

# Hell and Paradise

*Guide to Burma* by Nicholas Greenwood.  
Bradt Publications, 41 Nortoft Road,  
Chalfont St Peter, England. £12.95.

*Burma: The Alternative Guide* by the  
Burma Action Group, Collins Yard,  
Islington Green, London. £3.99.

With 1996 designated as Visit Myanmar Year by the Burmese government, a number of guidebooks to the country have been published, and not only the ordinary, glossy kind with smug pictures of the Shwedagon pagoda and sunsets over Inle Lake. Nicholas Greenwood, who has had a long-time love affair with Burma, dedicates his guide to opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

*Burma: The Alternative Guide*, a 36-page booklet, struggles with the moral issue of visiting a country under firm military rule. It has maps indicating the distribution of forced labour in Burma and even a "democracy map of Rangoon" showing the places where people were killed during the pro-democracy uprising in 1988. It actually recommends that people stay away from

Burma or, if they must go, to learn about the current political situation there.

In his *Guide to Burma*, Greenwood also quotes people who have been employed as forced labourers on such projects as dredging the moat at Mandalay Palace or hacking through malaria-infested swamps to build a new railway from Ye to Tavoy in the southeast. But he does not recommend a tourist boycott of Burma; on the contrary, he himself has travelled more extensively in the country than any other foreigner. Greenwood describes off-beat places such as Tavoy, Arakan, Putao in northern Kachin State and the wild ruby-mining town of Mogok.

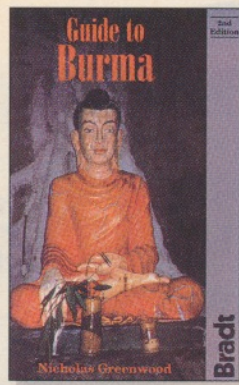
His descriptions of these places are not always flattering. Even the ancient royal capital of Mandalay gets a beating: "Mandalay was once a beautiful city, the cultural heartland of Burma. But it was also a repressed, forlorn city, with a spirit stifled by succession of battles, kings, fires and governments."

What should have been a romantic trip by steamer on the Irrawaddy River turned out to be "41 hours and 40 minutes of sheer hell. No cabin, no bed, no food, no toilet, just the captain's table to sleep on, a watermelon

hurled at me by a drunken soldier and a plastic bag in which to pee."

But precisely because of his honesty, and his deep affection for the country, Greenwood's book is probably the best guide to Burma ever written. It also contains a wealth of information about Burmese history, festivals and politics, in addition to the standard tourist information. A chapter about Burmese culture written by Zar Ni, a former student at the University of Mandalay who now lives in exile, adds to the book's value.

Given the country's underdeveloped infrastructure, Visit Myanmar Year may not bring in the hundreds of thousands of tourists the government is hoping for. But it has encouraged many to air their feelings about travelling—or not travelling—to Burma. Ironically, even the introduction to *The Alternative Guide* sounds inviting: "Burma is a country of breathtaking beauty—golden pagodas and temples beyond description, countryside as varied as snow-capped mountains, lush green paddy fields and white sand beaches." ■ Bertil Lintner



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