

Golden Rock

I had first seen the "Golden Rock Of Kyaik-to" in a painting at the Inya lake hotel and was told that no tourist could go there. The golden boulder was perched atop a solid granite outcrop, jutting out from the side of a mountain in Burma's Mon state, precariously near the edge, leaning over, appearing to nearly fall off, but balanced as it is believed to be on the hair of the Buddha, it would remain perfectly balanced forever.

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I checked into my hotel on the royal lake, the Kandawji, the old British rowing club, and headquarters for the Japanese imperial army during WWII. The next morning, I went searching for a reliable driver and companion. Near the strand hotel where the money changers and hustlers hang out, I found a man and his friend who were willing to go to Kyaik-to for twenty-five cartons of cigarettes. At the equivalent of four dollars per carton sold at the diplomatic store, it came to one hundred dollars. The smokes could be black-marketed at a profit. We went to pick up the cartons, but the manager was out and the clerk couldn't sell such a large order. I had them drop me off at the Shwe Dagon Pagoda, and told them that I would meet them after five at the strand bar.

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Barefooted as is the requirement, I ascended the east stairway, past the dangling horse puppets, tortoise shell combs and triangular brass bells to reach the walkway of the 2,500 year old pagoda. Near a soft drink stand at the tail end of a green scaly cement serpent, a Burmese man approached me speaking perfect English. He invited me to sit in the courtyard's shade where I smoked a Naga brand cheroot and drank a sparkling lime. Pigeons marched around puffing up their feathered chests and we spoke in hushed tones, as our eyes darted around looking to see who may have been observing our conversation. There could be no doubt in Burma that military intelligence watched the movements of everyone.

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I told him that I wanted to go to Kyaik-to pagoda. There was no talk of twenty five cartons of cigarettes to seal the agreement. As we talked of the golden rock, something sympathetic developed between us. Evidently he had never considered going to Kyaik-to because of the chronic wheezing asthma which constricted his breathing and would prevent him from slogging over those hills. I knew that he wanted to go and although it was not Allowed for me, that he had found the courage to try. He said that his name was Mgtwe and that he would pick me up at six the next morning. I gave him a hundred dollar bill to begin preparations, and to show him that I trusted him. As Mgtwe stood and began to leave, he turned back to me and said, "We eat off the same plate".

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At five that evening ,I returned to the strand hotel bar where the two men from that morning were waiting for me. I had already decided to cancel these two sharks, but after finding that they could not even read the Burmese script on my tee shirt, and that they were not Buddhist, I told them to forget the whole thing. As the muscles in their jaws tightened, I finished my drink, picked up the tab, stood up and walked out of the bar room at the strand hotel. Promptly at six a.m. Mgtwe arrived at my hotel with blankets, food and water. The driver of the car was his friend, a lanky Burman. We drove north from Rangoon to Hlegu and on to Pegu, one of the ancient capitals of the Mon people. Pegu was at one time a small island in the gulf of Martaban. It is said that the island was so tiny that only one duck could land there. The duck's mate had to perch on his back to rest. Even today, the women of Pegu are teased about their attachment to their men. One Pegu girl near the Shwemawdaw pagoda said that my pants had many pockets. The women of Pegu are very beautiful she said, and that with so many pockets, I should carry a few Pegu girls along with me. I agreed and asked her if she would like to be the first to climb inside. She laughed a wonderfully playful smile.

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Across the plains to Waw and through a town called Nyaungkhashe, and finally across the Sittang river, we crossed into the Mon state over a bridge which closes at sunset and opens at sunrise. The Mon state was closed to tourists so I felt

like celebrating. Just then a soldier intercepted us, climbed into the car and ordered us to command headquarters. The Mon state was certainly a different district, as the people on bicycles rode around with rifles in long holsters attached to the back. The soldier who rode with us had a green uniform with three stripes on his shoulder. We pulled up to the post, and the commander looked up from his desk through thick lasses which magnified his eyes.

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He asked if I was authorized to come here where were my papers? Who gave me permission to cross the Sittang river? My passport had four additions, each of which folded out over a yard long, covered with visas. Amongst those visas he found several to Burma.

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"Why do you come here with no authorization? You must return to Rangoon, this is an insurgent area", he added "and we cannot guarantee your safety".

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"But sir", I implored. I am a Buddhist, I have lived in Asia for many years as you can see by my passport, I didn't come as a tourist, I came to pray. As a Buddhist yourself sir, you can understand that it is very important to pray at the golden rock". I offered him a carton on Winstons. "Please sir, you must help me to pray at the golden rock".

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My name was entered into a log book as Mr. San Francisco". "Ok" He smiled. "Here is your pass", signing a long form which he had been filling out in duplicate from the beginning. Everyone in the room clicked their tongues and smiled. The commander popped a green leaf stuffed with beetle nut and lime into his mouth. A black telephone with an ancient crank on the side rang on his desk. It occurred to me that this was the first telephone that I had seen since leaving Rangoon. The telephone number was two digits. The commander picked up the line, barked something into the perforated mouthpiece and hung up. As we were shaking hands, I noticed the pass was only for one night., "Can you sir, extend this pass to three nights and four days". "ok, Mr. San Francisco" He beamed, "Plus a VIP room at the top".

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Mgtwe was completely surprised. We took the once fearsome soldier who had become our friend and defender back to his station near the river and gave him 100 Kyats. As we pulled away and waved at each other, he faded into the distance and we proceeded along an oxcart road lined with ancient bell shaped stupas. "This road is opened only if the rebels want it opened", said Mgtwe. Children vendors sold cooked locusts on a stick, and if their wings were peeled off, they tasted like cashew nuts.

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The Mon people were very white skinned with delicate features and so friendly. Long before the Burmans had left their homelands in central Asia for their migration south, the Mons had settled into the fertile coastal lands along the gulf of Martaban on both sides of the Tenasserim mountain range. The Mons founded a kingdom called Suvannabhumi or the "golden land" which was a federation of three states. The mons ruled for one thousand years and became South East Asia's most cultured people as the arts and architecture of that time show. The Mons had contacts with kingdoms in India and shared trade and culture as early as the beginning of the Christian era. The whole of S.E. Asia could have come under the domination of the Mon, but unfortunately for them, they were not a warrior race but a race of artists and poets.

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At the last Burmese army outpost, there was an orange robed monk with tattoos on his neck. The soldier asked if we could give the monk a ride to the base of the mountain. Of course we agreed. The monk sat next to me. He was a Karen, he said, and lived on top of Kyaik-to. "Tonight will be a full moon". He said "And we are lucky as the long tedious walk ahead shall be well lit".

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We parked the car and hired baggage carriers. Some pilgrims, too old or too sick to take the long walk were wrapped in green blankets tied to thick bamboo poles, and two hearty boys carried them up the hills for hire. Mgtwe and I decided after dinner to bathe before the journey. A walk down the hill led to a bamboo shower room. Inside a woman poured buckets of water drawn from a well into a wide pipe of bamboo which went through the wall, where a dozen naked young monks showered. I to striped and poured the fresh coldwater over my steaming head and body. The drive here with the military interruptions had taken from sunrise to sunset.

The porters were strapped with our baggage, and just as we began to walk uphill, two young Mon girls who were finishing their journey and coming down the mountain said smiling, "oh you are just beginning to walk, here these staffs are helpful" one girl was so beautiful, her skin so white like a powdered rice ball. She handed me her staff and looked into my eyes deeply, brushing my ear with her flowing black hair, her smile still lingers.Â Â It was nearly dark when we began the ascent.

There were thirty-three hills to climb over and the walk would take from six to eight hours from the bottom to nearly 4,000 feet. The trail was rough in places. Tigers do live in these hills and more people die from snakebite in Burma than any other country in the world. The trail became a tunnel, as the bamboo was so thick, collapsing in on itself, a solid roof of vegetation blocking even the moonlight. In open places, the shadows of huge jungle leaves above became like monstrous spiders, black undulations on the silvery earth. A flower which only opened at night scented the cool night air as we walked. Stumbling up one mountain and down the next, we had to pause often until Mgtwe could catch his breath between coughing fits.

Ever climbing up and down, we finally reached the ridge where the golden boulder could be seen lit up and shimmering in the distance. The sight gave us strength. Men with huge bamboo lattice cylinders shaped like ice cream cones attached with straps to their heads and shoulders like a yoke, moved steadily upwards on legs of iron, humping baggage like our own. We had a torch dipped in kerosene to light the way. The jungle was controlled by the Karen who smiled at us and offered a drink. We ate many oranges as we walked over the mountains, through the jungle, humming with nocturnal insects when we again met the Karen monk. We joined together as we walked and he talked about Buddhism and the virtues of the dignified man. He offered us a place to stay at the monastery, but I explained that the officials had already provided a room for us. Finally about midnight, we arrived on that thousand year old trail at the plateau of the golden rock.

We were escorted to a room where a military officer offered us tea. The long walk had been exhausting for us all, but we felt a sense of accomplishment. Mgtwe especially felt elated, this being his first trip to the golden rock, in his heart he never felt that he would be able to walk up here due to his chronic asthma which had required me to walk much slower than usual. Mgtwe had to stop many times along the way with violent coughing spasms. As we laid out our bedrolls, a satisfied smile passed over each of our weary faces.

We awoke at five the next morning and the air was chilled while people lit incense and candles in the darkness. Women pilgrims near the base of the golden rock sang chants and songs. As the first pink rays of sunlight struck the golden rock, it seemed to glow like a burning ember. Kyaik-to pagoda was perfectly balanced upon a blunted granite column rising off the side of the mountain. This column was tilted at the top with a slight lip at the edge, keeping the boulder balanced. Gilded petals of flowers opened around the top of the granite column, and were outlined in red. Sloping downwards towards the precarious edge, looking as if it should tumble off into the darkness below, was the golden rock. The boulder rested perfectly on it's center of gravity enabling three small boys, putting their shoulders to the edge and moving in unison, to easily rock the massive boulder back and forth.

The golden boulder was about twenty feet tall, gilt solid from centuries of devoted hands pressing on gold leaf which by now had become several inches thick. On top was a ten foot spire shaped like an elongated bell. Crowned with a pure gold umbrella, delicately filigreed like lace, which impaled a golden bird resembling a phoenix. Above the bird, the four directions were indicated, and at the very top was a gold lotus blossom which was traditionally studded and filled with gems.

At the entrance was a small gate under which women cannot pass, and over a short bridge spanning a gorge which separated the granite outcropping from the main mountain, we passed under another gate made of silver with the respective deities and Nats peering down to those faithful passing below. Orange robed monks bowed at the base of the rock and touched their lips to the gold. People were encouraged to push the boulder as hard as they could to demonstrate it's magical perfect balance. Incense sticks placed vertically between the golden boulder and the column supporting it, bent elastically, nearly to the breaking point, defining flexibility. The male pilgrims knelt and touched the golden rock where mere children seem to have the strength to rock several tons of granite back and forth like a toy. The sound of the boulder moving was an indescribably deep hollow sound, the sound of granite moving over granite, a sound from the ice age, and the creation of the world. I was so strange here, being the only foreigner, but people were not the least bit shy. Anywhere I sat, a crowd of curious children would join me, leaning on me, and made sounds to attract my attention.Â Â

Mothers of small children pointed their baby fingers at me as if to say, "Who is that?"Â

Chanting goes on constantly near the golden rock. One chorus picked up where the other ended, breathing in rhythm like cicadas, the air was filled with unending song. The people were from all parts of the country, but there was not another foreigner for a hundred miles. On the sides of the mountain hermits lived in caves. To go inside, I had to crawl through limestone rocks in the darkness to a cool cavern where a hermit sat silently before Buddha. At another opening people threw coins over a ledge into the hermits cave. The mountains surrounding this place purpled in the distance. Around the mountain, people sold tiger skulls with long gaping teeth, flying squirrel pelts, leopard and tiger skins, elephant femur bones and teeth, powdered rhino horns, monkey skins, dried monkey hands and monkey skulls from bowls stacked up like grapefruit. Goats heads were being cooked with their severed tongues draped between their eyes, over a slow roasting braiser. There were snake skins covering stalls which were over twenty feet long and more than two feet wide. The people were so beautiful and innocent that when I looked at them, they turned and looked behind them, thinking that I must be looking elsewhere.

The courtyard overlooking the golden rock was a mosaic of unmatched chinese ceramic tiles. Old women threw hand full of jingling coins across the tiles for Buddhist merit, and children ran to and fro collecting them. An old hermit approached and hammered his walking stick which was crowned with fragrant jungle flowers on the ground before him. He wore dark black rimmed sunglasses, and his teeth were stained reddish black from chewing beetle nut. Each of his fingers had at least one ring with various stones and metals. He walked to the opposite end of the mosaic courtyard and again hammered his staff as he sat down. His beard and mustache were streaked with white and his skin was like oiled hardwood.

Mgtwe told him that "I thought he must be a very holy man. He said that he wandered around the entire country, sleeping in caves or under the moon, and that like a monk, he ate nothing after the noon hour. He held my hand and felt the knuckle bones in my fingers like prayer beads as he chanted and looked up into the sky. I bowed before him as he brought his hand to my forehead and touched me. The liquid sun poured down upon a scorched horizon below. The sky turned to red as the sun fell behind the golden rock, then to a grape purple, like a boxers bruise.

The VIP quarters were separate rooms in a basement. Mgtwe and I shared a room with a Burmese lieutenant colonel, his wife and four kids. We slept on a wooden platform wrapped in mouldy blankets. That was the VIP room. Where everyone else slept looked like the Bombay bus station. At dawn, the sky became pink, and when the first rays of sunlight slowly pulled the molten gold out of the darkness, I took some pictures. Hundreds of people burned candles and incense in prayer. To see the endless mountain ranges below, stretching out to the ends of the curving earth, and to realize that all of these hills were populated with remote tribes people, the Padaung, Bre', Latha, Karen and so many others, was to understand their isolation.

Everything had to be carried up the mountain by the lattice basket cone carriers. Some with the muscles of goats, made the trip more than once a day. The beer that I ordered had arrived packed in as I had specified "in ice" by these cone carriers. Breakfast was pan fried noodles, onions and spicy porcupine steak. Every time that I ate, I thought of those crispy locusts on a stick and wondered if I would find one in my rice.

Local craftsmen made bamboo spectacle frames without lenses, and burned the sides to resemble tortoise shell. Toy bamboo transistor radios, with the dial numbers cut from a length of measuring tape glued beneath red plastic, and bamboo machine guns were very big with the kids. On several of the toy rifles U.S.A was burned into the shoulder stock. There was a stiff wire hand crank, which when turned rotated an uneven spool. The spool's edge "snapped a wedge of bamboo and imitated rapid gunfire. The real war was not far away and has often closed this area.

I bathed and learned the fine art of sarong bathing. Bathing outdoors in a river, while never being less than fully clothed. Another hermit reached the summit of the golden rock. He smoked a knarled black burl pipe attached to a plastic tube which he held in his mouth. He had a snow white beard and wore lime green snap-on earrings and a chocolate brown robe which matched his skin. Hermit chic.

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