



A HELPING HAND

Ouch! Another bump. If only I could move just half an inch. Brown eyes stare. Painted faces crowding close. Colourful rows of crammed knees pushing, pushing at every lurch.

The Lonely Planet guide had given us a realistic idea of what to expect, so we were warned that it wasn't going to be the exotic dream of Kipling's poem. The ever-present dust from the unsealed roads was like a thin yellow-brown veil that shrouds our memories of Mandalay still. Our style of travel was to ignore taxis touting at guesthouse doors and find our way around by local transport. Often quite a challenge, but the satisfaction of making it to our destination using only sign language and wits instead of being ferried by taxi or tour bus couldn't be beaten, not to mention the benefit of the fractional cost.

So, on our first morning in Mandalay, Burma, venturing out into the heat and dust, we picked our way amongst the frenetic human activity in the street, eyes down to ensure safety at each step. In my line of sight as I allowed myself a quick upward glance were several pick-up trucks crammed with people, the overflow on the roof and hanging from the step at the back. "Those are the local buses," said Mike. "That's what we are looking for."

For the first time in almost a year of travel, I gave quick but serious thought to opting out. But, always up for adventure, I let it pass as we were given a hand up onto the number we

were looking for. First on, we made our way to the front next to the cab, bending low. More passengers climbed aboard, then with a cloud of blue exhaust, we jolted too fast into the hurly burly where the only rule seemed to be 'every man for himself!'

As well as our bench seat on the right hand side, there was another on the left and a third running down the middle, wide enough for two rows of people sitting back to back. After

a few more stops all benches were fully occupied, but that didn't deter the driver from stopping for more fares.

Agile elderly climbed on and found a spot to crouch beside bald headed monks clad in rich red robes and children on their mothers' laps. We squeezed up as best we could, ours the only bare knees amongst the long wrap-around longhis of the locals. Decorated with creamy thanaka designs, the faces of the headscarfed women stared blankly.

Jammed hard up against the metal of the pick-up cab, my right knee hurt as it rubbed at every bump on the rough road. Not a thing I could do about it. Oh well, a small price to pay for adventure. But then, without looking at me, the woman sitting opposite, our knees meeting through her colourful longhi, gently eased her hand between my knee and the metal cab.

Moved by her kind and selfless gesture I smiled a heartfelt 'thank you'. She glanced at me shyly then looked away, leaving her hand where it was, cushioning my knee. Clambering out at our destination, I caught her eye and smiled again, nodding slightly, trying to show gratitude the best way I could.

Her flicker of acknowledgement as our eyes met touched me deeply. Two lives, worlds apart, meeting in a fleeting moment of recognition.

Anna Smith



THE JOY OF FRIENDS MADE ON THE ROAD

With pure exhilaration we peddled our hired bikes over rough footpaths amongst the dramatic scenery. We felt so adventurous finding a little piece of China all to ourselves. The shapes of the ancient limestone karsts soared high all around us, vivid against a cloudless blue sky, when up ahead peddling towards us we spotted two other foreigners.

"What are you doing in our wilderness?!" I joked as we stopped to negotiate passing. We all laughed and ended up chatting and sharing our stories before continuing on our separate ways.

The objective of our year backpacking in South East Asia and China was to learn how local people lived their everyday lives. We stayed in homestay accommodation as much as we could, and just by talking to people in the street, we were invited into homes and schools. Our plan worked well and we had some wonderful experiences, but what we hadn't anticipated was the additional joy of getting to know other travellers.

The very first were a young couple we met in a modest guest house in the Philippines. Unexpectedly stranded with no guide book, they took us under their wing and gave us their Lonely Planet Guide as they departed for Singapore. As 'mature' backpackers we were flattered that these two young things wanted to spend time with us, but we were just at the beginning of our adventures and were yet to learn that age didn't figure in the backpacker community.

After a day's trekking in Burma we thought we would be the only overnight visitors at the tiny mountain top monastery, but another couple had arrived just moments before us, still red in the face from the long climb. We chatted over our meals, cooked in near darkness by our respective guides over the open fire of a ramshackle cooking hut, and later shared the wooden floor of a large sleeping area. Making beds of blankets, we piled layers on top to fend off the cold.



*A 'new friend', sandwiched between
Anna and Mike*

Two women waited on a platform in central Burma with their wheelie bags, for a train that may come any time from 10:00am if it came at all that day. Older than us, they exuded an air of elegance, complete with carefully applied makeup, looking out of place at the run down station, amongst the reserved locals and other minimalist travellers such as ourselves. We were a little in awe and kept to ourselves only to find that when the train arrived we were seated directly opposite them. Well, five hours sharing that 1960s carriage as it rocked and heaved along ancient lines, revealed two delightful and very intrepid adventurers. Where they hadn't been wasn't worth knowing about, and always on a shoe string.

On a camping tour of Europe the following year we were warmly welcomed into the homes of each of these new found friends and learnt something of being French, German, Swiss and Dutch. There was an instant meeting of minds with these and many others because of our common desire to stretch the boundaries of our understanding.

Connecting with each of them was an unexpected bonus, and we have already had the great pleasure of having one of them come and experience everyday life as we live it.

Anna Smith