

## The Other Side of Myanmar

By Dr. Glenn Nosworthy

Burma (or Myanmar) is one of those rare places that immediately get under your skin once you've been there. After you've experienced it, you can never forget the place or its people. It calls you back. It is not a place that actively beckons visitors. It does not seek them out. It just draws you in, quietly.



*Pagan, Burma*

Who can guess what it is? Perhaps it's the beautiful but derelict-looking colonial-era buildings of Rangoon, many painted in a startling shade of turquoise.



*Colonial-era buildings in Rangoon*

Perhaps it's the hundreds of ancient Buddhist stupas that dot the dusty plains of Pagan. Perhaps it's the Intha fishermen of Inle Lake who row their boats using their legs, or the varied and colourfully clothed tribal peoples of North and East.

No two countries in Southeast Asia are exactly alike, and Burma's uniqueness is part of its charm. In no other place I've seen the people so proudly hold on to their traditions. Most men choose to wear the sarong-like *longyi* rather than the shorts, jeans, and business suits that have become de rigueur in the rest of the region and around the world. Women and children still daub their cheeks with *thanaka*, a mustard-coloured paste made from tree bark and which cools and softens the skin while protecting it from the sun.



*Girls with 'thanaka' paste on their faces*

The cuisine has elements of India, China, and Southeast Asia, but is like no other. Here you can find salads made from tea leaves and coffee laced with lime juice. The flavours are rich and textured, but not overly spicy.

And then there are the people. Or should I say, peoples. Burma is home to an incredible diversity of ethnicities and cultures. The largest group is the primarily Buddhist Burmans from which the country derives its name. But in the cities, you will find large concentrations of ethnic Indians, Chinese and Mon people as well. As you move across the country you will encounter many other fascinating peoples such as the Shan, cousins of the Thais, the Karen and Karenni, and the Padaung, famous for the neck-rings worn by the women.



*wearing traditional neck-rings*

*The author with two Padaung ladies*

But my experience has been, wherever one goes and whomever one meets, the people—the civilians, I should specify—are invariably warm and welcoming. They are, perhaps, not as extroverted and exuberant as the Thais in their warmth, but they are friendly nonetheless. And one always has the strong impression that they crave contact with the outside world or people from it. They will invite you into their houses, and share with you their meagre food and otherwise generous hospitality.

I will never forget the time a friend and I were asked to give a talk to a classroom of Karenni students living in a refugee camp just across the border in Thailand. We had no idea what to talk about, so we told them briefly about ourselves and where we were from (Canada, in my case, and India in the case of my friend). Then we asked them what they wanted me to talk about. In an irony that is almost heartbreaking, they simply said they wanted to know about Burma. Imagine that. Here was a group of teenagers that wanted a couple of foreigners to tell them about their own country. Maybe it was a way for some to preserve memories. Maybe to create them. You see, many in that room had actually spent most of their lives in that stifling camp and had no memory of the place from which they or their parents came. They simply knew that it might be a long while yet before they were truly home. So, with some awkwardness, my friend and I told that room full of Burmese Karenni students about the beauty of their own country, and its hope and potential. For me, at least, it was an unforgettable experience.



*A school house for Burmese refugees on the Thai side of the border*

And then there was ‘Ethel’, the proud and energetic lady who befriended my fiancé and me in Rangoon. She took us to a market, and then to a coffee shop to meet a friend, and then a school—a little wooden house in a lane—so that we could give school supplies to the children whose parents could not afford them.



*The school to which we donated some supplies; parents (many of them wearing traditional clothing items) peer into the classroom windows, eager for their children to be let out*

Then she took us to her home to meet her family and share in some of her food. And all she asked later on was for us to bring back some Milo [Editor's note: the brand name of a chocolate malt drink by Nestlé] on our next trip, a flavour she remembered from better days. I'm still waiting to make that trip, but will not forget my promise to 'Ethel.'



*The author with friends in Rangoon*

A few weeks ago, Burma again came into the global consciousness as monks and common-folk marched to the street to express their aspirations for the country. Much has been written on the events of that time and since, so I will not dwell on them here. I cannot do them justice. But I would like people not to forget the other side of Burma—its charm, its grace, its wonderful people. One day, I hope, this is all we will need to know of this beautiful country.

*[All photos in this article were taken by the author or his fiancé]*