

Going off the beaten track in a country notorious for its politics and human-rights abuses, **David Kootnikoff** encounters leg-rowing fishermen and some fearless comedians.

Burmese ways

When Soe hears my wife is Japanese he quietly apologises. During the 2007 anti-government protests in Myanmar, a young soldier in flip-flops shot and killed Japanese photographer Kenji Nagai.

Soe (not his real name) watched the BBC coverage of the street protests on a teahouse television in the village of Nyaungshwe, on the shores of Inle Lake, about 400km north of Yangon. The absurdly named State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) neglected to cut the country's satellite and internet connections quickly enough to censor Nagai's killing and Soe, along with many other Myanmar, watched in horror as Nagai died. "No one supports the government – everybody hates them," Soe says under his breath. As we soon discover, it is a familiar refrain.

The next morning, Soe takes us out onto the lake and the damp air seeps into our clothes as a lone bird from the surrounding marshes breaks the silence. Nestled between two mountain ranges in Shan state, Inle seems far removed from the catastrophe of Cyclone Nargis, which devastated Myanmar last spring.

Inle is home to the Intha, one of Myanmar's more than 130 ethnic groups. They live in houses that sit on

stilts above the water like giant long-legged spiders. Fish are a staple here and the residents tend floating gardens that are attached to the bottom of the shallow lake by bamboo poles.

One of Inle's "leg-rowing" fishermen emerges from the mist like an apparition. Using a cone-shaped net made from teak, he hooks one leg around a single paddle to steer, while attempting to pull in a catch of *nga hpein*, the local carp, with his hands.

A few times a week, Inle's floating market meets somewhere around the lake – the location varies. As we navigate through a log-jam of boats, a group of water-borne hawkers converges on us. After docking, we make our way through the crowd and find a bustling outdoor market selling everything from fresh eels and dried ants to cheroot cigarettes. Twin girls wave rice crackers at us while a man tries to interest me in some lemon-yellow tofu. His lips are stained crimson from sucking on betel nut, a mild drug.

The next day a rickety horse-drawn cart drops us off at the edge of town for a trek into the hills around the lake. A dry path leads through a Pa-O – another ethnic group – village and on to a one-room schoolhouse. Inside, the teacher points at an English letter

and the class recites it in unison, their faces smeared with a white moisturising cream from the bark of a *thanakh* tree that makes them look like a gaggle of circus clowns.

Mandalay is Myanmar's second-largest city, after Yangon, and its last royal capital before the British annexed the country in 1885. A 19-year-old George Orwell was stationed here as a police officer in 1922 before being transferred to the north of the country, where he spent another four years. Twenty years later, he wrote *Animal Farm* and *1984*, novels that depicted dystopian societies which, for some, reflect modern-day Myanmar. Ironically, the junta has tried to capitalise on Orwell's residency by allowing photocopies of his novel *Burmese Days* to be widely available throughout the country.

The Moustache Brothers comedy troupe is renowned for its politically charged performances of *a-nyeint pwe*, a type of traditional Burmese vaudeville. The three comedians have been banned from performing for fellow citizens and survive by putting on nightly shows in their own home for foreign visitors. Tonight, more than 40 tourists are crammed into the comedians' small basement beneath photos of opposition

Clockwise from main picture: an Inle Lake fisherman leg-rowing; an Inle stilt house; the Golden Boulder stupa; historic Bagan.



figure Aung San Suu Kyi, a good friend and fan. Brother Number One, 60-year-old Par Par Lay, has been arrested three times, most recently during the September 2007 "saffron revolution", when he was jailed for providing food to the demonstrating monks. He and fellow Moustache Brother Lu Zaw previously served nearly six years in a labour camp for criticising the nation's dictatorship during a performance at a party at Suu Kyi's house in 1996. Par Par Lay still performs similar routines – including a traditional Burmese dance – in which he masks himself like a thief to spoof the corruption of the regime.

A few hours west of Mandalay is the historical area of Bagan. Founded in 1057 by King Anawrahta, Bagan consists of hundreds of temples and stupas spread over a 40-sq-km plain. With Burma's largest river, the Irrawaddy, winding through it, Bagan rivals Cambodia's Angkor Wat as one of Southeast Asia's most alluring sights.

In hushed tones at a cafe, our guide says that last year he watched the monks march twice before joining them for the third demonstration. After the junta stifled the protests, he took his wife and two

children to his village, near Mandalay. Two months later, when it was safe, the family returned.

After dawn, on the road south from Bagan to Mount Popa – the Myanmar Mount Olympus and home for pre-Buddhist spirit-gods known as *nats* – we pass processions of monks collecting alms from the faithful. During the saffron revolution monks refused to accept alms from anyone who was aligned with the junta, turning their lacquered black bowls upside down in an act of excommunication. It was a highly symbolic gesture for the inhabitants of this devoutly Buddhist country.

Arriving at the foot of the temple more than an hour after having left Bagan, we are greeted by an army of hungry monkeys waiting for breakfast. The top of the small mountain temple, a former volcano, is bathed in light as the sun peeks over the surrounding hills.

Back in Yangon, the city's most luxurious hotel, The Strand, is offering a discount – a superior room listed at US\$450 a night is going for the "bargain" price of US\$350. A sales rep says the management is planning to expand and will build a swimming pool. In the lobby, a complimentary copy of government propaganda rag *The New Light of Myanmar* features a photograph of

Getting there Thai Airways (www.thaiair.com) operates flights from Hong Kong to Bangkok and from there to Yangon. In an attempt to project an air of normality, the Myanmar authorities have made tourist travel to the country relatively simple.

the paunchy chairman of the SPDC, Than Shwe, teeing off at the opening of a golf course in Mandalay. It also warns readers that the BBC and Voice of America are "killers in the airwaves", bent on destroying the nation.

Our final day is spent visiting Kyaiktiyo, also known as the Golden Boulder stupa, an enormous rock painted gold and perched high above a forested valley. To reach this sacred site involves an hour-long trek uphill from the drop-off point, five hours east of Yangon. On the journey, the driver sucks noisily on betel nut to stay alert as he negotiates numerous military checkpoints. At the Irrawaddy crossing in Sittoung, a soldier is asleep at his post in the middle of the bridge. In a strange way it offers a small glimmer of hope; even Big Brother eventually nods off.