

The River Trip

I woke up at 4:30 am to catch the flight on Myanmar air from Rangoon, capitol of Burma, to Sittwe in Arakan state which borders Bangladesh. Only 45 minutes later we arrived at the small airport with the crumbling blue sign proclaiming "Sittwe airport." Locals pay the equivalent of \$10 for this flight, while foreigners pay \$90 one way.

We caught a truck down main street and passed the hundred-year-old victorian clock-tower near huge shade trees in which hung upside-down by their hundreds fat, black fruit bats wrapped in their leathery wings, and on to the jetty where my friend Kway Win had his boat waiting for us. The boat was painted a garish red and bright blue with flowers tied to the bold prow. Here at the banks of the Kaladan river stand bamboo houses built high on stilts in expectation of the annual floods.

As we got underway, some small boats hollowed out of a single log sailed past with a taut cotton sail. We are going to Myauk-u, the ancient capitol of Arakan state in the 14th and 15th centuries. There are no roads to Myauk-u other than the Kaladan river. We traveled against the current with purple mountains in the distance to the west, their peaks overhung with steely pink clouds, mountains which mark the border with Bangladesh. At the river banks, black water buffaloes are submerged up to their nostrils, and women in colorful skirts push nets webbed on bamboo against the current to catch prawns.

On board my friend Kway Win is returning home with his new bride of three weeks named "Pan Wai Pyone" or "small lovely flower." Although she is Arakanese and was born here, she has not returned to Arakan state since she was seven years old. She was raised in Rangoon and is very much a city girl. Kyaw win's mother is aboard and cooking at the back some fresh prawns, chicken and fish. She seems more thin than I remember her, perhaps from worry over her first son, who died a few months ago. The last time I had seen him it was evident that he had not long to live.

I was well-prepared for the journey with four litters of Laphroaig single-malt scotch whiskey, my favourite, a huge wheel of edam cheese, a two-foot-long salami, and four packets of Italian spaghetti with tomato paste and various nuts. I bought a long fishing pole with an impressive reel and lures of squiggly rubber worms with hooks and weights.

Kyaw Win, his bride and his mother sit opposite me in lounge chairs. Although I don't understand much Burmese, and certainly not the Arakanese they are speaking, there is an obvious tension in the air. After a few minutes, Kyaw Win's mother goes to the top deck to pray. Win's brother-in-law hands me a soccer magazine in Burmese with grainy pictures of people I don't recognize. Emerald-green rice stalks close to being harvested grow on the river banks, so rich is the soil. It is easy to see why empires flourished here for centuries.

The Kaladan is too muddy to fish. Before there was a breeze, cool and refreshing, but now the air refuses to move even though we plow against it. Mom is kneeling on the top deck, hands clasped together, eyes tightly shut before an image of Buddha.

Sometimes we come to within sixty feet of the riverbank following a deeper course that only the boatman knows. The clouds have become a billowy cumulous with gray frying-pan bottoms. Any rain will be light. Win goes to sleep in a lounge chair while his mother still kneels and prays above. The bride offered me sunflower seeds, and I gave her some sugared figs.

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She told me that she actually believed she would be back in Rangoon for her English test at the American embassy. I told her to forget it, as in the first place, there was no way we would be back in time, and secondly, the embassy was now closed as well as the roads leading to it due to the events of September 11th to all but American citizens.

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She is excited, but seems to have no idea of where we are going. The boat travels slowly upstream and it will take about six-and-a-half hours to reach Myauk-u. Finally, we pulled up to the dock at Myauk-u and the rains began. Naked children frolicked in puddles and a woman walked by with a huge load of firewood on her head balancing an umbrella on the edge of the pile, keeping her hands free. The thunder actually seems to shake the earth.

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Checked into the paradise island resort, which has many amenities. Upon my checking in, the staff who appeared from the shadows gave me a bundle of candles because there was no electricity and a box of mosquito coils. I remember from the last time this place had become completely inundated by floods and washed away. It was also inhabited by screeching rats. I registered in the book and noticed that the last entry was August 8, 2000, a year and two months ago. I knew that this is a popular place.

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I had ten candles burning, fixed to the bedposts, which dripped with hot wax. Although the walls are bamboo, they are painted an army green, perhaps the only available color, and the plaster, a tone of green that can only be found on death row. I am sleeping with my knife open. Outside my door near the river I can hear pigs either fighting or being slaughtered. I am too exhausted to care. Turning out the lights is like a birthday party where I just walk around the room and blow out the candles.

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Early the next morning, win, his wife, his father and I left Myauk-u by two horse-carts. The road east across the plains could not be passed with any vehicle although we had crossed this same road three years before in a jeep, as it had completely deteriorated. The walls of the ancient city could be seen, as they were five miles square on each side, despite their now being completely overgrown.

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The wooden spoke wheels of the horse-cart were nearly 5 feet tall. The cart plunged into deep puddles and lurched from side to side and many times the cart driver had to get off and lead his horse around the craters as we walked along side. After about an hour, we came to a small market at the banks of the Lemro river. Below was our boat looking very much like Bogart's African queen. We loaded up our gear, cranked up the engine, and were off.

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Several dangerous-looking wasps flew in the window, hovered around and flew back out. Near the river banks bananas

grow, and young girls swim in their cotton wrap-around skirts, filling them up with air like balloons, and float around together laughing. My black shirt has irregular white lines on both sides where the salt in my sweat has crystallized. The Lemro is no more than a half mile across, and we are going up river against a strong current. The water is rather muddy from the rains and the silt.

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We stopped the boat amid mountains so dense with bamboo that you could never penetrate by foot, and picked up a kid, a relative of the boatman, to bail water out of the boat. He seems absolutely terrified of me, as if he expects me to eat him. It seems difficult to elicit a smile. The river narrows to a few hundred yards and i can gauge by the plants growing out of the river that we are moving upstream about as fast as a man can walk.

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After some six hours on the Lemro we stopped at a village where win's father had a friend. Unfortunately, he was away. The village was Laytoo Chin, as three of the old women had the rising-sun tattoo between their eyes and the spider-web design on their cheeks. The headman's house had a wild boar skull on the wall, complete with long, curved tusks and an animal-skin drum. We were in southern chin state. We returned to the boat, and every now and again my eye would catch a flash of bright yellow or brilliant turquoise of some elusive jungle bird.

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There was a small, clear waterfall which poured off the hills draped with bright green leafed tendrils and wispy ferns.

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All at once there was a horrible grinding noise and the propeller shaft broke. After some discussion and the realization that it could not be repaired, the boatman began walking downstream to try and find another boat. Essentially, we were stranded. The cooking pots were brought off the boat, a few stones piled up, old bamboo collected and split up as we started a fire. Water-bailing boy began peeling potatoes. The sky burned orange-pink as the sun set. To look up at the sky here is to know the brightness of stars before the advent of electricity.

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A few hours after dark we could hear the lonely chug, chug of an engine. Somehow boatman had managed to find another boat. Because the shore was endless round stones, we would sleep on the boat.

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We woke up before sunrise; the mountains were draped in fog but above is the first thin crescent moon and bright beside it is venus. After an hour on the river there were dozens of silver flying fish skimming over the river surface. Win's wife cried out with delight, for she had never seen fish fly.

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Win's dad figures we have travelled at least sixty miles up the Lemro. We stopped at one chin village for lunch: slices of edam cheese, fried salami, noodles with tomato paste, a huge cucumber which is orange on the outside and yellow inside. This seems to be a prosperous village. There is never a shortage of food. Some of the old women here have tattoos similar to the Laytoo but no sunrise between their eyes. Their ears were distended but the silver, drum-shaped earrings were missing. These people are called the Kuttu chin. This village is at the junction of the Lemro and Waakchaung rivers. The Waakchaung is perfectly clear and we all take a bath. Reboarding our boat, we rounded the

bend and continued up the muddy Lemro.Â

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In the afternoon we crossed a wide creek flowing into the Lemro, stopped, and went swimming.Â Up in the hills was a M'gan village.Â We hiked up the banks and found another prosperous village with various kinds of chicken, goats, black-bellied hogs and healthy dogs.Â There were only a few women in the village as the more able ones had gone off to tend the fields several hoursâ€™ walk away.Â The older women who remained had three rings of tattoos around their calves composed of dots, and faces full of black dots interspersed with squares.

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I sat down in a chair and drank amber scotch.Â I tried counting the varieties of butterfly, but lost count at about twenty-five.Â The skies thunder and echo between the mountains.Â Dragon flies hover very low just above the tree tops anticipating the rain.Â A kid comes by with a bird he had caught and tethered to a string. He tosses it into the air and the bird flies the length of his string.

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To the north of the headman's house is a cairn piled high with flat stones which must be a grave.Â At the top of the mountain to the east appears a rainbow which has the most intense colors, absolutely pure pigment right out of a paint box.Â As the intensity pales, the rains begin.Â

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We retreated into the headman's house.Â There are a half-dozen dried gourds slightly smaller than a basketball with long necks.Â It is in these gourds that water is stored.Â A tall, black, unglazed ceramic jar with a very thin curved, elegant lip is brought out.Â This is where the liquor called "Kongye" is stored.Â Kongye is made of fermented rice, various grains, and some type of tree bark.Â At the neck the black vessel is plugged with leaves.Â Water is added from the gourds and long, thin bamboo straws are plunged through the leaves.Â These straws are ingeniously notched at the end to form a sharp point and bored in three places.Â The bore holes are smaller than the grain so that the grain does not go into the straw.Â Depending on the length of fermentation, the Kongye is like a yellow beer at one month, and like white lightning after one year.Â This Kongye was young and the taste fruity and pleasant.Â The M'gan are obviously happy that I enjoy.Â

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In the mid-1970's, Ma Sa La, the socialist government of general Ne Win, ordered the chin to stop the practice of tattooing the women's faces.Â Except for a few elderly women in the village, everyone else is working the fields three mountains away.Â We have asked the headman's son-in-law to leave tomorrow at daybreak to bring back at least ten tattooed women to photograph.Â The youngest woman with facial tattoos is said to be 37 years old.Â We will buy the son-in-law two pots of Kongye.Â Win's father and I sleep outside on the headman's verandah while win and his bride sleep inside.Â

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The next day around noon, the son-in-law came back to the village. With great difficulty the headman was able to get together twelve tattooed women.Â When we would go out to scout a sight where the light was right, they would all disperse and go home.Â Again the headman would have to go house to house and gather them altogether again.Â The light came in patches between the tree limbs, making the pictures very spotty.Â I had to move the whole troop, along with every kid and curious adult down to the shore of Thelemro.Â It is very hard to elicit a smile; these seem to be very reticent people.Â The light was at least even, and after awhile I got a few of them to laugh.Â

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The facial tattoo of the M'gan is first squares overlaid with a series of dots which cover the entire face.Â The tools must be long and blunt, as the tattoo holes are quite large.Â Around their calves these women also have three rows of tattoos.Â The process would begin for the girls when they were between the ages of 11 to about 13 years old.Â It is said to take several days and must be very painful.Â The dress is home-spun black and red cotton.Â Around the village and inside their own homes the women are topless but if I came upon them pounding rice they would shyly cover up.Â If seen from a distance returning home from the fields with a bamboo pack, strapped around their foreheads, they are topless.Â

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Meanwhile, I will go for another swim in the river.Â Everywhere I go bailing boy follows with my scotch, some pure bottled water, and a real glass.Â The red ants around here are a half-inch long, and if they bite you, you swell up even if you are a chin.Â I sent one hardy lad up a tree to retrieve coconuts and he returned with half a dozen coconuts and a hundred red ant bites.Â Two hours later his swelling had completely subsided.

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Later some of the boys came to the headman's house with a long drum, several gongs, and a pair of cymbals.Â A few jars of Kongye are in the courtyard.Â The people are incredibly shy and it takes a few sessions together to get them loose.Â The women, unless summoned, are nowhere to be seen.Â The men are incessant chewers of betel nut and constantly smoke.Â Every single boy has a sling shot around his necks that he learns to shoot at birds with deadly accuracy.Â The boys bring spears into the courtyard which are maybe six or seven feet long with an iron tip on each end.Â One tip is blunt for wounding or breaking a bone, while the other end is maybe ten inches long and very sharp, for piercing man or beast.Â The shaft is hard, black wood.

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Â The second photo session was perfect.Â The light at 4:30 in the afternoon was long and orange against the river with the opposite banks green and yellow.Â I assembled twelve of the M'gan on the stones and used every lens, including the macro, for shots of their eyes and close-ups of their tattoos.Â A couple girls too young to have

Tattoos are giving me the eye, and without the tattoos, their skin is quite fair.Â The features of the chin are quite proud and beautiful, their eyes huge, watery almonds.

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That night the whole village of maybe 75 people turns out at the compound of the headman.Â A fire is built and the animal-skin drum still having hair attached is set in front of the fire to have the skin drawn tight.Â Every few minutes somebody pounds the skin to see if the heat has produced right tone.Â Then the men came out with their heads wrapped in cloth, stamping the earth in front of the drum.

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Dancing one by one, they picked up their ox-hide shields and hefted their spears, dancing various dances which were like martial arts. They would charge at me, peering over the shield, and thrust out their spears.Â The men, who had large disks in their ears, wore the purple-and-green striped chin blankets around their shoulders, and a wrap around their legs.Â As the gongs rang, the drum bellowed, and the cymbals trilled, the warriors gave a fierce display.Â When the party was over, and the Kongye drunk, everyone broke a section of flaming bamboo to light the way home.

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We had arranged the previous night to assemble some of the chin warriors to take some photos of them in the daylight.Â Again, everyone went down to the Lemro, where i knew from yesterday the light would be even.Â One man has classic

chin features, the round disk earrings, purple blanket, spear and ox hide shield. To the beat of the drum he does a war dance. Everyone insisted on shaking hands before we boarded the boat and headed north. The headman has warned us that it may not be safe up-river.

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Surely I am the first foreigner to have reached this far into southern chin state and the upper Lemro river. From the boat I can see trails straight up the mountain where a chin would have to walk maybe three miles over a mountain to come back down to the river only a few hundred yards upstream. We reached another junction and left the Lemro for the clearer waters of the Thannchaung river. After an hour or so the boatman became worried that the river was becoming too shallow and indeed we stopped and walked about a half-mile upstream where the river was only a few feet deep. I cut my foot on some sharp stones. I convinced them to return to the fork and continue up the Lemro. After the junction, the Lemro was moving really fast, churning up and twisting with whirlpools. Win's wife put on a lifejacket. The engine is at full bore but we are barely moving.

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The power of the river is increased as it is squeezed between sheer stone mountains covered in moss, bamboo and, higher up, huge shade trees. On one bank are a type of deer, both with horns, a male and female as one was larger, but the color was more orange than brown.

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The river became even stronger and we nearly stagnate. The boatman wants to turn around before the engine burns up but I can see one trail on a distant mountain and urge them ahead. They are becoming nervous, as we have travelled nearly 100 miles upstream, further than they have ever been. The sense of fear from the boatman becomes palpable; we are in uncharted waters. We are way beyond any administered area.

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There was one bamboo house on the side of the mountain. We landed at the beach and sent the boatman up to find out what to expect. A few minutes later I could hear dogs barking at him. We were close enough that I could see kids at the windows. The boatman returns and says there is no village ahead but I don't believe him and send win and his father to inquire.

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When Win and his dad climbed up to the house, they called down to me to come up and to bring my camera. I got off the boat and sank into deep silt. I walked up through the peanut plants on the bank, through the fields and up to the house. From the top of the notched-bamboo stairway, blood flowed down. Literally the stairway was stained and dripping with blood. Climbing up the stairs, I saw four chin men working with a Dah, the sharp knife of the hills, cutting, slicing and gutting a huge gaur, the world's largest bovine, which can stand six feet at the shoulder. The head was severed and nobly standing, its black, thick horns stretched out. His penis was two feet long and drying in the sunshine. We bought a few kilos of beef to cook for lunch. The Chin know that the gaur likes salt and so set out a salt lick while they patiently waited. A herd of about a hundred gaur had come down from the mountain and the Chin were able to spear this beast.

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When we continued upriver, the current became too strong, so even I had to agree we had no choice but to turn around and head down-stream. Going with the current for a change, the wind was refreshing as we sped along, stopping at the clear Thannchaung river to cook lunch and bathe. Bailing boy had become my friend and li gave him slices of salami and took his picture. Now when I looked at him he smiled. Somewhere while we were stopped he had managed to

catch a plastic-water-bottle-full of long grasshoppers. As the fire was started, he tore the wings off and we fried them in olive oil. Delicious.

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After lunch, once we had gotten underway, a huge wind storm kicked up a blinding sandstorm from the dry silt on the river banks. Behind us, the clouds turned black as we tried in vain to outrun the rain. Within a few minutes the rains began, and a group of monkeys howled and sprang through the trees.

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The next day we picked up the boat with the broken propeller shaft and lashed it beside us. Now bailing boy had two boats to bail as he jumped from the end of one through the window of the other.

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I am sunburned, the soles of my feet are cut from sharp stones, I am a landing place for flies, and my pen is running out of ink, but at least the rains have stopped. Suddenly there was a huge clap of thunder. Soon we will be travelling downstream in complete darkness, guided only by the beam of a flashlight.

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Three hours' motoring downstream in the darkness with Win's father at the prow with a flashlight beam canning the rushing waters, trying to avoid dangerous sandbars, flotsam, and approaching boats finally brought us to the jetty from which we had departed several days before. We were satisfied; we had accomplished what we had set out to do. I had film stock of a tribe of southern Chins, a stock I believe to be the first complete photographic record of the isolated M'gan.