

MYANMAR: A PLACE FOR KIDS



Travelling with children to exotic destinations can be tricky; but it can also bring great rewards, as MELINDA MURPHY discovered on a recent family holiday in Myanmar.

“
You can do it ... you're doing it ... you're ..." Crash!

My six-year-old son Hudson was flat out on the road, a mere five metres from the shop where we'd just rented bikes.

"Okay, bud, get back on. You've got this!" But he didn't have it. He fell again. And again. And again. So did his eight-year-old sister Maisie. I began to question my sanity. What were we doing taking them on a 15km bike ride through the pagodas of **Bagan**? I hadn't counted on dirt roads with an inch or more of loose top soil and pockets of gravel.

Jaws set in determination, they again picked up their almost-new bikes – bikes that had

been arranged for them by our tour company which had asked for wheel measurements weeks before, to ensure they were just the right size for us all. And they fell again.

Then the most amazing thing happened: locals (even nuns in pink robes) turned out onto the neatly swept dirt streets of New Bagan, cheering on the little blond-headed Western boy and his blue-eyed sister who kept falling off their bikes. Their cheers worked wonders because they both suddenly got it, and off we went, leaving the crowd clapping in the distance.

We weaved in and out of the awe-inspiring pagodas, stopping to climb a few along the way and snack on local treats, including flat discs of tamarind flakes. The kids loved it all, quickly forgetting their bruised and battered knees.



During our time in Bagan, the kids adored exploring each special pagoda barefoot, learning more about Buddhism than I knew in my 40s. We'd sat perched on one of the temples, mesmerised by the others awash in the morning sunrise. But the pagodas were perhaps at their best from our bike seats, with the children's peals of laughter bouncing off their walls.

Myanmar is a magical place, partly because the tourism industry is at a perfect juncture. Since the government started pushing tourism in 2012, the country has developed enough infrastructure to make it easy to travel with kids in tow. There are decent hotels, English-speaking guides and good restaurants, many catering to Western tastes. At Inle Lake, kids can even order pizza with ingredients shipped straight from Italy itself. In Bagan, my kids happily wolfed down a yummy local meal while we watched a unique puppet show in which the puppeteers were part of the performance. But what makes Myanmar so great is that the country still feels original and the people are genuine. Yes, locals with heads wrapped in beautiful scarves tried to sell us stuff, but nobody outright begged for money.

The markets in Myanmar were different than others I've seen, somehow more colourful and vibrant. People were happy, there as much to see their friends as they were to sell their wares. Men and women alike, faces covered

in *thanaka* (a cosmetic paste made from ground bark), grinned at us all. Other markets have sometimes stressed me out with jaded sales people a bit cranky at my children's enthusiasm, but not so in Myanmar. They genuinely like children. At one market, my kids were fighting (as siblings often do) and a painter hawking his art started drawing on their arms, fashioning home-made tattoos, of sorts. He'd never done anything like that before, but he thought he'd cheer them up – and the kids were absolutely delighted. The best part? He wouldn't take any money for it.

In Pidaya, we took a hike through the countryside, walking through fields of mountain rice and climbing gently sloping ravines on our way to Shwe Oo Min Paya, a cave adorned with more than 8,000 eye-popping gold statues of Buddha. We stopped at a one-room hut on stilts, cobbled together out of bamboo, the kind of place the Big Bad Wolf could easily blow down. Two middle-aged sisters lived there, sitting for hours every day on the tattered floor, making hats after hat to sell at market. My kids watched as their weathered hands cut the bamboo, then deftly stitched the pieces together. We bought two hats for US\$2 each. Sure, we could have bought fancier hats somewhere else, but their broad smiles

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— they were thrilled that we wanted one of *their* hats — were truly priceless. It was a lesson my kids discussed for weeks on end. “Mommy, we really made those ladies happy when we bought the hats they made.”

An hour or so later, we came upon another house, this one made from handmade bricks, home of the local potato chip “factory” — a strong word to use since they weren’t exactly churning out bags of chips and there were no big pieces of machinery. Rather, the family peels and cuts piles and piles of potatoes by hand, placing the slices on a giant screen to be smoked over a big fire pit, then deep fried. The very poor family served us hot tea and freshly fried potato chips, all for free. Paying for them would be considered an insult, though we were allowed to buy some raw ones to cook at home. By the way, they were, hands down, the best potato chips I’ve ever had. Ever.

Inle Lake was my favourite, a place like no other, where homes on stilts are surrounded by fields of hydroponic farms and the famous fishermen, paddling with one leg posing for photos. There, we saw weavers at work, including long-necked women from the **Kayan tribe** making scarves using an archaic method. We watched blacksmiths working in teams of five: one stoking the fire using two pipes to pump air underneath the fire while

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three men took turns hammering a hot piece of iron held by the fifth worker. Boat makers fashioned a longboat out of a tree, umbrella makers whittled bamboo handles and workers crafted lacquer bowls and plates — all under our watchful eye. My kids were fascinated, all the more because they got to try their hand at most of the things they saw.

I’d never have guessed that a trip to somewhere as exotic sounding as Myanmar would teach my kids some of the most important — and basic — life lessons. They learned about a different culture and forgotten crafts, sure, but best of all, we were all reminded that the simple things such as a little encouragement, a thankful smile and a bike ride in the sun make for the best memories.



Fact File

The roads in Myanmar are not the best so flying from city to city is least time-consuming and happily not too pricey. However, the flight schedules are often published in Burmese and tricky to unravel. It's best to use a travel agent to make these local flight arrangements. These agents can also hire English-speaking tour guides and arrange for drivers.

Diethelm Travel
diethelmtravel.com/myanmar

Bike Rental in New Bagan: Grasshopper Adventures
grasshopperadventures/myanmar

Nanda Restaurant and Puppet Show
“Nanda Restaurant Bagan” Facebook page

Italian Food (“i.e., happy kids!”)
Golden Kite, Inle Lake 

