

Pindaya

Land of Harmony, Spirit of Grace

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First Golden Light

I have come to Pindaya in central Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) to photograph one of the most revered pilgrimage sites in the country. The special sanctity of this site arises from the fact that its caves shelter more than 8000 Buddha statues, which devotees have placed there as religious offerings since the 16th century.

The name Pindaya literally means “I killed the spider.” If ancient legend is to be believed, seven celestial princesses once entered the cave to pay their devotion. The *naga*, or master dragon, planned to capture them with its magic power, so it assumed the form of a spider and wove a web over the mouth of the cave. When the princesses realized they were trapped, they started to scream. A prince on a white horse heard their screams, came to their rescue and struggled to victory over the web and the dragon. The princesses carried the prince off to paradise, where they rewarded him with a fruit of the rose apple tree.

Eager to photograph the site of this famous legend, I rise well before dawn to get an early start. On my way to the caves I stop to watch the sun rise over the lake. Waiting for daybreak, I am barely warm enough with extra layers of clothing, especially when the wind picks up to further accentuate the chill. I tuck my shivering hands deep into my pockets and hunch under a massive banyan tree, keeping warm until the sun spills its first golden light onto the lake and surrounding hills. This glorious sunrise is an auspicious start to my much-anticipated day at the caves. But at the precise moment that I finish a roll of film and rise to go, the villagers start to arrive, so I turn back and quickly load another roll. And it’s fortunate that I do. From where I stand I can see beautiful Pindaya Lake wake up and come to life before my eyes. The spindle-topped stupas of the village pagoda loom in the background as oxen graze nearby. Men crouched in their ox-drawn carts move slowly along. People bathe and wash clothes, unfazed by the frigid temperatures of the air and water. Straight-backed women toting water pots on their heads walk so gracefully along; they appear to float across the landscape. The scent of cooking fires and the sound of pagoda bells hang in the air.

This is the way it has been for as long as the centuries old banyan trees have stood here, and the way it will be forever, sunshine or



Ox-drawn cart at dawn moves slowly under a massive, centuries-old banyan tree.



From the walls and terraces of the caves rise thousands upon thousands of precious Buddha statues.

Children ride water buffalo through sesame fields in bloom.

monsoons, peace or war, democracy or socialism. Nothing upsets the timeless rhythm of daily life in Pindaya. These village scenes transfix me, and before I realize it, one hour becomes two and morning becomes afternoon. No place has ever seemed so pure, so uncomplicated, so serene. Somehow the caves seem less important now.

Cheerful, Carefree Existence

On my second day in Pindaya I set off to visit the caves. On the way, I am momentarily distracted by women threshing and winnowing wheat. My curiosity gets the better of me, so camera in hand, I walk down to get a closer look. After repeatedly hammering out the straw to separate the seed, they sift out the chaff using flat bamboo baskets, in an endless, rhythmic cadence as old as time. They gossip and laugh as they work, conveying a cheerful, carefree existence, unbounded by the stress of contemporary life. This scene of untouched purity and simplicity is irresistible, and it would have been the same hundreds of years ago. We become fast friends and they challenge me to help with the work. These are not simple tasks, although they make

them look easy. One of the women, Sai Pin Win, invites me to share her lunch of rice and vegetables. At day's end and 10 rolls of film later I am still here, wondering where the time has gone. I try to recall if I have ever felt this peaceful. I have not. It is a mixture of feelings that it can't possibly get any better than this...and that something even better lies just



around the corner. Perhaps the caves...which I will visit tomorrow.

Act of Kindness

I awake to a new day and a new resolve to photograph the pilgrimage site, but first I make a quick stop at the famed potters. The crafting of terracotta water pots in Pindaya is both a cottage industry and a folk art. A potter from hundreds of years ago would be quite at home if she were to come back to Pindaya today. Her techniques are still in use by her descendants, for it is a family craft, handed down from one generation to the next. I watch with rapt attention as Ke Htoo Za creates an ingenious mixture of river silt, rich earth and sand to make the pots porous. After shaping, she dries them in the shade for several days, then fires them in a low temperature kiln. The porousness allows the moisture on the outside to combine with the breeze and lower the temperature to keep the water cool. Ke Htoo Za presents me with a gift of pottery of her own loving and skillful creation. She expects nothing in return for this act of kindness, but I promise to bring photographs of her on my next visit, as my gift to her. Until now I am blissfully unaware that another day has passed. No matter, the caves have been there for millennia...they will be there tomorrow.

Nourishment from Old Souls

But the new day brings another unexpected fascination: the weekly market. Villagers arrive on foot or atop rickety ox carts, piled high with produce and other wares to sell. As their displays take shape in the early morning sun, the market wakes up to a blaze of color



Women thresh wheat to separate the seed from the straw.

and activity. Shoppers bustle along pathways just wide enough for the occasional tangle of children. Vendors' voices proclaim the merits of their wares, even as they intermingle with a lively discord of barter and negotiations. In



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The crafting of terracotta water pots in Pindaya is both a cottage industry and a folk art.



Worshippers, like this monk, retreat from life's daily routine to come and pay their devotion at the consecrated caves.

Photographic Tips:

The Pindaya Caves are one of the most photogenic...and challenging...subjects to photograph. Come prepared for the challenges by following these suggestions:

- ❖ Bring a tripod for the low light.
- ❖ Wide angle lenses with focal lengths in the 24mm – 35mm range will work best, but this is also the perfect place to experiment with your fisheye lens.
- ❖ You'll need a means of "painting" the Buddhas with light, especially in high contrast compositions that include white, gold and black statues. You can accomplish this with an off-camera flash, with or without a slave, or a high-intensity flashlight. This is the fastest way I know to burn through batteries, so bring a fresh supply.
- ❖ Allow plenty of time – you won't want to rush!

the spill of activity, life turns on a still point. Every day Hlathien comes to occupy the same spot, to arrange her display of cabbages, cilantro, tomatoes and garlic around her in an arc of color and fragrance. She brings food from the village her family has lived in for generations. Food from the garden her ancestors planted a thousand years ago. She brings nourishment from old souls.

I while away the hours wandering from stall to stall. The wares range from produce, spices and flowers, to fish and betel nut, to household goods, blankets and clothing. One vendor proudly displays a copy of *Newsweek* Magazine for sale, should I wish to keep up on current events. That the magazine is from 1997 is irrelevant. By the time I leave the market it is too late to visit the sacred caves. They will have to wait until tomorrow.

Spellbinding Serenity

Finally on the last day of my journey, I make my long-anticipated pilgrimage, for if I postpone it any longer I will miss it entirely. Crossing the threshold of this spiritual centerpiece for the first time, I am wonder-struck. It has been well worth the wait.

Venturing deeper into the caves, I bear witness to generations of devotion...a declaration of faith that is so complete, so absolute, that I can only stand in awe. From the walls and terraces rise thousands upon thousands of precious Buddha statues of all sizes. Some are made of gold or silver, others of marble, lacquer, teak or ivory. Some splendid statues glisten with gold leaf that devotees have burnished onto their bodies. Worshippers incline themselves before the statues, heads bowed in prayer, holding flower offerings between their clasped palms. The importance of this devotion is not lost even on the children, as these tiny supplicants bow their heads in solemn adoration. Prostrating themselves before the sacred statues, Myanmar Buddhists do not worship the material objects, but rather the great principles they represent: kindness, compassion and tolerance.

Having visited the caves, I am spellbound by the serenity of it all. I am profoundly moved by Buddhist adherents who continue to follow the path after thousands of years, by worshippers who retreat from life's daily routine to come and pay their devotion at this most consecrated place. The Pindaya Caves calm the soul even as they stir the senses. It is as if the very spirit of Lord Buddha himself has emerged from antiquity to roam among the devotees in this revered site, this sanctified shelter, this place for spiritual renewal and clarity.