

VISITING MYANMAR

– PEOPLE, LANDSCAPES, CAVES, & BATS

- Elery Hamilton-Smith

Karst along the Atryan River



I have just returned from one of the most remarkable journeys of my life. It is so remarkable that I find it very difficult to know where to start and what to include.

So, thanks to Prof. Daw Tin Nwe of Yangon University and Paul Bates of the Harrison Institute in Britain, I have just enjoyed my first ever visit to Myanmar (formerly Burma).

A group of us went to the nation's first-ever international workshop on Bat Research and Conservation, and then to lead a fortnight of field research on caves and bats in the Mawlamyine and Hpa-an areas.

I have rarely attended a workshop or a field trip with so much enthusiasm and so much commitment to both research and conservation. The students who went into the field with us were constantly exposed to new experiences and ideas, took it all in, and learned both skills and knowledge at the most amazing rate. It was also immense fun.

Interestingly, the students were virtually all women, but they were incredibly adaptable and competent. We took them through some big caves, wading across wetlands, carrying field equipment, boating the rivers, and almost everything else; they took it all in their stride.

Elery with students boating on the Atryan River



Angela suspects that their beauty was one of the real reasons for my enjoyment of the journey – but that's not true – their sense of fun and enjoyment of life was even more wonderful than their beauty.

You will soon start to see our reports, but it would be premature to try and do justice to our real findings at this stage, but we will soon be publishing more scientific and technical details than would be possible at this stage.

Even lots of our (thousands of) photographs are not ready yet.

Our fieldwork had several objectives:

- A research study on the bats of the country: we kept finding previously unrecorded extensions of range for many species, sometimes as many as 8 to 10 species in one cave
- Establishing a cave and karst data-base system for the country, and
- Teaching the students a whole battery of fieldwork techniques and basic knowledge of both ecology and karst science to all.

But before the field trip, we saw some splendid things, such as the famous Shwedagon Temple. It is unbelievable – immense – the main dome is over 100 m. high and that sits on the top of a hill.

The masonry is not only beautifully done, but also brilliantly coloured. The main dome is gilded with gold leaf (some 55 tonnes of it) – as is much else.

Fortunately we went in at the Eastern entrance, which has escalators to carry visitors up to the base of the main dome.

This is on a great platform with a multitude of smaller temples and shrines. I think it really is the most magnificent temple (of any religion) that I have ever seen.

It is kept in perfect condition with everything appearing as if it was cleaned only an hour ago. There were thousands of visitors, walking, praying, lighting candles or incense, talking with friends, etc., etc. It is absolutely wonderful.

There were constant surprises, both pleasant and unpleasant. The bad news included the fact that although the nearest cave area was only some 200 miles from the city, it was a 13½ hours drive along a strip of wall-to-wall potholes!

The other bit of really bad news was that none of the bathrooms worked properly; there was either no hot water or only boiling water, or no water at all!

Then there was one of the most environmentally damaging quarries and cement plants I have seen.

Approaching Yathay-Pyan Cave



The good news was the unprepossessing places where we found unbelievably beautiful food, the scenic beauty of some places, the speed of skill development in the students, and the welcome wherever we went, but there was also a wonderful state-of-art cement quarry totally free of dust or vibration and designed for natural restoration.

Then there were the quirky bits, e.g., cars and other vehicles drive on the right, but have right-hand drive, simply because an astrologer said it would be better that way (in other words, they are almost as zany as Ronald Regan!).

Caves often commenced with an enormous temple – usually beautiful and well kept – far more impressive than in Thailand. Then one would walk through the temple into the deeper cave that was often immense.

Generally they were very large phreatic systems that had stoped upwards through roof collapse, but one immense cave, over 100 metres high, appeared to have resulted from hydrothermal erosion.

Our general routine was to go to the cave, after any required discussions with villagers or monks, to put an identification tag on the entry, then to do a reconnaissance walk through, with one team collecting data for the cave and karst data base; another preparing environmental profiles at 10 m. intervals; and others either searching for bat roosts (both current and abandoned) or seeking out other specific interest.

This was always a pretty intensive period for me to answer questions about the cave and its characteristics and try to help people make sense of their own (very acute) observations.

Then the bat nets and traps would be put in place ready for the evening bat flight. Specimens caught would be identified, measured, wing profiles drawn, ultrasounds recorded, again with small teams working on each aspect.

We also watched the incredible flight of *Tadarida plicata*, each with its several hundred million bats – the Asian equivalent of the famous bat flights of the Southern USA.

Finally a meal! We found a great restaurant in Mawlamyine that always stayed open until we arrived, sometimes very late indeed.

The country can be remarkably beautiful – the landscape of immense tower karst standing above a giant estuarine plain was impressive; the cities were full of beautiful buildings, even if many were somewhat run down, and tree plantings of the cities were absolutely magical.

I took a photograph of Mawlamyine from the top of the highest hill, and although my eyes took in the city, the photograph showed that there was hardly a visible building.

Returning from fieldwork on the Atryan River was a quite magical experience. Immense swarms of fireflies had settled in the vegetation along the banks, and they flashed in wonderful rhythmic patterns – some from left to right, some from the centre outwards to the periphery or from the periphery into the centre.

The Atryan River also led four of us to a village which had never seen Europeans, and which therefore made us especially welcome.

I will certainly be back – I suspect many times. We will soon be able to build upon our hard-won credibility and respect in order to introduce opportunities for others to work with these wonderful people. In all, it is the ordinary people who count most.

But I must say that in spite of their bad press, the government is now working very genuinely towards good environmental management and towards a sense of social reconciliation and re-unification.

The temple within Weibyan Cave

