



Dr Tan Su-Ming (third from left) with her cycling buddies and one of her guides

Mingalabar Myanmar!

Text and photos by Dr Tan Su-Ming

A FEW years ago, I read *The 4-Hour Workweek* by Tim Ferris. The book's idea of taking mini retirements really resonated with me, so I decided not to wait till I had officially retired to start checking off the adventures on my bucket list.

This year found me on a cycling tour in Myanmar with nine fellow adventurers. In April, five Singaporeans met up with five Brits in Yangon before embarking on our nine-day adventure. We flew part of the way, bused part of the way and boated down the Irrawaddy river part of the way, but mostly we biked, about 470 kilometres over varying terrain.

A friend from Myanmar thought I was insane to go cycling in her country during the hottest period of the local calendar, when temperatures can soar up to 40 degrees Celsius by midday. "You are mad! You don't have to worry about malaria; you should be afraid of heat stroke!" Her words recalled a line from the Noel Coward song: "(only) mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun".

Not being the fittest (my fitness comes in fits and starts, depending on what I happen to be into at the present moment), I began to wonder how I was going to cycle 40 to 60 kilometres a day. It was my maiden attempt at riding a mountain bike too. The rest of the group, who were in better shape, left me in the dust each day. But one of our three cycling guides, named Saw, would ride last to make sure no one got left behind. He literally watched my back.

During the first three days, I took painkillers, and put salve on my bruises and abrasions every night, as I did take a few tumbles: off a small cliff into some bushes, onto soft clay, in an orchard full of potholes, in front of a motorcycle on a busy road... I remember Cho, another of our guides, making an offering at a shrine we came across, asking the powers that be to protect our group. I think I must have made my guardian angel work overtime.

But the days progressed, my body grew stronger and more accustomed to the daily rigours, and I began to enjoy myself. Every morning, I would prepare to ride to a new place. As I applied *thanaka* (the local sunscreen) to my face, I would say to myself, "Feel the fear and do it anyway." As we travelled on, my roommate and good friend, who had summited Mount Kilimanjaro with me some years back, would ask me periodically: "Do you think this is harder than climbing Kili?" Now and again I had to answer yes.

In Pindaya, there was the challenge of riding at a 12% gradient in 40 degree Celsius heat, over bumpy rocky roads, all the while with my muscles screaming "lactic acid!", and my lungs feeling like they were about to burst.

Then there was the traffic challenge of riding through busy streets trying not to get mowed down, or country roads where goats and cattle competed for the same space. In Pyin Oo Win, negotiating the hairpin bends down a mountain road was an exhilarating – if not heart-stopping – experience. Half the time I was afraid that my bike and I would fly off the mountain!

And then there was the water challenge...

We happened to be in the country during Thingyan, or the Burmese Water Festival, which lasts about five days. This celebration takes place towards the end of the hot and dry season, and ushers in the Burmese New Year. It also features the splashing of water, which symbolises the cleansing of sins and bad luck from the previous year. Our group had our sins and bad luck washed away countless times daily.

As we rode through small towns or villages, and country roads, there would be people, young and old, waiting to splash passers-by with water. It did not matter whether you were on foot or bike. The only ones spared were the monks, the elderly, and pregnant women. The traditional way is to use tree sprigs to sprinkle water at people from a silver bowl. However, the water came at us from water pistols, garden



Nondescript-looking temple complex in A Myint, but step inside and you'll be blown away by centuries-old murals on the walls

hoses, and buckets tipped over our heads. Eventually, we all looked like drowned rats. The soaking was actually very welcome, as it brought relief from the scorching heat; but got a tad dangerous occasionally, when a powerful jet of water obscured my vision or made me lose my balance.

We stopped at Buddhist pagodas in every town we arrived in, each one different from the last, and some of them pretty spectacular. But my favourite was a small, nondescript-looking temple complex that we encountered while biking through a little town called A Myint.



Novices at the *shinbyu* we attended – I guess I would feel glum too if I was a boy who had to wear make-up

Set in overgrown grass, the stupas looked neglected and unimpressive. But upon stepping inside one of them, we entered a whole different world. There were murals dating back eight centuries, depicting life back then, as well as the artist's impression of heaven and hell. Our third guide, Myint Than expressed his hope (which I shared) that more funding would be provided to preserve these national treasures, as it is sadly not the case at the moment.

Myanmar is a very beautiful country and I felt lucky to be able to get up close and personal with the land and the people. I think it would not have been possible to experience what we had if we had been in a tour bus, as several places we passed were accessible only by bicycle, motorbike or on foot. I remember the tea plantations, the paddy fields, the plum orchards and fields of cantaloupes or cabbages, the orange clay prairies, and the ubiquitous stupas that dotted the landscape. And everywhere we went, the Burmese folks who saw us passing by would smile and wave, and looked delighted if we shouted back, "Mingalabar!" ("Hello!")

During our journey, the ten of us and our three guides managed to get invited to a village wedding and also a *shinbyu*.

(A *shinbyu*, or novitiation ceremony, is a rite of passage for young Buddhist boys where they will enter a monastery and spend a short period of time as novice monks and learn the teachings of Buddha. The gold embroidered clothes they wear during the ceremony represents Prince Gautama Siddharta leaving his royal life of riches and luxury in search of the noble truths.)

During the *shinbyu*, an 83-year-old lady sat on the mat beside me. Conversing with me through Myint Than, she remarked that she wished she could travel and see the world like I was doing, as she had never left her village in her entire life. Myint Than smiled and told her that we had an extra bike if she wanted to come with us. I think of her from time to time and feel so fortunate to have had all the chances I've been given to visit all the places I have. ■



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