

Trekking Out A Crossroads

August 2016



Myanmar Report

Lorna Burnell & Emma Crewdson

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1. Introduction

A team of two friends decided to spend a month trekking in Myanmar along popular routes around Lake Inle, with the intention of documenting cultural and environmental impacts of tourism on the area. The pair faced a variety of challenges, including monsoon weather conditions, finding guides out of the main trekking season, food poisoning and elusive wildlife. However, they returned feeling that they had undertaken a worthwhile and successful expedition.

Personal Motivations and Circumstances

Both Emma and Lorna wished to gain a fulfilling and rewarding experience from this short expedition. The trip had aspects of science, adventure, personal challenge, community involvement and joint responsibility which built on their personal interests and skills. The trip was planned around both time and financial constraints with Lorna not being able to leave until after her graduation ceremony in mid-July and Emma having to travel to California to undertake research in early September.

Aims and Objectives

Aim: To make a broad assessment of conservation issues that could be faced in the Kalaw area of Myanmar due to the current boom in tourism to the country, by trekking on popular tourist trails with varying footfalls.

Objectives:

- Undertake day treks around Kalaw to familiarise ourselves with the local flora and fauna.
- Undertake a trek from Kalaw to Inle Lake, including visual monitoring of footpath erosion and citizen science recordings of biodiversity.
- Undertake a comparison trek between Kalaw and Pindaya, to see how tourist impact differs.
- Create a set of recommendations for guide which will have been translated.
- Communicate findings in an engaging and accessible way.

2. Team Members



Emma Crewdson

At date of departure: 3rd Year Undergraduate, MSci Geology and Geophysics, Imperial College London. 22 years old.

Lorna Burnell

At date of departure: 3rd Year Undergraduate, Bsc Physical Geography, University of Nottingham. 22 years old.



3. Pre-departure preparation

Vaccinations and medication

All necessary and advised vaccinations were up-to-date on departure.

Pre-departure practice

Both Emma and Lorna were pretty active before training and would consider themselves to have above average levels of fitness. However, it is clear that in order to have a successful expedition, some pre-departure training would be required, especially to test equipment and skills, such as new walking boots and navigation. During the Easter break 2016, between 21st and 25th March, Emma and Lorna stayed in Devon and undertook day long practice walks through the surrounding area in order to prepare for the trip. They were aimed at simulating the proposed treks (minus the weather conditions) and ensuring fitness levels were adequate. The schedule was designed to test a range of terrain scenarios, from distance and endurance to steep and changing terrain. Roughly 20km per day was covered (varying from 16km (10miles) when under large elevation changes to just over 20km (12.4miles) on flatter terrain), demonstrating that fitness levels were adequate to ensure Emma and Lorna were capable of undertaking the planned trekking routes. The changeable British weather and intermittent downpours experience also went some way to preparing Emma and Lorna for trekking in Monsoon weather conditions. Another training session was undertaken in the Lake District over a weekend in June 2016, this included trekking the Fairfield Horseshoe route. A week of cycling in Brittany was also undertaken before leaving for the expedition. As well as this both Emma and Lorna improved their fitness levels through regular exercise in the months preceding the expedition and felt well prepared to tackle the expedition to Myanmar upon departure.



Lorna and Emma training on the Southwest Coast Path.



Photograph of Fairfield horseshoe during training in the Lake District.

Language

To prepare for the expedition and communication barriers that may be encountered, Emma and Lorna began a free Burmese language course provided by The School of Oriental and African Studies in the University of London, in the hope to communicate with the communities they encounter as warmly as possible. On departure Emma and Lorna had built up a basic understanding of the Burmese language and could say some simple phrases.

“The course material comprises of listening tapes and supplementary written material. The course covers essential phrases and guidance on body language and gestures. Although multiple ethnic minorities with local dialects inhabit Myanmar most people learn Burmese at school or through general trade and travel. Therefore it is definitely beneficial to learn some Burmese before arrival. Many people speak English well and most have some proficiency. All immigration officials, touristic shop and hotel workers speak English. However off the tourist trail English speakers are less common and tourists making an effort to speak Burmese is appreciated.” Source: <https://www.soas.ac.uk/bbe/>

“In preparation for our expedition we have both been using a free online language course to learn some Burmese. This has not been the most successful area of our expedition. Burmese is unlike any language either of us has learnt before. We have the very bare basics down: Hello, thank you, goodbye, nice to meet you – that is about all.” – Blog excerpt

4. Background

Political and cultural history of Myanmar

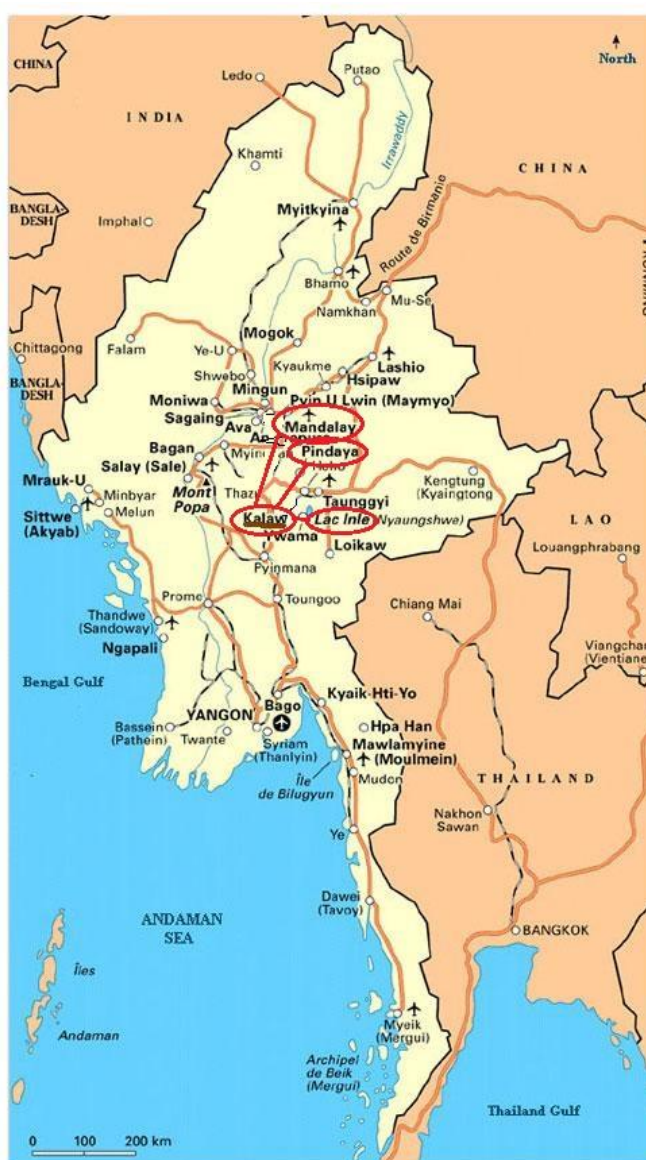
Myanmar has a complicated history, having been once a British colony (1885 – 1942) and occupied by Japan (1942 – 1948). Then called Burma, the country gained independence in 1948, but by 1962 a military coup ousted the prime minister. The country was then ruled under the Socialist Programme Party, which was the sole political party. The country has been fraught with oppression and the famous peace campaigner Aung San Suu Kyi was held under house arrest for many years, along with multiple other peace protestors, many others of whom were imprisoned. After many corrupted elections, in November 2015, Aung San Suu Kyi's Opposition National League have finally be recognised as the majority. The first legislative session will be held on Monday 1st February 2016. There is still tension between the varying cultures of Myanmar however and there is still a long way to go in restoring peace throughout the country.

Background to the Expedition Area

Kalaw, Lake Inle and Pindaya

Situated in Shan State at the edge of the Shan Plateau, Kalaw is a former British colonial hill station. There are many different ethnicities in the region, including Nepali Gurkhas and Indians who stayed after the British brought them there to build transport routes. With its high elevation this area is relatively cool compared to the surrounding plains. Inle Lake, found to the east of Kalaw is the second largest lake in Myanmar and 800 masl. The unique "leg-rowing" fisherman are an example of some of the varied cultures found here.

Pindaya to the north is famous for its limestone caves (including one containing 6000 golden Buddha statues) and the tradition paper umbrellas of the Shan state. The surrounding area is less explored by tourists than Kalaw or Lake Inle. Unlike other areas, it is much harder to find English Speakers in this area of Shan, with the local tribes (Danu and Pa-O) having their own culture and dress.



Map of Myanmar, highlighting the areas visited.

5. Reflections on Myanmar

Weather

On arrival, Myanmar was extremely wet on the ground, as is expected during the wet season. After a descent through thick low-lying clouds, huge expanses of flat ground could be seen flooded from the aeroplane.

Throughout the trip, the weather was overcast with short downpours most days. The weather in Kalaw was noticeably wetter than Nyaung Shwe, with all Kalaw day treks being a wash-out. Although the rainfall was persistent, it was light enough during the day to be no more than an irritant. The main danger posed was thought to be landslides; the guides were well aware not to go on routes that may be at risk from the high ground saturation. Nyaung Shwe was noticeably drier than Kalaw and the three day trek between the two consisted of 2 rainy days in the middle, and 2 dry half- days at the beginning and end.

"The first thing to note on arriving in Myanmar is the exceptionally warm reception from service and hospitality staff. There is a willingness to help us with our every need here, which neither of us has experienced so strongly before.

Unlike our Burmese, their English is very good. At least in tourist hot spots those who are interested in our money have always spoken English. Granted, some can only say what you want to hear, and any slightly obscure question some are unable to understand." – Blog excerpt



Photographs show the expanse of saturated land around Mandalay during the expedition.

Landscape

The regions of Myanmar visited during the trip were heavily managed, with extensive deforestation having taken place, the land is now arable or used as pasture. From Kalaw to Nyaung Shwe the landscape is dominated by a patchwork of thick red soil mantles, ploughed and planted with a huge range of vegetables, fruits and legumes. Ominous vertical limestone cliffs divide the hills on the trek from Kalaw to Nyaung Shwe.



Limestone cliffs protrude from the red soil cover on the walk from Kalaw to Inle Lake.



Photograph shows an overview of the landscape between Kalaw and Lake Inle, the topographic relief reduces towards the lake.

Conservation Concerns

Tourism

As it was the low season there were fewer tourists than there would be during busy months such as January, when it is reported that streams of people pass along the footpath each day. It was also revealed that one of the main tourist stops for the evening had purpose built accommodation to house the increased number of tourists that passed through on their way from Kalaw to Nyaung Shwe.

Litter

There was found to be a worrying amount of litter left along the main trek route from Kalaw to Pindaya. However, it was not clear whether this was left behind by tourists or in fact, as it was close to agricultural fields, whether this was left by local farm workers. Our guides discussed how tourists and NGO's were actually helping to educate locals on rubbish disposal and did not think that tourists were themselves directly littering.



Photograph of litter encountered during a trek.

Footpath Erosion

There was evidence of severe footpath erosion, especially during the final day of the trek. However, it was explained that this area was used far more by local people than the sections of the footpath used during previous days. Ox carts are also a large source of footpath/ track erosion and although these are obviously used by the local people as well, the increased demand for resources due to the high volume of tourists staying the night in these remote villages, will also largely increase the number of ox cart journeys undertaken.



Photographs show the extent of foot path erosion on popular tourist treks. Maximum amount of erosion seen was 0.5 m, average 0.1 m. Footpaths also thought to be eroded by overland flow as part of a run-off drainage network.



Photograph shows a method of run-off capture, fencing and plants used as a trellis to dam surface run-off.



Footpaths are used by tourists and locals for ox drawn carts used in agriculture. Most local traffic now uses recently built tarmac roads.

Agriculture

Much of the area that we trekked through on the route from Kalaw to Nyaung Shwe was agricultural land, from rice paddy fields to arable fields of cauliflower and ginger to fields of banana trees. It was explained that an increasing problem in the area is cash crops, and that farmers are converting from growing a variety of crops for personal consumption and to sell in the village (almost subsistence farming) to growing cash crops such as ginger. This can lead to a number of problems including reduction in self-sufficiency as well as increased ox cart traffic (both to transport the cash crop out of the area and to bring in a variety of foods and resources that the area now doesn't produce). Also of interest are the floating gardens which can be found on the shores of Lake Inle. Interestingly multiple rice species are planted in the upland area which gives the farmers and villagers some guarantee in low crop yield years. The use of fertiliser in Myanmar is very low.



Floating gardens on Inle Lake are popular with tourists sightseeing in boats on the lake.



Top photograph shows the terracing rice paddies. Left photograph shows the method of handpicking rice, right photograph shows the practice of drying rice grains in the villages.



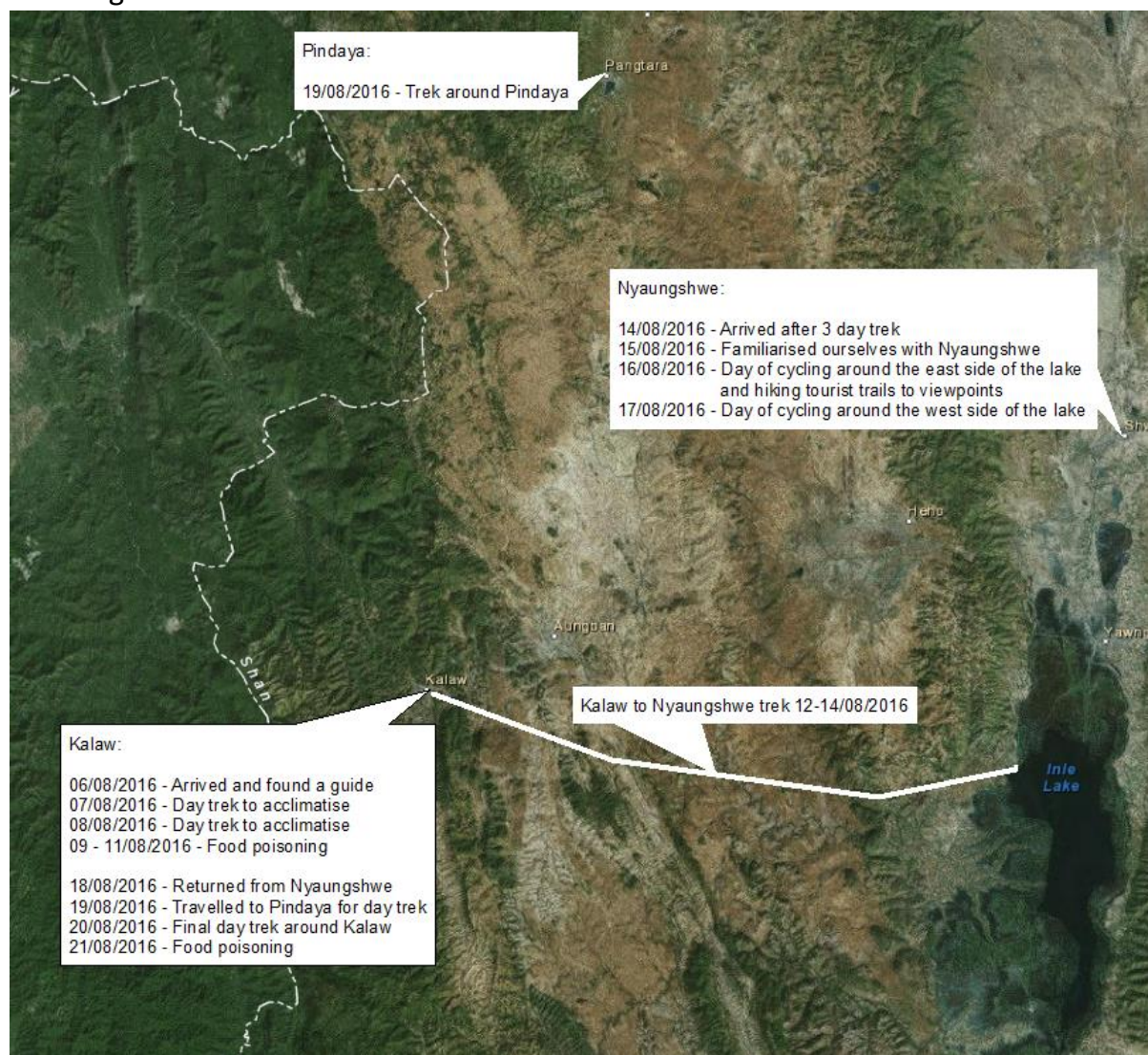
Left photograph shows cabbage crops, maize is shown in the right hand image.



Banana trees have been planted on the left, and sunflower crops on the right.

6. Further Detail

Trekking routes



Access and permissions

Permits are required for trekking in much of Myanmar. However, for the areas of Kalaw, Lake Inle and Pindaya special permits are not necessary, but you must trek with a local guide.

Transportation

To minimise long durations of in-country travel by rail or national airlines, Emma and Lorna flew to Mandalay rather than the larger airport of Yangon in Myanmar. To minimise costs no direct flights were taken with short connections in Mumbai, Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok. Emma and Lorna flew together from Bangkok to Mandalay and back, although they took separate flights to and from Bangkok.

In country travel

Accommodation

We stayed in basic hostels and hotels whilst in the cities of Mandalay and Kalaw. During the overnight trek we stayed in local villages that were organised by our guides. It was been decided that camping was infeasible due to restrictions and permits for travelling in these areas. It also provided an insight into the local customs and cultures. Whilst in local homestay accommodation particular care was taken in ensuring the food and water provided was prepared adequately. Despite best efforts, food poisoning was a repeat offender during the trip.

Food, Water and Illness

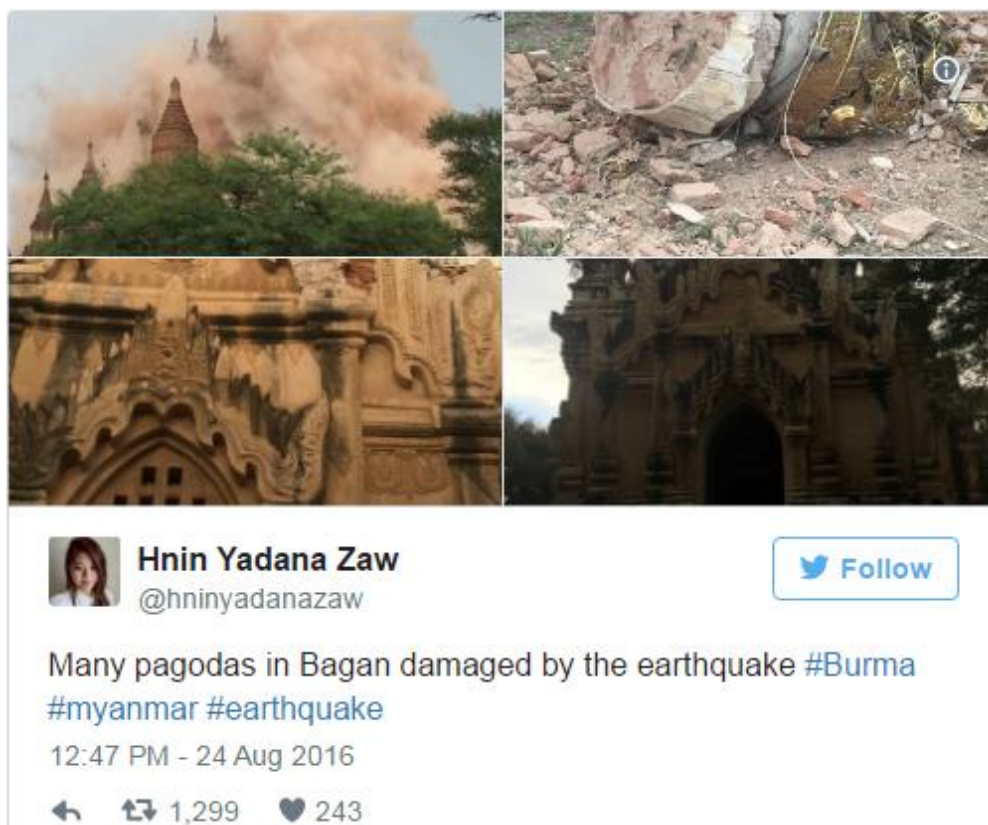
Throughout the duration of the expedition Emma and Lorna only drank bottled or boiled water/drinks and ate a vegetarian diet, did not eat salads and ensured that all cooked food was piping hot when served. This being said both Lorna and Emma ended up with very harsh food poisoning just before they planned to embark on the first trek which confined them to bed and bathroom for 3 days, as well as Emma getting food poisoning later in the trip.

Communications

Both Emma and Lorna purchased a Myanmar SIM card on arrival in the country. Lorna also took an old Netbook previously taken during independent travel. This allowed communication to the UK. A blog was set up on Wordpress to document the expedition, this is a fairly good platform as posts can easily be written on a phone via the app and uploaded there or later on. Lonely Planets "Thorn Tree travel forum" was also used for on the ground information from fellow travellers.

Natural Hazards

On account of repeated illness the trip was cut short by a couple of days, on the final planned day Myanmar experienced a magnitude 6.8 earthquake. This is an event which we had prepared for in our risk assessment, and demonstrates the importance of thoroughly researching the hazards and risk involved in your expedition.



Twitter post from www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/24/myanmar-struck-by-6-8-magnitude-earthquake

7. Acknowledgements

With thanks to the Imperial Exploration Board for their advice and guidance, and in the financial support, planning and equipment hire made available for this expedition. In particular thank you to Dr Philippa Mason, Dr Lorraine Craig and Dr Philip Power for their guidance on sourcing maps and planning a worthwhile trip.

The Imperial Exploration Board were able to support the expedition with:

- Guidance on first aid training
- Advice on travel insurance
- Partial financial support to cover the cost of travel insurance
- Partial financial support towards the cost of flights
- Partial financial support towards the cost of vaccinations
- Hire or loan of a satellite telephone

Thanks to friends of friends and family for their advice on the general culture and experiences in Myanmar as a foreign traveller. In particular Myat Aye provided a very honest account of the countries situation and practical advice on travel in the country. Thanks to Myat's Aunt for being our in-country emergency contact. Charlie Eustace of the Royal Geographical Society also provided support in contacting relevant fellows currently teaching English in Myanmar.

Exploration whether independent or within a team is a valuable life experience and Lorna and Emma hope to plan further expeditions building on this visit to Myanmar.