



PHOTOGRAPHING
BURMA
ANDY MUMFORD

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For Teresa

My constant companion, my inspiration, my best friend, my wife.

INLE LAKE



Along with Bagan Inle is one of the places that everyone who visits Burma goes to. It's utterly unique, a huge lake with hundreds of scattered communities living in houses built on stilts above the lake. Entire "floating" villages are home to hundreds of people who travel the lake in canoes and the mountains around the lake are inhabited by various different tribes who come down to the Five Day markets that take place in villages on the edge of the lake. The lake is also home to fishermen who move their canoes by rowing with one leg wrapped around the paddle, a style completely unique to this area of Burma.

It's an amazing place and well worth spending three or four days here. The lake with its beautiful mountain backdrop offers almost endless photographic possibilities and the Five Day Market is a great place to photograph an incredible range of people.

Essentials

One of the first choices you have in Inle is where to base yourself. The accommodation in and around Nuang Shwe at the north end of the lake is usually a cheaper option. However, many of the interesting villages like Nampan are towards the southern end of the lake so if you stay in the north you've got a long boat ride (which inevitably is more expensive) to get to them. The hotels closer to these villages are all of the "floating hotel" variety, which are considerably more expensive than staying near Nuang Shwe so you certainly don't save money on boat trips by staying out on the lake. However, the lake is very big and as you'll almost certainly be photographing at sunrise and sunset staying at the northern end of the lake can lead to long boat trips across the lake in the cold and dark to get to where you want to be or back to your hotel at the end of the day.

The Five Day Market takes place in various villages around the lake on a rotating cycle and there's actually more than one. The most popular with tourists and the most interesting photographically is the one that moves around the villages like Nampan, Indein and Ywama in the south although there are also markets in the large towns to the north of the lake like Nuang Shwe and Heh

The only way to travel around the lake is by hiring a boat and driver to take you where you want to go and prices vary a lot. If you're staying in Nuang Shwe, you have a choice of different boatmen so prices tend to be cheaper than if you're staying in one of the floating hotels where you're more or less obliged to use the boats and drivers that belong to the hotel. They tend to have fixed prices for different trips but the prices vary and change so much that any price I give here will most likely be inaccurate and/or out of date by the time you read this. Generally most boat trips are arranged to take in the tourist highlights of the lake combining trips to the 5 Day Market with visits to the various workshops on the lake, although it's perfectly possible to arrange something much more specific with a driver, for example if you want to photograph the fishermen at sunset or sunrise.

Finally, it can get pretty cold out on the lake at night and around dawn so take warm clothes. A good fleece and/or warm jacket is recommended, particularly for dawn trips when you can find yourself drifting through some very chilly mist.

BAGAN



SHWESANDAW PAGODA

Shwesandaw Pagoda is easily one of the most popular sunrise and sunset locations situated a little to the south of the Anawrahta main road close to Old Bagan. The large white temple is easily spotted and accessed from the road on the other side from the large Ananda and That Bin Nyu temples.

Shwesandaw is ideally located with lots of pagodas and temples surrounding it in every direction but it's particularly good for sunrise as there are so many temples to the east and southeast. As such the southeastern corner is the best place to stand as it has a great view with some of the larger temples, like Suiliman Paya in the distance and the squashed pyramid Dhammayangyi along with the smaller Myauk Guni and Taung Guni closer by, all backlit by the rising sun. The views from the southwestern corner are also really good slightly after sunrise as the sun picks out the red brick of the temples and pagodas there.

Access to the terraces is via a staircase on the outside of the pagoda. It's very steep and the terraces are high so you'll most likely use your hands on the steps in front of your face to keep balance. A backpack with a tripod attachment is a better option for getting your gear up than a messenger bag and carrying your camera around your neck with its strap is not advisable as the camera will bang into the steps as you climb the pagoda. Before sunrise usually only the western staircase is open so this is the one you'll most likely find yourself climbing in the dark. When you get to the top turn to the right and go around the corner of the terrace and you'll be on the south side. Continue to the next corner (the south east) for the best sunrise views.

Shwesandaw has five terraces at different heights each of which are flat with a low wall and encircle the pagoda giving 360° views. The highest terrace is the smallest and even though it's relatively large it can be very crowded in the peak season so finding a spot for a tripod at the edge facing the sunrise means ensuring you get there very early. The first time I arrived there in the dark about an hour before sunrise I was surprised at the amount of taxis and horse and carts waiting for people who had already climbed up to the top of the temple. People arriving later had to jostle for space on the top terrace and inevitably there isn't space for everyone, particularly photographers who need to set up their tripods on the edge of the terrace with an unobstructed view. If this is the case when you visit then it's worth going to the next terrace down. It's bigger, tends to be less crowded, and offers almost as many options for views as the top terrace.

The crowds tend to thin a little immediately after the sun has come up as people head back to their hotels for breakfast which makes it much easier to move around and shoot different views in the changing light. There's also a beautiful reclining Buddha located in the long building next to the south western corner of the pagoda which is well worth a visit.

Another pre-dawn shot taken a little later when the sun had started to come up but was hidden behind a thick curtain of mist. The balloons take off around dawn but depending on wind and conditions they take off from different places and move wherever the wind takes them. Because of this it's hard to guarantee that you'll be able to compose a shot with them in it although Shwesandaw's location near the north western corner of the plain means there's an excellent chance of the balloons passing either to the south or east of the temple.

On this particular morning the balloons took off and moved from east (left) to west (right) in an arc to the south of Shwesandaw which meant I had lots of chances to shoot images with them composed against the different temples. This is taken looking to the east towards Ananda (the large temple) just after the balloons had launched from around Shwezigon Paya in Nyaung U. At this time the mist was very thick so I composed a very minimal image with just the temple and single balloon to balance the image and cut out everything else in the foreground.

Nikon D800E & Nikon 70-200 f2.8 VR





This is another pre-dawn shot taken before the sun rise and just after the balloons had launched. I used a telephoto zoomed in to about 150mm to really compress all the spires and pagoda tops together then captured the scene just as the balloons were taking off and were all clustered together in the same part of the sky.

It's a different perspective of Bagan and one that isn't immediately apparent to the naked eye as it can only be seen by scanning the scene through the viewfinder with the telephoto zoomed in. I looked for an area that was particularly dense in temples and spires and then waited for the balloons to move into the frame.

Pre-dawn in Bagan is wonderful for these kind of monochromatic images as the mist causes a separation between the different trees and temples which prevents the different shapes from merging into each other as shadows and silhouettes often do.

Nikon D800E & Nikon 70-200 f2.8 VR II

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andy isn't really sure if he travels in order to take photographs or takes photographs in order to travel, but he knows that the two inspirations are inseparable.

Originally from the UK, Andy has been fascinated by travelling since his first family camping trips to France when he was 7 years old and since then has visited most continents on the planet. However, it was only in 2007 that he started to become interested in seriously photographing his travels, which inspired him to start learning as much as he could about the art of taking pictures.

He lives with his wife Teresa in Lisbon where he probably spends too much time dreaming about and planning "the next trip"

You can see more of his work on his website.

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