

Dear Family and Friends,

I am still having a difficult time putting my experiences in Myanmar (previously Burma) into words. I left feeling both encouraged and discouraged. Encouraged by the people I met, and discouraged by the apparent poverty prevalent all over the country. Before coming to Myanmar I was imagining a government suppressive through military power, armed soldiers at every corner. However, this is not what I encountered. I actually never even saw a gun the entire time I was in the country. But this did not mean that I did not see oppression from the government. Most cities charged entrance fees said to be used for "archeological purposes" but everyone knew that it went directly to the military. Most goods were heavily taxed, curfews were enforced, and women had little rights. Myanmar has one of the poorest health care systems in the world. Although there is supposed to be 'socialized' medicine, patients end up having to pay under the table or bribe their doctors to perform certain procedures. As I write this I am realizing how horrible this might sound to an American who has so many freedoms. I am sure you are asking yourself "how can these people live in a country run by a military junta and still find happiness?" But after having spent a week in Myanmar I experienced a culture of people who have learned to make the best of their lives in a country with a corrupt government. I saw people who in an American's eyes had nothing. Women would walk from their bamboo made huts with dirt floors to the local market with a basket on their head. The basket would be full of the goods they would sell for the day, while squatting on the dirt road beside a traffic frenzy of motorbikes, bicycles, and small open air vans. Some carried meat covered in flies, others with vegetables and fruits. I am sure the amount of money they made in one day would be comparable to the amount my lunch cost (which averaged around 2-3 USD a meal). Although this sounds like someone living in extreme poverty this is the norm in Myanmar. Unlike the USA, there is almost no middle class. Few are very wealthy and those who work for the government but most live well below the poverty line. The majority of the people lived day to day on the money they made. They had no disposable income. We often associate our happiness with the amount of money we have in our bank account. In Myanmar, for the first time in my life I saw a group of people who radiated joy and thanksgiving not for their material possessions but for their families and simple lives. Every person we passed on the street or stepped into their business greeted us with a smile. The people were kind and always wanted to help us. While in Bagan (The City of Ten Thousand Temples) three of my friends and I were riding bikes through the small villages to different temples that scattered the area. One of my friends' bike broke when we were more than 8 miles from our hotel. A man walked over to us as we were huddled around her bike and asked if we needed any help. We explained what had happened and he brought us to a repair 'shack' near by. He talked with the man in Burmese and quickly the repair man fixed her bike. While there we played peekaboo with his small children and his wife offered us food. Upon leaving we tried to pay the man and he would not accept our money. I left feeling in awe of the kindness this family had bestowed upon us. Upon my return to the ship I have heard numerous stories from others of experiences very similar to this.

While in Myanmar I had the opportunity to spend time in Yangon (previously Rangoon) and Bagan (an area of small villages). Yangon was unlike any other city I have ever been to. Street markets could be found almost every other block, open air restaurants with small plastic tables lined the streets. The ground was littered with trash and mosquitoes filled the air at night (I learned this the hard way). I would not consider Yangon to be beautiful but more functional for the people who lived there. Tourism is a very recent concept in Myanmar, only since 2011 the borders have been open to foreigners. The country is still transitioning from a military dictatorship to a democracy. Although they have an elected president the military is still very much in control. As I have had time to reflect on my time in Myanmar I still have many questions. I have begun to wonder if I only saw what the government wanted me to see? I already want to return to Myanmar in the following years to see the difference that will hopefully be made in the country. When talking to locals about the government almost all said "the future seems bright." I truly believe the country is looking up, I just wish the change was quicker.

Because this email is getting lengthy I will list my top 11 favorite experiences I had while in Myanmar.

1. Watching the Sunrise at Su-la-ma-ni Pahto, one of the many pagodas in Bagan. There were beautiful hot air balloons that rose up over the temples that could be seen for miles.
2. Sitting and talking with the owner of our hotel in Bagan about her culture and life.
3. Eating fried rice and noodles at every meal. (The food was more similar to American Chinese food than the food I had in China).
4. Walking through open air markets being asked to buy traditional longyi's (the long tie skirts both men and women wear on a daily basis).
5. Meeting a new friend in our hostel in Yangon who is from Germany. She is going to show us around once we get to Hamberg.
6. Renting bicycles for \$1 and riding through different villages all day and getting covered in dirt.
7. Climbing to the top of a temple through a small hole on a wall covered in paintings from the 11th century.
8. Watching how the local people make lacquerware (palm bowls covered in tree sap).
9. Climbing Mt. Popa, a temple at the top of an extinct volcano. (There were monkeys everywhere).
10. Taking two overnight buses (10 hours each) from Yangon to Bagan.
11. Playing "foot ball" which a mix of volleyball and soccer with local children. The ball is made out of palm bark.

Next stop is India!

Miss you all,

Gabriella

