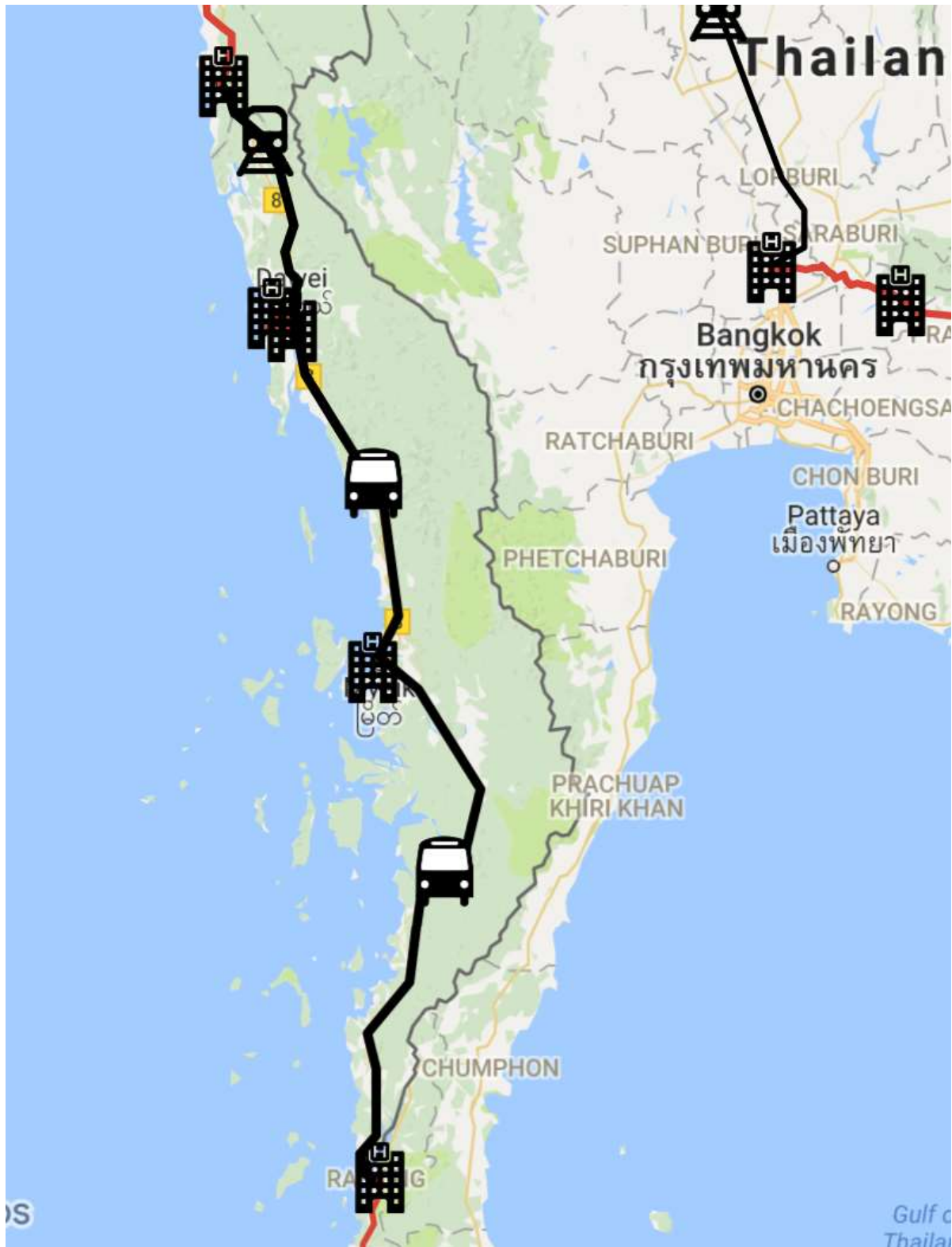


Season 7 – Part 2. Through southern Myanmar by bus and train.



Mo 25.4.2016, day 288. Huge travel day (Ranong – Kawthaung – Myeik, 25 km bike, bus).

This day ended up being a huge one! We headed down to the quay where the boats leave for Myanmar, which is actually NOT where Google Maps says they leave from. They leave from down at Ranong Passport Control in the south west tip of the city. Good thing Siria looked that one up carefully! I would have blindly followed Google.

We arrived and were instantly “ambushed” by one of the ferrymen. The normal price for the crossing is 50 B for locals and 100 B for foreigners. “Olur” ferryman offered to bring us across for 400B including the bikes. We really weren’t in the mood for asking around and bargaining so we decided to relax and go with the flow. The whole crossing ended up being a piece of cake. We got our passports stamped by the Thai customs, the bikes were loaded into the long-tail boat in a flash, we gave our passports and photocopies thereof to the ferryman together with 100 B fees for the Myanmar customs and simply leaned back and enjoyed the ride.

After about 20 min we arrived in Kawthaung and were instantly picked up by a guy from the Myanmar “tourist” association. He shunted us off into the passport control where we got our passports stamped and then he insisted on organizing whatever we had planned for. If possible we wanted to head up northwards that very day and not spend a night in Kawthaung. We soon learned that the speedboat was indeed permanently cancelled. What a disappointment! So we would have to take the bus. It was confirmed that it was not permitted to ride our bikes up the road northwards. So again we decided to go along with our tout that had latched onto us. At least he spoke excellent English, which made things simpler. He took me on a scooter to a counter where bus tickets were sold. There I learned that a small minibus was 25’000 K (about 25 \$) per person and they wanted 10\$ extra for the bikes. After some failed negotiation to get the price down I learned that there was also a big bus for 15\$ and 8 \$ for the bikes, but this bus would take about 1h longer, so 6h, as I had understood that the minibus took 4-5 h. So, having visions of a large comfortable air-con bus, I decided to go for the big bus, leaving at 4pm, that should get us to Myeik at 10 pm and bought the tickets. Unfortunately, at that time I only had Thai Baht and they gave me a miserable exchange rate. In retrospect, our first priority should have been to hunt down an ATM to get some local cash. But we only lost a couple of dollars and at least we had our tickets. So we had a simple lunch of fried rice and biked off to the bus station that was about 5 km out of town. On the way we stopped to withdraw money, but the only ATM in town that would work with international cards was not working. So we went to a bank to exchange our leftover Singapore dollars. I had a couple of two dollar bills and one 50\$ bill. This should at least get us through a day or two. The money changing experience was hilarious. It took over 30 minutes to get our money changed, our passports were copied, forms were filled and signed, bits of paper were filed and passed to the back office. Finally, our 50\$ bill was handed back to us with the words “dirty!”. and we were given some Myanmar Kyats worth about 5 US \$. I looked at the soggy, greasy, dirty and worn Kyats bills I was given and held them up and said, half-jokingly: “Dirty!”.

When we got to the bus station my vision of the air-con bus was quickly shattered. We were pointed towards an old beaten up Chinese off-road bus. We looked inside and it was already stuffed full of all sorts of boxes and sacks. There was even a scooter parked in the aisle. Soon two friendly chaps turned up and helped me load the bikes into the bus., They somehow went on top of all the sacks and the trailer fitted snugly behind the scooter. I love this pragmatic “No problem” approach often found in

developing countries. So different from the Swiss “Es ist verboten!” mentality. I tightly tied the bikes down to the seats to make sure they wouldn’t bounce around.

We got talking to the driver who turned out to be a computer engineer who now had his own and was driving it between Kawthaung and Myeik. We also learned that the trip would take us 14 h and not 6h as promised when I bought the tickets!

So punctually at 4 pm we left. The bus was almost empty and we each had a twin seat to ourselves. However, as we got going and started to leave town the bus started filling up. At one military camp 4 additional huge green steel boxes came aboard together with more passengers and we finally had to give up our luxury of having twin seats to ourselves. So there we sat, jammed onto a tiny seat right at the very front of the bus with no leg room. The road was small and windy with steep hills and steep descents. The bus barely made it up the hills, going at walking pace and the driver also went downhill very gingerly in low gears using only the motor brake. The driver had a “first engineer” sitting on the engine block beside him, who would pour water from a big plastic tank on dashboard onto the engine. The whole front of the bus was stiflingly hot, heated by the hard working engine. In spite of all windows and doors being open, the hot stuffy air just sat there. Only when going round right hand bends at good speed was some fresh air pushed in through the windows giving us some relief from the heat. Going up hills the driver sometimes wouldn’t manage to smash in the lowest gear at the first attempt and the bus would come to an almost complete stop. Each time this happened the first engineer would leap out of the bus with a big wedge and jam it under the rear wheel to stop the bus from rolling backwards. This routine and the fact that we went downhill very very cautiously convinced me that the bus had indeed no brakes and so I decided to be ready to jump out if ever the bus should start rolling backwards!

We stopped at a restaurant after about 3h, where we had a simple meal of rice with meat and vegetables. Then we drove on through the night. Most of the time we were driving through palm oil plantations and at one point through a huge charred and still burning area where the forest was being cleared. Really sad to see.

Amazingly we even managed to find some sleep!



















Tu 26.4.2016, day 289. Relaxing in Myeik (15 km)

We arrived in Myeik punctually at 6 am. Our friend the driver invited us to have some traditional Myanmar food for breakfast, so we stayed on the bus, while everyone else got off and we drove down a narrow side alley in our private bus and parked beside a small little food stand. There three ladies, each wearing thick layers of the pale brown mud-like face cream that seems to be all the rage here in Myanmar, soon brought us all sorts of sweet sticky rice packed in banana leafs. We then packed up our bikes while everyone crowded around us to witness this spectacle. Selfies were taken, Facebook details exchanges and soon we were off.

As we rode through town in the early morning all heads turned. Clearly, two westerners on bikes schlepping kite surfing equipment is not something Myeik sees every day. We had read about bicyclists being followed by “spies” who check-up if you try to do something illegal, like sleeping in a temple or camping or even just biking along a road that is not open to tourists. And sure enough, soon we had our very own spy and he really looked the part, riding a tattered scooter that was billowing black smoke and wearing a thick layer of the fashionable “mud” in his face and with freakish make up round his eyes. He was always there behind us or in front of us. When we stopped he would stop. When we turned round, he would turn round. Once we got him into a bit of a hassle, as we turned left just after he had passed us. And sure enough he made a u-turn and came back after us.

He soon lost interest though, when we went into one of the travel agencies, as all good tourists should.

We checked into White Pearl Hotel, which is excellently located and “only” 20\$ and had a nice long snooze. In the evening we headed up to the large pagoda on the hill, in perfect time to watch the sun set over the town and the islands and fishing boats in the background. The atmosphere was lovely.

After a bit of a stroll through the town and some dinner we called it a day and headed for bed.















We 27.4.2016, day 290. Unexpected organizational help (Myeik – Dawei, 15 km bike, bus)

The plan for the day was to reach Dawei. We had asked around the myriad of travel agents that can be found at every street corner the day before about big busses. We got as many answers as agents we asked. So for me, this meant that each agent was looking after one or two busses and trying to sell tickets for his busses only. In any case none of the busses left at good times for us, some were at 2 or 3 in the morning, some late in the afternoon or evening. So our plan was simply to go to the bus station at a reasonable time and ask round for the next bus to Dawei. We were at breakfast at 7am and there was one other western guy there with us. After a while he asked us “why are you wearing the same tee-shirts?”. Indeed, we were both wearing the red shirt we got from the Reykjavik marathon, as it was the only clean garment we had left. A bit embarrassing walking round wearing the same shirt! But anyway, we got chatting and it turns out he is a German tour guide living in Myanmar and taking care of the handful of tourists that find their way to this obscure corner of Myanmar. But he did know about the busses and said that there are not many, but there was one leaving at 8:30 but not from the bus station, but from the stadium. He also showed his hand drawn food and hotel map of Dawei that I quickly took a photo of.

We quickly decided to give the 8:30 bus a shot, looked for the stadium on our maps and headed out of town. Down a side lane close to the stadium we saw two busses. We asked and sure enough one was going to Dawei, it was no problem to put our bikes in the luggage compartment along with the trailer and soon we were sitting in a modern air con bus with comfortable seats! All this for only 15\$ per person.



The bus ride was great, really luxurious compared to the trip from Kawthaung. We stopped at some restaurant for a 2\$ meal that was surprisingly good and arrived in Dawei at around 4pm. There our German friend's map proved its usefulness and we found the cheapest hotel in town without effort and checked out one of his highlights after the next: best traditional Myanmar food in town: check! Good Thai food and draft beer: fail! They were out of draft beer! Best coffee in town: check! Although we had lime shakes instead. Coffee and Cheesecake: CHECK! This place, Dream Journey Café, actually ended up being our favourite hang-out with its rooftop seating area right in the middle of an orchard of shady mango trees.

# Dawei Delicious - Food Map



- |                                  |   |
|----------------------------------|---|
| 1. Amazon Cafe + Restaurant      | - Best Coffee in Town, Free Wifi                |
| 2. Joy House Restaurant          | - Best value, Draft Beer, Great Thai Food       |
| 3. Golden Dragon Restaurant      | - Best fried wheat noodle (Kauk Sur Cho)        |
| 4. Upper Mac Street Stall        | - Best dessert in Dawei                         |
| 5. European + International Food | - Best view over Dawei (Beef Steak + Apple Pie) |
| 5a. Mate SWE Tea House           | - Best Samosa - Mahinga                         |
| 6. Naan Bread Street Stall       | - Naan and Chick pea Curry                      |
| 7. Molatow Street Stall          | - Best rice noodle soup 2pm - 6pm               |
| 8. Big Market (Clothes + Snacks) | - Mingle with the locals                        |
| 9. Daw San Curryhouse            | - Best traditional Burmese Food                 |
| 9a. Pearl Ekar Restaurant        | - Pricey, but Best Ambiance                     |
| 10. Dream Journey Cafe           | - Coffee and Cheese Cake                        |
| 11. Pollar Max Cold Drink Shop   | - Best Ice cream + Avocado Salad                |
| 12. Monday's Burger Shop         | - Best Burgers and Sandwiches                   |

[www.lifeseeingtours.com](http://www.lifeseeingtours.com)

[www.myanmarparadisebeach.com](http://www.myanmarparadisebeach.com)









Th 28.4.2016, day 291. One more day in search of kite surfing wind (Dawei – Maungmagan, 20 km)

In Myeik we observed that in the evening quite a fresh breeze set in, easily strong enough for kite surfing. Unfortunately, there was really no place to rig up all our stuff there, but this did make us hopeful that if we found a nice beach there might be enough wind and about 20 km east of Dawei there was a nice beach!

So after finally finding a place for breakfast (fried rice and eggs) we headed off. Biking in Myanmar is certainly very entertaining and also quite an adventure. There are all sorts of vehicles on the road, some billowing out huge black clouds of exhaust, a lot of people walking and also on bicycles. And every one stares, most also wave and cheerfully call out. The roads so far were quite good. Some side lanes were not paved and some roads are pitted with pot holes, but not that bad really.

We got down to the beach and found the Coconut Bungalows without problem. Apparently the best deal in town at 25\$. Then we hopefully headed towards the beach with all the kite stuff. The beach was quite a surprise for us. There was one restaurant after the other together with shops selling all the usual touristy stuff. It was however quite low key and tasteful as everything was constructed out of bamboo and the road was just compacted sand. Unfortunately, there was not wind! So we settled down for a nice meal. Afterwards we made a little excursion to the brand new resort that was put up just south of the beach. It was absolutely terrible! Some identical cubic concrete bungalows arranged in a perfect rectangular grid, each with air con. Easy to see what this whole place will be like in a couple of years. There will probably be no one to stop it. A real shame, this could be turned into a great exemplary eco



tourist place with close to zero impact on environment and great benefit to the community. Instead there will be concrete bunkers charging huge amounts of money that will be pocketed by corrupt politicians and the military junta. And so it goes!

When we got back, we found a nice place to relax and have some coconuts. The people there were absolutely fascinated by our bikes and inspected them in excruciating detail, knowingly nodding their head. We then had a spooky experience. One rather poor looking guy came and sat with us trying to say or explain something to us. We tried to understand what he was saying but we couldn't. Coloured by our experience in other countries, we thought he was probably begging for money. We sat there for some time reading, he sat there also, waiting. When we got ready to leave, he gave us two sachets of shampoo as a present. Also it turned out that some other guy who we hadn't even noticed had paid for our coconuts. I still don't know what exactly was going on there...







Fr 29.4.2016, day 292. Excursion to San Maria Bay and back to Dawei (Mangmagan – Dawei, 50 km)

We had breakfast in the Coconut Bungalow. Siria had Müsli with Yoghurt and fruit, I went for the pancake with fruit. Siria definitively made the better choice, it was delicious and a decent portion. My pancake was also delicious, but pitifully small...

After breakfast I decided to bike over to the next bay, where apparently paradise like beaches were to be found. The ride was great and it was fun riding without bags. The road led through really remote villages, with hand operated water wells, no electricity and cheerfully waving children.

The beach was quite nice, but then again, it was just a beach. For me the beach was just a good excuse for a great ride through the countryside. I took the obligatory photos and headed back.

After a short ride we got back to the Sein Swe Moe Guest House in Dawei. We were going to be given room #1 but it was only free at 5pm, so we dumped our stuff and went to find a place where we had seen two seamstresses at work with their sewing machines as Siria's silk sleeping bag and my trousers badly needed stitching up. The ladies quickly got the problem and soon their mechanical sewing machines were whizzing over our garments. Absolutely fascinating to watch. The sewing machines would be expensive antiques back in Switzerland! They did a fantastic job and when they were finished and I pulled out my purse, all they said was "No, no, no! Present!". We were speechless.

We then went for iced lime juice under the mango trees in Dream Journey Café and afterwards found some curry and naan breads at a small street stall (yummy). Then we went for some desert. While we were getting supplies for tomorrow's train journey, a very nice young French guy started talking to us. I was surprised he seemed to know our names and all about our trip. It then transpired that he also was staying at the Sein Shwe GH and had biked here from France with his girlfriend. We hit it off immediately and soon afterwards we were sitting in Dream Journey Café talking and talking. We didn't even realize how time flew. Suddenly we realized it was past 11 pm and the place actually closed at 10pm. The poor girls running the place were sitting downstairs glued to their smart phones just waiting until we would finally leave. We felt really bad! We then said our good-byes and went to get a small bit of sleep before catching the 4:20 train for Ye. Sure to be another adventure! We informed the young guy who was on night duty, that we would be leaving at about 3:45 and he would have to open the gate. He said no problem and asked if he should wake us. We said "No, no! We'll wake up for sure!".





























Sa 30.4.2016, day 293. Overslept! (Dawei, 0 km)

I woke up feeling as though I had slept pretty well, it was still dark outside and I knew it must be before 3:30 as no alarm had gone off yet. I groped around for my mobile phone and checked the time. 4:45. So, that was that. We overslept and missed the train.

So we slept some more and finally got and slowly started a very lazy day, that would take us from one café to the next. We soon met up again with our new found friends Jean-Philippe and Justine who were also in no rush whatsoever to get on their way down to the beaches just south of Dawei due to the sweltering heat. So basically we spent all day with them, chatting and simply having a good time. We also were absolutely fascinated by their bikes. JP had a recumbent bike and Justine a three wheeler. We had a go on both bikes. The recumbent is actually quite hard to ride. I even fell off the first time I tried. The three wheeler was very comfortable, but also very heavy and quite slow. Also I guess it would be quite bulky to put in a bus or plane. I'm not really sure how suitable it is for touring, but these guys made it here all the way from France! Again it was really inspiring talking to them. I am slowly getting more and more avid to try and ride all the way back home through all the Stan countries. We'll see. We still have a long way to go here in Asia. What an adventure!





















Su 1.5.2016, day 294. Loooooong train journey. (Dawei – Ye, 15 km)

We went to bed early and I had a restless sleep, waking up every couple of hours, worried we would oversleep again. But this time the alarms went off, we got up, packed our stuff and biked off to the railway station. We were there just before 4 am. There was no one there, except for two guys sleeping on the platform. 4:30 am and there was still no-one there. At 5am finally people started to arrive. So our information that the train was to leave at 4:20 was most certainly wrong. More likely it should leave at 5 or 5:30, but for sure it is always late. We watched the sun go up, 6 am came and went, then 7 am. No sign of a train, people had ambled off probably to get breakfast. Then a couple of people who looked official appeared at the counter. We asked about tickets and were told to wait. Finally at 8 am they called me in and I got the tickets. 4000 Ky per person in “upper class” plus 700 for the bikes. Just then the train finally arrived. Some military trucks arrived and grain and other stuff was unloaded from the luggage carriage. The train was then switched round and it was time to load the bikes into the train. I had heard stories of people’s bikes being bashed up by the motion of the train, so I took great care to securely lash the bikes to the wall with our elastic ties and then I pushed a heavy box against them. Very soon I was drenched in sweat and my feet were covered in a horrible slimy goo from the floor of the waggon that had a terrible fishy stench. The seats in the upper class only had one position, sort of half reclined and were covered in a horribly dirty linen cloth, but there was lots of space. Also our seats were facing backwards, which was unfortunate as we had almost no air blowing in our faces. And so, finally, at 9am the train pulled out of Dawei south station, soon afterwards we arrived at Dawei main station. And there again the train stopped for 1.5h for no apparent reason. In retrospect, we would have easily caught the train the day before as very probably the train never really leaves on time.

And so we trundled through the forest (or what is left of it), plantations, small very poor villages at a very leisurely pace, slowly heading northwards. Soon we were both snoozing deeply. Suddenly a jolt woke me up. Everyone was excitedly looking out of the window. I looked out and saw that we had collided with a truck carrying bricks. There was a large group of gaffers standing round the train, all taking photos with mobile phones. I could hardly believe it! How can a truck collide with a train traveling 20 km/h? I resisted the temptation to join the gaffers and so we sat there as the temperature of the train slowly increased under the burning midday sun. We only had 1l of water left and the sweat was simply running off our bodies. We started wondering what we should do. Sit it out? Get our bikes and ride back to Dawei? We had only covered 25 km or so. We decided to wait and see what happens. Eventually they managed to pull the mangled truck off the front of the train, the train reversed a bit probably so the tracks could be cleared and we were on our way again. The train stopped regularly and so we could buy water, however we noticed that the bottle was not sealed and the water looked quite murky indeed. Also we didn't touch the food, as everything looked as if it had been standing round in the sun for hours. Later on, at least we managed to find some sealed water bottles. So finally we arrived in Ye, exactly at midnight, 20h after arriving at the station in Dawei. The bikes had survived the trip without a scratch and soon we were biking through the dark streets of Ye. Luckily, when we rang the doorbell of the Starlight Guesthouse, someone was there to check us in. What a day!































Mo 2.5.2016, day 295. Excursion to the 4-Facing Buddha (Ye, 30 km)

We had a nice breakfast with great freshly brewed coffee on the veranda of the guest house overlooking a lake with the Pagoda on a little island in the middle of it and met David, the guy running the place. We also got chatting to a very nice Irish girl, Eva, who has been bumming round the world for the last 18 months with a friend of hers. One thing they are doing was house sitting. What a good idea! I'll have to check it out... We exchanged e-mails and she gave us loads of good tips of things to do up north. Talking to other travellers is better than any guide book! After breakfast we biked about 15 km northwards to a temple complex for some sight-seeing. No sooner had we arrived than one of the monks beckoned us in, sat us down on the floor in the middle of a room and soon a low table was placed in front of us and a couple of elderly lady monks laid out up all sorts of vegetarian dishes for us. There was even coffee for dessert! It was fascinating sitting there watching the monks going about their routines. It seemed to me that most of the monks were girls, all with their heads shaved. I somehow didn't realize that girls could also be monks. I somewhat ignorantly supposed it was a purely male domain.

After lunch we strolled over to the main temple. A huge 8 story building with 4 huge sitting Buddhas facing 4 directions. There was also an equally huge reclining Buddha close by that was under construction. Fascinating to see how they are made: they are constructed of a steel mesh that is clad in concrete. There were also a couple of pagodas and temples scattered around and two very posh luxurious western style villas with several cars parked in front. I wondered who they might belong to?

The 4-facing Buddha temple was absolutely stunning to visit. Apart from a few locals we were the only tourists and had the place all to ourselves. We climbed all the way to the top through hall after hall filled

with columns, Buddha statues and gold and dark red decoration. At the top we enjoyed the vista over the heads of the Buddhas and the cool breeze. Very soon -we thought- as Myanmar opens up to tourism, tour busses full of tourists will be arriving and the atmosphere and tranquillity of the place will vanish.

When we got back, Siria quickly disappeared back to the guest house, following the call of nature. She has been suffering from a bit of diarrhoea the last couple of days. I had a stroll round town, found some fresh rotis and went to watch people feeding fish from the pagoda on the island in the middle of the artificial lake in the centre of town. Wherever the fish food was thrown, the water immediately started to bubble and boil as hundreds of fish started fighting for the food, their silver bodies twisting and turning. It was actually quite scary. There must be an incredible number of fish in the lake! I somehow wondered what would happen to me if I should fall in... The fish food was sold in plastic bags and of course lots of the bags ended up in the lake together with the fish food. Pollution by plastic is really a serious problem here...























