured clothes, smiles, look and manners reflect the kindness, joy, simplicity, traditions and customs of this population and the ethnic groups to which they belong. In Myanmar live 135 different ethnic groups officially recognized which can be grouped into eight major groups, namely Kachin, Kayin, Kayah, Chin, Mon, Bamar, Rakhine and Shan.

These ethnic groups with their different coloured dresses and traditions and the places to visit look like characters and landscapes came out of a long dream.