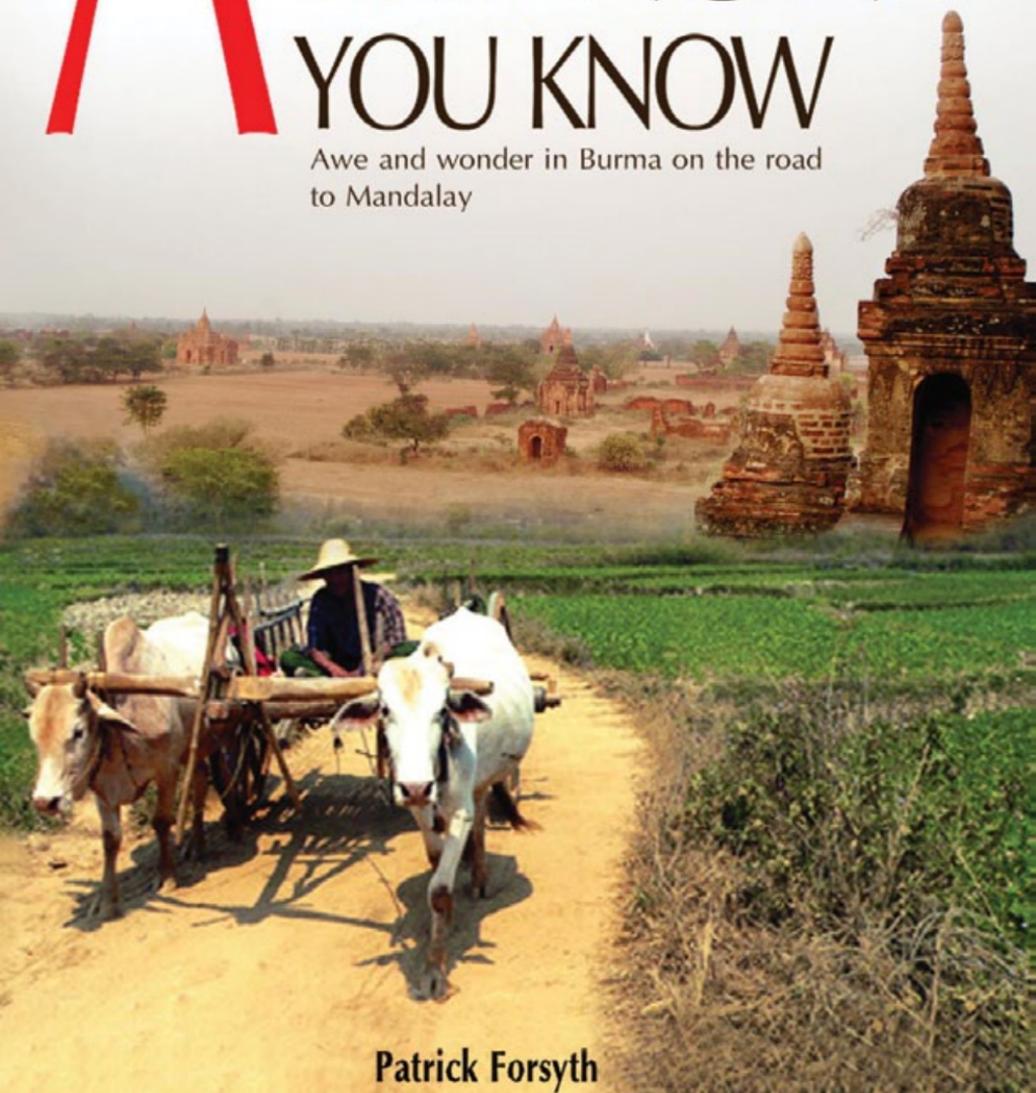


A LAND LIKE NONE YOU KNOW

Awe and wonder in Burma on the road
to Mandalay



Patrick Forsyth

A LAND LIKE NONE YOU KNOW

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Text by

Patrick Forsyth

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For Anna (without you ...) and, of course, Sue too (ditto).

A Land Like None You Know

Praise for “First class at last!”

“... lively, witty and wry” *Select Books*

“Sick to death of budget airlines and cramped hotel rooms, Forsyth decides to blow the budget and take a long trip in luxury. While his writing is witty, it is hardly a revelation that things are more comfortable in first class. But, if you miss the days of the empire, agree with him that Belgium is boring and that everyone on cruises is horrible, then this will be a treat.” *The Good Book Guide*

“... witty and full of interesting facts” *Essex Life*

“... it reminded me of Bryson ...” Neal Asher (bestselling author of *Gridlinked*)

A Land Like None You Know

“... quite unlike any land you know about ...”

Rudyard Kipling (who visited Burma a century ago)

A Land Like None You Know

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Since the journey described here was made and since I finished writing this book, further anti-government protests have occurred in Burma. The world was shocked by pictures in the press and on television of monks being shot while making peaceful protest, but little international action followed. Then in May 2008 a cyclone hit the delta, more than a hundred thousand people were either injured, died or lost their homes and the Burmese government's slow reaction and refusal of immediately-offered international aid signalled again to the world the nature of the regime that holds this wonderful country in its grip. Many more will suffer or die as a result. There are those who help and try to change things, but there is clearly more to be done, so let me end this note by listing the details of the Burma Campaign UK.

Burma Campaign UK
28 Charles Square
London
N1 6HT
Tel: +44 (0)207 324 4713
Fax: +44 (0)207 324 4717
www.burmacampaign.org.uk

If you want to find out more or help, you can get in touch and they can tell you more.

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PROLOGUE

“To have a grievance is to have a purpose in life”

Eric Heffer

Antidote time

There were two reasons for me undertaking the journey described here: one was an old song—and the other was an objectionable man called Harold.

Harold sat next to me on a long-haul flight to Singapore. He was two sizes too big for the meagre economy seat and he announced as he sat down, or rather collapsed into the seat from a great height, “I’m going to make your flight hell,” and he did.

Who was it that said, “Hell is other people”? Whoever it was, they probably had to fly economy. Of course, flying is a modern marvel. Turn up at the airport and a few hours later you can be on the other side of the world. Wonderful. Well, provided you ignore the journey to the airport, the queues, security checks and general angst that pervades the process of actually getting onto a plane it is. And sometimes the flight itself can be a relatively tolerable experience; certainly it is better than the months on a boat to get to say Australia, which people had to suffer in the years of sailing ships. But, and it’s a big but, there is much about the whole process that can be miserable: the seats are too small, the food is dire, the time change on long haul flights adds another hazard to surmount and you need a holiday when you get to the other end just to recover and get ready for your holiday.

I was brought up by the sea and travelled little as a child. When I was young, I thought going down to the beach hut we had below a small cliff a couple of hundred yards from the house was a holiday. Going to the Channel Islands as a teenager was a great adventure and I remember going abroad for the first time on business in my early twenties being very daunting. “I don’t speak any French,” I told my boss before leaving to attend a conference in Nice. “No matter,” he replied, “I’ll write down what you need to be able to say.” When I looked at his note on the plane it set out the French for two phrases: the first was, *May I have a beer, please?* And the second was, *My friend will pay.* For years since then, just like most people, I guess, all my travel has been conditioned by a budget. Whenever I face the prospect of the costs involved, certainly of travelling long haul, it brings on an attack of my IBS—that’s irritable bank syndrome. Many of us balance where we go, and how long we stay, with the cost. Most trips involve compromise, and despite the large costs involved I work at reducing other costs in a vain attempt to make a trip seem reasonable. Consider doing your laundry when you are away. A large hotel will charge a substantial amount, enough to make you wonder whether to have a clean shirt or another beer. In Thailand, which I have visited often, there is a little laundry near my favourite hotel, which will do the entire accumulated laundry of two people from a week’s travelling for the cost of not much more than a pint of beer. Collecting my laundry from there on one occasion it was presented neatly wrapped as always, but without the laundry bag I had used to bring it in. The laundry lady produced a large pile of such drawstring bags and sorted through them all to find mine. Every single one was from a select hotel: Shangri-La, Mandarin Oriental, and others; and I bet that, like mine, they had all been taken to compensate for high laundry prices. Though, in my defence, I have had mine for many years going back to a time when they were a give away item. Really.

Despite everything to do with cost I decided, just for once and as an antidote to a lifetime’s travel nightmares, to blow the budget and set up a trip on a wholly different basis: going first class in every way. It was a revelation. The journey was truly wonderful (and I wrote about it in my book *First class at last!*), but it was all too

soon over and my subsequent journeys were arranged, as before, with due deference to costs, even those necessary to keep my shirts in pristine condition. However, I had been spoiled now and after my one truly exceptional journey I found I resented all the various economy class discomforts even more than in the past.

And then I came across Harold.

It was when I was going to Singapore on business. I was travelling in what a friend of mine calls scum class. For ten minutes as people boarded the plane the seat next to mine had remained tantalisingly empty. I was by the window, and a woman of uncertain age was ensconced in the aisle seat reading a copy of *The Lady*. She looked unlikely to drink too much or play loud rock music that would spill out of her iPod into the surrounding air. She looked more likely to get out her knitting. There was not a baby in sight either—so far so good. At that stage of the boarding process it is always almost impossible not to harbour the impossible dream of having an empty seat next to you. You watch everyone coming down the aisle willing them to walk on past. Other passengers in your immediate area can help make a flight tolerable or turn it into something worse than a day trip to Hades. On other forms of transport it is possible to make some attempt to fend off people intent on sitting next to you. On a train or bus say, the best tactic is not, as people sometimes believe, to pile baggage of some sort on the seat alongside you. The kind of people you want to discourage, and send on past you down the aisle, will always take a perverse delight in making you move it. A better approach is to leave the seat empty. Then, as someone approaches it, you flash a maniacal smile at them and pat the seat next to you encouragingly. No one wants to sit next to the nutter on the bus and so, doubting your sanity, they tend to pass you by. But on a plane, seats are usually pre-allocated, certainly on scheduled and long haul flights. The battle for seats on a “free seating” budget airline is another matter, and another horror. But if someone has been allocated the seat number next to you then they will almost certainly sit in it and there is precious little you can do about it. Keeping your fingers crossed or praying to some imagined seat selection god is sadly vanishingly unlikely to make any difference.

If you are unlucky then you can be stuck with the source of

that bad luck for many hours. Even a small thing can add to the unavoidable irritations in a big way. Someone who has had too much to drink or talks incessantly, the kind of premature articulation that won't let you get a word in even to say shut up, can be a nightmare. On another occasion I sat near a woman with a piercing, raucous and uncouth voice, who punctuated every phrase with "like"; a minor disturbance perhaps, but over time it soon became maddening. My quiet neighbour and I exchanged glances at one point when her latest outburst ended in a shriek of laughter and he said, "Just think, that must be the first sound the poor guy with her hears every morning". Right: there's always someone worse off than you are, and that's actually not such a bad thought to keep in mind when you are flying.

So, as these thoughts and reminiscences ran through my mind, my designated fellow traveller lurched into view. He was carrying a ridiculous amount of baggage, with his various odd-shaped parcels brushing the heads of people already seated as he passed. He dumped half of them across the lady in the aisle seat who looked as horrified as I felt, then leant to and fro to retrieve them and put them into the overhead locker. He was both ordinary, yet at the same time threatening. His face was sweaty and so, my nose soon discovered, were his armpits. Aged about forty and already dressed for the beach, his long Bermuda shorts were of a curtain material favoured by those with neither taste nor a need for sunglasses. His shirt was coming adrift from his shorts, a process made worse by several buttons being undone, and a section of his large stomach was visible. He looked as if he kept a bulldog and ran a tattoo parlour. He didn't actually say he was going to make my flight hell, of course, but his demeanour spoke unmistakable volumes.

He flopped into his seat, said "Good morning, I'm Harold", planted his left elbow firmly in my ribs, his earphones in his ears and called the cabin attendant demanding a drink even while other passengers continued to board the plane. The attendant whose eye he had caught smiled back at him, but her eyes flashed a look that could have burnt holes in the aircraft's hull. "Listen you ignorant lout," she said, "Just wait and be quiet until we are in the air then I might get you something, though only if your behaviour improves

markedly and remains good throughout the flight.” Sadly, of course, she said no such thing, just murmured sweetly that she would be back as soon as possible. But I wished that she had said something that fierce and so did the aisle lady, I am sure.

None of this boded well, and some hours on, as my attempts at sleep were constantly thwarted by his moving, snorting, breaking wind and the buzz of some primitive rhythm issuing from whatever music player was tucked into his shirt pocket, my worst fears were surpassed. It was the longest flight of my life. I read recently that astronomers have announced the discovery of the most Earth-like exoplanet yet. It orbits the memorably named star Gliese 581, and is itself catchily named HD 69830d. It is more than 120 trillion miles away in the direction of the Libra constellation, and orbits just the right distance from its sun to be able to support life. They reckon there is water on it. It is a bit larger than the Earth, so that gravity would be greater and a great step for mankind there would take a fair old effort. Still, the item I read in the newspaper actually quoted one Xavier Delfosse of Grenoble University as saying, “... this planet will most probably be a very important target of the future space missions dedicated to the search for extraterrestrial life.” When I read this I thought that surely the distance ruled out any thoughts about going there, however much fun it might be to meet any 69830dlings living there, certainly until something is invented to make a simple journey like going to Singapore a bit easier. Now looking back on that Singapore flight, I reckon I’ll sign up for the space flight, the journey time would surely seem to be as nothing compared with a trip with Harold.

As he pumped his elbows yet again I made a decision. I would organise another exceptional trip, one that took me away from all this sort of thing and was again first class all the way. Harold still made that flight a miserable one, but I tried to ignore his ever moving elbow and dwelt on my decision to plan another special trip; doing so did make me feel a little better.

What I had to do next was to decide where in the world I should go. As the flight time went slowly by, I watched a movie and then turned over to one of the music channels, more to keep my earphones in and Harold out of my consciousness than because I wanted to

listen to music. The music playing as I switched on was an easy listening selection, which for the most part meant easily ignored and easily forgotten, but one track did grab my attention. Frank Sinatra launched into the song *Road to Mandalay*.

*On the road to Mandalay,
Where the flying fishes play,
And the dawn comes up like thunder,
Out of China cross the bay.*

It is an old standard, featured originally I think on his album *Come fly with me*, so perhaps appropriately being played to me at 30,000 feet. The words were sort of familiar, not least because the song is derived from a poem written by Rudyard Kipling, titled simply *Mandalay*, which is in fact in the voice of an old soldier, back from the wars and remembering his time in the exotic place.

A few minutes slipped by as I half listened to this, my mind roamed somewhat and I found myself asking “Mandalay. Wherever is that?” But I also found I couldn’t answer my own question with any certainty. The song spoke of pagodas and contained the line “China cross the bay”—presumably indicating that the place was in the East but, although it was a place the name of which I knew, I found I could not place it. I snoozed and when I stirred—Harold was on the move again—I found that the music programme had gone full circle and reached the same song again. This time I took in another line in the lyrics: *From Rangoon to Mandalay*. Rangoon I did know: that was the capital of Burma, a country lying just north and west of Thailand, and Thailand was a country that I had visited many times. Mandalay suddenly sounded exotic and mysterious and it had to be somewhere nearby.

It sounded good. I had already decided to set up another trip as an antidote to being Haroldised. To this intention I now added an intriguing destination—I decided I would go to Burma to visit exotic Mandalay, and I would do so in some style. I was adamant. The only thing that would put me off would be to discover that Harold had the same intention. He had finally lapsed into a deep and noisy sleep so I could not ask him, but I hoped it was unlikely.

Some days later, that flight over and consigned to be forgotten before it put me off ever wanting to travel again, and on my return

to England with my resolve still firm, I set about finding out more and making arrangements for the trip. Would my initial feeling that Mandalay was an irresistible destination hold up in the cold light of day, or was my idea as doomed as my attempts to pretend that Harold was not making every moment of my flight miserable?

Chapter 1

A FEARFULLY GOOD IDEA

*“Dangers bring fears, and
fears more dangers bring.”*

Richard Baxter

Having established that Mandalay is in Burma, I did a little research to give me a more precise picture. Knowing other parts of South East Asia to some extent, I certainly knew of Burma. My knowledge though was not in any way detailed, but more random. For example, I did know that Burmese cats are not Burmese but come from Thailand, not that that is vital information to making a visit to either country. If I was to make another special trip it had to be a good choice of destination. I bought a guidebook. The *Insight Guide* was the first one I chose, partly because it looked beautifully illustrated and partly because I found a second hand copy of the latest edition on Amazon's web site. I was not into major spending just yet. It arrived as promised and had the word Burma on the cover, with the word Myanmar in smaller type. In 1989 the

Burmese Government changed the name of the country. What was officially called the Union of Burma became the Union of Myanmar. This was a move made not without considerable contention; it is said that it was part of an attempt to rewrite history and have many events from the past forgotten. Still the name Burma hangs on and remains in use with perhaps most people around the world, so I will use it here, just as the *Insight* guide does.

Scanning only a few pages showed that the country looked both beautiful and fascinating. The guide referred to its “eternal beauty”, it called it “magical” and even a cursory glance at the photographs seemed to demonstrate their point. They showed temples, rolling countryside, unspoiled looking towns and villages, elephants, markets, temples, smiling faces—many covered with patches of thanaka, a sandalwood paste traditionally used to protect the skin from the sun—spectacular sunsets, river scenes and one more thing ... yet more temples.

I found that this was a country with history and tradition going back thousands of years, a turbulent history with wars aplenty and, like so many parts of the world, with a period spent under British colonial rule. A “land of gold” populated by “a deeply religious and dignified people,” *Insight* said and, by the look of it, with more temples than Britain has parking meters. Mountainous in the north where it links to the Himalayas, the country narrows to the south and can be described as consisting almost entirely of a river valley. The Irrawaddy river, which I better call the Ayeyarwady since the government changed its name at the same time as that of the country and various towns, runs for more than 2000 miles from the mountains in the North to the lush delta lands in the South where it discharges into the Andaman Sea. The built up silt of the delta harbours some ten million acres of rice growing and makes Burma a minor food exporter, especially to India, though in economic terms the quantities are pathetic and any major potential revenue earning opportunity is largely stillborn. It is said that the country and the river are one. The Burmese call it a “kind river”, because it brings life and it remains largely unpolluted as no factories populate its banks. It is a powerful river too, changing with the seasons, and in places swelling by four times in width and becoming up to 4 miles

across in the wet season. In the nineteenth century traditional dispatch boats, powered by forty rowers, took ten days to travel from Rangoon to Mandalay against the current, and four days in the opposite direction. In the dry season, with the river low and quieter, the journey time reduced in both directions.

First impressions were good. The city of Yangon, as the capital Rangoon is now known, is only a short flight from Bangkok. Incidentally did anyone in the government give a thought to how many additional keystrokes all this name changing would make people have to make to write about their country and explain these changes? Imagine if it was suddenly decided to change the name of England to something like Blairland; and don't think the thought has not crossed his mind—and *by the way Oxford is now Cherieford*. It could happen; whoever is in power. Another town, Bagan, doubtless also newly named, was set half way to Mandalay and both it and Mandalay were on the river. So a visit to Mandalay could surely be made along the river. I have something of a distaste for large boats and rough seas, or rather my stomach does, but then so did Admiral Nelson, who was evidently a martyr to sea-sickness and still managed to win a few great naval battles. However, pictures of the river all showed it looking sufficiently like the proverbial millpond to calm the fears in even my stomach. So maybe a plan was taking shape.

Unusually the guidebook started with a negative: it made reference to the dismal reputation of the Burmese Government—*junta* is a better word—with regard to human rights. It actually posed the question as to whether making a visit to the country might endorse or actively help support this oppressive regime and should thus be avoided, though it quickly moved on, saying that, “informed travellers must make up their own minds”. Not many guide books try to talk you out of visiting the place they have chosen to describe; though, now I think of it, perhaps something similar could be added to those written about a few other places—*Skip the rest of the book; go somewhere else*.

Burma's military government dates back to 1962, ever since when it has ruled with little popular support, and amid increasing unrest an opposition to the government was set up and the smiling

face of its female leader Aung San Suu Kyi quickly became known around the world. 1988 saw a bloody, but ineffectual, series of protests. It took place on 8th of August and “8888” has passed into the language as a mantra of dissatisfaction with the government and an expression of people’s desire for freedom and change. Aung San Suu Kyi’s NLD party (the National League for Democracy) won a convincing victory in an election, convincing to everyone that is except the ruling party who simply ignored the results and continued to rule. They have kept Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest for much of the ensuing years. This is no place for an extensive history lesson. Suffice to say that the situation has never been resolved: the government is repressive to the point of using slave labour to work on their chosen projects, some of which, like clearing land for a golf course, are linked to tourism. It spends nearly half of its total budget on its military despite the fact that 60% of the population lives in poverty, and allows one in ten babies to die before their fifth birthday because of the nation’s dismal healthcare. It imprisons anyone expressing dissent about government policies and imposes rigorous and widespread censorship.

A special state department called the PRSD (The Press Registration and Scrutiny Department) exists to handle censorship. It checks every single piece of published writing they can get their hands on, from school textbooks to newspapers and magazines. It is common to see magazines sold with pages cut out. There are obvious nos; you will not see the word democracy appearing anywhere for instance, but rules are vague and a variety of other topics can find disfavour and prompt the word *hpyoke* (remove) for little apparent reason. Some things are temporary. If the government falls out with a neighbouring state, all mention of that country, its people and anything about it will temporarily disappear. The army of people needed to carry out this task may be good for employment figures and scissors manufacturers, but it does not help inform the Burmese people’s view of the world. Publishers can be closed down for long enough to ruin them, so the official line is usually carefully observed. Even so, ways may be found to circumvent officialdom, and it is said that people read carefully between the lines of any apparently innocuous story about animals as allegory may be used to change the