

A Burmese Sunrise

written & photographed by omar samra

This is the first of several installments recounting the journey of a lone traveler who, for an entire year, dispensed with predictability and all comforts to chase a lifelong dream and experience what our multi-faceted world has to offer. *Omar Samra* takes on a journey that will implore you to pack a back-pack and take off on a voyage to get know your world on a more intimate level.



Honest writing is not easy. It must come to one naturally to start and never feel like a chore to finish. Attempting to relay experiences of a whole year is challenging at best. Especially when every step you take and every encounter that awaits you is a story in itself; a unique incident in a place so alien to one's mind that it seems of a different space altogether. For the benefit of an audience, sharing the experience and my own personal scrutiny, I shall endeavour to make sense of it all. Those who know me, also know that my writing is not flowery, neither it is necessary to be. Those who don't, and have never had the privilege of traversing to the farthest corners of the earth are about to find out that such beauty needs no language to do it justice. I am merely a vessel through which you may be able to catch a glimpse of something that is not of the every day. I can only hope that through these unadorned words, you too will one day decide to embark on a journey of your own.

Forgetfulness is a gift to man. What would life be like if one could perfectly feel exact emotions associated with a painful experience for the rest of their life? It is a gift that I fear has been bestowed on me in the most generous quantities. I often find myself akin to goldfish, forgetting names, directions and even what I just ate a few hours ago. However, when it comes to travelling in general, and my journey around the world in specific; I can still remember every single taste, sight and smell I experienced as if it were yesterday.

My journey I feel can be divided into three distinct chapters. The first, in Asia, took me from mystic temples of a forgotten Burma to the towering Himalayan Mountains of Nepal. From the Shaolin monasteries of central China, traversing north, through the Mongolian Gobi desert and Siberian wastelands to a more sensible European Russia. Second, in Central America, I switched from wanderer to worker, immersing myself in a voluntary marine conservation project in Costa Rica and a community project in Nicaragua. I then resumed travelling in those two countries, traversing jungles, scaling volcanoes and exploring the awe-inspiring Mayan temples in Honduras and Guatemala. Last, in South America, my trail took me from the upper echelons of the Peruvian Andean range to the lost cities of the Inca. Four-kilometre high altitude lakes of the Altiplano gave way to the tremendous salt flats and the blistering geysers of Uyuni. The driest place on our planet earth, the Atacama desert of Northern Chile, marked the beginning of a trail down the longest coast line in the world towards the astonishing glaciated lands of Patagonia. I remember nearing Antarctica and standing as the most southern man on the face of the continent on Chile's Isla Navarino before finally making my way to charming Buenos Aires and happy Brazil.

I'd love to say that the curiosity of embarking on such an adventure more than outweighed the confines of my daily life and social pressures, but the truth is that taking the decision to leave everything behind and embrace 'uncertainty' never came easily. At that time I had been living and working in Hong Kong as part of a six-month secondment from London and getting paid well. I was in a city full of character, surrounded by friends and beautiful women. An exotic weekend getaway to Thai white sandy beaches or a captivating Chinese town was a couple of hours' flight away or less. Life had a certain comfort to it that was akin to my days back home in Cairo. I began to feel life was too predictable, I could tell with reasonable certainty what I would be doing in the next three or four years and it scared me. There was so much more to see and do. The choice became clear. I would remove myself from those all too familiar comfort zones and re-educate myself by way of immersing myself in an endeavour that would engage and challenge my every sense. I was not alien to the experience, more than once I had, at my own choice; uprooted myself from my familiar surrounding to cities



“The light of the infant sun started to break through and the faces of some 2,200 pagoda’s of this enchanted land began to fill with texture”

where I knew no one and had to start as if from scratch. Yet, this would be a different experience altogether. A trip that lasted a whole year with the ambition of experiencing a considerable part of the world’s villages, towns, cities, diverse landscape and people, meant that I wouldn’t be able to stay in one place for too long. A lone traveller, I would follow my heart, wandering through the far reaches of this world in search of happiness and myself. It wouldn’t be easy, but then again I would have it no other way.

The Union of Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) marked the beginning of my trip. It was, and still is in a state of unrest. The government has absolute control over all resources and flow of information. The illusion of choice is not even there. Going to Burma and inevitably spending money meant putting more capital in the hands of a corrupt few who will do whatever they can to maintain their positions of authority. Keeping the country closed to the outside eye meant that with no witnesses to the injustice, the situation will never improve and the corrupt government will continue to keep its people in check with the most unorthodox of ways. One must make an informed decision before going and I’d like to think that I had weighed my options carefully.

My stay in the capital, Yangon, was eventful yet brief. It did enough, however, to wet my appetite to exploring more in this country. After a few days of travelling around Inle Lake, I eventually made my way westward to the ancient town of Bagan.

I remember climbing out of my narrow single bed, quietly getting dressed and tiptoeing through the corridor not to wake other travellers. In the darkness, I fumbled in my pockets looking for my bicycle-lock key. All bicycles looked identical, and naturally the very last one I tried was mine. The air was cool and refreshing. It would be months before I returned to live in a polluted city. I smiled entertaining the thought a while longer. I took calm deep breaths through my nostrils, feeling my lungs fill with the clean air. The plan was to see the legendary sunrise over the city of Bagan from one of its higher temples. I’d have to find a way to get into and climb to the top of the temple, but first I needed to find one. Half an hour of intense cycling later and darkness still prevailed with my goal nowhere in sight. Sensing time no longer on my side, I decided to jump off the bike and continue the search on foot so I can navigate better through the uncut grass.

Ten minutes later and still no luck. My hopes began to falter. Suddenly a voice jumped at me as if out of nowhere, “you wan’ see sun-ruy?” Startled, I looked behind me. A little girl quickly explained in broken English how little time I had to see the sunrise and that she knew an entrance to one of the bigger temples. With no wish to take any chances, I nodded in silent approval and followed the local Burmese girl through the long grass. Her quick pace soon developed into a run as she navigated through the grassy maze as if it were a large well-defined footpath. Suddenly we veered to the left and stopped in front of a small corrugated metal door with an oversized pad lock. The girl shuffled in her small pocket in what sounded like one hundred and one keys, then craftily pulled out the exact key that unlocked the door. A smiling Buddha figure greeted us as we went into the main chamber of the temple. There was no time to stop and admire as the girl quickly made another sharp turn leading me into a narrow door. For an instance it looked like I would not even fit through there. The girl took one glance back at me, ushering with her hand to follow and gracefully sprinted up a narrow flight of stairs to the side while humming a catchy Burmese tune. I quickly climbed after her, albeit with much less finesse, trying my best not to bump my head into the very low ceiling.



All at once, we emerged from the darkness of the tunnel to the top of the temple. The girl motioned me to move closer towards the ledge and get a better view. She quickly retreated in a corner, as if appreciating my need for solitude amidst these breathtaking surroundings. The world around me was engulfed in darkness. And the many pagodas springing from the earth in the vast land ahead of me were nothing but dark opaque objects. Minutes later, red and yellow textures slowly emerged blending into the horizon as the sun began to lazily crawl over. The light of the infant sun started to break through and the faces of some 2,200 pagoda’s of this enchanted land began to fill with texture. The sky softened with a pale light that had the effect of adding a strip of soft blue and violet to the magnificent array of colours unfolding before my eyes. The mask over the temples unveiled faster now and the deep red and brown colours of the stuccoes became more prominent. Then, as if in celebration; the sun’s rays made a final break, shining brilliantly over and through the magnificent temples like a veteran actor standing gracefully on stage as curtains rise amidst tremendous applause. The moment faded into eternity, time stood still in witness of it all and I felt like I was in a different space altogether. A subtle energy flowed through my body and I smiled, wishing it would go on forever...

A few seconds more and it was over, the full colours of the spectrum manifested in just minutes as the sun ascended over the earth signalling a brand new day. Regaining sense of time and space, I was teleported back to the earthly stone ledge where I sat with feet dangling in the air. I breathed deeply, savouring the moment for seconds longer than made my way down again with the girl, albeit this time in a slower reflective manner.

A precious artwork is made all the more valuable by being unique. In one moment, the artist transcends his own abilities and expectations to produce a piece of work that is so brilliant, it is almost prophetic. Equally, in life, there are no ordinary moments. Never again will elements and forces come together in the very same way to manifest themselves to you. What I experienced on that morning was magical and I shall forever remember every time my eyes look far into the rising and setting sun. ☺

Background: Sunrise over Bagan, the city of two thousand pagodas. More of Omar’s Burma photography next page.



One of the many temples in Burma



Worship area inside the Myanmar temple



Omar's bike rests at a stop after cycling through Bagan for an entire day



The largest Buddhist temple in Myanmar, the Temple Of Myanmar



Omar in the colorful setting of the largest temple in Myanmar



One of Bagan's more than two thousand pagodas



Young Buddhist students in an alleyway in Yangon heading up to a monastery



A local woman in a poor village smoking tobacco hand wrapped in a leaf



A local market in Yangon



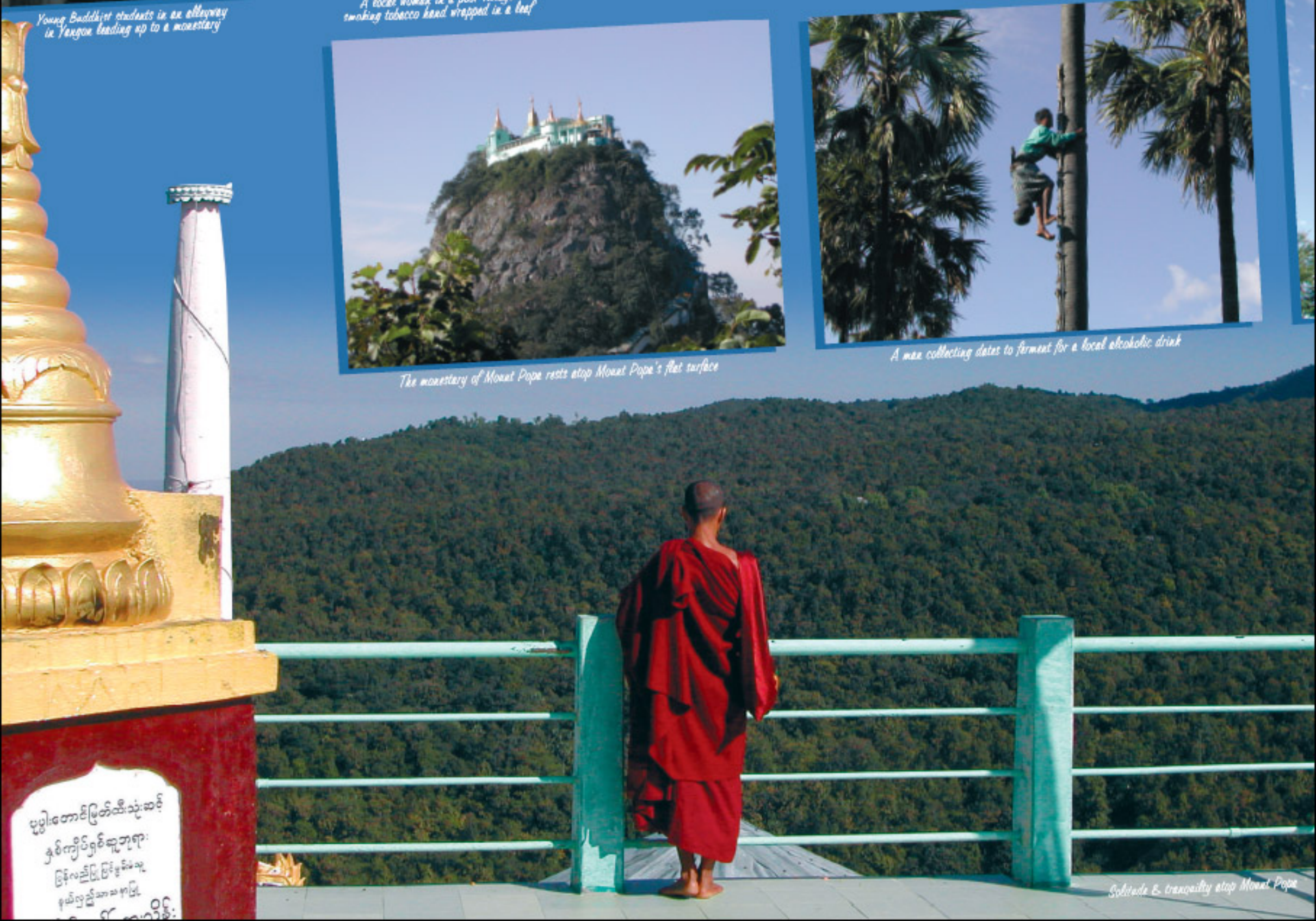
Stray monkeys in the streets of Myanmar



The monastery of Mount Pope rests atop Mount Pope's flat surface



A man collecting dates to ferment for a local alcoholic drink



Solitude & tranquility atop Mount Pope