

CYCLING MYANMAR (1)

A Catalogue of Misadventures



Leana Niemand

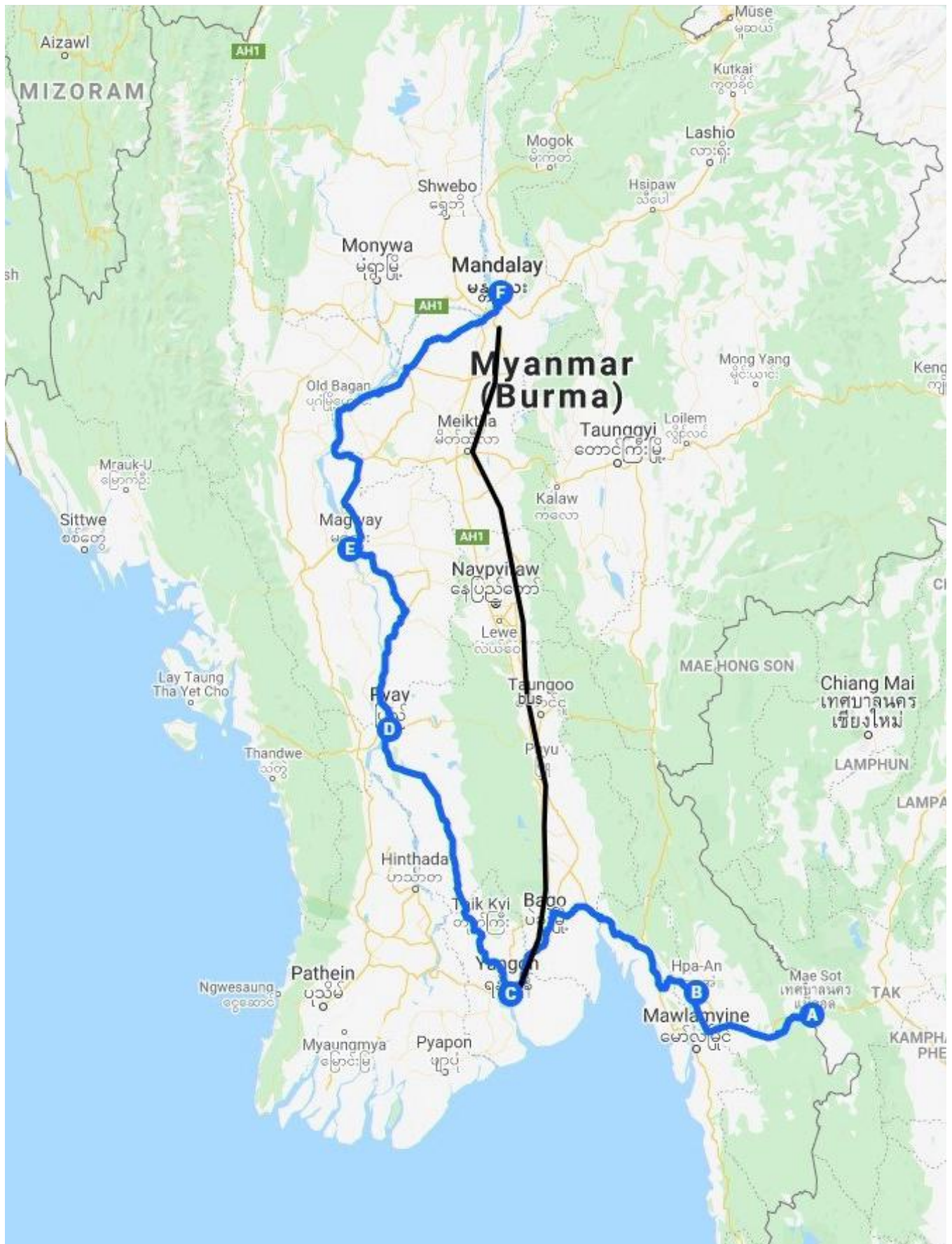
<https://capetocape2.blogspot.com/>

<https://payhip.com/LeanaNiemand>

<https://web.facebook.com/leana.niemand>







CYCLING MYANMAR (1)

A Catalogue of Misadventures



Acknowledgements

The road through Myanmar offered more than miles; it offered moments of unexpected grace. To the strangers who stepped out of their day to offer water, shelter, or simple kindness — your generosity was a soft wind at my back. You reminded me that the world is stitched together by small mercies.

To my sister, Amanda, guardian of my scattered words and keeper of the record. This blog carries your quiet devotion in every page.

To Val Abrahamse, who held the shape of my life while I wandered far from it: your steady care made it possible for me to chase a dream without fear of what might unravel behind me. I travelled lightly because you carried the weight.

This blog is not only a record of where I travelled, but of those who helped me keep moving. My gratitude runs deeper than these words can hold.







MYANMAR (1)

A Catalogue of Misadventures

Prelude

I crossed into Myanmar with the innocent optimism of someone who believed the ride would be a pleasant, if sweaty, cycling adventure. Instead, I found myself in a country determined to test my patience, my bicycle, my paperwork, and occasionally my sanity. What followed was a heat-struck, water-soaked, passport-less odyssey through temples, traffic, bureaucracy, and bus rides that felt like punishment for crimes I hadn't committed. It was, in short, unforgettable — though not always for the reasons one hopes.



Crossing the Friendship Bridge Mae Sot, Thailand to Myawaddy, Myanmar (10 km)

Crossing the Friendship Bridge should have been a simple affair: roll up, get a stamp, smile politely, and pedal off into a new country. Instead, Myanmar greeted me like an over-enthusiastic host who had prepared far too many surprises.

I always find it astonishing how a single line on a map can separate two entirely different universes. One moment you're in Thailand, the land of iced coffee and motorbike efficiency; the next, you're in Myanmar, where men wear longyi, everyone paints their faces, and the currency comes in such voluminous quantities you need a new wallet just to store the notes. I withdrew cash and instantly felt like a corrupt politician.

The heat was a biblical 40°C, the kind of temperature that makes you reconsider all your life choices. By midday, I decided to stay in Myawaddy rather than tackle the mountains. This, as it turned out, was the first in a long series of poor decisions.

The hotel owner informed me that the road over the pass was so narrow and so catastrophically bad that traffic was only allowed in one direction every second day. Naturally, the direction I needed had already gone. I would have to wait. Myanmar, it seemed, had decided to introduce itself slowly—like a novel with too many footnotes.







Myawaddy - A Parade, a Prince, and Pork Offal on a Stick

I woke to a racket outside that sounded like a marching band falling down a staircase. Curious, I followed the clanging and drumming until I stumbled upon a ceremony so colourful it made Mardi Gras look underdressed.

During school holidays, young boys enter the Buddhist Order for a week or more. These boys—dressed like princes, carried shoulder-high, and showered with popcorn—were paraded through the streets in a procession that included trucks blasting deafening music and what appeared to be the entire population of Myawaddy. It was festive, chaotic, and utterly wonderful.

Food in Myanmar is an adventure, especially if you enjoy not knowing what you're eating. Enter Wet Thar Dote Htoe—pork offal cooked fondue-style in bubbling soy sauce and skewered on bamboo sticks. Pig lungs, intestines, tongue... basically everything except the oink. You eat it perched on tiny plastic stools designed for toddlers, which adds a certain humility to the experience.











The Bus of Shame - Myawaddy to Hpa-An

After being thoroughly terrified by warnings about the road to Hpa-An, I caved and took the bus. I should have known better. Advice about cycling conditions is almost always wrong, especially when delivered with dramatic hand gestures.

The road was indeed narrow and in appalling condition, but the real spectacle was the traffic: buses, taxis, and trucks forming a single, endless line over the mountain. Corners were so tight that vehicles had to perform three-point turns, which is not something one expects on a highway. A new toll road existed, apparently, but everyone avoided it because it was “too expensive”—a phrase that in Myanmar seems to apply to anything costing more than a cup of tea.

Hpa-An, mercifully, had plenty of guesthouses. Clay jars of water stood around town like ancient hydration stations, reminding me of Sudan. Myanmar was clearly a hot country—just in case the 40°C hadn’t already made that obvious.







A Narrow Road and a Thousand Paan Stalls - Hpa-An to Thaton (50 km)

By early morning, my clothes were already clinging to me like needy toddlers. The road north was narrow but lively, shared with motorcycle salesmen carrying their entire inventory, bicycle taxis with sidecars, and three-wheel motorbikes transporting families, chickens, and occasionally both.

The entire route was lined with stalls selling paan. Myanmar, I discovered, is held together by betel nut and optimism.

In Thaton, I planned to visit the famous mountaintop pagoda. Only after checking in did I realise the pagoda was in the next village. This was mildly inconvenient, but I was already too hot to care.









Monks, Heat, and the Art of Diving Off the Road - Thaton to Kyaik to (68 km)

I set off early enough to see barefoot monks collecting rice from villagers—a serene sight that lasted approximately three minutes before the heat arrived and tried to kill me.

The road was flat, good, but extremely narrow. My mirror became my best friend. Every time a truck appeared, I hurled myself off the road like a startled gazelle. It was a system that worked surprisingly well.

In Kyaikto, Happy Guest House offered an air-conditioned room for 16,000 kyats. I had planned to visit the mountaintop pagoda, but the heat had other ideas. I stayed indoors, communing with the air-con.





The Road to Bago - Kyaikto to Bago (90 km)

April is Myanmar's hottest month, which is a polite way of saying "don't do anything outdoors unless you're a lizard." The ride to Bago was blistering. The heat rose from the road, fell from the sky, and wrapped itself around me like a hot, damp blanket.

Water stops were plentiful, but hydration was a losing battle. I drank constantly and remained as dry as a raisin.

In Bago, I found the bright green Emperor Hotel, which looked like it had been painted by someone with a grudge. The stairs were nearly vertical—Everest in architectural form. Thankfully, the staff took pity on me and carried my panniers upstairs. I must have looked like a melted candle.





A City, A Nightmare, A Missing Passport - Bago to Yangon (90 km)

I left early, determined to outrun the heat. The road was a “highway” in the sense that it had two lanes and a shoulder, though the shoulder was more pothole than pavement.

The last 20 km into Yangon were a pure nightmare. Despite being Sunday, the traffic behaved as though the entire city had decided to go for a drive at the same time.

At the Ocean Pearl Inn, I discovered my passport was missing. This produced the kind of panic normally reserved for house fires. I unpacked everything, called the Emperor Hotel, and retraced my steps mentally. Nothing.

By evening, I met John from New Zealand, who had rented a car and driver. He offered me a ride back to Bago the next morning. I accepted instantly, clinging to hope like a koala to a eucalyptus tree.





The Great Passport Hunt (Featuring Power Cuts and a Giant Buddha) - Yangon to Bago

John dropped me at the Emperor Hotel, where the manager—an absolute saint—drove me from police station to immigration office, translating everything. Unfortunately, the town promptly lost power, and the police couldn't type the letter I needed.

While waiting, we had lunch. Food always tastes better when eaten with locals, especially when you're stressed enough to eat the tablecloth.

Still no power. So I visited the enormous Shwethalyaung Buddha—55 metres long, 17 metres high, built in 994, lost for centuries, and rediscovered in 1881 by railway contractors who must have been very surprised.

Back at the office, still no power. We took the letters to a street kiosk, then returned to find the street transformed into a bustling market selling fruit, meat, and spices.

Finally, the letters were signed. I was instructed to take them to "Myanmar Travel Tourist" in Yangon. Tun-Tun, the manager, arranged a taxi. I left Bago exhausted, passportless, and deeply impressed by Myanmar's ability to turn even simple tasks into epic quests.







Bureaucracy, Water Fights & Other Natural Disasters - The Immigration Office That Wasn't

Armed with the mysterious address from Bago (written in Burmese, naturally), I wandered Yangon asking strangers to decipher it. After much pointing and shrugging, it turned out the address was simply... the immigration office. If only someone had mentioned that earlier.

The immigration office sent me off for photos, and when I returned, they were closed for lunch. Lunch, I discovered, is Myanmar's most sacred institution. Eventually, I received a letter confirming my visa number and entry date. "This letter is as good as a visa," they assured me. Which was lovely, except I still didn't have a passport.

Meanwhile, the South African Embassy in Bangkok emailed to say there was no South African Embassy in Myanmar and that I should approach the UK Embassy. So off I went, only to find the UK Embassy also out to lunch. I began to suspect Myanmar was powered entirely by lunch breaks.

Once inside, the staff requested translations of the letters from Bago. This led me down a small alley lined with typists, translators, and photocopiers operating from plastic kindergarten tables. It felt like joining a queue for a very bureaucratic carnival ride.

Then came the internet café, where I attempted to print the email from the SA Embassy. Yahoo refused to send me the login code. By the time I succeeded, the Embassy had closed. And after lunch, I discovered my passport photos were the wrong size. Of course they were!

Eventually, all forms were filled, copies made, photos resized, and fees paid. The lady at the Embassy admitted they had never encountered a case like mine and weren't entirely sure what to do. She promised to contact Bangkok and email me updates. I agreed to stay in Yangon for a day or two, in case more information was needed — or more forms invented.







Colonial Charm & Newspaper Detectives - Yangon

With nothing to do but wait, I took a walking tour of Yangon. The city was a delightful mix of colonial buildings: some restored, some crumbling, and some clearly waiting for someone to remember they existed.

I placed a reward advert in the newspaper, thanks to an exceptionally kind Burmese man who helped me navigate the process. Myanmar's kindness often arrived just when I needed it most.

Sunset was the best time to be out. Food vendors lined the streets, markets spilled into bus lanes, and every shop blasted music louder than the one next door, creating a sort of urban symphony. Pedestrians shoved their way along the pavement while vendors fried, steamed, and skewered everything imaginable. I ate the samosas but not the pork offal on sticks!





Thingyan Looms (and Bureaucracy Retreats) Yangon

By now, the passport situation had become a royal pain in the backside. Still, I wasn't the first person to lose a passport, and I wouldn't be the last. Waiting a few days didn't bother me.

What did bother me was discovering that Thingyan — the Burmese New Year and Water Festival — was about to begin. A four-to-five-day national water fight. The phrase "Son of a bitch" escaped my mouth with impressive regularity.

The Embassy would close for the festivities, meaning no progress whatsoever. Yangon was gearing up for the celebrations, and it was clear I needed to move along. If bureaucracy was taking a holiday, I might as well resume my travels.





The Road to Okkan (111 km)

I didn't get away early, and the roads were already clogged. I tried a different route to avoid the worst of the traffic. It was longer, but quieter — until I reached Route 2 North, which was narrow, uneven, and terrifying.

Buses and trucks hurtled past at alarming speeds, but they seemed used to sharing the road with bicycles, oxcarts, tricycles, and scooters. Shade was the only redeeming feature.

Somewhere along the way, I found 30,000 kyats — three neatly folded 10,000-kyat notes. A considerable sum for villagers. I felt terrible for whoever lost it, but I put it toward a room the Okkan Hotel. Myanmar giveth, Myanmar taketh away.





Paradise (Sort Of) Okkan to Gyobingauk (90 km)

After breakfast, I headed north. The road was still narrow, the traffic still terrifying, and the heat still relentless. The Water Festival hadn't officially started, but people were already throwing water, which was a blessing. Even the bitumen seemed to be melting.

Gyobingauk was conveniently halfway to Pyay. Down a dirt road, I found the Paradise Guest House. It wasn't much of a paradise, but it had air-conditioning and cost only \$10. The air-con wasn't exactly powerful, but it made the room slightly cooler, which was enough.





The Water Festival Begins (and I Become a Target) - Gyobingauk to Pyay (90 km)

Holiday traffic meant fewer buses and trucks — a welcome change. But with the Water Festival officially underway, there was no escaping getting drenched. Kids armed with buckets and water guns lay in wait, shrieking with delight as they spotted me pedalling toward them.

They ran to refill their containers and soaked me repeatedly. I received a double dose everywhere I went, but in the heat, it was bliss.

By the time I reached Pyay, I was thoroughly waterlogged. Myat Lodging House was my chosen abode — well-known, but a bit of a dump. But after a day of being gleefully attacked by small children, I wasn't picky.





Water Fights, Wheel Woes & The Bus Ride From Hell - Thingyan: The Day Photography Died

Thingyan — the Burmese New Year Water Festival — officially began, and with it any hope of taking photographs. The streets transformed into aquatic war zones. Bandstands armed with hosepipes and enormous speakers blasted water and sound at anyone foolish enough to pass. Side roads offered no escape; children manned their own miniature bandstands and were even more ruthless.

I spent an extra day in Pyay enjoying the festivities. Everyone was having the time of their lives — on foot, in pickup trucks, or perched on motorbikes — all soaked to the bone. It was impossible not to get swept up in the madness.

The Wheel That Cried Wolf - Pyay

I left Pyay in a spray of water, only to hear an alarming noise from the back wheel. It grew progressively worse. Lubricant did nothing. I returned to Pyay, hoping for a bike shop. But everything was closed — and would remain closed for four days. Thingyan had shut the country down.

I was convinced the hub was dying. But once the bike dried, the squeaking vanished as mysteriously as it had appeared. I didn't trust it. I also didn't trust the motorbike riders with bottles of whiskey tucked into their back pockets. The roads were chaos.

Bagan had bike shops. Getting there by car was expensive, but at least it would get me off the road. I reluctantly arranged a lift.







The Ride I Shouldn't Have Taken – Pyay to Bagan (by car)

In hindsight, taking the ride was idiotic. I thought Thingyan lasted four more days. It didn't. This was the last day. The owner of Myat Lodging House had lied — he wanted the hefty fee for driving me to Bagan.

The festival made the journey slow. I arrived at the View Point Inn, which had plenty of options, including a dorm.

Bagan itself was extraordinary — in the same jaw-dropping category as Angkor Wat and Petra. Between the 9th and 13th centuries, kings built over 4,000 temples; around 2,000 remain. The temple-studded plain stretched across 40 square kilometres and looked like something dreamed up by a very enthusiastic archaeologist.

New Year's Day was quiet. Everything was closed. I cycled out to explore, but the heat soon became unbearable. The sunset didn't deliver the colours I'd hoped for.

I stayed another day to take more photos, but the light never improved. The bike shop search yielded nothing. The one person who looked at my bike found no problem. I was annoyed — I'd missed a large part of the route, had poor photos, and still didn't know if the bike would survive. Myanmar was testing me.











The Lethargy of Myingyan - Bagan to Myingyan (55 km)

After so much time off the bike, I expected to feel energetic. Instead, I felt lethargic and sluggish. Myingyan was halfway to Mandalay, so I stopped at Kaung Kaung Guesthouse. The rooms were pricey, and the Wi-Fi didn't work. "Have Wi-Fi" apparently meant "Have a sign that says Wi-Fi."

The Road to Mandalay (Not as Kipling Imagined) - Myingyan to Mandalay (110 km)

The route was hot, dry, dusty, and slow. I wondered if something was wrong with me, but the road turned out to be a false flat. The second half felt downhill.

With temperatures around 40°C, only mad dogs and cyclists were out. Around midday, truck and motorbike drivers pulled over to nap in roadside shelters. I pressed on, determined to reach Mandalay.

Mandalay was not the romantic vision Kipling described. It was dusty, sprawling, and decidedly unpoetic. The cheapest bed was at AD1 Hotel, located in the onion market. My \$13 room had an en-suite and air-con, and the market had that timeless Asian feel. I liked it immediately.







Back to Yangon (and Back to Bureaucracy)

I spent one more day in Mandalay, then took a bus to Yangon to see if my passport had turned up. My visa was running out. The bus was cheap (\$10) and surprisingly comfortable — reclining seats, air-con, and minimal stops. We rolled into Yangon around 5:30 p.m. The short cycle from the bus station to the hotel was a nightmare: horrendous traffic and dark streets.

A Twist of Luck at Last Yangon

No passport had turned up. But — miracle of miracles — my old passport (which I'd kept because it contained my American visa) turned out to be still valid. I'd assumed getting a new passport cancelled the old one. It didn't. It still had two blank pages. No emergency travel document needed.

The UK Embassy agreed to refund the fee. Things were finally turning in my favour.

I bought a ticket on the first available bus to the Thailand border. But buses only ran every second day. The next bus was in two days — a night bus — meaning I'd arrive at the border on the day my visa expired. I would leave Myanmar by the skin of my teeth.











The Bus Ride From Hell - Yangon to Myawaddy (Thailand border)

Expecting a bus like the Mandalay–Yangon one, I was horrified to find the opposite. The seats were narrow, designed for tiny Burmese, not bulky Europeans. Two people barely fit side by side.

Sleeping was impossible. There were no toilet facilities, and the bus rarely stopped, so drinking water was risky. By daybreak, we'd only reached Hpa-An.

Then came the mountain road — narrow, steep, exposed drop-offs. Roadworks caused long delays. Everything was done by hand. Supplies were carried in woven baskets dangling from shoulder poles. It felt like travelling through the 1800s.

Not long after, while negotiating a tight corner, a massive bang erupted under the bus. People screamed and instinctively moved to the opposite side — impressive, considering they'd all been asleep moments before. The driver and his crew crawled under the bus. An hour later, we continued.

We stopped at a temple where monks handed out drinks in exchange for donations. Then crawled toward Myawaddy, arriving long past midday.

Immigration took longer than usual since I was leaving with a different passport. But once cleared, I cycled off to Mae Sot, Thailand, immensely relieved.

Thus ended a problem-studded ride in Myanmar. My next priority: get to the South African Embassy in Bangkok to apply for a new passport — a process I believed would take months.



Epilogue

By the time I pedalled back into Thailand, damp, dusty, and clutching the wrong passport, Myanmar had given me more stories than kilometres. The country had thrown festivals, roadblocks, lost documents, broken wheels, and cliff-edge bus rides at me, and somehow I'd survived all of it — barely. My next stop was the South African Embassy in Bangkok, where I hoped the process of getting a new passport would be less dramatic than the journey that made it necessary. Myanmar had been beautiful, baffling, maddening, and marvellous, often all at once. And although I left by the skin of my teeth, I left with a grin. I will be back.



About this Chapter

This chapter is a personal account of my bike ride through Myanmar, part of a round-the-world cycle journey. There are countless possible routes to take, and the one described here is by no means the best — just the one I chose.

The distances

The daily distances recorded in this book may not always be the shortest route between two points, since I do tend to wander off course from time to time. The kilometres, however, were accurately recorded on my odometer. My readings often differed from distance markers and maps, sometimes coming in a little high, sometimes a little low. I always noted the day's total at the end, which might even include a detour to the market or a few extra loops while searching for accommodation.

Time of year and date

This book covers my cycle ride through Myanmar between 30 March and 25 April 2015. A lot may have changed since then — roads may now be smoother or rougher, places where I stayed may have been upgraded or demolished, and the hills may or may not be as steep as I remember. At the time, though, they certainly felt it.

Insurance

Travel insurance covering theft, loss, and medical issues is essential. Some policies exclude “dangerous activities,” which can include scuba diving, motorcycling, and even trekking. I wouldn't have thought cycling counted as dangerous, but it's definitely worth checking the small print.

Clothing

Because you'll spend most of your time in the saddle, good-quality padded cycling shorts are a must. I cycle in ordinary sandals, though you can ride in whatever footwear feels comfortable. I only travel with one pair of shoes, but you're free to pack as many as you like. In the tropics, it's hot enough that warm clothes are rarely needed, except when heading into higher elevations. Bring insect repellent and anti-chafe cream as part of your basic toiletries. I recommend wearing a cycling helmet, even though I don't.

The bicycle

Any bike will do, as long as it feels right for you. It should be fitted with racks, which most bicycle shops can install. Panniers are expensive, but they're worth it. I strongly recommend Schwalbe tyres: they may cost more, but they're reliable, and you'll rarely get a flat. Make sure you know how to repair a punctured tube. A handlebar phone holder is very useful for navigation, since I rely on Organic or Google Maps to find my way. I also find a handlebar bag essential for carrying my camera and the other things I need during the day.



ABOUT MYANMAR

Myanmar is also called Burma. The change from the Union of Burma to the Union of Myanmar in 1989 reflects the country's evolving identity, which may inspire curiosity and respect for its cultural history among the audience.

Capital city:

Surprisingly enough, neither Yangon nor Mandalay is the capital city of Myanmar. In 2005, the government shifted its administrative centre to Nay Pyi Taw (Naypyidaw), a newly constructed city near Pyinmana, possibly to promote regional development or improve administrative efficiency. Nay Pyi Taw was proclaimed the capital of Myanmar in 2006, marking a significant political decision.

Currency:

The Kyat (pronounced 'chat') is the official currency of Myanmar, abbreviated as 'K' or 'MMK' and usually placed before the numerical value (i.e.K500). Kyat comes in notes (no coins) of value K50, K100, K200, K500, K1000, K5000 and K10,000.

The US dollar is used as an alternative currency, particularly for larger purchases. Smaller purchases, such as taxi rides, buses and cheaper to mid-range meals, are quoted and are almost always paid for in kyat. I have found no need for US currency in Myanmar and usually draw local currency from the ATM as soon as I cross the border.

Language:

The Burmese language is the official language of Myanmar. English is widely used – to varying degrees of proficiency.

Religion:

Myanmar is a predominantly Buddhist country with 89% of the population being Buddhist, 4% Christian, 4% Islam and about 1% Animist.

Location and size:

Myanmar is located in the western portion of mainland Southeast Asia. The country is bordered by China to the north and northeast, Laos to the east, Thailand to the southeast, the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal to the south and southwest, Bangladesh to the west, and India to the northwest. The country covers 676,578 square kilometres and has a total length from north to south of about 2,050 km, and its width at the widest part, across the centre of the country at about the latitude of the city of Mandalay, of approximately 930 km from east to west.

Population:

Myanmar has a population of 54 million and has a population density of 83 per Km; it is listed as no 127 on the list of countries by population density.

The people are made up of a striking array of different ethnic groups, which include Bamar/Burmese (the largest in number), Shan, Karen, Kachin, Chin, Mon, Han Chinese and Indian, to name but a few.



About the Author

Hailing from the city of Cape Town, South Africa, Leana's journey into the world of cycling began not with years of training but with a single bold decision. In 2005, driven by curiosity and a spirit of adventure, she entered the Tour D'Afrique—a legendary mountain bike race stretching from Cairo to Cape Town. With little cycling experience, Leana purchased a bicycle, flew to Cairo, and set out on a route that would take her the entire distance from Cairo to Cape Town.

Returning home, Leana found that the rhythms of ordinary life could not compare to the freedom of the open road. The call of adventure proved irresistible, and in March 2007, she and her companion, Ernest Markwood, embarked on a journey that would evolve into a round-the-world cycling odyssey. Though they began together, the road eventually led them to discover their own unique directions—both in travel and in life.

Leana's travels have taken her across Africa twice, through the Middle East, Europe, the United Kingdom, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, the Indian subcontinent, China, Southeast Asia, and Australia. Her wanderlust then carried her to Ushuaia, Argentina, from where she cycled the length of South, Central, and North America over several years. Along the way, she explored many of the world's larger islands, including Cuba, Jamaica, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan.

Today, Leana continues her adventures in Southeast Asia, ever inspired by the promise of new horizons and the enduring joy of life on two wheels.









**It's not a race. It's a journey in which neither the distance cycled,
nor the destination is of any importance.**



Over 27 days and 764 kilometres, Myanmar delivers everything from water-festival ambushes to passport disasters, false flats, broken hubs and bus rides that defy engineering. A journey meant to be simple becomes a catalogue of misadventures — funny, frustrating and unforgettable.

