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A Little Too Off the Beaten Path in Burma

It only took three days to hike a remote route to Inle Lake, but the spontaneous trek turned into a wild adventure filled with monks, a fired guide, and a land untouched by tourism.

The bus from Yangon deposited us at our destination in the dark and cold early hours when most people are still asleep. That's what we had hoped to be doing, but a locked gate stood between us and the unlit guest house where we had planned to catch a few hours of rest. Tired, hungry, cold, and stranded in the middle of a mountain village, we realized our trek through Burma's Shan State was turning out to be even more spontaneous than we had planned.

The idea was to avoid the tourist influx that has inundated Burma's (now officially known as Myanmar) most popular sites since its military dictatorship was replaced by a quasi-civilian government three years ago. Most tourist itineraries include a stop at Inle Lake, but a photographer friend and I decided to hike there from the mountain village of Kalaw, a less common route.

But, when we set out during the high-tourist season in December, even small numbers of tourists seemed cumbersome on the 40-mile stretch of dirt paths and red clay earth that stretch between the two locales in Eastern Burma. So we hired a guide and cook to take us slightly south of the usual route, keeping us away from the heavy footfalls of other trekkers. Hiking through rice and

sugar cane fields during the day, talking with tribal women descended from dragons in the afternoon, and sleeping in unheated monasteries with novice monks in the evening, we were determined to experience nature and a more natural Burma.

Although most people talk about Burma's tourism industry as a recent phenomenon, foreigners have been trekking around Inle Lake for almost two decades. Enticed by the lake's floating gardens, stilted houses, and legendary one-legged fishermen, hikers began making day treks near the 13.5-mile-long and seven-mile-wide body of water as early as the 1990s. Initially, they bunked in monasteries because rebel groups fighting in the area made it difficult for foreigners to stay in local homes, explained Harry Singh of Golden Lily trekking outlet in Kalaw. But earlier this century, home stays came into the picture and are now a fixture, even though the practice is officially prohibited.

Singh remembers how villagers used to run and hide at the sight of foreigners. In 1998, only 700 trekkers made the trip. But by 2012, the number had more than doubled to 1,700. Guides follow the same route for several years at a time, so nearby villagers became adept at hiking up the price of bottled water and posing for photos. We wanted to steer clear of the popular path, and came to Singh for help. Unrolling a map, he pointed out a trail to the south of the usual route that he planned to send us on.

We set off a few hours later, hitching a ride on the back of an open truck. It was the last vehicle, aside from the occasional scooter, that we would see until the end of the trip. Our guide, Ghochin, told us all he could about Kalaw, a hillside escape from the heat established by the British that remains a popular getaway among the country's elite. Once we started walking, Ghochin stopped talking and focused on shading himself with his bright red umbrella decorated with images from the popular k-pop "Gangnam Style" song. When he learned we planned to rise before the sun, he declared ours a "very interesting" and "very funny trek." It would prove to be both.



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Our initial route was sparsely populated by tourists—or locals, for that matter. The rice paddies we passed were worked by only a handful of farmers, and it was not until we stopped for lunch that we had a chance to talk to anyone. Over green tea, Than Gyi told us about her village, interrupting herself frequently to stare at us and laugh. She was 73, a mother of 10 and grandmother of an “uncountable number.” When she was young, the homes were made of bamboo and there were no cars or motorbikes. Vehicles are still unusual, but homes now are made of brick and wood and have metal roofs instead of thatch. The house where we ate lunch was a two-story wood structure with a simple wooden ladder leading to the second floor. Than Gyi and several other women watched as we sat eating the chapatti and curry that Tharnge, our cook, had made for us in the kitchen, a bamboo lean-to with a fire pit. We never met the home’s owner, but we did meet several of his grandchildren. Than Gyi was one of his neighbors.

“Sometimes as a kid I heard about America, but I didn’t see American people,” Than Gyi said.

She saw her first tourist 10 years ago, three years before the village got a primary school. We left her sitting in the sun shelling peanuts and drinking tea.

A series of paths flanked by flowers and fields followed. On one such dusty path we stumbled upon a group of brothers herding buffalo with slingshots. The oldest, Mt Ping, which translates to clever boy, was 14 and hadn’t been to school since fourth grade. As we moved past him he raised his arm and waved, hesitantly at first, and then more confidently the further we traveled away from him.

We traversed narrow bamboo plank bridges over trickles of water and wound our way up a hill from which we enjoyed a view of fields and homes from the shade of a banyan tree. We kept going, up hills, down into valleys and through specks of villages, noting the change in agriculture as we went: rice, wheat, peanuts, corn, chili peppers. Bawnanzone village was bright red with peppers. Chili peppers were everywhere, drying on mats, on roofs, and in fields. They were piled in heaps inside homes, stored in overflowing baskets, and stacked in pyramids as high as children. The chili harvest was coming to an end. Despite the look of plenty, it had not been a good one, according to one villager. Her family would make between \$100 and \$1,000 on the crop—enough to live on, but not enough to make them rich.

The sun was waning; so we decided to stop for the night. There was one monastery nearby, an ancient site more than 200 years old, but no tourists had ever stayed there. We waited for Tharnge, the sole Buddhist among us, to plead our case to the monk in charge, who was reluctant to turn away two women and their Burmese entourage. It was the perfect retreat, a hilltop hideaway with only an abbot, three teenage novice monks, a handful of dogs, and several bamboo loggers for company.



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The monastery itself was a single room with a high ceiling and numerous decorative pillars. The wall directly opposite the entrance was covered in colorful glass and bead mosaics. In front of the mosaics a dozen life-size Buddha figurines rested on a slightly raised stage on which the novice monks watched a muted soccer game on an old television while the abbot chanted. No one ventured onto the raised platform and the monks seldom came down. We didn't share our dinner with the monks whose religion dictates they cannot eat after noon.

It wasn't until late into the night that we discovered the problem with staying in non-touristy areas—the lack of amenities, or blankets in our case, that were locked away in a glass cabinet. Shivering, we pulled our hats low over our heads and zipped our jackets tight around our chests. Although Burma is warm during the day, the temperature drops dramatically at night.

Our guide had no qualms about asking us to sleep closer, and, when we refused, he informed us he hated us. When a villager brought food at 5 a.m. the next morning we were already awake, and had been most of the night, too cold to sleep. As we scarfed down eggs, tea, and toast in preparation for the day's hike, we decided to continue on without our guide, asking our cook to take us the rest of the way. We left before either had time to answer and were halfway down the hill when my friend questioned our decision: "Do you think the cook will follow?"

Within a few minutes he had caught up and was leading us along a narrow dirt path hedged by rhododendrons and bamboo fences, the early-morning light reflecting off a tapestry of spider webs. In the distance we could hear the faint ring of a cattle bell and the off key voice of a farmer singing. We walked through wheat fields taller than our heads and on raised narrow paths between rice paddies. Yellow daisies, sunflowers, and butterflies were abundant.

In an open field a line of women hoed the earth in unison while two little girls harvested and bundled ginger with scythes, their heads covered in red turbans.

The women belonged to the Pa-O tribe and wore red head coverings as a reminder of the dragon from which they are descended. The forested hills around the lake are shared by various tribal people, including the Padaung, whose habit of fitting young girls with neck rings has made them famous for their giraffe women. Long necks are considered a sign of beauty by the tribe, and traditionally they add rings to a girl's neck as she ages, creating a brass coil that can weigh as much as 25 pounds and makes the neck look longer by pressing down the muscles around the her collarbone.

The route we took traversed mostly Pa-O land, a tribe that has an interesting tradition when it comes to marriage. Male suitors bring a box of betel leaves and nuts to the home of a potential mate, who then chooses her partner based on the box he brings. Later, if they decide to separate, the couple must break a betel nut to break the union. Like most of the people in the region, the Pa-O live in simple villages without electricity or running water, and they practice basic agriculture.



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A stretch of almost desert-like wasteland followed the agriculturally rich valley and it is there that we caught our first glimpse of the lake, a sliver of blue peeking from between two distant mountains. The sparse bushes gradually gave way to a forested canopy as we climbed through a break in the mountains. We moved slowly down slippery stones, careful not to focus on the ledge to our right that dropped down to the mountain base. At the bottom we found ourselves in a shaded bamboo forest. We met the head of our host family in a sunflower field.

Wandering around the village of 30 or so homes we found corn cobs piled everywhere: in baskets, in homes, in pyramid piles, just as chili peppers had filled earlier villages. At dinner time we gathered around an inside campfire fueled by corn cobs and ate popcorn. Most families live on the second floor of their wood homes, sleeping, eating, and socializing on mats in the main room. The earthen ground floor was reserved for crop storage and the occasional chicken or other small animal.

Our dinner was served later on a low table around the same indoor campfire. We ate as if on display, the others watching and refusing to join us, but we were too tired and hungry to care. We had a few packaged cookies with us and conspired to have tea delivered to the woven room we were sleeping in so we could enjoy the snack in private. We huddled under the covers and drank and ate and then ducked out in the dark to brush our teeth. The village was silent and dark and if it hadn't been so cold we would have slept easily.

The next morning, the roosters started crowing at 4:30 a.m. We were awake and walking toward the lake before 6 a.m., and on the water in a wooden motor boat manned by an old fisherman before sunrise. We moved slowly, mindful of the floating villages we were passing where people squatted on their porches to wash dishes in the water, boys floated by on boats, and women peeked out of windows. In the distance fishermen balanced on the front of their wooden crafts, one leg wrapped around an oar for propulsion and steering, the other standing straight, thus freeing their hands to pull fish from their nets.

We emerged onto the lake suddenly, our narrow channel opening into a large blue expanse of water that merged with the blue of the sky. There was no official to charge us the \$5 tourists must pay upon entering the lake from more frequented routes. A morning mist hung over everything, clearing occasionally to reveal lone fishermen. As the sun rose and we neared the lake village of Nyaungshwe on the opposite side, boats became more frequent and their occupants were not all locals going to market. In the distance I spotted banners on buildings and a pair of one-legged fishermen balancing with large cone-shaped nets. As we drew closer, the fishermen became more intent on posing for our pictures than fishing. Before we could pull away they paddled over and with outstretched hands uttered a single English word: "money."



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We were back in tourist territory. On dry land there were dozens of trekking outlets, each offering bike rides, hikes, and laundry service. Nu Nu Yin, 30, left her accounting job in August to open Fantastic Inle Travel & Tours with her lover. She was 11 when she saw her first tourist.

“They ask me where is hotel,” she said. “I am afraid tourist so I am running.”

Now she is grateful for the jobs the tourist boom has brought to her once sleepy town, but admits it has taken away other jobs.

“Last year fishermen were real fishermen, now they are just for show, for tourists in the lake,” Yin says.

We consider ourselves lucky to have captured several of the real ones.