

[Gill Charlton takes the recently opened route from Bangkok into Burma, via Dawei, the 'Death Railway', and the town that inspired 'Mandalay'](#)

[By Gill Charlton](#)

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In the garden of **Home Phutoey**, a tourist lodge on the banks of the River Kwai Noi in southern Thailand, is a small museum dedicated to Sir Edward “Weary” Dunlop. “When despair and death reached us, he stood fast, his only thought being our wellbeing... He was a lighthouse of sanity in a universe of madness and suffering”, writes a fellow PoW of this heroic Australian surgeon.

This is surely the man who inspired Richard Flanagan’s recent Booker prizewinning novel, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, his unflinching account of the building of the SiamBurma “Death Railway” in 1943. Earlier in the day, I had visited Hellfire Pass, the cutting near Kanchanaburi where much of the novel’s action is set. There it is possible to walk for a few miles along the former railway line, while listening to the heartrending accounts of Australian PoWs on the memorial’s excellent audio guide.

The completed railway, bombed by Allied warplanes in 1944, has been largely reclaimed by the jungle. Today the crumpled Tenasserim Hills are breached instead by a road which tourists can now use to enter Burma, to visit the town of Dawei (colonial Tavoy) and to travel on north to the capital, Yangon.

It’s a fourhour journey from Bangkok to the border crossing at Ban Phu Nam Ron. On the Thai side, the government is building a smart dual carriageway, part of a major infrastructure project which will link Bangkok to a new deepwater port on the Indian Ocean being built near Dawei. But not any time soon.

Out of sight of Thai customs, the smart grey metalled road dissolves into a bumpy dirt track. I have to hitch a lift in a trader's pickup (negotiated by my Thai driver) and cross three miles of noman'sland before I see a Burmese flag fluttering above a line of log cabins. The friendly immigration officer wears jeans and a polo shirt. He enters my visa details into an oldfashioned ledger, counts the days I can stay on his fingers, and stamps my passport with a flourish.

Robert, my Burmese guide, is waiting with a Japanese fourwheeldrive. "There's nowhere to stay here, not even a monastery," he says. One of Burma's top guides, this is his first time here. "The driver and I found a man who sold us a beer from his house. He said we could sleep there but when we saw the loaded AK47 hanging on his wall we thought it might be safer in the car."

Peace has come only recently to these hills, by way of an informal agreement in 2012 between the Burmese government and the various Karen militias fighting for autonomy. It is a beautiful drive through the mountains along a gravel road lined with some magnificent hardwood trees – though most have been sold to buy guns. At a Karencontrolled checkpoint we pay a \$12 "road toll". It can't bring in much as the only vehicle we pass in the first two hours is an elephant carrying his oozie to work in the forest. Only as we near the coast do the first motorbikes appear. It has taken four hours to cover 100 miles – part of the road is being widened, which hasn't helped – but Dawei is worth the journey.

The streets, laid out on a grid by the British, are lined with handsome wooden houses; many have intricate gingerbreading and verandas hung with rare orchids. The creekside market is packed out with fishwives, their piles of snakehead, parrotfish and butter fish laid out with an eye to artistry. All over town are the sort of cottage industries – weavers, potters, cashewnut roasters – that have disappeared elsewhere, squeezed out by cheap Chinese imports.



[The bridge over the River Kwai in Kanchanaburi Province, part of the infamous Death Railway](#)

Driving south, the landscape is beautiful and empty: purple mountains frame a sward of rice paddy shaded by slender toddy palms. At the Shin Motehti monastery – a glorious collection of old wooden pagodas – a Buddhist initiation ceremony is under way. Some of the novice monks are toddlers and accompanied by their fathers. Their heads newly shaved, they will spend a week here, rising to chant at dawn and walking barefoot to beg food from the local community. But today life is easy as their mothers and grannies, dressed in their best silk longyis, arrive with rice and sweetmeats for their begging bowls.

Initiation ceremonies are a cause for great celebration in the wider community. In a meeting hall, low tables are piled high with food and cans of drink for anyone who drops by. The ceremony has cost \$2,000, a monk tells us over tea, paid for by a local family with Thai connections.

Everyone gets a gift and we are pressed halfpint beer glasses when we leave. It is this sort of encounter – with Robert on hand to translate – that makes exploring offbeat Burma such a pleasure.

Asia Highway 112, between Dawei and Moulmein, has only recently opened to foreigners. The going is slow as it is being rebuilt. We stop at Thanbyuzayat, the western terminus of the Death Railway, where an original Japanese C56 engine sits

in a glade. The nearby cemetery, maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, contains the remains of 2,995 Allied prisoners. Each grave is marked by a metal plaque, giving the name and regiment (if known), shaded by a flowering plant. “Sleep on, dear son, until we meet. Mum and Dad,” says one, dedicated to 22-year-old Royal Artillery Gunner H J Humphrey.

Moulmein, now called Mawlamyine, became the first capital of British Burma in 1826 and much of its colonial heritage remains: the Edwardian villas in gardens with flower beds; the colonnaded schools and law courts; lofty St Patrick’s and redbrick St Matthew’s; and a hub and spoke Victorian prison. All are still in use. The view from the pagoda-topped hill above is also much as Rudyard Kipling saw it in 1889 when he came here and wrote his ballad *Mandalay*, which opens with the lines: “By the old Moulmein Pagoda, lookin’ lazy at the sea, There’s a Burma girl a-settin’, and I know she thinks o’ me”.

I wonder if the girl was a royal servant. For a few steps away is the former palace of Queen Seindon, one of King Mindon’s queens. Exiled in the 1880s, she brought her entourage to Moulmein and built a scaled-down replica of her apartments in Mandalay Palace. The gilded figures are carved with such verve they seem about to spring off the wall.

This corner of Burma is full of small treasures that give great pleasure. I take a local boat from a floating dock on the scruffy waterfront to Ogre Island. Just before we cast off, a quack doctor jumps on board. His sales pitch is a masterclass in mime. Over the next hour he persuades many of the passengers to part with several hard-earned dollars for his elixir of youth which, he claims, will perk up every part of their anatomy.

Fortunately the islanders are an industrious lot and make a good living stitching conical hats and carving walking sticks, pipes and pens which are sold all over Burma.

The garden of one house is a forest of red, blue and yellow posts. “What are they?” I ask the rickshaw driver. He says I must guess. I fail. You can tell he loves this moment: the wonder on people’s faces when they learn that these are sleeves of

dyed latex drying in the sun before being chopped into rubber bands. Ingenious.

It takes three hours to putter upstream to Hpa An along the fastflowing Salween River passing farmers, fishermen and boatbuilders. The landscape is reminiscent of Guilin in China: outcrops of limestone rising sheer for hundreds of feet. Golden bellshaped stupas balance precariously on some peaks; others hide cave temples filled with the Buddha statues that the Burmese donate to earn merit for the next life.

Hpa An itself is a scruffy, downatheel place, having been fought over by the Karen and Burmese armies for decades. Yet it contains the best Burmese restaurant in the country. San Ma Tan serves up tapassize plates of fish, meat and vegetables and unlimited lentil soup, a dozen different homemade chutneys, rice, ginger tea and candies. It is moreishly delicious. The bill is \$5 for two.

After wandering around southeast Burma largely on my own, I rejoin the tourist trail at Golden Rock. Lorries ferry pilgrims up the mountain to see a giant boulder covered in gold leaf that balances precariously over a cliff, anchored in place by a hair of the Buddha. It may be one of the most important pilgrimage sites in Burma but everyone is on the make here, even the monks who start up at dawn with loudspeaker demands for donations that smother the ethereal chanting from monasteries on neighbouring peaks.

I wished myself back in Byin Nyi Gyi, the Prince's Cave, near Hpa An. There I was the only early morning visitor. I crossed a bridge over a lake fed by a hot spring and climbed a staircase past a pageant of lifesize temple guardians and heroes from Karen folk tales. In a deep cave, hundreds of Buddhas sat and lounged beneath curtains of stalactites. Plastic buckets on the floor caught the worst of the drips from the rock. In the corner, an old monk chuckled away at a tape recording of a sermon and lit his first cheroot of the day. His beautiful grey cat slumbered on in a bamboo deckchair. This was the Burma I had come to see.

How we moderate

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