



The beauty of Bagan

Photos: Hayley Mill

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Sometime called the Angkor Wat of Myanmar, Bagan is an increasingly famous area just southwest of Mandalay housing more than 4,000 Buddhist temples and pagodas.

Accessible from the capital Yangon (formally Rangoon) in the south by a 10 hour bus journey (or a short flight), Bagan really should be on your ‘must see in Myanmar’ list.

It’s like the land that time forgot. Getting off your bus you are taken to your hotel by horse-drawn cart, which is a standard mode of transport around the area. There are no 7-11s, everyone speaks almost perfect English, and the staple activity for tourists is temple gazing.

From as early as 1057 there was a flurry of building by the Kings of Bagan. This continued for more than 200 years, resulting in temples and pagodas of all shapes and sizes being constructed.

Since then, many of the buildings have decayed to a dilapidated state, either due to earthquakes or lack of attention. Local and international funding is helping to restore many, but there is still much to be done. Your US\$10 (B310) entrance fee goes towards helping to preserve these archaeological treasures.

With literally thousands of temples to choose from (you can visit around 3,500 of them – many rebuilt from nothing, some in almost original condition) we had to narrow it down. Distance and weather was a factor as visiting in summer meant some extreme heat, so we chose our transport accordingly. Day one by horse-drawn cart to orientate ourselves with ease, and day two by bike.

US\$20 (B620) gets you a horse-drawn cart and driver for the day. They have great



local knowledge of the best temples to visit and the easiest way to navigate the area, plus there’s the novelty of an alternative mode of transport.

Travelling by bike the next day meant we had the freedom to go where we wanted. Everything is fairly central, although you may find yourself cycling up to 20km in the heat, so make sure you are prepared.

Many of the more popular temples have a ‘key keeper’, who is someone entrusted by the government to look after the temple and tell its story.

Many of the key keepers are second or third generation, which means they are very emotionally attached to the area. Unlike the temples of Angkor, in low season you can easily get around here and see very few other tourists. That means you get the key keepers and their stories all to yourself. Visiting some of the major temples, such as Dhammayangyi Pahto, gives you an insight



into another world.

Dhammayangyi Pahto was built by a king who killed both his father and brother to claim power, then killed his wife as he believed she was practising Hinduism. It’s pretty much in original condition as no-one is keen to restore it due to bad karma. As such, there are also fewer souvenir sellers, making the experience much more pleasant.

One of the temple kids gave up trying to sell us his wares and proceeded to guide us around, showing us the spot where the king would cut off the hands of disobedient subjects. At 10 years old, our ‘guide’ had almost perfect English and the makings of a future

Clockwise from top: Overlooking temples in the late afternoon from the top of Buledi; this 10m high Buddha located in Ananda Pahto is one of the four in this temple, each facing north, south, east or west; twin Buddha statues at Dhammayangyi Pahto, a Buddhist temple built by a King to make amends for murdering his father, brother and wife.

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Keykeeper Mr Sooni selling sand paintings in his temple. Sand paintings have a background made of sand from the Ayeyarwaddy River and then are painted over.



Hayley Mill and Cari Siebrits wearing traditional *thanakha*, which is used across Myanmar as both a beauty product and skin protector.



When visiting the Ayeyarwaddy River, Hayley and Cari came across these girls on a school trip. Having never seen Westerners before a mini photo shoot followed while the girls practised their English.



Local woman making *thanakha*. The root or branch is ground against a flat stone and water is added to make a paste.

key keeper or tour guide.

Along the way we stopped off at little known temple and talked to locals who were keen to share the wonder of their area. We stumbled upon the Gubyaukgyi temple, cloaked in darkness in an attempt to preserve the original paintings and murals on the wall. We were restricted from using a torch, relying on the key keeper, a 90-year-old woman, walking with us holding a single naked light bulb to guide our way. The paintings told the story of a time long ago and were impressive to see first-hand.

Cycling the 10 km from where we were staying in Nyaung U, past Old Bagan to New Bagan, we saw many pagodas crumbling by the roadside. Once impressive and important in their day, they now add to the photographic landscape. The area boasts a dusty

red panorama dotted with palm trees and scattered greenery, spiritual Mt Poppa to the east and the Ayeyarwaddy River flowing in the west.

The spectacular sunset can be viewed from many of the temples, but with the number of tourists around during the high season, it's a better idea to seek out a lesser known spot from a local.

We sat on top of Buledi and watched the sun go down with just a handful of other people. Watching the temples glow golden in the afternoon sun really was a sight to behold – just like Bagan as a whole.

Hayley Mill was a former volunteer with Phuket charity Phuket Has Been Good To Us. She is now embarking on travels throughout the world and writes a travel blog at mshayleyj.blogspot.com.



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