



Temple Splendour

Traversing the plains of one the world's greatest archaeological sites, Charukesi Ramadurai finds herself drawn to Bagan's enigmatic pagodas

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IT IS PITCH dark when we get off our cab near the Buledi Pagoda, gingerly feeling our way ahead with a tiny flashlight that threatened to die any minute. If not for my unwavering faith in Google maps, I wouldn't believe we are anywhere but in a sparse jungle; there are no people, no cars, no monuments. Our guide had warned that 5am is too early to head out but we have only that morning left in Bagan, and don't want to miss the sunrise.

Buledi, also called Bulethi or Buliti locally, is supposed to be one of the less popular pagodas



on the sunrise-tourism circuit. The tourist hordes in Bagan have left no pagoda unclimbed, no viewpoint untested, all for that perfect sunrise shot. But who am I to complain? I am one of their numbers, turning up at an ungodly hour in the morning.

As with other pagodas in Bagan, Buledi is steep, with solid, jagged, uneven blocks of steps. As the husband and I huff and puff our way to the top, every step feels like an achievement in this semi-blackness. Fuelling us is that smug feeling that we are about to go where we are likely to have the place to ourselves.

Turns out, no. When we reach the first platform of this pagoda, we find a couple dozen tourists already perched on the best spots, cameras at the ready. We squeeze in between the waiting crowds and listen to the murmured conversations around us in a dozen languages; more and more people arrive on the scene,

even as the sun shows no signs of emerging.

An hour later, there are dull pink and orange swirls on the horizon, which gets brighter and cheerier, throwing the forms of the surrounding pagodas into dreamy silhouettes. And as we watch, suddenly a hot-air balloon appears in the distance, then another and another, till the sky is filled with these balloons. It's a spectacle we all absorb in companionable silence, one that is almost as awesome as the sunrise itself.

A somewhat similar — albeit more crowded — scene plays out during sunset, this time at the white Shwedagon pagoda, and this time without the balloons. Shwedagon is chock-full of tourists when we arrive. Wily vendors are plying brisk business with coconut water and carbonated drinks and more tour buses and taxis are pulling up every minute.

This pagoda is also much taller and steeper, which means more huffing and more puffing, a fitting end to an active day. There are people occupying every available inch of space, some even settled precariously on crumbling ledges, dangling their legs in thin air and clearly trusting their luck.

Although the city was devastated

by two earthquakes in the recent past — in 1975 and again in 2016 — many of the structures still stand tall and proud. According to varying estimates, over 2,000 pagodas and monasteries lie scattered across 41 sqm of Bagan; history unfolds in plain sight at every nook and corner of the old town.

The Irrawaddy River, the lifeline of Myanmar, flows along Bagan, lending much-needed greenery to this somewhat arid region. It is January, one of the coolest months of the year, but we are sweating as we make our way to the Shwezigon paya (the local equivalent for temple, another name for pagoda) after breakfast. Bagan is slowly coming to life, as little girls on their way to school, their cheeks streaked with thanaka bark paste, wave shyly at us as our car passes them.

Shwezigon is one of the most significant religious sites in town, imposing and gleaming in the morning sunlight. The pigeons sitting on the domes take flight at regular intervals, the flutter of their wings the only sound in that

peaceful silence. A few Buddhist monks in their maroon robes are offering prayers and we quietly circumambulate this temple in their footsteps.

From here, we head on a whirlwind tour of the other monuments, each of which I try to remember by their shapes. The Ananda pahto (or temple) is particularly exquisite, with its standing Buddha statues facing the four primary directions. This one is also clearly a tourist favourite, as evident from the traffic jams on the narrow lane leading to it. Bagan's most popular restaurants — both serving only vegetarian food from all over the world — are also situated on this very lane, making it chaotic at all times of the day.

The other pagodas go by in a blur: The squat Dhammayangi, the "crown jewel" Sulamani and the towering Thatbyinnyu. In front of every important



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: PREMISES OF ANANDA PAHTO; A CARRIAGE DRIVER WAITING FOR BUSINESS; AN ARTIST AT WORK AT A PAGODA; YOUNG MONKS BY THE ROAD



temple, artists display their colourful creations on canvas and cloth, some of them still sketching and painting, even as tourists drive hard bargains to take one of these local scenes back home with them as souvenirs.

Although we had a long, leisurely lunch — local tamarind leaf curry and rice, among other delicacies — we can't resist the clarion call of the street food, especially given how much of it seems familiar, yet new. Sweets sellers offer free samples of their delights, while the man in his cheerful *longyi* (traditional sarong) making the local version of the Indian dosa (rice and lentil crepes) on a large flat pan calls us over for a live demonstration.

Bagan is one of Myanmar's most popular tourist destinations, thrust into the limelight after the recent sociopolitical changes that have swept through the country. It is an ancient city, and has remained somewhat protected by its isolated status till now. I am glad to have found my way to this city of pagodas before the backpacking hordes descend. ▀