

MYANMAR: A LAND OF TREASURES

By Dr Desmond Wai



There were many gold-plated temples at Shwedagon Pagoda. I should have worn a pair of sun-glasses.

I was privileged to be invited by Professor Than Sit, Chief of Gastroenterology at Yangon General Hospital, to lecture on liver cirrhosis and liver transplantation in Myanmar. To me, Myanmar is a mysterious place, as most news about Myanmar is usually about her political situation. I thought the invitation was a good chance to visit this interesting country, so I agreed instantly.

When I arrived in Yangon, the former capital city of Myanmar, I had difficulty sending an SMS to my wife. My Singaporean colleague laughed at me and said, “Desmond, there are two countries on earth where roaming is not available. First is North Korea, and second is Myanmar. You mean your secretary did not warn you?” This initial experience further mystified my impression of Myanmar.

When my colleague later bought me a can of Coke, and for himself a Tiger beer, I was pleasantly surprised. I always had the impression that there were trade sanctions against Myanmar – perhaps Coke and Tiger beer were not on the sanction list.

As I arrived early, my local hosts brought me around. Yangon was just like any other big city in Asia; full of energy, young people, and traffic jams. I first went to the Jade Market. It is a huge complex with more than 100 shops selling different things, including jade, and it reminded me of the Russian market in Cambodia. One of my Myanmar patients had opened a shop at the Jade Market and when he knew I was visiting his country, he instructed me, “Dr Wai, when you are there, please visit my shop. I will give you good discounts. DO NOT shop at other shops. You cannot tell the good jade from the bad ones.” I went straight to his shop and true enough; they all looked the same to me. I tried to look for a piece of nice jade for my wife but somehow I did not like any of the display items.

Later, I visited an old friend of mine, Professor Khin, at his private clinic. I was shocked at the crowds there. It was busier than any



A common road-scene in Yangon. Myanmar men are gentlemen. Though they were hanging on at the edge, they would still protect the ladies by letting them enter the middle of the truck.



The Jade Market is a must-see spot in Yangon. There are more than 100 shops selling jade and gold products.



Three different jade rings, with prices attached at the back. I honestly could not tell the difference between the three, though their prices ranged from US\$280 to US\$13,800.



This 100-year-old tree was broken by the strong winds during Cyclone Nargis.



I met a worshipper at Shwedagon Pagoda, who worshipped by staring at the sun every day.



Street along the Yangon. Many local women put a special herbal facial cream on their face. My local hosts told me that these help reduce sunlight-related skin damage.

Singapore hospital A and E department or polyclinic. The clinic was a four-storey building with its own laboratory, café and travel agency. My host explained to me that as Yangon was the capital (at least until March 2006), patients from different parts of Myanmar usually came here to see a specialist. The clinic did patients a great favour as they usually needed arrangements for return flights and accommodation. I thought this was a very good idea and maybe the hospitals in Singapore could learn from them.

My talk was in the evening and I was pleasantly surprised to see the ballroom was already filled with an audience of 300 doctors 15 minutes before the starting time. Professor Than Sit explained that most doctors in Myanmar had limited access to medical journals or overseas medical conferences. As a result, they treasured CME activities by overseas visiting experts. My talk went quite well, and I also enjoyed myself at the Q and A sessions, where I could hear from the local doctors regarding their clinical problems.

When the talk was over, a group of young doctors came up to me. I was expecting some questions on cirrhosis or liver transplants. Instead, their leader asked in fluent English, “Dr Wai, we are house officers here. We are all very interested to work in Singapore. Could you tell us how to apply for jobs there?”

I was taken aback. I thought that if they did manage to find jobs in Singapore, it would be Myanmar’s loss, and I replied, “Years ago, we did not

recognise medical degrees from Myanmar but I think they may have changed the rules. You can try asking the Singapore Medical Council or the Ministry of Health.” Yes, we are short of doctors, but I wonder if we are fulfilling our needs at the expense of others.

My return flight was in the afternoon the following day, so I had a morning to spare. My host brought me to Shwedagon Pagoda, the most sacred pagoda in Myanmar. We went in as a group and I saw my host paying for my entrance fees but I also noticed many people walking in without paying. My host told me foreigners were charged US\$5 per entry while locals could enter for free. My host jokingly said I was tanned and looked like a local, and if I had not been speaking in English, they would have let me enter for free as well.

The Pagoda was huge and was filled with gold-plated temples. I saw many locals surrounding a few statues and continuously pouring water over them. My host explained that there were seven special statues, one for each day of the week. Those who were born on say, Monday, ought to worship and pray at the Monday statue, and so on. My host then asked which day of the week I was born on so as to guide me to the correct statue. She looked shocked when she heard that I did not know; apparently, the birth-day was very important to the Myanmar. Anyway, I explained I was not a Buddhist, and I was there to sightsee, not to pray.



Coconut milk noodles are a favourite local breakfast dish.



Braised pig organs (comprising pig meat, fat, skin, tongue, kidney, liver and intestines) are a very popular appetiser. It did not really suit my taste.

This was an interesting trip. I got to know much more about the beautiful country. The more I think about Myanmar, the more I feel how fortunate our lives are in Singapore. Perhaps, we should be more grateful about what we have here. SMA



Desmond is a gastroenterologist in private practice. Taking care of his newborn son is his latest hobby.