Story and photos by Fred Gebhart

Reporter's Notebook showcases the travel experiences and encounters of *Travel Professional*'s top editorial contributors, in their own words, covering an eclectic range of events, topics and product introductions.

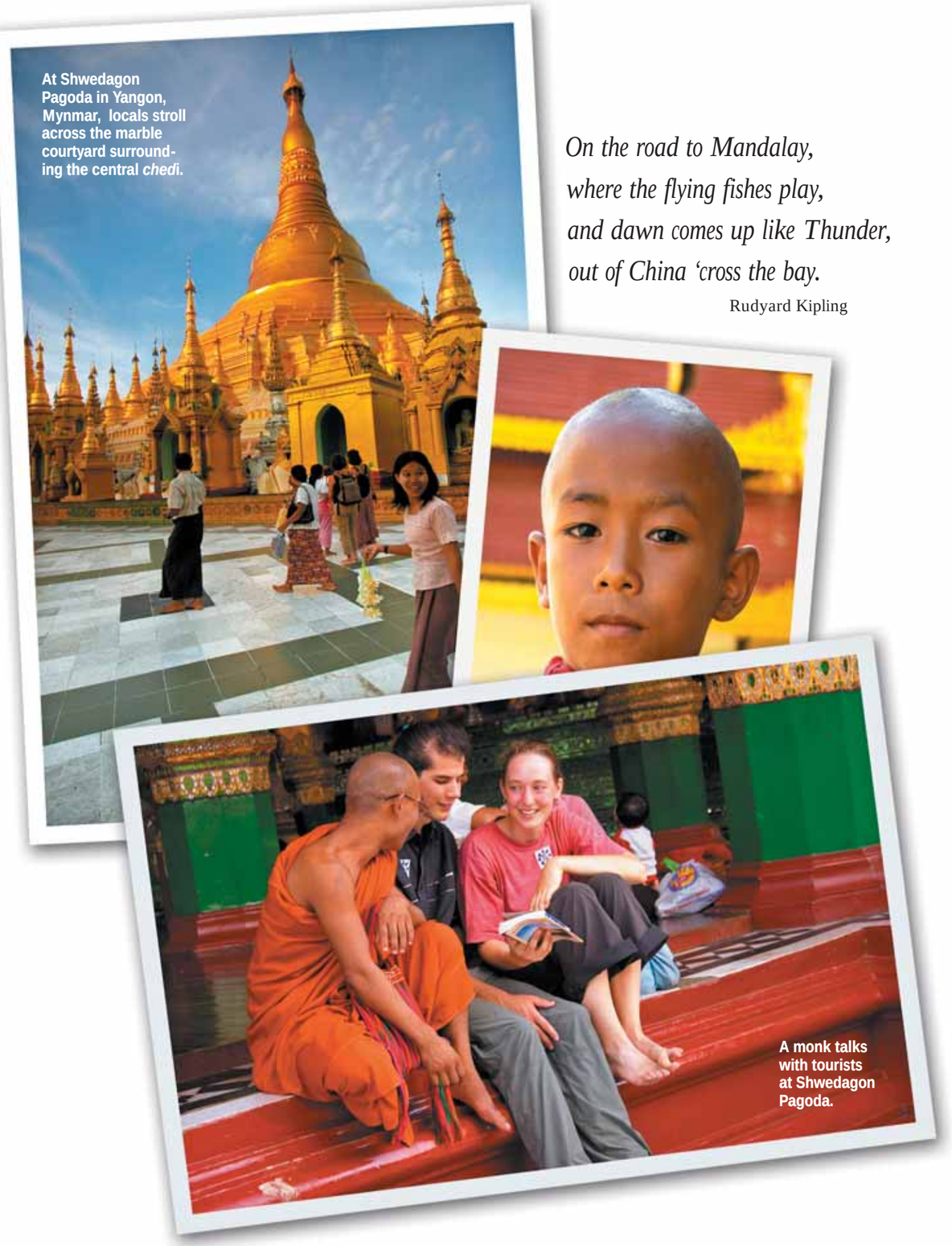
Mynmar Takes On Tourism

The country formerly known as Burma wants more visitors

If British poet Rudyard Kipling had ever visited Mandalay, he might have realized that the city sits landlocked in the middle of the country once known as Burma, hundreds of miles from the nearest flying fish or from China. But Kipling's romanticized visions still set expectations for visitors to India, Malaysia, and his old stomping grounds, now called Myanmar (pronounced *ME-ann-mar*).

Most U.S. tour operators offering Asia include Myanmar, from Absolute Asia to Abercrombie & Kent, Brendan, Geographic Expeditions, Isram, Pacific Delight, Travcoa, and more. While political concerns and U.S. government sanctions have discouraged travel to Myanmar in recent years, the country wants to welcome more North American visitors.

In September, frequent *Travel Professional* contributor Fred Gebhart joined Exotissimo, one of the largest destination management companies in Southeast Asia and a long-time Myanmar ground operator, for a whirlwind familiarization tour of Yangon, Bagan, Mandalay, and Inle Lake, Myanmar's most popular destinations. Many are included in U.S. tour packages.



At Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon, Mynmar, locals stroll across the marble courtyard surrounding the central *chedi*.

A monk talks with tourists at Shwedagon Pagoda.

On the road to Mandalay,
where the flying fishes play,
and dawn comes up like Thunder,
out of China 'cross the bay.

Rudyard Kipling

REAL IS A BLURRY CONCEPT in the country formerly known as Burma. After all, Myanmar is the country that prompted colonial policeman George Orwell to pen 1984, a society in which black becomes white and wrong becomes right by government decree.

So it probably shouldn't have been a surprise when our tour guide handed out plain brown envelopes on the bus ride from Yangon International Airport to Trader's Hotel in downtown Yangon. Inside each envelope was the black market equivalent of $30, a wad of 1,000 kyat (pronounced chat) notes thick enough and crisp enough to be rolled into a small club.

"Everybody uses the black market in Myanmar, government officials, hotels, business people, tour operators, tourists, locals," said George Ehrlich-Adam, general manager of Exotissimo Myanmar, which hosted a small fam trip in September. "The official exchange rate is six kyat to the dollar, the black market rate today is 1,320. That's down from about 850 three years ago. The kyat has lost 40% of its value in 36 months."

What's the single most important thing to know about Myanmar? In 1950, the kyat and the Thai baht were about equal in value.

In September, 2006, the baht was worth about 37 to the U.S. dollar versus 1,320 to one for the kyat. Most prices here are quoted in dollars, and an envelope filled with dollar bills is a traveler's best friend.

"When I was a child, in the 1950s, Burma was the richest country in all of Southeast Asia," said a well-dressed man who I chatted with briefly at Shwedagon Pagoda later that first day. He was wearing a crisp white shirt and a longhi, the traditional wrap-around skirt still worn by most men and women in Myanmar.

"Today we are the poorest. We had the best schools, the best-educated people, the most roads, the busiest seaport, the best hospitals and doctors. Today, we have the poorest schools, the worst roads, the quietest port, and doctors who do their best with old equipment and very few supplies. But I can say that we are the first in one area: We have the fattest generals in all of Asia."

After we finished chuckling, my anonymous acquaintance melted into the late afternoon crowd of worshipers and tourists slowly circling clockwise around Shwedagon's gleaming golden pagoda. Open criticism of Myanmar's military rulers is common, but only in relatively private settings such as large crowds or among friends.

Faded Glory

Yangon, indeed all of Myanmar, is a visual time warp. Billboards for the latest hip-hop concerts cluster at major intersections while low colonial-era buildings molder in decaying elegance. Except for Trader's and one or two other towers, central Yangon looks much as it did when British rule ended in 1948, just a little worse for wear.

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What's In A Name ?

MYANMAR OR BURMA? Expect to hear both, as well as phrases such as "my country" or "this country" that let the speaker avoid using either name. Antigovernment groups use Burma. The government uses Myanmar. But outside the political arena, differences are based more on habit and age.

"When I was brought up and educated, we lived in Burma, so Myanmar does not trip so easily from my tongue," explained 30-something tour guide Tin Win Maw. "But if you look at history, Myanmar is the traditional name of our country."

The place was called Myanmar at least as long ago as the 13th century, when Kublai Khan swept down from China to destroy Bagan, leaving 4,000 or so temples in ruins and not much else. Burma is a 19th century British creation, based on the name of the majority ethnic group, the Bermans, or Burmese.

In 1989, the ruling military junta replaced many Anglicized names with the originals to mark a break with the colonial past. Burma became Myanmar, Rangoon became Yangon, Pagan became Bagan, and so on. The result is a sometimes-confusing patchwork of names.

The U.S. State Department lists its embassy address in Rangoon, Burma, with no mention of Myanmar. Lonely Planet, which publishes the guidebook most often seen in the hands of U.S. travelers, calls its volume Myanmar (Burma).

"People here tend to use Myanmar for official purposes or in pubic places and whatever they are more comfortable with at other times," said, Exotissimo Myanmar general manager George Ehrlich-Adam. "In everyday conversation, I think you are going to hear both names for many years. But whatever happens, I'm not sure that Burma will ever come back." — F.G.

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Most structures seem to have enjoyed a single new coat of paint in the last 60 years, and that in the build-up to "Visit Myanmar Year 1996." Full-grown trees sprout from roof gutters four stories above busy streets. Even the venerable Strand Hotel, restored to original 1901 elegance, is again showing the years with worn carpets and hairline cracks in the Edwardian marble flooring, all disguised by gleaming teak, lazy ceiling fans, and impeccable service.

Little of Yangon has been replaced by modern high-rise buildings, which gives the city an appealing antique look compared to the skyscraper bustle of Singapore or Bangkok. Old buildings tend to get reused, not replaced, from the former British governor's mansion, now the five-star Pansea Orient-Express Governor's Residence hotel, to the vacant warehouse reborn as Monsoon, a high-ceilinged pan-Asian restaurant popular with local entrepreneurs and expa

Modern technology has made little obvious impact. Cell phones are available, but initiating service costs about $3,000. The cell system is deliberately incompatible with Blackberry and international roaming services.

Offices hum with computers, but Internet access is limited and censored. Signs in hotel business centers and Internet cafes warn that web-based services such as Hotmail, Yahoo Mail, GMail, and MS Messenger are officially blocked. At the same time, anyone who uses a computer seems to have an email address with at least one of the banned services.

"Internet is a very serious game," explained a hotel staffer helping access my Earthlink email address. "We build new back doors, censors close them, we make new ways to work around the firewall. Little by little, two steps forward and one and three-quarters steps back, we are changing things."

The view looking down on the marble lobby of the Strand Hotel in Yangon, Mynmar, with staff showing guests into the dining room.

Myanmar's government has its own successes. The former capital of Bagan,

"When I was a child, in the 1950s, Burma was the richest country in all of Southeast Asia. Today we are the poorest."

— resident of Mynmar

Most prices here are quoted in dollars, and an envelope filled with dollar bills is a traveler's best friend.

an hour north of Yangon by air, remains the single most popular attraction in the country. Kick at the red, sandy soil and you're likely to uncover part of an 800 year-old brick or some other artifact.

The ruins of nearly 2,400 catalogued temples lie scattered across 18 square miles on the dry, sandy plain next to the Ayeyarwaddy River. Most are literal ruins, fallen walls or overgrown piles of weathered brick. A few have been restored to active use, which means visitors leave shoes and socks at the front gate. Try to visit early in the day – the tropical sun turns marble courtyards blisteringly hot by midmorning, even during the June - October rainy season.

Rebuilding the Past

Want your name on a temple? It takes as little as $3,000 donated to the archaeological restoration service that oversees Bagan. The hitch? The restoration done in your name may be more impressive than real.

"Westerners tend to value age and historical accuracy," Ehrlich-Adam noted. "In Myanmar, old is just old. Most people think new is better. If you look at the restoration in Bagan, most of it looks like a cinema set. Historical accuracy is less important than looking impressive."

That puts Bagan in sharp contrast to Angkor Wat in Cambodia. At first glance, Angkor is more imposing, with its massive stone faces and fallen temples overgrown by jungle. Bagan is more a symphony that builds. At some point, maybe on the back of a horse cart bouncing slowly over a rutted track, maybe on a second story temple platform accessible only by cramped, near-vertical stairs lit by flicking candles, comes the revelation that the maze of irregular mounds, broken spires, and rounded stupas once formed a city the size of lower Manhattan.

Restored or original, the ruins of Bagan are surrounded by small fields of corn, peanuts, beans, and other crops. What is missing is villages. They were moved a few miles away to New Bagan in the 1990s. The evictions left Bagan to the tourists and a handful of hotels.

> "Little by little, two steps forward and one and three-quarters steps back, we are changing things."
>
> *— resident of Mynmar*

For years, the automatic choice was the 86-room Hotel at Tharabar Gate, just outside the historic entrance to the ruined city. The only alternative was a rundown government guest house.

Today, there is no automatic choice. Tharabar still has the best location to explore the ruins, but the riverside Thiripyitsaya has the best spa and the best river view suites. The newly-opened, all-villa Aureum Palace has the most impressive views across the ruins. Ignore conventional wisdom and book the low-end Jasmine villas – a design quirk left Aureum's more expensive villas with limited views.

Inle Lake has its own controversy, more political than historical. Located in the Shan State, a mountainous region on the border with Thailand, Inle was largely independent under the British and would like to stay that way. Hoteliers convinced the government to limit lakeside development, both to forestall competition and to avoid pollution linked with overbuilding.

Travel agents on the Exotissimo fam enjoy the scenery along the shores of Inle Lake, Mynmar.

"There are two ways to run a hotel," said U Ohn Maung, managing director of the lakefront Inle Princess Resort. "You can compete on price or you can hold your price and compete on ser-

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vice. Better to sell one room at $200 than ten rooms at $20. When occupancy improves, those $20 guests won't pay $200 and you will be stuck at the bottom of the market. But the $200 guest will tell his friends and rooms will fill up."

That's tough love when occupancy falls toward 20%, as it does every June. It sounds better as rates climb toward 40% and 50% in August and September. By November and December, when advance bookings are running 90% and above, holding the price lines starts to look like genius. In Myanmar, separating reality from wishful thinking is no easier in the hotel business than it is in politics.

A group of tourists and their guide leaving the inside of a temple in Bagan, Mynmar. The 'no shoes' warning sign is in Burmese and English.

Sanctions and Credit Cards

In 2003, the United States and the European Union imposed economic sanctions on Myanmar. The goal, according to U.S. President George Bush, was to encourage the ruling generals to recognize the 1989 election that the military government lost by a landslide and to free imprisoned opposition leader (and Nobel Peace Prize winner) Aung San Suu Kyi.

Sanctions forced every foreign bank and most foreign-owned business to pull out of Myanmar. Without international banking access, credit cards and travelers checks could not be used. Transactions that couldn't be settled in cash just didn't happen, at least not officially.

"Sanctions had zero effect on travel agents, tour operators, and DMCs (destination management companies)," explained Lee Marona, president of Exotissimo USA during a dinner in Bagan. "When a client pays a travel agent or a tour operator, who pays us or one of our competitors here, every penny goes to accounts in countries like Thailand, Singapore, or Hong Kong that don't have sanctions. Everything is prepaid and no money ever goes to Burma.

"Who the sanctions hurt are local restaurants, tour guides, merchants, anyone who lacks those international connections. If you want to buy something on impulse in any other country in Southeast Asia, you whip out plastic and buy it. In Burma, you have to use cash. There are no ATMs or places to cash travelers checks. People worry about running out of cash, so they scrimp.

"Say you want to give your guide a bonus because he or she did a such great job ... will that leave you stranded next week? You want to splurge on wine with dinner, but will you still have cash for the departure tax? You really want that lacquer chest, but you have to think about the hotel bill. People spend less locally because they're afraid they will run out of cash."

Paper or Plastic

But once in Myanmar, you will almost certainly see familiar credit card logos discretely displayed at hotels, tour agencies, even a few upscale restaurants and souvenir shops. Some firms accept travelers checks, with fees starting around 14% because checks must be taken to a bank outside Myanmar for payment.

"If you ask Visa and MasterCard and American Express, they all tell you, officially, that their cards and checks are not valid in Myanmar," said Roland Rohrer, general manager of the Hotel at Tharabar Gate in Bagan. "But official is a code word. It means there is a back door. It might cost you 5%, 8% extra, but you can use your credit card here. If George Bush thinks sanctions stop credit cards, maybe somebody should tell him about the Internet."

There are two ways to use plastic despite sanctions, Rohrer explained. One relies on PayPal or a similar online payment system that credits card payments to an offshore bank account. The other is credit card merchant accounts in a nonsanction country.

Most businesses that deal with large numbers of foreigners and relatively large balances use both methods, he said. That provides a back up in case of Internet or approval problems. It also drives up the cost of doing business here, which accounts for the unofficial credit card surcharge.

But even the best backed up plans can go astray. One of our group tried to pay her hotel charges by credit card. Internet access was down and the international telephone line was so buggy the merchant bank rejected the charge because of transmission errors. Three $20 bills later, we were on our way. — F.G.