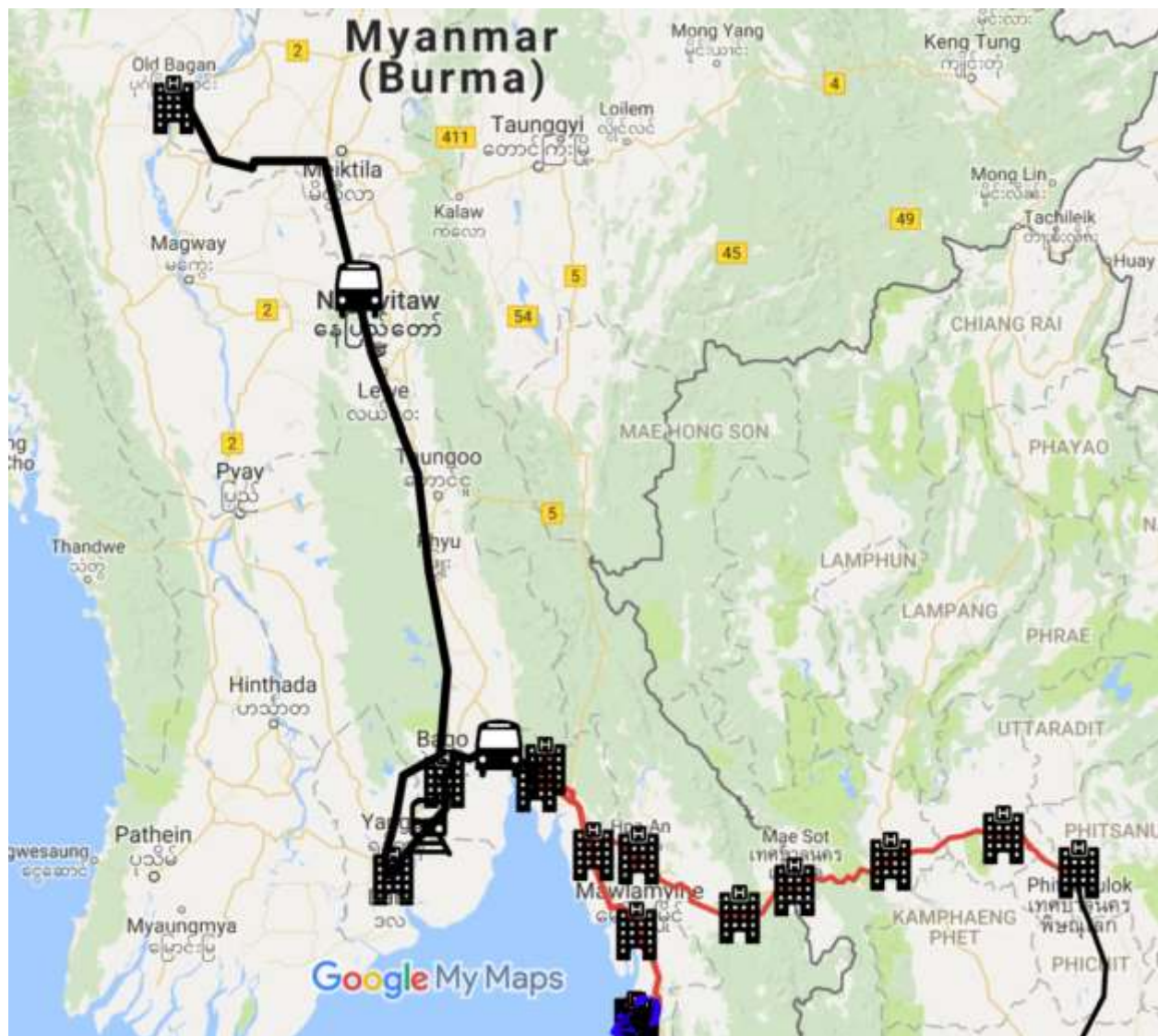


Season 7 – Part 3. Biking up southern Myanmar.



Tu 3.5.2016, day 296. Long ride along back lanes (Ye – Setse Beach, 110 km)

We decided to head up northwards in spite of Siria's stomach problems. We also decided to head off early so as to escape the brutal heat. We were on the road at 5 am and it was still almost completely dark but already the monks were out, marching through the streets collecting food donations. After about 25 km we stopped for some fried rice for breakfast and left the main road to take the back roads. This turned out to be a great decision. The ride went from great to even better, passing through wonderful little villages with surprisingly posh colonial style wooden houses, some great tree lined roads through dried out rice paddies and also along glaring white tidal pools where they were producing salt by letting the sea water evaporate. The only problem was that the road was in quite miserable condition, mostly dried and dusty red mud, sometimes really bumpy and rocky and very rarely paved. And if it was paved, then there were actually more potholes than paved surface. This slowed us down considerably and so at noon, when we stopped for lunch at a very nice place by a river for some rice and

soup, we had only covered a bit more than half the distance and so we had to continue riding in the afternoon heat. We arrived in Thanbyuzayat at about 4 pm, had some coffee and decided to push on and also ride the last 15 km down to Setse beach. About then Siria's stomach started to cramp quite badly, in retrospect it was far too big a day to do with her unsettled stomach. And so we limped on down to the beach where there were two signs, one pointing left to a Motel and one pointing right to 21 Paradise Hotel. Not knowing anything about either place we randomly decided to turn right towards the 21 Paradise Hotel. When we arrived we immediately saw that this place would knock us back quite a bit. But at this point Siria was really not doing very well, and so we decided to lash out and treat ourselves to TV with HBO movie channel and air con for 50\$.











We 4.5.2016, day 297. Relaxing and almost kite surfing! (Setse Beach, 0km)

I got up quite early and went out to enjoy breakfast under the pavilion on the beach. After doing my best to make a dent in the breakfast buffet I biked back up the beach to check out the other Motel. It was quite dilapidated, but less than half the price, quite funky and located right on the beach. When I got back, Siria was just about ready for breakfast, so I went back for a second breakfast, determined to get my money's worth!

We spent the day lazing around. I was quite hopefully observing how the wind was slowly picking up. Could this mean kite surfing? Late in the afternoon I decided to give it a go and rigged up everything. Needless to say, that this attracted quite a bit of attention! Quite possibly this is the first time anyone has tried kite surfing on Setse Beach... Unfortunately, the wind was just a fraction too weak and I just couldn't pick up enough speed to go upwind. But it was fun all the same! Later I got chatting to the kids that were riding up and down the beach selling rides on their horses. I promised them, that I would give it another go tomorrow.





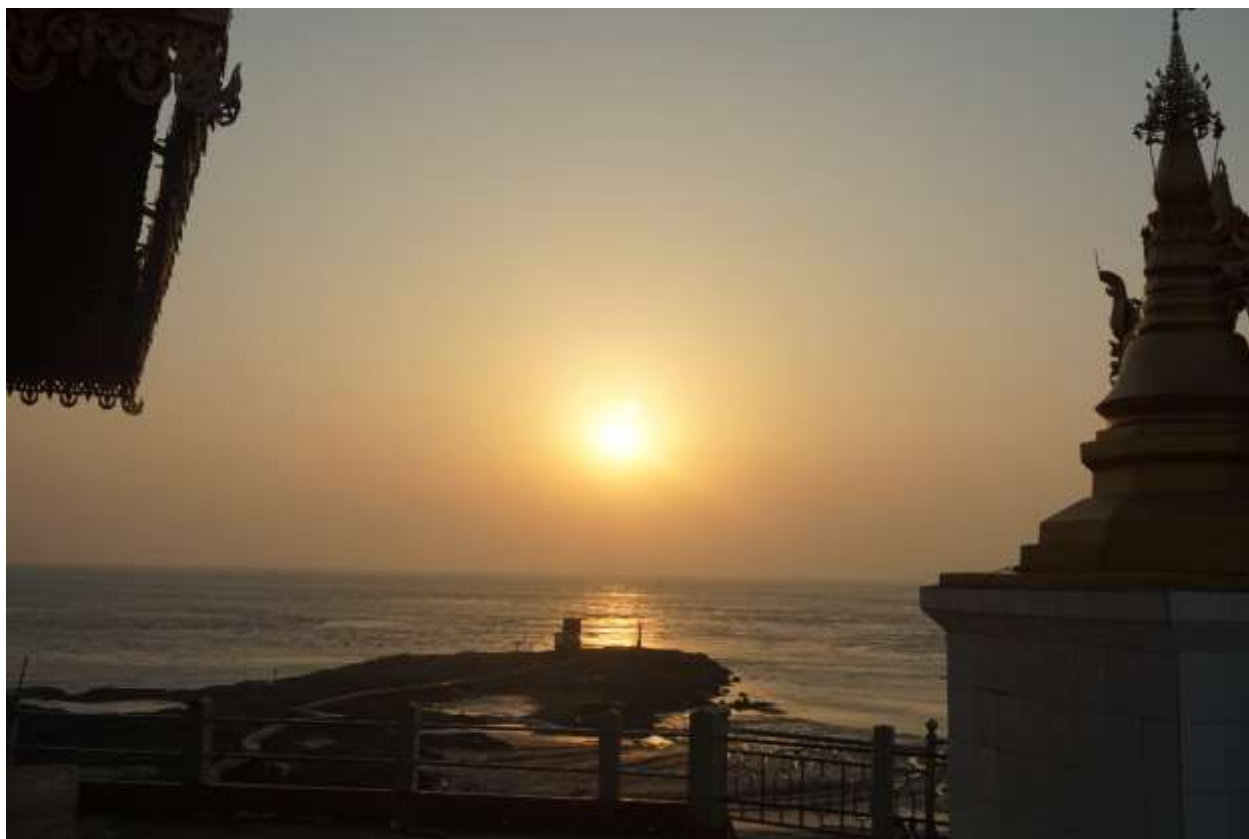


Th 5.5.2016, day 298. Ride out to Kyaikkami Temple (Setse .- Kyaikkami – Setse, 60 km)

This day was pretty much a copy of the last one. Again I tried to do a bit of kite surfing, but there was even less wind than the day before. Siria also gave it a go, but also for her there was too little wind, especially as there was also some nasty waves to deal with. But the good news was that she was again fit enough to give it a go!

In the evening I biked up north to the temple in Kyaikkami. I arrived just in time for sunset. It really is quite amazing how many splendid temples they have here in Myanmar. This place really is a tourist gold mine! It was also fun to ride back in the dark. I sometimes wonder what it would be like to bike in the dark and sleep during the day. Temperature wise it certainly would be more pleasant!









Fr 6.5.2016, day 299. Giant reclining Buddha (Setse Beach – Mawlamyine, 90 km)

The plan for the day was that Siria would take the Bus and I would ride to Mawlamyine. I was a bit worried leaving Siria with her stomach problems, but she assured me everything would be fine. And so at 6am I was packed up and ready to go. It was fun setting my own pace but – me being me- I pushed the speed quite a bit. I was in Thanbyuzayat at 7 am, where I had two of everything, two coffees, two eggs and two fried rice. I got a funny look from the people serving!

I saw on the map, that about 20 km before Mawlamyine there was some sort of temple, so I decided that that would be my lunch break. I covered the 50 km in about 2.5 h and arrived there at about 10 am. Turns out I had stumbled on the world's largest reclining Buddha! Really quite crazy, there are no other words I can find for this construction. It is even possible to go inside the Buddha where there are lots and lots of statues arranged to tell little stories. Towards the Buddha's feet all the scenes are violent and scary and close to the head they are all peaceful with cross legged Buddhas meditating and monks serenely praying. It's good to stay on guard though while walking through the display as there are precipitous drops with no railing, unfinished floors and rusty rebar sticking out all over the place. All part of the adventure!

On the other side of the valley construction was ongoing for an even bigger Buddha. Also there seemed to be quite a nice walking path up to a pagoda located right on top of a hill. I simply couldn't resist the temptation to hike up, in spite of the scorching heat. It was a 300 m climb without much shade, but I've gotten quite used to the heat and am certainly as fit as I've ever been. But I did get some funny looks from the locals. I think for them it is unimaginable that anyone should want to go for a mountain hike at lunch time. The view from the top was certainly worth the effort and there was a nice cooling breeze.

Back down at the bottom I had two delicious sugar cane juices (two of everything!) and downed 1l of cool water and finished off the last 20 km to Mawlamyine. The hotel was great with air con and HBO. I was really noticing the heat and couldn't really drink enough to keep me from dehydrating, so I did the best possible thing in these circumstances: switched on the air-con and watched the cartoon Rio. Fantastic!

At about 5pm I headed out in search of the Cinderella Hotel where apparently there was internet for 500 Ky / h and then, in the middle of Mawlamyine, I bumped into Siria. What a beautiful coincidence!

After a couple of very expensive fruit shakes that entitled us to free internet at Cinderella's, we had dinner down by the water and headed back to the hotel.

















Sa 7.5.2016, day 300. Hanging out in Mawlamyine (0 km)

We didn't really do much all day except wander round Mawlamyine a bit, we found a very nice place down by the water that had air con (at least as long as there was no power outage, something that is quite regular here) and great cappuccino frappes. For sunset we went up to one of the Pagodas. The atmosphere up there was so peaceful, very quiet, just the jingling of the wind chimes on the peak of the Pagoda.













Su 8.5.2016, day 301. Excursion over to Bilugyun Island (Mawlamyine – Bilugyun 40 km)

We got the idea of going over to the island right on the other side of the river from Mawlamyine from Eva, a girl we met a couple of days ago, so we went down to the pier, just as she had said, to catch the ferry for the locals. Again we were a bit worried if they would take our bikes. We seem never to learn. Of COURSE it would be no problem, this is not Switzerland after all! People crowded into the boat, when there was no more room, people crowded onto the roof, our bikes went onto the roof also and when the boat was completely full, they loaded about 10 scooters onto it as well. All no problem! It ended up being a delightful little excursion on the island. Simply biking through the villages, waving back at all the people that waved at us, stopping for a sugar cane juice or coffee here and there, chatting with some local who was keen on practicing his English over some tea. We took a small long tail boat back. Also here our bikes didn't even raise an eyebrow. In fact, a scooter come aboard the tiny boat together with our two bikes.

We went for some Rotis at the best Roti place in Mawlamyine, just down the road from our hotel. There we also found a place that sold Longis. I had long wanted one. They seem so practical and also seem the most appropriate thing to wear when visiting temples. It was fun choosing one and having the way to wear them explained by the rather shy girl in the shop. But I think she also was having quite some fun with us, we certainly laughed a lot! Then we headed up to another Pagoda for yet another splendid sunset. On the way there we dropped into the Ocean Center, a brand new mall in the centre of town. This turned out to be quite an interesting experience. It seems to me that the locals dress up to go to the mall. We watched one group waiting at the bottom of the escalator discussing. Then -after summoning all their courage- they stepped onto it, just about managing to keep their balance by gripping onto the handrail with both hands. It struck me, that this was probably the very first time they had ever been on an escalator in their lives. Everything was really expensive and there were security guards all over the place. It certainly was nothing like any shop we have seen here in Myanmar so far. I guess this is what is called progress... I wonder if it is!

After enjoying yet another wonderful sunset at yet another wonderful pagoda, we went down to our favourite restaurant for beer and food and finally to our favourite café for cappuccino. Funny how quickly we get into routines. I guess we are getting old...

















Mo 9.5.2016, day 302. Back on the road again. (Mawlamyine – Thaton, 70 km)

We had breakfast of oats, milk, mango and bananas that we spooned out of cut open water bottles. Still the best biking breakfast by far! We were on the road by 6am, headed out of town and over the very long bridge over the tidal river. The ride was flat and easy, we even had a bit of tail wind and we made good progress. About 20 km before Thaton a guy on his scooter came along side me and started chatting. Turns out he is one of only 20 Burmese living in Switzerland. What a coincidence! We chatted and he invited us to a coffee in the next village. He was an extremely nice man! It is these encounters that make travelling by bike so special. Another fun part of the ride was that for some reason there were a lot of “music trucks” on the road. These are old clapped out trucks towing a generator and huge speakers that blare out music at incredible volume. Sometimes they were just parked in some alley and a couple of young kids were sitting close by. We had no idea as to the reason, but it was certainly fun! We arrived in Thaton exactly at 12, found a good Chinese restaurant for some lunch and then hunted round a bit for a hotel as the only one marked on Maps Me was definitively too expensive at 35\$. After asking round for a bit we found a great place for only 10\$. After a refreshing shower I lay down on the bed and instantly fell into a deep sleep with very vivid dreams about biking through India. After 1.5 h Siria woke me up with the sound of a cock from her i-phone. It took me a while to realize where I was...

Then we went for dinner, that was interrupted by another blackout and had a small stroll around the town before heading back to the hotel for an early night.









Tu 10.5.2016, day 303. Nice back lane biking ☺ (Thaton – Kinpun, 85 km)

We were on the road by 5 am biking through the dark, quiet and cool streets was great. We made great time for the first 40 km, arriving in Milin just after 7 am for some rotis for breakfast. We then left the main road following a road that is not on Google but is on Maps Me. I was a bit worried it would be in poor condition resulting in slow progress, but it was a great road. Tiny villages, almost no traffic at all and also quite nice scenery. The only problem was the heat. In the shade the temperature was well above 40°C, but there was no shade. Also we had a slight tail wind, meaning that we also didn't have a cooling breeze in our faces. We had to stop a couple of times to cool off in the forest beside the road. The extremely good news was that Siria had got over her stomach problems and more or less her old self again.

We arrived in Kinpun exactly at noon. We were both very surprised how touristic the place was. It was full of souvenir shops, stalls, restaurants. Right when we arrived a tout came running towards us advertising his hotel. This always makes us suspicious, so we sat down, had a sugar cane juice and I went to check out the other hotels in town while Siria guarded our bikes. It turned out the tout's place was in fact the best deal in town at 20\$ for an AC room and free WiFi. Turned out that we DID have AC and WiFi, however the power was down most of the time, so it was not much good.

We went for some fried rice at one of the many restaurants and headed off for an early night, as we were planning to head up to the Golden Rock Pagoda early next morning.

We 11.5.2016, day 304. Golden Rock Pagoda (Kinpun – Golden Rock – Kyaykto, 20 km)

The alarm went off at 2:45 and we were out on the road at 3 am. The road soon turned into a well-trodden trail, sometimes with steps, sometimes paved leading up into the mountains. There were lots and lots of little huts along the trail, that probably sell all sorts of stuff during daylight. There was no moon, but we walked up without torch light. This way other senses become far more acute and also, even if you don't see the path right in front of you very clearly, you can appreciate your surroundings far more, the stars, the shadows of the trees, the silhouettes of the hills. Walking with a torch you only see a small patch of ground right in front of you. Somehow I think this is similar to meditation. Normally your mind is so filled with thoughts and occupied by the constant flux of impressions that our consciousness is limited to a small patch of light right in front of us, similar to the torch light. Only when we quench the endless chatter in our minds, do we start seeing what is beyond, similar to what happens when we switch off the torch.

We made good progress to begin with, however Siria's stomach started to revolt again. This is not good at all! Slowly dawn came as she bravely battled her way up the hill, being passed left and right by grandmothers, small kids, girls balancing their merchandise on their heads as traffic on the trail started to pick up. The walk up was absolutely magic, especially observing the change in atmosphere as dawn slowly crept over us and everything started to wake up.

It was about 7:30 when we arrived at the top and there we were absolutely shocked by the amount of people and how touristic it was. It felt more like a fair than a holy Buddhist Vihara. The vast majority of the tourists were Burmese, we only saw two other "foreigners", as it is one of the most sacred Buddhist places in Myanmar.

After getting over the first shock at all the people, shops, stalls, people collecting donations, etc. and after paying the 10\$ special foreigner fee, we had a bit of a stroll around the place, admired the golden rock, delicately balancing on the cliff face, took the obligatory photos and then boarded the truck that would take us back down again. This was the next adventure: everyone was transported on flatbed trucks that had very closely spaced benches mounted at the back. People were packed as tightly as anyway possible on the back and then the truck took off at a break neck pace down the steep switchbacks. It actually felt more like a roller coaster ride than anything else! Poor Siria was certainly not looking very fresh, I only hoped she would make it without throwing up.

We got down safe and sound at about 10 am, had some rice and then went for a snooze before the 12 noon check out. We hung round Kinpun a bit to avoid the vertical noon sun and then made the short 20 km bike ride down to Kyaikto, stopping on the way for a short snooze in the shade of a small shelter.

Unfortunately, Siria was not doing well at all, so we booked a room in the first Hostel we came across with air con to escape the brutal heat. Actually the hostel was not bad at all, and cheap at about 10\$. While she slept in the room I went round town for a bit of a stroll. Not really very much to see apart from a whole bunch of pagodas. Had some rotis and coffee and bought some crackers and vitamin drink for the patient. We had quite an early night and left the plan for the next day open...











