

Myanmar bird's eye view: Bagan's Buddhist temples by balloon

By Todd Pitman
The Associated Press

BAGAN, Myanmar — The moment of takeoff was silent, and mesmerizing.

Within seconds, our hot air balloon was floating above the treetops, gliding toward what Marco Polo called “one of the finest sights in the world” when he saw it 700 years ago: the ancient city of Bagan in Myanmar (also known as Burma).

Below us, the baked brick spires of hundreds of 11th- and 12th-century Buddhist temples poked skyward through the purple-red horizon of dawn, graceful and serene. When I spotted the giant golden dome of the Dhammayazika Pagoda, glittering like a jewel in the first rays of light, my heart skipped a beat.

I had just spent several days exploring these iconic monuments and pagodas, walking through their dark stone corridors, climbing their steep exterior steps. But peering at them from the edge of a moving basket in the sky was an entirely different experience, at once thrilling and existential.

Our pilot, a Belgian named Bart D'hooge who has flown here for nine years, described Bagan as “stunning ... even if you see it just from the ground.”

“But once you take off in a balloon, you get a completely different perspective,” he said. “It really gives you a bit of an idea of the size of the ancient kingdom” that flourished a thousand years ago.

The city is home to the largest concentration of Buddhist temples, stupas, and monuments in the world. More than 2,200 are spread across a plain adjacent to rice fields and villages along the Irrawaddy River. Only from above can this vastness



be fully appreciated.

The temples were built by a series of Burmese kings who ruled the region for roughly 250 years, until the city was abruptly abandoned in the late 13th century for reasons that are not entirely clear. Although time and the elements have eroded many of the structures' once ornate exteriors, the buildings themselves are still largely intact.

On August 24, 2016, a magnitude-6.8 earthquake shook central Myanmar, damaging at least 389 of them, according to the country's Department of Archaeology. Some have been closed to the public fully or partially. Others are in various states of repair, covered in elaborate arrays of bamboo and wood scaffolding.

Overall though, the most iconic temples remain accessible to visitors. Local residents still flock here to pray before the colossal Buddha statues, many lit by bright beams of sunlight inside. And

foreign tourists still arrive en masse, their numbers having grown steadily since the military, which ruled for half a century, began opening the Southeast Asian nation up to the rest of the world in 2011.

Despite the influx, authorities have capped the number of balloons permitted in the skies here at 21, for safety reasons. With an average passenger capacity of eight to 16 on each balloon, space is limited and seats can sell out. For that reason, it's best to plan your trip well in advance. Bagan's balloon flight season runs only from October to March, when winds are calmer and the weather is cooler and more predictable.

Cancelled flights are rare, but balloons do get grounded several times a year. On what was supposed to be a clear day in March when I was scheduled to fly, a thick blanket of white fog unexpectedly enveloped the entire city, even shutting down the airport. Fortunately, I was able

LOFTY PERSPECTIVE. Hot air balloons are seen just after takeoff flying over the ancient city of Bagan in Myanmar (also known as Burma). Balloon flights are a popular tourist activity in the city, which is home to the largest concentration of Buddhist temples, stupas, and monuments in the world. (AP Photo/Esther Htusan)

to get a spot the next day.

Flights are not cheap, averaging \$320 to \$380 U.S. for a roughly 45-minute ride. But for those willing to pay, it's a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Asked if he ever gets tired of flying in Bagan, D'hooge — who has flown everywhere from Kenya to New Zealand — shook his head in the negative.

“With the sunrise, sometimes when you get the light right, it's just stunning,” said the pilot, who works for Balloons Over Bagan, which was the first company to pioneer flights here 17 years ago. “I don't think there are many places in the world that get to this point.”

UNICEF urges Malaysia to ban corporal punishment in schools

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia (AP) — The U.N. children's agency is urging Malaysia to ban corporal punishment in schools after the death of an 11-year-old boy allegedly abused at a religious school.

The boy died just days after both his legs were amputated due to a bacterial infection after he was allegedly whipped with a water hose at a private Islamic boarding school. Police have detained the assistant warden, who allegedly whipped the boy and several others as punishment.

The UNICEF representative in Malaysia, Marianne Clark-Hattingh, said the boy's death was a “stark reminder of the negative consequences of corporal punishment and violence as a form of discipline.”

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