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Sunday talk :Celebrate the Art of diplomacy



Food fare :An avocado harvest

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Books :A Burmese pilgrim's progress

Ma Thanegi emerges from this determined travelogue as an articulate member of Burma's small middleclass, well-educated and liberated (she is a divorcee on good terms with her diplomat ex, has a grown son and a boyfriend), with three years in prison behind her for taking part in "the political movement of 1988".

Being virtually prohibited from travelling overseas by the daunting paperwork demanded - made additionally burdensome because of her political activism - she decides to go on a local tour, an 18-day trot through 29 towns and more than 60 temples, ending up in a town on the Chinese border where a passport is not needed to make a brief foray out of the country. The whole thing is enlivened by 27 sketches by the author of places and scenes seen along the way, and a rather rudimentary map.

She calls this a pilgrimage. Some would call it a tough sightseeing trip - certainly not for the weak-willed.

It often involved rising at 3am, answering calls of nature under the cover of nature, foraging for food, staying in dubious makeshift accommodation or taking her chances in temples, and above all climbing - climbing those endless steps to behold celebrated Buddha statues.

Pilgrimages - one has only to think of Chaucer's "The Canterbury Tales" - were always in part excuses for a change of scene and company, and this is certainly true here. On board the battered bus she rides, she's joined by a ragtag bunch of fellow travellers, only some of whom she empathises with. Gradually, they begin to accommodate each other's personalities, except in the case of the two men who do nothing but take swigs at a bottle and speak to no one, and an uncouth would-be lady who blocks the bus gangway and endlessly jingles her many bangles.

Ma Thanegi finds compensations where she can, above all in food. And she's definitely a foodie, there's no doubt about that. Meals are lovingly described in every detail.

This reviewer, who can never remember a meal beyond it being good or bad, admires people who, like French grandmothers, can recall an entire menu years later. Here, we are told:

"The vermicelli came fifteen minutes later, in steaming coils overflowing from a dinner plate. It was topped with half-cooked vegetables, crisp slices of meat and shreds of an omelette.

"I asked for a bag, and spooned in half; that would do for supper. The whole dish looked as if it could feed me for two days, and all for 50 kyat [Bt15]. With dedication born out of hunger, I shovelled spoonfuls into me. Replete, I sat back with a sigh, breathed deeply and burped discreetly. I felt tired out with the exertion."

The heartiness is an inevitable result of one who's suffering the privations of life on the road. Though she's clearly a tough cookie, Ma Thanegi knows to take her opportunities when they're offered.

Her comrades in travel demonstrate a hunger for shopping that could match your average Thai bargain hunter.

"My companions showed off the bottled flowers, toys, herbal roots, pickled fruits and peanuts they had bought as presents for families back home and looked appalled when I declared that I had bought none.

"I put on my alas-all-alone-in-the-world face and went to fetch lunch: chicken with tomatoes, cauliflowers fried with eggs, clear soup with a sprinkling of sliced gourd."

That was at Mount Popa, the home of the nats. One would think that belief in these animist spirits would clash with the devout Buddhist beliefs of the Burmese, but actually it emphasises the all-embracing nature of the established religion.

The pilgrims take in all the sights - Pagan, Lake Inle, Taungyi, Mandalay, Maymyo, Lashio and finally, fording a river on foot after leaving the bus by a broken bridge, cross into China for a glimpse of the nouveau-riche lifestyle in Ruili, the town that straddles the border.

The journey back, on tickets acquired by sleight of hand for the night train, was more comfortable, with son and boyfriend there to meet her at Rangoon station - a return to the normal everyday world after the novelty and excitements of the past 18 days.

Altogether, this is a very readable account of an internal journey, a modern-day prose nirat in a land one does not immediately associate with pilgrimages (or bus tours), though they are clearly enjoyed just as much as in mediaeval times in Europe.

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