

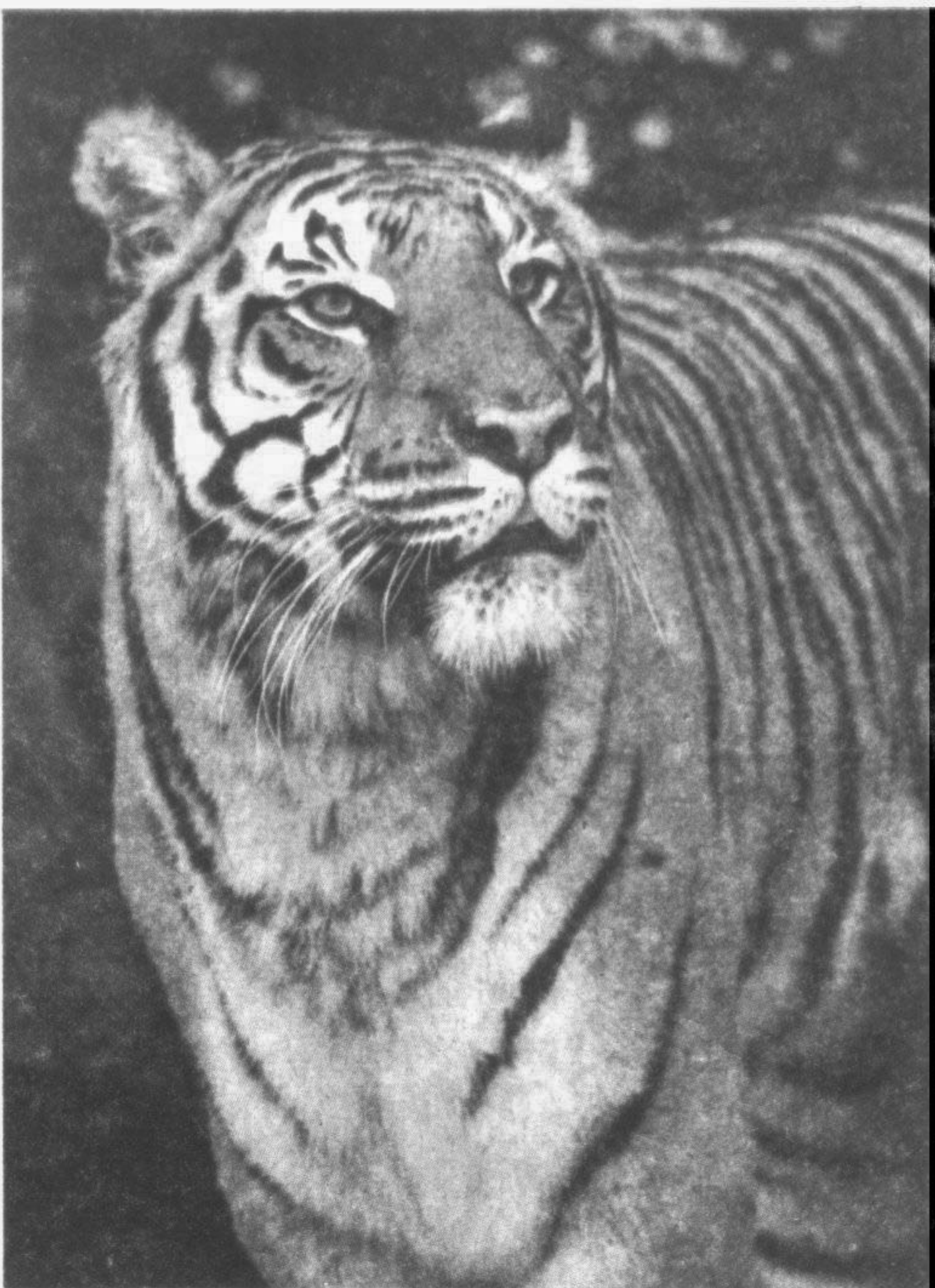


Travel & Tourism



On the Prowl in the Sundarbans

Home of the Royal Bengal tiger, the deltaic swamps of the Sundarbans are the perfect place for a close encounter with nature.



The Tiger on the prowl

THE excited high pitched whisper brings the small group to a sudden halt. Some fifty metres ahead a Royal Bengal tiger steps into view. Five people freeze, scarcely able to believe their eyes. One of them, smaller than the rest, raises his long telephoto lens, but he's too late. The tiger has melted into the bush again.

The young man, only 5 feet 3 inches (1.6 metres) tall, lowers his camera and sets off in pursuit, an armed guard close by. The other three, visitors to this vast mangrove forest called the Sundarbans in south western Bangladesh, follow silently as the leader trails the magnificent striped cat.

Rubaiyat Mansur is only eighteen years old. For much of the year he attends Dhaka's Notre Dame College, where he studies art, science, logic, and economics.

The first time I saw him it was late at night in the Sundarbans. He wore jungle green clothing, and his sleek black hair was tied back with an elastic band. He looked like a modern living version of Kipling's delightful character in *The Jungle Book*. So he became Mowgli as well.

Mowgli is knowledgeable about the Sundarbans, having visited the forest regularly since 1986. He's fortunate in that his father, Hasan, owns an adventure tour company. Mowgli's passion for wildlife watching and photography is well served in helping his father as a guide.

Mowgli makes good use of the seven-hour river boat voyage from Mongla to the jungle base at Katka by honing his skills in wildlife observation. The young tracker points out long-nosed Gangetic dolphins escorting the boat. Over there, he indicates the muddy river bank, a long mean-looking estuarine crocodile warms itself in the sun. Above our heads sea eagles and Brahmini kites soar gracefully in their quest for food. A multi-coloured kingfisher darts like a flashing

rainbow from its perch to scoop a delicacy from the wide river. Up in the trees occasional troops of langur monkeys scream abuse as we pass. Mowgli knows them all.

It's early morning at Katka. Spotted deer are grazing peacefully along the shoreline. Mowgli has found fresh tiger tracks close to the rest house. "It probably came really close to the building in the night," he tells me as we walk where *Panthera tigris tigris* was hunting only hours before.

Young Mowgli already knows much about his beloved jungle. "We'll go for some long treks over the next few days: we'll see lots of wildlife." He has confidence in his own knowledge. Around our feet the aerial roots of the *Sundari* trees point wickedly skywards like miniature javelins. "The trees breathe through those," Mowgli explains. Just as tigers leave their pug marks between the wooden spears, so we leave only our footprints, being careful not to break off the delicate tips.

Hasan suggests we spend a night on the watch tower across the river from Katka. As the sun spreads its final rays across a meadow of long golden grass we settle down for a twelve-hour vigil overlooking the tiger's backyard.

"What's to stop a tiger jumping over the gate and coming up the tower?" We ask. "Nothing," replies Mowgli. "If the tiger wants to come, he will come." He doesn't seem unduly concerned.

The moon is bright, and the jungle plays tricks on our eyes. Shadows appear to creep stealthily towards us, but it's only the trees stretching in the night. Fireflies begin to look like distant eyes staring menacingly in our direction. A commotion in a nearby tree startles us all, yet it's only monkeys restless in their sleep.

In the early morning hours we hear the warning barks from a herd of spotted deer. The tiger is on the

prowl. It's Mowgli, of course, who sees it. He listens intently then aims the beam of a powerful torch in the direction of the faint sound. A large creature crosses the spotlight and disappears into the grass. "It's only a deer," says a tired voice. "It was a tiger!" Mowgli is emphatic and will prove he's right when the morning sun burns away the night's veil of mist and reveals the tracks.

Our last day in the Sundarbans finds us hiking along a broad sandy beach between the jungle and the Bay of Bengal. We move into the trees and soon discover a mixture of tracks. This forest is ideal for tracking; it's much more open than wetter jungles.

A large wild boar watches us cautiously. Shaking his head at the folly of these two-legged creatures he trots off deeper into the woods. Mowgli finds fresh tiger tracks, but they are mixed with older sets and confusing to read. From beyond a thicket we hear a deep throaty "auhwoom" and we know the tiger is close.

"Tiger, tiger, tiger!" Mowgli sees it first as, only for a second, it steps into the sunlight.

At the apex of the Sundarbans food chain and with no natural enemies, this healthy tiger is trailing spotted deer.

It knows we are here and merges its perfectly camouflaged body with the forest. *Homo sapiens* will not be on his menu today.

The light will soon be failing, and we are deep in the forest. It's time to go. "Come, let's go tell my father we have seen the tiger!" Mowgli is excited. He may be a fine tracker, but he's still Hasan's son, and his father must be told of his success with yet another of the Sundarbans' most elusive creatures.

"Just as tigers leave their pug marks between the wooden spears, so we leave only our footprints." "If the tiger wants to come, he will come." Digonto

Travel Briefs

17 new aircraft of Kuwait Airways: Kuwait's finance minister has said the Kuwait Airways will self finance the purchase of 17 new aircraft at a total cost of USD 1.05 billion, which have been ordered during the last three years.

Among the new aircraft are five Airbus A300s, three Airbus A310s and A320s. Two Boeing 747s are scheduled to be delivered from September 1995 through July 1997. -BD Shipping Times

Emirates Groups report successful year: The Emirates group of Dubai has ended the financial year of 1994/95 with a 23.9% increase in profit over the previous financial year to a total of USD 39.7 million.

The group comprises Emirates and Dnata. Emirates is well placed to continue its progress with one of the youngest aircraft fleets in the world. -BD Shipping Times

Best employee of July: Mahtabuddin Mridha, senior security man of the security Department of the Sonargaon Hotel, has been selected as the best employee of the month of July 1995.

Mahtab started working for the hotel from September 1981. -BD Shipping Times

Air France will enhance SA service: French Carrier Air France is planning to invest more in the development of scheduled operations in South Africa (SA).

The newly appointed SA general manager commented that Air France is planning to introduce a fourth flight using a Boeing 747-400 in November 1995 and a fifth frequency later next year. -BD Shipping Times

Travelling Solo

WHAT associations come to mind when you consider the word - travel? Do you truly seek touristic experiences that will test your mettle and be etched forever in your brain? The images of the perfect holiday, as displayed in advertisement brochures in palm-fringed beach, blue sky, potent drinkfuel our fantasies but seldom compare with actual experiences.

Smooth trips are so common and so extent forgettable. I hesitate

appear into solitude to recuperate from the world, to mend wounds and return re-energised. We need to realise that life offers us two kinds of pleasure: some are essentially social, companionable, shared; others can best be sampled alone. Angling alone can be inspirational - in many cases poetic ideas and profound thoughts have come to men and women in solitude.

More and more people are beginning to experience

by Sahid A. Makhfi

to call them boring trips, but whenever a friend returns from foreign travel bragging how flawless everything was, I try to change the subject. If you must spill your reminiscences of a perfect trip, make it snappy, because in six weeks they will all run together in a placid haze. When Shakespeare wrote, "Sweet are the uses of adversity," he must have been thinking of travel.

To make the most of your travel, skip the much publicised tourist tips, forget the package tours and don't be misled by the so called seasonal appeal. If you have opted for a precise date in the peak season, lured by the travel agent's inducements, be prepared to face the ruin of all happiness. You arrive at your much-awaited destination, only to be swarmed by population pollution. Crowds crown the monuments, tourist buses are packed, hotels are booked and step by step you will find the hassles growing. In fact, no one has the time for your, sir.

So, travel in the anti direction. Even forget the company. You are left with solo travelling and that too in the sunny clime. But there is enough shade if you choose to travel all alone.

Recently I applied my travel theory and went to explore Bengal hamlets, in the dreared season when people prefer higher altitudes. Summer had its effect. Palace hotel was empty. For the price of a dormitory I bargained, and got, a suite. Idle camp attendants turned out to be good guides as they had enough time on their hands. The mango groves were blooming with the ripe fruit and watermelons were no less colourful. The hotel manager considered me a genuinely serious tourist and extended his cooperation by unlocking the manuscripts relating to the history of the city.

Alone, there is always an opportunity to meet new people. When people venture out together in a group or as a couple, they appear self-contained. Other travellers rarely approach them, and they don't feel impelled to include others in their orbit. I even have qualms about setting off with a romantic partner, unless the relationship is ideal! Getting away together may boost a struggling romance, but it's rarely a cure when things go wrong. And distance from a partner can give the luxury of perspective - the first real step towards solving a problem.

Solo travelling is a creative escape from the tensions of modern life, a chance to dis-

solitary travel as a chance to learn and enjoy the journey, to savour the world more fully. It is the ultimate escape to go to at one's own pace, and sing a song without anyone objecting to the off-key notes. You can do as much or as little venturing as you want. You're free to do as much as you wish-and that's a wonderful feeling. One of the compelling reasons to travel alone is that it can put you in touch with your own resourcefulness. You get a thrill out of making your environment work for you, and there's the thrill of mystery, of not knowing what will happen next. It's a guarantee that you will take risks, that you will meet the unknown head on. Quite unlike when you are being shepherded around in a group or when you must accept another's decision.

In a group where temperaments vary, you could feel guilty when you force your co-travellers to take in one more fort when they want to settle down to a drink in the hotel, or you may feel resentful that you're being dragged to a boring museum or fossil park. Since people have such different tempos and vacation preferences, going alone relieves you of a lot of adjustments. You set your own itinerary, menu and timetable.

Alone, you get the unadulterated new. You create a new identity on the spot. Before you embark on your vacation, enquire if anyone knows people in the places where you will be, and then contact those people. If they don't come up to your expectations you can avoid them, but in case they share your tune it can enhance your tour. Local newspapers, radio and TV are the next best alien friends.

Treat yourself as someone whose pleasure is important; this isn't the time to be spartan. Loneliness will be the least of your worries, but if savouring it alone poses a hurdle try these ploys. Throw in some light work like reading a book, or writing notes. This protects you if you can adopt the magical belief that if you don't see anyone, they don't see you. Another strategy is to eat, out, making it a sumptuous meal, and so avoid the more difficult problem of eating alone. Consider it to be a shame to leave a place without having tasted its finest dishes.

The time of sharing comes later, when you take out your journal or photographs and relive your experiences in the company of friends and family.

WHETHER arriving by sea or air, the first sight that greets the visitor to Yangon is the magnificent and dazzling Shwedagon Pagoda. As the plane descends through the clouds, one is immediately captivated by the enormous pahn-shaped golden spire that towers over the parched landscape of the Irrawady Delta. It is here that one should rightfully begin one's visit to Yangon (Rangoon the capital of Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, for over 2,500 years, this ancient wonder of the world has fascinated European travellers and one early English adventurer called it "perhaps the fairest place that does be in all the world." Rudyard Kipling of "Road to Mandalay" fame called the Shwedagon that "walking winking wonder."

While Yangon may no longer be the thriving city that it once was during the premier days of the British Empire, it is undergoing an economic renaissance. The Myanmar government recently lifted its long-locked bamboo curtain to international tourism.

I check in at the Summit Parkview, one of Yangon's newest hotels catering to the international business traveller. This distinction may soon change however with new hotels mushrooming up against the Yangon horizon.

After awakening in the milky dawn before the searing heat of the day's sun, the first thing I do, like so many Yangonites, is to walk to the Pagoda. I pass the monstrous 25 feet high *chintse* (mythological beasts guarding the entrance), remove my shoes and climb the 104 steps to the pagoda terrace. Along the way I pause at one of the many little flower and "nirvana goods" shops to purchase a bouquet of flowers and miniature paper parasol for offering. Plated with 8,688 solid gold slabs each worth around \$500, the value of the gold and jewels on the pagoda is said to be greater than all the gold in Fort Knox. Given the eroding value of the dollar these days, who could doubt it? The tip of the stupa is set with thousands of priceless diamonds, sapphires and the world famous Burmese rubies, while a huge emerald sits in the middle to catch the first and last rays of the sun. Yet for devout Buddhists these are reminders of the more valuable "Triple Gems" of their faith.

Sightseers who are not at the pagoda to offer prayers can just observe a microcosm of Burmese life that parades through the pagoda compound. The boys and young men who will become novice monks for a week or ten days are brightly dolled up in costumes resembling those worn by princes in a village drama. They are carried on the shoulders of their male relatives in procession.

The first-time visitor to Yangon will find that despite the modern conveniences Myanmar is very much a traditional culture with its main attractions and national pastimes still centered around the pagoda, monasteries and traditional Buddhist festivals. The city of Yangon itself is little more than 150 years old. After conquering King Thibaw, whose capital had been Mandalay, in 1886 the British made Yangon their administrative capital, annexing the former Burmese kingdom to become an appendage of the British Indian Empire. Since the founding of the city, formerly a small fishing port of little importance, coincided with the end of the Anglo-Burmese Wars, the name Yangon (anglicised to "Rangoon") means "the end of strife." Flying in from Bangkok, as most tourists do, the peacefulness, and calm of this un-hurried city with vintage buses left over from the 1940s immediately becomes apparent compared to most hectic Asian metropolises. With disdain for what they perceived as the inscrutable irrational Orient supposedly characterized by disorder and chaos, the British colonial administrators constructed the new city on a geometric grid of numbered streets. At the center of the grid is another pagoda called Sule which, if the Shwedagon is the soul, is Yangon's heart. After paying respects to the Shwedagon, one should proceed downtown to the Sule pagoda for further exploring the city.

For more practical information on travelling in Myanmar, one can visit the very courteous and helpful government run Myanmar Tours and Travel (MTT) across the street. According to the Tourism & Hotels ministry, tourist arrivals have increased dramatically, from 26,000 in 1992 and 62,000 in 1993 to about 100,000 in 1994. However, their ambitious goal of welcoming half a million tourists for "Visit

Myanmar Year 1996" may not be realized if the new hotels under construction are not ready by next year.

A stone's throw from the Sule Pagoda and the MTT is an unusually exotic example of Anglo-Burmese architecture - the majestic Yangon City Hall. It is an eclectic piece of wedding cake architecture, often called "an Englishman with a Burmese turban." Visitors may be charmed by Yangon's quaint Victorian architecture, but at the time of construction, critics had been less charitable in de-

scribing the dour Dickensian High Court building nearby as "probably having been designed by a pardoned convict who never forgave his judge. Many would agree that the old buildings in Yangon have certainly lasted long enough to become respectable. Outside of Calcutta and Bombay, Yangon probably has the greatest concentration of British colonial architecture of any city in the world. At least it is more apparent here as there are very few modern buildings and virtually nothing resembling steel and glass, thank goodness.

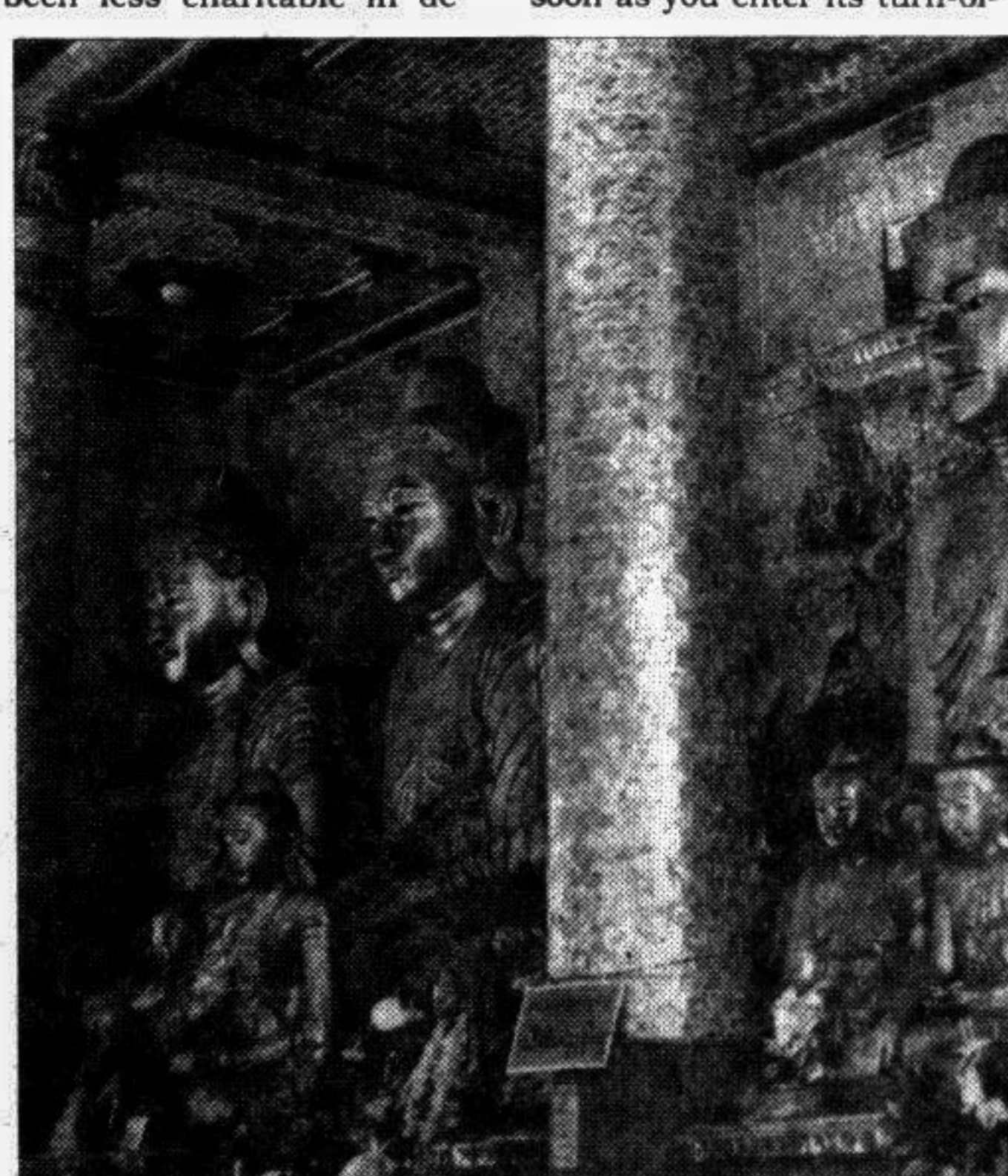
If British colonial architecture makes you nostalgic for the erstwhile Raj, then take a stroll or a bicycle sidecar rickshaw down to the Strand Hotel on the waterfront. Recently refurbished and operated by Amanresorts, the Strand, by Daniel Haber

once one of the legendary hostels of the East, has the distinction of being the country's oldest (and most exclusive) hotel. It was opened in 1911 by the Sarkies brothers who also ran the legendary Raffles Hotel in Singapore and the E & O in Penang. As soon as you enter its turn-of-

The City of Yangon

stick on the stamps or envelopes, there are little school boys ready and eager to assist you with paste on their fingers just waiting to glue your letters for a small gratuity.

Walking Yangon's hard-to-get-lost straight streets is a good way to pick street bargains, sightsee, and meet the friendly people. Like Paul Theroux, one will find "a strikingly handsome race of dispossessed princes" all almost identically dressed in *longyi*, white shirt and sandals. Although English is



Golden Buddhas in the Shwedagon

widely spoken, it's good idea to learn the Burmese numbers tit-nit-thon-one-two-three etc. - to make sure you get local prices. Perhaps one of the best buys is the Burmese cheroot-only one *kyat* (pronounced "chat") or about one US cent at the black market exchange rate. Myanmar is a nation of smokers. Virtually everyone smokes from grannies to toddlers-although it is said that they must first learn to walk before they can light up.

Ladies might like to pick up some *thanaka* bark, the natural "cosmetic," similar to sandalwood, that everyone male and female wears. Many decorate their cheeks and

foreheads with its cooling paste. For adventurous street snackers, Yangon has no shortage of eatables, whether it be a bowl of spiced noodles, crunchy fried crickets, or the durian fruit, an odoriferous assault on the senses, the later two definitely an acquired taste for foreigners. However, at the Ne Lar Win Yogurt Shop on Mahabandoola Street, Western palates will be satisfied with the best fresh strawberry *lassis* (yogurt drinks) and open-face avocado sandwiches, this side of the Suez.

Cafes abound throughout the city, and one of the best is the Sunny Cafe on 37th Street. It has tables *al fresco* on the curbside and waiters in *longyis* will take your order and serve free pots of all the green Chinese tea you care to drink. The little low wooden coffee table is loaded with plates of pastries and the waiter simply counts up the missing pieces and adds the amount to your bill. This is good place to meet locals-my address book is full of the names of all the people who treated me to tea. One was a rice exporter who informed me that Myanmar is one of the five top rice exporting countries in the world.

On the same street one will also find the city's best known used booksellers, the Pagan Book Shop named after Myanmar's famous archaeological site. It is run by a sexagenarian who is a good conversationalist and will sit down with customers with a pot of tea. A harried backpacker rushes in perspiring, demanding the latest Lonely Planet guidebook to Myanmar. Regrettably the latest guidebook in the antiquarian shop dates from the 1950s. Since socialization in 1962, precious few, if any, new books have been allowed into the country, so there is a booming sidewalk market in used books.

For entertainment in the evening, having been invited by one affable off-duty student guide named Morris, I visit the latest in Yangon night life-a music cafe/pub called "Mr. Guitar". Here, over American sandwiches and beer (Budweiser), one can get sentimental and listen to the lovely Burmese lasses, such as those that charmed Kipling a century ago, singing on their banjos not "Kila-lo-lo" but vintage pop songs such as "Que Sera Sera" and we are the world. -Degonto