Explorers

China Exploration and Research Society

A Newsletter to Inform and Acknowledge CERS’ Friends and Supporters

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Clockwise from Top:
- Villagers along the bank of a Chindwin tributary.
- A baby Irrawaddy Dolphin swimming alongside its mother. HM Explorer on the Irrawaddy.
- A fruit bat with newborn suckling.

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President’s Message

In retrospect, I have given China the best forty years of my life. Likewise, China has given me perhaps the best years it has to offer to a modern explorer. In both, China and I, we are declining in what we can offer each other. For me, my active years are dwindling with age. For China, a network of roads is making what remains in the back country little to explore.

Thus it seems natural to make the best of my remaining years, by turning to new turf among China’s immediate neighbors. This is both personal, as well as strategic for a growing CERS. One of those countries is Myanmar. In operation style, I take on a different approach by switching from land exploration to conducting it over water, through the use of a boat, a 100-foot river boat named HM Explorer, launched this summer in Myanmar.

Unlike Jacques Cousteau’s boat Calypso that gained world renown sailing the blue ocean, this new CERS boat would sail through internal waterway of Myanmar, one of the few countries with much remained to be explored in Asia. Due to circumstances within the last half century, Myanmar remained largely closed to the outside world, until quite recently. Few roads penetrate its deep interior in northern Myanmar. But a boat can take us far inland. Before WWII, Myanmar, then known as British Burma, boasted the world’s largest freshwater fleet, the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company. That fleet has long been gone. But the rivers remained.

I often say, where there are roads Myanmar lives in the past, as if from fifty years ago. Where there are no roads, the country is a hundred years behind. Today, that notion can be translated to mean being not polluted by modernity, and most pristine in both natural and human senses. This issue of our newsletter would bring you results of our first forays into that unknown, yet most colorful country. As one of my lectures denotes about Myanmar, “Coming from behind, to lead or to follow?”. In my view, Myanmar has much to share with the rest of the world, ancient heritage, simple ways of life, and above all, traditional values.

Just as International Business Machine became IBM, Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing became 3M and Hong Kong & Shanghai Bank became HSBC, so the China Exploration & Research Society over the years has come to be called by many of our friends and associates simply as ‘CERS’. Now that our work has expanded to include many of China’s neighboring countries, it seems appropriate that we allow the full name to evolve and be shortened to CERS.

With that came the birth of our new and a parallel logo to our other China one – CERS Explorer, with an anchor over the globe. Let’s hope this logo will complement our old logo, as well as representing direction of our future exploration.
Thein Naing, Captain of the HM Explorer, pulled on the honk with five to six bellows. His friend running a smaller boat in the opposite direction answered with a few beeps. For a moment, I thought of Gil Shaham’s violin answering Yo-yo Ma’s Cello, both using a Stradivarius. I told Naing that next time I would bring him an Italian air horn, with musical tune of William Tell or some bugle call. From then on, every time someone hears the honk, they know Cowboy Naing, as I call him, and his boat is just around the corner.

Whenever Naing ran into an acquaintance on the river, he would again blow his honk. In between, there were a few times such calls were for warning slower boats in his way. Like a truck driver honking his new Peterbilt or Mack truck to make sure that his friends take notice of his new vehicle, Naing is obviously proud to be behind the wheel of this brand new boat, a 100-foot boat that CERS has just launched in Myanmar to explore the internal waterway of the country.

Naing has been on the river, more accurately on a boat, since a teenager. Born in 1962, he has worked on a boat since 1977, thirty-five years to date. He knows the Irrawaddy well, having worked in Myitkyina for two years and Bhamo for another two. The rest of the time he was working the water of the Irrawaddy up and down Mandalay, all the way to Yangon. However for the
last seventeen years, he spent on the Chindwin, a major tributary of the Irrawaddy. Whenever Naing needs to take a break, his First Mate takes over the wheel. Aung Naing Win is 32 years old and has worked on the same boat together with Naing for 14 years.

We were making our shake-down cruise on the Chindwin, beginning two days ago. His knowledge of this river serves us well, as we are most interested in exploring the Chindwin. I often said of Myanmar, “Where there are roads, the country may be 50 years behind. Where there are no roads, probably 100.” Our boat will take us back in time, making discoveries, conducting research, and documenting nature and culture before changes come. Finally, an explorer can again be ahead of change.

George Orwell wrote his *Burmese Days* under the tropical heat and humidity. Almost 80 years later, here I leaned on my bed in one of five air-conditioned cabins and penned my new experience on a riverboat. This is not the riverboat of old with red stripe over a black funnel, emblem of the Flotilla Company which in its heyday was the largest freshwater fleet in the world. Myanmar, then British Burma, had seen its days at the helm of Southeast Asia. It was the biggest rice exporter in the world. Burmah Oil was the predecessor of British Petroleum (BP). For jade and ruby, one needs look no further than Burma.

Our boat, HM Explorer, borrows its prefix from the British Admiralty. Rather than referring to His or Her Majesty Ship, it discretely signifies as my exploration ship. Our partner Misuu prefers to interpret HM as Heritage Myanmar which is perfectly fine with me, as we intend to explore the many natural and cultural wonders of this hidden land. While HM Explorer is not your deluxe Mediterranean or Road to Mandalay cruise ships, neither is it Spartan without modern devices. Toilets and showers, though communal, are well appointed with good taste.

“Nit Taung,” a few seconds later “Thone Taung Tit Thowe”, called out the two boat boys sitting to starboard and portside at the bow. The first call meant two arms (approximately three feet), the latter three arms plus one count between spread of thumb and index finger (approximately six inches), as the boys cum navigators called out one after another to Captain Naing. Each boy was in charge of a very long bamboo sticks, one red and white, the other blue and white, to measure the depth of the water as the boat was passing through. Despite our boat’s relative shallow draft of three feet, during dry season it may still hit bottom or be caught in sandbar if not careful. Mark Twain used to work on a boat on the Mississippi and did similar chore, resulting in the usage of the term “Mark Twain” as meaning deep enough to pass.

We pulled anchor and left Monywa west of Mandalay 6am in the morning. The first day’s cruise lasted thirteen hours as we saw a most spectacular tropical sunrise and then sunset. In between there were a few rainstorms which
prompted us to stop and buy equipment to rig up a canopy on the top deck. The scenery along the way was spectacular as we observed the occasional villages, adjoining pagodas, and different types of boat traffic up and down the river. While ferry boats overloaded with cargo and passengers were frequent sights, we were most fascinated by the bamboo and log rafts.

Some of the bamboo rafts must have been crafted together with utmost care as they looked almost like a well-formed architecture with a superstructure on top as housing. One wonders how long such a journey may take as the raft simply drifted with the flow of the river. With a boatman in front and one at the back, a long wooden oar works also as rudder to direct the raft. Log rafts were put together with scaffolding above water, with floating logs hung below. These huge, heavy and long rafts were pulled by tug boats downriver in snail pace. Log rafts were put together with scaffolding above water, with floating logs hung below. These huge, heavy and long rafts were pulled by tug boats downriver in snail pace.

The fastest boat on the river was our Zodiac inflatable as we launched it as tender to get to shore. All eyes were on us as no one had seen such water vehicle. We keep two Zodiacs onboard for use as tender as well as lifeboat, though I hope the second usage is never needed. We also outfitted our boat with long-range VHF radios in case we were to stray faraway. Eight folding bicycles, four of them can be operated with electric recharge, would provide access to nearby villages and towns away from shore.

On one such trip using our Zodiac, I saw a tall and colorful bird with reddish head on a sandbar. Momentarily I called out to Paul Buzzard, our Field Biologist, “Saurus Crane.” On closer look, I quickly corrected, “Stork, it has the beak of a stork.” I managed to take some shots from a distance and as soon as we got back to our boat, Paul consulted his bird guide against my photos. “Painted Stork,” confirmed Paul. “The guide noted it as FR, for Former Resident, with current status in Myanmar unknown,” added Paul. With our sighting, at least we can update the record that they are still around on the Chindwin River, near the border with India and possibly the westernmost range of this bird. Other birds we saw along the river were the Pied Kingfisher, Egrets, Cormorants, and Whistling Ducks. Future trips should produce many more species.

Given the high sand banks during low water season, whenever we wanted to stop to look at any village, the Captain simply plow the boat head-first onto the bank, or any sandbar. Turned the rudder to bring the stern alongside and we were docked, without pier, jetty or docking charges. Where the water was too low, we would drop anchor further out and used the Zodiacs.

At Kina, the first town we stopped at, we strolled the tree-lined street. Before we got very far, two plain-clothes policeman stopped us and asked for our visas and permit. We mustered through and said we’d soon be on our way, leaving them copies of our passports. Most of the towns and cities along the Chindwin are not officially open to foreign tourists. Though we looked local enough, especially with me in my Longyi, Paul’s face always blew our cover. We ended up having to explain our presence with stories and credentials. Saying that we have multiple goodwill projects in the country often help, and also true.
We ate our breakfast and lunch on the upper deck. For dinner we prefer the lower deck in the enclosed dining/working area. To do so avoided the thousands of bugs and insects flocking toward any lit area after dark. As we enjoyed our dinner, an occasional look at the windows with armies of flying bugs outside made us appreciate more the cool air we were in. After dinner, I retired to the upper deck with the lights off, appreciating the occasional fireflies flickering in the dark night, or the canopy of stars with the Milky Way seen with naked eyes.

The following morning, I could see thousands of dead insects along the sides of our boat, as the wet condensation night air glued them to the window panes and sills. We stopped by Min King to visit the early market, in order to buy supply of seafood and vegetable. Like at all tropical area, markets are most busy between 6 and 7am before the heat sets in. We found one huge prawn, measuring maybe ten inches if stretched. For that we paid 1500 Kyat, or nearly Two US Dollars. A fish weighing 1.5 Kg went for 3000 Kyat. At a café, we bought twenty Chinese style fried “Yau Teo” or as locals called it with the Cantonese name of “Yau Ja Gui”. For that we paid 2000 Kyat, or 100 per piece.

While at the market, two policemen caught glimpses of us and soon we found ourselves answering their many questions. Where do we come from? What are we doing here? Where are we going? What with the permit papers? We looked as bewildered as possible while allowing our guide cum manager Chaw Su (whom I always call Cha Shui as in roast pork), a young lady of 27 from our Cat Café, to bother with all the excuses and answers.

Soon we were all herded to a local café where a town administrator with glasses hanging over his nose was holding court. More questions were asked as we made four sets of copies of our passports and visas for their record. While I chatted with Chaw Su in English, suddenly the admin guy looked up and spoke to me in English. Fortunately he sounded quite polite rather than challenging my answers. After almost an hour of interrogation, we left without posting bail.

It seems well worth the trouble to get on shore as we were told by the head policeman that ours was the second group ever to visit the town in decades. Last year, a group cruising upriver with the Road to Mandalay, a deluxe and expensive tour operator, stopped by for a quick look. As we only had one huge prawn to share among the six of us, I told our chef to use it to make a Tom Yum Kung soup. That way, everyone got to try the flavor of a Chindwin River prawn.

After two days of cruise, we reached Kalewa, and it was time to turn back. For this shake-down cruise, we must also try to sail on the Irrawaddy over the next few days. Whereas over the next few years, we must produce work results of higher value than the boat. While we are not Jacque Cousteau with his Calypso, achieving our goal would require hard work and dedication of my team.

This inauguration cruise, or maiden voyage, is just the beginning of many more discoveries to follow. Later this summer, we would also begin to take student interns on an educational dry run, or wet run during the rainy season. At the same time, I would try to keep a record of the times we are booked by the local police, at every new station we would dare to penetrate. As always, “it is easier to ask for forgiveness than permission”. That motto served me well for four decades in China. It should work here in Myanmar too.
**HM Explorer**

*Boat specifications:*

- **Length:** 106 feet
- **Width:** 20 feet
- **Draft:** 3 feet
- **Engine:** Hino V8 330HP
- **Fuel Tank:** 450 Gallon
- **Water Tanks:** 1600 Gl Underdeck 100 Gl Upper deck
- **Generator Output:** 20 KW
- **Fuel Use:** 7-8 Gallon per hour
- **Cruise Speed:** Normal Flow 16 Miles per hour, High Level Flow 25 Miles per hour
- **Range:** Full tank, 60 Hrs 900-1000 Miles
- **Cabin:** 5
- **Captain & Crew:** 5
- **Manager & Service Staff:** 5
- **Guest Capacity:** 10

*Clockwise from top:*
- Sunset on the Chindwin.
- Village lady along the riverbank.
- Mother and child at local market.
- Old lady along the Chindwin.
"Kan dao" I excitedly heard from CERS Hainan Director, Wang Jian. He had just seen an Irrawaddy dolphin in the wake behind the HMS Explorer, and soon we all had great looks of the dolphins. We spotted dolphins again farther upstream, and they soon became a highlight of the HMS Explorer’s maiden voyage on the Irrawaddy (Ayeyarwady) River. There is great potential for research and education programs focusing on the dolphins, and CERS can substantially enhance their conservation, given we have our own boat.

Irrawaddy dolphins are closely related to killer whales or orcas which were made famous from the “Free Willy” movies. Orcas have developed several specialized hunting techniques to utilize prey species that vary from fish such as herring and tuna to blue whales to sea lions. Reflecting their close relationship to orcas, Irrawaddy dolphins have developed a mutualistic relationship of co-operative fishing with traditional fishermen on the upper reaches of the Ayeyarwady River. The dolphins drive fish towards fishermen using nets cast on the surface in response to acoustic signals. In return, the dolphins are rewarded with some of the by-catch (with a fish species that the dolphins especially relish according to the fishermen). Particular dolphins are associated with individual fishing villages, and an 1879 report indicated legal claims were frequently brought into native courts by fishermen to recover a share of the fish from the nets of rival fishermen which the plaintiff’s dolphin supposedly helped fill. There is thus also an opportunity to learn more about another mutualistic fishing relationship reminiscent of prior CERS work on fishing with otters and black cormorants.

Irrawaddy dolphins are found not only in the Ayeyarwady River but range from India to the Philippines. They prefer muddy, brackish waters at river mouths but can live up to 1,400 km upstream in the Ayeyarwady and up to 700 km upstream in the Mekong as well as up to 60 km out to sea from river mouths. As a species Irrawaddy dolphins are not seriously threatened primarily because over 5,000 Irrawaddy dolphins were recently documented in coastal waters of Bangladesh. The Ayeyarwady sub-population is widely separated from other sub-populations, however, and it is considered critically endangered with around 50 individuals likely remaining from Mandalay to Bhamo in the north of the Ayeyarwady.
It was a very positive sign that we saw several young dolphins, but we saw dolphins in fewer areas than prior surveys. The population is hopefully still at a point where it can be saved as long as an effective conservation approach addresses the main threats to dolphin conservation. It is imperative that Irrawaddy dolphins are spared the fate of Yangtze River dolphins and the pink dolphins in Hong Kong waters.

A Tang Dynasty text from 800 A.D. mentions Irrawaddy dolphins as “river pigs” traded among the Pyu people in Myanmar (Burma), and the dolphins are still consumed in some parts of their range. Currently, however, on the Ayeyarwady River the main threats to dolphins are from being accidentally caught in gillnets, disturbance and pollution from gold mining and in particular the threat from electrofishing.

To address these threats a three-pronged conservation approach must work in collaboration with the government, non-governmental organizations and local communities. First, gillnets must be removed from large areas of dolphin concentration and illegal electrofishing must be eliminated everywhere with increased law enforcement presence and increased penalties for offenders. Second, as compensation for lost income from these fishing methods, throw nets and small boats can be purchased to encourage mutualistic fishing with dolphins. Further, this mutualistic fishing can then be demonstrated for tourists to bring in another source of revenue. Third, if the dolphin population in the Ayeyarwady drops much lower, captive breeding options can be explored. Potentially, individuals can be introduced from the Bangladesh population to increase genetic health and prevent deleterious inbreeding. Finally, to complement these approaches it may be possible to utilize the high reverence Burmese people hold for Nats which are local spirits that must be propitiated. It may be helpful to build Nat temples demarcating dolphin concentration areas to venerate the dolphins and other river life.

On future CERS expeditions and student trips we can enhance Irrawaddy dolphin conservation by surveying for dolphins and monitoring the population as well as by interviewing fishermen about effective conservation approaches. During the student program this summer we unfortunately did not see any dolphins. Likely the water was too high and the dolphins had moved up tributaries in search of fish and/or mates. We did make contact this summer though with Aung Myo Chit, a Burmese expert on Irrawaddy dolphins. We also recently received an underwater acoustic microphone from Jim Serach, a Biology teacher from Lawrenceville School who also dazzled us with his bat trapping during the program. I look forward to testing out the microphone to listen for dolphin clicks hopefully in collaboration with Mr. Aung and/or Jim, and I look forward to students excitedly screaming “Kan dao” meaning “see it” or “ting dao” meaning “heard it” as they first encounter the dolphins…
Since ancient time, the Irrawaddy has been the lifeline of Myanmar. Today it remains so as we sailed up the mighty river. Distant thunder and lightning announced the approach of the rainy season. Closer at hand the flying ants predicted the imminent coming of rain. The bad news was that there were millions of bugs tonight. The good news, at least for our boat boys, was that these were not just flying ants but mainly Mayflies, and tasted wonderful when fried. In fact, at the market they go for 5000 Kyat per 1.5 kilo. True to the bug’s name, we were here in the middle of May. Like locust, they flocked in swarm toward the light on our boat. Even on water, they could float and took off into flight, dragging their two elongated tails behind. Before this episode, I used to think only fish like Mayflies, as fly-fishermen use fake ones as bait.

The boys were laughing and totally delighted. Shining a strong flashlight on the water next to the boat to attract the Mayflies, they began scooping these bugs in by the scores. With each scoop, the metal strainer filtered the water out, and with a quick circular motion, a hand would harvest a fistful of the insects. “Oosh,” came a squirt sound as the fist tightened its grip to crush the bugs and then it was dumped into a large basin. Soon the basin was filling up, thousands, maybe tens of thousands, of these Mayflies squished to death. Some were still moving, struggling to get back to flight, largely in vain. After all, Mayfly only lives for a day or less.

Quietly working like clockwork, two other crew members were fanning up a charcoal fire stove. Using a stone pounder, one guy hit the bugs into a paste. The other chopped up some garlic, mixed them with the paste, and padded it down like a hamburger patty, before putting them into a small wok with boiling oil to fry.

It looked too gross to try, but too good to pass, after seeing the grin on my crew’s faces with anxiety. After all, they were told I am an explorer. I mustered enough courage, cracked a tiny piece, and stuffed it into my mouth, all the time pretending to look normal. To my surprise, it was rather tasty, not unlike dried minced pork or fish threads we were so used to eat with our congee. Palatable as it was, I declined a second serving, not wanting to deprive my crew from their gastronomic delicacy!

We were at the confluence of the Mue Mint where it meets the Irrawaddy. Here green water of the stream meets murky yellow one of the river. Going in for a dip, I made sure I stayed on the
green side, just in case the murky current might carry me downriver, toward Yangon hundreds of kilometers away towards the ocean. I like to compare the yellowish water to the Myanmar milk tea that I drink every morning, and the greenish water to the Shan tea that I sip in the afternoon. Perhaps symbolically Myanmar tea has become mainstream, not unlike the Irrawaddy taking over the Chindwin and other minor tributaries.

“You’ve never been to Bagan? I can’t believe it!” Such were remarks made to me by many friends, knowing that I have been traveling to Myanmar for over a decade and in recent years several times a year. Finally, I have arrived in style, on board our own exploration boat. Strange enough, I have always felt a bit reluctant to rush to any major tourist attractions, somehow feeling that my dear friends can visit these places on my behalf. Thus goes Bagan, that I feel I could not have added much new insight by visiting.

Perhaps one small revelation I have here in Bagan is common to other monumental sites and architectural wonders of the world. I often believe that any monumental ensemble of buildings worthy to be called a legacy, like the one here in Bagan, is results of a strong dynasty with powerful king or successive kings. As a prerequisite, it usually requires a tyrant of a king to muster enough manpower or slave labor in order to create such edifice, be they palaces, temples or mega superstructures for future generations like us to admire in awe. Of course, since these were constructed in the distant past, we tend to admire in ecstasy rather than remembering the agony in the making of. However, many such places may provide the only clue and evidence for a historian to reflect upon both the spiritual and temporal past of a people.

We first anchored at Jetty Street by the bank of the river, next to an old Flotilla riverboat with two flats (barges) attached to its sides. Here were hundreds of Flying Foxes, largest species among bats, which flocked to roost on three large trees. They were most active both in the morning and evening, allowing Paul Buzzard, our Field Biologist, to observe them at some length. Soon we moved our mooring to the bank right next to the Aye Yar River Resort. Two beer at the bar got us the Wifi password. Soon we were back on our boat and connected up to cyberspace for the rest of the evening.

At the village of Yandarbo between Bagan and Mandalay, we observed that almost every household is engaged in pottery making. From tiny ornamental vases to large jars, these merchandises were shipped all over Myanmar and sold at markets and shops. I was most fascinated by a water jar which came with a faucet tap. Under the cover is a ceramic filter that apparently provides slow and minute drainage, clean enough as regular drinking water.

Besides being devoted Buddhists, Burmese are also known to believe in Nats. Such are spiritual beings that can bring good fortune or bad luck to a person. Villages and towns have Nat temples and shrines, large or small. There are major festivals throughout the region in celebrating the Nats, or in special circumstances someone being chosen and be married to a particular nat. There are thirty-seven main Nats and innumerable minor ones, each with special power and redeeming value when worshiped.

Looking at people along the banks, I wonder what are their joy, and their sorrow. If something misfortune should befall them, they can go pray at the many temples and pagodas. If something fortunate should happen, they can also go thank the Buddha. And if that’s not enough, praying to the thirty-seven Nats ought to tip the balance.

In 1870, an English gentleman Talboys Wheeler sailed from Rangoon (Yangon) to Bhamo, way north near Yunnan of China. At a point above Mandalay, their ship anchored opposite a small island named Theehadau, on which there was a pagoda and a small monastery. His account noted some large but tame fish which came to the surface at the call of the monks who fed and patted them on their heads and backs. He called these “large dog-fish without scales, and appeared to be nearly all head”. Twenty to thirty could be seen at one time.

In fact, these were no fish, but the Irrawaddy Dolphin, highlight of our entire Irrawaddy trip. We finally encountered them when we were negotiating a passageway near the village of Myit Kan Gyi. Wang Jian, one of the members of my team, suddenly called out, “Dolphin, dolphin.” He was looking toward the stern and saw several fins of the dolphin rising above the water. All along Wang knew that I’ve been watching out for this famous freshwater mammal that is still roam this region of the Irrawaddy. Captain Naing quickly slowed the engine and banked the boat sideways, so we could have a better view.
Soon all hands were on deck, looking at these dolphins which surface every now and then. Whenever a sighting was made by someone, everyone turned their heads and looked eagerly at the same direction. Our Captain took the boat in slow circles such that we could have as much viewing time as we wanted. With a 300mm lens, I captured many pictures every time the dolphins came to the surface. I couldn’t wait until I put the object in focus, but simply snapped away whenever a dark spot showed itself. Even at every stir of the water, I pushed my shutter. There was little time to review what I got. Everyone was excited.

With his binoculars, Paul noticed that there was a calf next to an adult and cautioned that we should not follow too closely. Sure enough, several of my pictures turned out showing a calf seemingly taking a joy ride over one of the flippers of the mother. Whenever the mother rose to the surface, the calf showed up higher on top of the flipper. One image even had the baby showing a big smile. That has to be one of the best pictures ever taken of these Irrawaddy Dolphins.

We pulled to the bank and dropped anchor so we could interview the local fisherman. Everyone pointed to U Tin Taung who is supposed to know how to call for the Dolphins. Renting his boat, we went out with him to search again for the Dolphins. U Tin Taung said there were twenty-seven Dolphins in their water and that this season there were two calves. Last year, the Fishery Department of Mandalay asked the villagers to help protect the Dolphins. 200,000 Kyats were allocated to the entire village for this effort and together with U Aung Thin, another villager, the two of them became the prime persons in charge.

An unfortunate incident happened last year when fifteen boats from a nearby village came over to fish at night, using electric shock. Two Dolphins were electrocuted and died. Among them was Got Htit, a nickname the fishermen had given to a particularly friendly Dolphin with a mark over her neck. In the past, she was one of two Dolphins which would answer U Tin Taung’s call of “Bruuu, Bruuu,” while vibrating his lips. The other is nicknamed Got Sin, still alive.

U Tin Taung spoke convincingly that Got Htit would arouse fishermen at night on their boat whenever there were schools of fish coming close. At times she would raise her tail once to alert them. On a second round of raising her tail, she would scoop over some fish her tail had picked up. Many times they were alerted by the Dolphin to the approaching of fish. In those circumstances, they generally would net eight to nine kilos of fish. Though the story might sound dramatic, U Tin Taung told it with all seriousness. The two dead Dolphins are now kept in a museum in Mandalay, said U Tin Taung.

August to March are said to be the best months for viewing the Dolphins. They like to surface and play between 3 to 5 pm in the afternoon. Sometimes you can even hear them playing after midnight. As we obviously were here during off-season, we considered ourselves lucky to have seen them earlier in the day. After being toasted under the intense sun for two hours, we failed in relocating them again and gave up the effort. But we promised to return on our way back.

The following morning, we shopped at the market of Katha, a sizable town by the bank of the Irrawaddy. Just as our boat pulled off from the town, we again saw a school of Dolphins. Being high on our boat’s deck, we could follow them around with commanding view. Again I was able to photograph a mother with infant. We stayed for almost an hour before continuing our journey north. As we turned to leave, one Dolphin flipped its tail high as if to say good bye to us. It was said that the best time for viewing the Dolphins are morning and evening. We knew in years ahead, we would revisit with these rare mammals many more times.

While on board our boat, I discussed with Misuu, our local partner, the future of these Dolphins. We both felt that the future of the Dolphins is inexplicably tied to the condition of the Irrawaddy. The awareness of the people, especially the fishermen, to protect their habitat would be crucial to the survival of the Dolphins. Right away, we planned to launch a project using students to help raise the awareness of this issue, calling them Irrawaddy Dolphin Kids. If the Dolphin can become an icon or mascot of the Irrawaddy, its importance would be raised and the species accorded better protection.

I lamented in the passing of the Baiji Dolphin of China which I heard so much about in 1985 during my Yangtze expedition. Since then they have never been spotted again. In 2006, a six-week scientific expedition with international marine biologists failed to find any evidence of their existence, despite using state-of-the-art acoustic devices over the entire historical range of the dolphin. The Baiji Dolphin is, sadly
and functionally, extinct. Within the last couple years, the Pink Dolphin which frequented the Pearl River Delta suddenly disappeared. They used to entertain nature lovers of Hong Kong who would charter cruise boats to view them. We feared that if more awareness were not raised with the plight of the Irrawaddy Dolphin, they may someday face similar fate.

Nearby at the riverbank city of Male, we visited the market and bought fruits, vegetable, and other supplies. A plain-clothes policeman stopped us to ask for paperwork, a routine we were now accustomed to. After producing copies of our passports and visas, we continued on our way. At the pier, I saw two child monks in red robes. Both were holding toy machine guns. “Their future is pretty grim if that’s what they are playing with,” said Paul to me, and I concurred.

At a sandy beach by the village of Wei Ma, I met 18-year-old Aye Maung Maung. Despite being a slave, as evidenced from the heavy iron chain on one of his feet, Aye Maung Maung has a wonderful and caring master. Though day-time work is heavy with intensive laboring, the master would allow Aye Maung Maung a bath in the morning and evening. I even observed his master helping him brush his teeth, or tusks to be more accurate, as Aye Maung Maung is a working elephant.

Wei Ma is one of the few remaining elephant camps, right on the bank of the Irrawaddy. Today there are less than forty elephants remaining in this camp, catering to the timber industry in the neighborhood. In days ahead, no doubt their dedicated service for centuries would be replaced by heavy duty machinery. With mechanized and modern logging, the forests will be depleted at a fast pace to deem the elephants useless, sooner or later. We offered Aye Maung Maung a bundle of bananas which it devoured in no time at all.

Shortly beyond Wei Ma, the Irrawaddy enters a narrow gorge which runs for about twenty some kilometers. At one point, a huge cliff rises for over two hundred meters above the river. This is called the Second Defile, described by many early British visitors as the most spectacular scenery their eyes ever beheld, no doubt the Number One scenic spot of the entire Irrawaddy. Nearby is a rock protruding out and above the river with a pointed notch. Locals call this the parrot’s beak. Painted green with a red beak, it is said when the water is at its highest, it would just reach the beak as if the parrot is drinking from the river.

Soon we reached Bhamo, the northernmost end of this trip. The town used to be a very important trading post between Yunnan of China and upper Myanmar. It was also at a strategic location of the Old Burma Road during the Second World War. Today it remains a busy town with a few Chinese shops. We ate at the Blue Ocean Restaurant, owned by the Yang family, a third-generation Chinese. From here, we have to retrace our path and head back toward Mandalay and Monywa.

Along the way, we anchored for a night at Myit Kan Gyi, the village where we first saw the dolphins. Almost the entire village with dozens of kids came out to see us. We chatted some more about the dolphins, finding out from the villagers that there were indeed close to thirty dolphins in the vicinity. In my mind, I kept wondering whether these same little kids would someday tell their grandchildren that once upon a time there used to be many dolphins swimming in the river. If our new Irrawaddy Dolphin Kid Project were to succeed, that would not be how the story ends.
After a long day — watching the banks of the Irrawaddy glide by in the heat and copper glare of the sun over central Myanmar, the colours finally gather in the west as the sun slides behind dark rain clouds and a cooling breeze slowly moves a distant squall across the horizon. Lying in a hammock on the deck of the HM Explorer and sipping a tall, cool drink, it is hard to imagine a more comfortable moment. I think back to the accounts I have been reading of the early explorations of upper Myanmar. In this cool breeze and dimming light, they seem all the more extraordinary. What could motivate someone to give up the comfortable of the life of a colonial official or entrepreneur in exchange for struggling up trackless mountains and sliding down bamboo soaked hillsides as an explorer?

George Orwell, so insightful about so many things, may have provided the answers to this question. While not an explorer himself, except in the exploration of the human condition, George Orwell had an intimate knowledge of the colonial world of British Burma, having served as police officer in the country between 1922 and 1927. These were the experiences from which he drew to write his powerful indictments of imperialism; the novel Burmese Days and the short essay On Shooting an Elephant. Later in his life, Orwell, who gave up his colonial life to return to Europe and begin a career as a writer, also wrote a short essay entitled Why I Write. In it he lists four motivations as the chief forces that drive people to become authors: 1) sheer egoism 2) aesthetic enthusiasm 3) historical impulse and 4) political purpose.

Lying in that hammock on the deck, it occurred to me that these motives apply quite well to explorers, too, and the colonial era European explorers of Myanmar illustrate them perfectly. This should not be surprising – an explorer in the past had to also be a writer, although now I suppose communication through film and video would also count. Travelling merchants, missionaries and adventurers may be just as tenacious and wander as far, but we do not consider them explorers unless they write about their journeys. This is why Marco Polo’s uncles are not venerated as explorers, although they were the ones who first took their young nephew to China. Nor is the Portuguese adventurer Felipe de Brito called an explorer, although in 1599 he set himself up as governor in Syriam at the mouth of the Irrawaddy. His rule lasted for a remarkable 13 years, until he was finally executed in 1613. Unfortunately, he did not have time to leave an account of his adventures first.

Marco Polo, the iconic explorer, is sometimes included among the list of Europeans who explored Myanmar. In the late 13th century, he described the defeat of a Burmese elephant army at the hands of a much smaller Yuan-dynasty force in 1277, and the taking of the capital Pagan in 1284. Polo also describes the region of Bhamo, under the name Zardandan, however, it is not clear if he ever actually visited this land.

The invasion by the Mongols destroyed the grand kingdom of Pagan and left what is now Myanmar broken up into a number of small kingdoms. It was not until 1510 that a strong central Burmese force began the reunification of most of the country. It went on to create the largest kingdom in the history of southeast Asia by 1580. Although the over-extended empire soon collapsed, Burmese power never completely flickered out again until 1886 when the British moved in to the palace in Mandalay.
The British knew of the riches of Burma through the descriptions of merchant explorers. As early as 1586, an Elizabethan merchant in the service of the Levant Company left an account of a visit to what is now Myanmar in the descriptively entitled essay *The Voyage of Master Ralph Fitch, Merchant of London, to Ormus, and so to Goa in the East India, to Cambaia, Ganges, Bengala; to Bacola and Chonderi, to Pegu, to Jamahay in the Kingdome of Siam, and backe to Pegu, and thence to Malacca, Zeilan, Cochin, and all the coast of East India: Begun in the Yeere of our Lord 1583, and ended in 1591.*

Despite this glowing account of riches, it seems that it was nearly 200 years later that the explorations of Myanmar by Europeans resumed in earnest. By 1757, when the so-called Honourable East India Company had administrative control over all of India, the neighbouring country to the east, with its rich natural resources, must have held an irresistible attraction. Already in 1755, Captain George Baker and Lieutenant John North visited the court of the King at Ava on behalf of the Company and published an account of their travels in 1808 as *Journal of an Embassy to the King of Buraghmahuys.* More visits by “soldier-diplomats” followed. Colonel Michael Symes provided a detailed account of his missions in 1795 and 1802, and Captain Hiram Cox published his *Journal of a Residence in the Burmhan Empire*, covering 1796-97.

While exploration supported by the East India Company had begun in earnest, imperial expansion proceeded in stages, and only after a long period of Burmese imperial expansion. In 1785, the Burmese king Bodawpaya was strong enough to conquer Arakan, then Manipur in 1814, and finally Assam in 1817–1819. The new additions to the Burmese empire left Burma with a long and ill-defined border with the new British Empire to the west. When cross-border raids by rebels from the British protected territories of Assam were met by counter-cross-border raids by the Burmese, the First Anglo-Burmese War was the result. Lasting from 1824-1826, it was the longest and most costly war in British Indian history, but eventual British victory led to the annexation of Arakan, Manipur and Assam, as well as Tenasserim. The Second Anglo-Burmese war in 1852 added Pegu and the mouth of the Irrawaddy to the East India Company’s treasures.
Each of these annexations was preceded and followed by more exploration by British “soldier-diplomats.” In fact, the history of exploration and the history of conquest were inextricably bound together. After the First Anglo-Burma War (1824-1826), John Crawford followed with a detailed Journal of An Embassy from the Governor General of India to the Court of Ava, 1826-27. Major Henry Burney, resident to the court of Ava from 1830-37, published on the history, geography and resources of upper Burma. The tradition continued after the 2nd Anglo-Burmese War, as Henry Yule published A Narrative of the Mission to the Court of Ava in 1855. Exploration was not limited to the Irrawaddy valley. In 1868, with British funds and the blessing of the king of Burma, a British led mission set out from Mandalay to explore the trade route from Mandalay to Yunnan in China. Formerly the route had been an important road for merchandise travelling between Myanmar and China, but a rebellion of Muslims in Yunnan, who set up a rival government based in Dali, had all but closed the way. Both the British and the Burmese king sought to reopen the route. John Anderson, M.D. accompanied the expedition and took copious notes of their progress, recording information of importance for trade or military operations, but also documenting the customs, dress and artifacts of the people they met as they passed through the Shan States and Kachin areas.

The chief objective of the mission, however, was not ethnography, but rather “…to discover the cause of the cessation of the trade formerly existing by these routes, the exact position held by the Kakhuen, Shans and Panthays, with reference to that traffic, and their disposition or otherwise, to resuscitate it…”

Anderson eventually published his account in 1876 as Mandalay to Momien: A Narrative of the Two Expeditions to Western China of 1868 and 1875. Anderson and each of the “soldier-diplomat” explorers before him provided detailed accounts of the geography and economy of the country they passed through. Their interests in trade, transportation, and military matters, were all clearly strategic. They offered up detailed accounts of local products and production, such as the native oil industry and its source in the hand dug oil wells at Yenangyaung (‘Petroleum Creek’). Their writings were intended more as a record for the East India Company and the British government than for the general public. Trade, progress and money were the clear motivators for these explorers, always with an eye to the possibilities for expansion of the empire.
Perhaps the pinnacle of this kind of boldly political explorer was Archibald R. Colquhoun. He first published an account of his explorations in 1883 as Across Chryse: Being the Narrative of A Journey of Exploration Through the China Border Lands from Canton to Mandalay. This gave a stirring account of the journey and also included a prolonged discussion about the feasibility of building a railroad from southern Burma to China. Colquhoun was back in the public eye a year later with a short pamphlet introducing Burma to a broader audience. In it he provided a basic account of the country, both the lower British controlled portion and the upper portion still ruled by the Burmese king. Colquhoun argued that Britain should take an active hand in manipulating the existing Burmese court. Aggressive diplomacy was necessary, for one thing, because Britain must act before its French rivals did. The core of his justification for deep British involvement, however, is clear from the title of the publication alone, “Burma and the Burmans, The Best Unopened Market in the World.” The title resonates today just as it did in 1885.

Colquhoun argued against the widely held opinion that Britain should take control of upper Burma by force. Public opinion in Rangoon, he noted; “...is clamouring for the annexation of Upper Burma outright, but public opinion in Rangoon on this subject is not to be too greatly trusted...” “All the necessary effect can be produced without going the length of annexation or protection...”

Colquhoun’s timely pamphlet was not enough to stop precipitous action by the Torrey government. Led by Lord Churchill, who had recently been appointed Secretary of India and whose son Winston had just turned 11 years old, and with popular approval in Britain and outspoken enthusiasm from British merchants in Rangoon and Scotland, a minor dispute over a fine imposed on a British firm for illegal logging was all the justification that was needed to start the Third and last Anglo-Burmese War. In 1885, an invasion force quickly took the royal capital at Mandalay, and in 1886, King Thibaw and Queen Supayalat were sent into exile and independent Burma became a province of British India. That same year was also notable for the handover of direct control of oil production in Yenangyaung to the Scottish-controlled Rangoon Oil Company, and for the founding of the Mandalay Distillery (refining rum and gin, not oil products). Imperial British priorities were as clear as ever.

Annexation was not the end of politically motivated exploration. In 1888, G.J. Younghusband, the older brother of Francis Younghusband, published an account of his expedition to the Trans-Salween Shan State of Kiang Tung. He wrote of the reasons for his journey thus; “Having obtained six months’ leave, and being sick of the pomps and vanities of this civilized world of ours, I determine to take upon myself the cloak of an explorer, and to penetrate into a new country.” A thin cloak it was. In fact, Younghusband had been sent by Major M.S. Bell, head of the Intelligence Branch of the Indian Army “to learn all that was possible concerning the people, their customs and habits, their trade and commerce, their industries and the products of their country, - vegetable and mineral.” While the customs and habits of the people made for interesting reading, the main goal for Younghusband was clearly political; he was instructed also “to report minutely on all military matters,” and thus to set the stage for the pacification of the new imperial territory.

With all of this political intrigue in the service of empire motivating exploration by “soldier-diplomats,” one might get the impressions that exploration was purely a political game. Another breed of explorer, however, with a very different motivation was also wandering the globe – the explorer-naturalist. These were often supported, it is true, by companies and governments interested in the natural resources of newly opened territories, or territories that they dreamed of opening. The explorers themselves, however, were motivated by what might best be called the ‘natural history imperative;’ the drive to understand the natural world, to explain it, and to set the record straight. The naturalist-explorers searched Myanmar for its biological and cultural treasures, and this will be the subject of Part 2 of this two part article.

END PART ONE
At the far end of the horizon, black clouds were gathering fast. We could tell there was rainstorm forming south of us just by looking at the haze under those clouds, connecting heaven to earth. Our boat, the HM Explorer, was racing downstream, traveling at almost twice the speed of our upstream journey. It looked as if the storm was traveling at our direction, and soon we could expect a rendezvous with the summer monsoon.

Before the storm arrived, the wind picked up dramatically, beating up waves over the river as well as sending me backward from the bow to midsection of our boat, shielded by the captain’s cabin and the library bar. Momentarily the storm blew over and barely missed our boat as I saw this huge white mesh of rain went upriver to meet with another huge dark cloud descending from the sky. As the two met, they mated into one Ying and Yang wholeness as I admired in awe.

Just a day before, I looked up above me at noon and saw the midday sun surrounded by a halo-like rainbow. Everyone turned their heads skyward and took in this auspicious sign. The many pagodas in this country must have helped choreograph such natural phenomena, using the Irrawaddy as both a theater and a stage.

We were at the Wel-ma Elephant Camp by the river, my second visit within three months. I was eager to find out more about this village with thirty families. Bill Bleisch, our Science Director, and I were trying to identify a worthy project in one of the last elephant camps. But given my impatience, soon to reach the age of a senior citizen, I hate to wait, or search indefinitely. Past experience tells me that we can always start something small. In time it would branch out to become more substantial, and sustaining, involvement.

The village has a childcare center as well as a primary school, offering up to Grade 3 education, with three teachers in residence. On the blackboard, I could see the children were taught even English. Today they were learning what a cup is. In another...
classroom, younger kids learned from drawings on the board. Ironically, one of the images drawn was that of an elephant. This, they should have learned at birth, being in an elephant camp.

This elephant camp, however, is not open to the public. In fact, prior permission has to be acquired from some higher office in Yangon before anyone can visit. We, being haphazard explorers, did not know of this protocol, nor care to go through such maze of paperwork. U Kyaw Khine Swe, the camp manager, pointed to a sign which spelled out the additional fees they charge, for looking at elephants, for photographing them, or for riding one. Such charges are very much on paper only, as since a year ago, only one tourist group, traveling with the super luxurious Road to Mandalay cruise, stopped by to have a look.

We apologized for our intrusion, but quickly directed our conversation toward their remoteness to civilization, effecting in the many deficiencies they have to face. Electricity comes from a small generator but they have no money to buy fuel. A Myanmar company offered help by providing a gallon of diesel a day, translated to about two hours of lighting each evening. As a token of our seriousness in helping this community, and to pave the way for our future project here, I quickly decided to provide USD1,000 in cash so they can equip and renovate the daycare center, plus add an hour of light to each night. I also promised to continue the support should we devise a long term project here. They in turn agreed that we could visit any time without procuring the necessary permit from faraway Yangon.

Our financial support cum bribe must have worked, as soon after we saw outside the school six elephants lined up like honored guards, each with their keeper riding high on top. We went out and busied ourselves in taking pictures. Drolma our Tibetan Education Officer had never been to Myanmar, let alone seeing an elephant. I emphatically asked U Kyaw Khine Swe to put a mount on an elephant so she may get to ride on one for a picture. One of the largest elephants.
a 37-year-old female by the name of Myo Mya Thit, soon left the group and went back to the village to be mounted. Meanwhile another elephant went into the river to take a bath with its owner. With the bath came also a good brush of its ivory tusks by the keeper.

Soon, Myo returned, with two rattan framed baskets, one attached to each side of her back. Its keeper called out an order in Burmese, a sound to make it get on its knees and then lower her back as well to squat completely down, so as for someone to mount. She bent her front legs and went down on her knees. But no matter how her keeper yelled, she would pick up her body over and over again and refused to squat down. This act was repeated over half a dozen times. Even when the keeper took his machete knife out of the sheave and poked the thick skin of the elephant, it would not budge.

Finally we gave up attempting to ride an elephant. As U Kyaw Khine Swe said, usually this elephant listens very well to order. Somehow today she got stubborn. Looking around at us, he said most likely the elephant refused to sit down because several of us were wearing white T-shirts. She probably mistook us as the vet who came occasionally to check on the elephants and gave them shots. It must have associated us as doctors and didn’t want another shot.

Back on the boat, Dr Bleisch together with Dr Buzzard, CERS Field Biologist, was in active discussion with Jim Serach, a guest teacher from the US, about future collaboration in study on bats of the area, Jim being a bat expert. Bill wanted to write to his friend in India, a vet and trainer for mahout or elephant trainers. Though he is likely retired now, he used to head a program in training and keeping timber elephants. Perhaps he would like to come here to teach more humane ways of training of the elephants. Bill had noticed how all the keepers here drove the elephants with long and sharp hooks, while the machete-waving keeper may be even more brutal while attempting to break his elephant. Bill said that his friend would immediately fire any mahout found using a “weapon” to train an elephant. Certainly offering reward is better than applying punishment. I have learned the same lesson as a child at home and at school. I also suddenly felt somewhat vindicated in offering the Camp Manager a bribe.

I also want to return to document how these elephants work the timber, before the last one would disappear, replaced by modernized and mechanized machines fast coming into this country. The time capsule which had isolated this rich and wonderful country is bursting. While I cannot stop or delay its new emergence, perhaps I can help record something unique that is centuries old, and in passing.

A short distance pass the Elephant Camp is the precipitous cliff of the Irrawaddy, called the Second Defile. Perhaps inspired by the bathing elephant, we stopped our boat and went in for a dip. Whenever I took a swim next to our boat, I must remember to tell our boat staff and guests that no one should be using or flushing the toilet. After all, like all boats on the Irrawaddy, the human waste comes right out into the river and could by chance hit me on the face. If that should happen, the impact would have a huge discount on my enjoyment of this great river of Myanmar.

TOP TO BOTTOM:
There was a sudden explosion and a few bits of shrapnel hit my chest, as I was sitting in the front seat of the van. Someone in the back seat said they thought we had been hit by a sniper from the Indian side. Indeed, we were on a remote border between Myanmar and India. Imphal, the nearest city of India, was perhaps a hundred kilometers of jungle and several hill ranges away to our west.

We had just made a stealth incursion across the border into India, which hugged a section of our road. The map on my iPad showed that the trail I took had led me almost half a kilometer beyond the Myanmar side of the border before I stopped. At first I thought I was the lone penetrator on the trail. As I stopped to look at some small flying insects, I realized my entire squad was scattered behind me, as if I was the leading sergeant; twelve of us in all.
Back in the van, I tried to take stock and assess the damage. I saw tiny red pieces of plastic scattered behind the dashboard. Then I saw the top of a cigarette lighter on the floor. The explosion was from a butane lighter that our driver had put on the dashboard. After being heated under the torching sun for a couple hours, it finally blew up like a firecracker, as if to celebrate India’s national day.

We were on our way from Kalewa to Tamu, a border town west of the Chindwin River. I was beginning to take a cursory interest in the living forest around us like an amateur naturalist, after seeing Bill and Paul in their natural and professional element of being field biologists. Just the day before on an outing with our two Zodiac inflatable boats, Dolphin 1 and Dolphin 2, I managed to capture the only specimen of a very colorfully banded beetle. Bill was observing a swarm of them along the muddy bank of a side river and craved a specimen. But every time their boat dug in on the bank with hands flying in the air trying to catch one, the bugs all flew off.

I joined in the frustrating effort from my boat. After a few futile attempts, I decided to use a more sensible means. Taking one of my flip-flops off my feet, I tried whacking on a bug sitting on the muddy bank. But I had to be careful so as not to smash the entire beetle; light enough to immobilize it, yet fast enough before it could fly off.

Soon my crude approach paid off, and we got one beetle, squished between my thong and the mud. It was knocked silly only momentarily, and it came back to live soon after we put it in a zip-loc bag. It was a most beautiful bug, with orange bands on a largely shiny blue abdomen and a green metallic head and thorax. Looked at under the sun, the bug danced in a rainbow of colors. I felt very pleased with my first specimen of an unknown arthropod. For the moment, we simply identified it as the Flip-flop Beetle.

The Chindwin River, unlike the Irrawaddy, came with teeming life. Insects were in abundance. Every evening we usually docked the boat along a section of the bank where it was quiet and forested. We harvested many insects that somehow got stranded on our boat the following morning. One night we got visited by an army of yellow ants with pincers. Their bites were most painful. The crew hurriedly cut off branches of a tree that touched upon our roof, thus dislodging the bridges for the marching ants onto our boat.

We also took on many boat refugees in the form of grasshopper, cricket, mantis, spider and more beetles. At night our lights attracted numerous bugs and moths. An extraordinary one with golden yellow head, a patched body and two spiked antennas cum forearms stayed, took up as a squatter upon the entrance door and stayed with us for many days. It even occurred to me to create a residency program for a boat-based entomologist. While we were amazed at the insects, Bill was forever using his binoculars to comb the banks looking for birds, whereas...
villagers, especially children, were observing us in return. One young man leaned over from the bank and took great joy in shaking Paul’s hand, probably the first white man he had seen except on VCDs. Foreigners have not been much in evidence on the Chindwin River since British colonial days.

Our long day-trip by van to the Indian border of Tamu was taken with the goal of having a brief look at the border market, but it also provided other surprises. There were many churches along the way; Protestant, Baptist and Catholic. And two Chinese families had been living in town for over ten years. Both from western Yunnan, one of them, the Xiong family operated a restaurant, The Water World, where we had lunch among the fish pools surrounding the dining area. Xiong Qinfen, 24 year-old daughter, wrote her name in formal Chinese characters to give me. She also pointed us to behind the restaurant where a black bear was kept inside a rather large cage. She had had it as a pet since when it was barely the size of a cat. Within three years it had grown to be taller than a man. Ironically, Xiong in Chinese also mean bear.

It took four hours by car to get back from Tamu to our boat anchored at Kalewa by the Chindwin. Kelay is a town in between and at the border of the Chin State of Myanmar, most famous for its weaving of textile. We stopped by a village filled with weavers in many homes in order to purchase some finished fabric. As it was already getting dark, outside and above a shop were many bats going after insects in the darkened sky. Using a flash, I succeeded in capturing the bat in action as the insects showed up as reflected white dots. The bat, however, showed up as if on an x-ray film.

Just days ago, at our Exhibit House of Inle Lake, we set up three nets to capture bats. While several got away and damaged our nets, we did manage to trap two bats for measurement. One of them, a smaller flying fox similar to the large ones we saw at Bagan, even had a newborn baby under one of its wings. Eyes not yet open, it folded up and sucked tightly on the teat as if in a deep sleep. We quickly took measurements and released mother with child back into the night.
The further north we cruised on the Chindwin, the more wild the country, with dense forests on the banks. We knew the river would offer many years of exploration for those of us interested in biology or the many ethnic groups inhabiting the unknown. We turned back from the town of Maleik and began our slow journey down the river again. In three days, we would be back where we started, at Monywa. But for someone just learning about the biodiversity the Chindwin River hosts, my journey as an amateur naturalist was just beginning.

Our team had kept ourselves busy. Cao Zhongyu documenting everything we found as we passed by, including a chicken boat and our own boat crew and kitchen staff at work, all in video. Wang Chi-hung, editor of Rhythms Magazine of Taiwan, began writing a lengthy account of this river expedition. He also intended to use our footage for an hour-long program on the TV channel that Rhythms operates. Zhang Fan had the joy of collecting fish and shrimp samples with the nets he brought from Kunming. I played the act of an amateur naturalist on the loose in a wild jungle.

Momentarily, our real naturalists, Bill Bleisch and Paul Buzzard, returned from their trek. Taking off his muddied boots and drenched shirt after being showered by a sudden rainstorm, Paul picked a leech off his body. Paul put the little blood sucker snoozing on his hand, still in its sleek form before being bloated with his blood. But this was enough to convince me that I should remain inquisitive outside of the biological world, and let the naturalist role be filled by these forest rangers of CERS.
AMATEUR BIRDER, BUT PRO PHOTOGRAPHER, ON THE LOOSE

by Wong How Man
HM Explorer, Myanmar

Wide watery valleys gaped in every direction, and the curve of the hills showed full and rounded as a woman’s breast under a garment of green plush,” wrote noted a British botanist explorer about the region of the upper Irrawaddy. He was talking of a time before the revolution in China, when he trekked from Yunnan to Assam, crossing upper Burma. Not the communist revolution, but the revolution in 1911 that overthrew the Manchu Dynasty. His journey was taken in 1913, exactly a hundred years ago.

But at this very moment, I have no imagination or romanticism for the beautiful scenery, let alone comparing the hills I

TOP: Satellite image with volcanoes on both sides of the Chindwin River.
BOTTOM: Pools for growing weed fagus inside crater.
wanted to reach in such fine style. We were all exhausted trekking under the tropical sun. The hill, and in fact three other hills nearby, jumped out of the satellite image I was studying and caught my eyes just a day ago. If these rounded hills could be compared to breasts, they all got blasted to hell some millennia ago. These are volcanoes that went through a violent jolt of eruption, left with a crater and now with a lake inside.

On the image, the shortest line from the Chindwin River where our boat was cruising to the largest of the volcano was only about two kilometers. But for some practical reason, we docked the HM Explorer some three kilometers further down at the home village of our First Mate, Kyaw Soe Myint. There he rounded up two local boys to guide us to the mountain. This thoughtful detail put us on a huge detour to approach the volcano in a roundabout way, lengthening our trek from a couple of kilometers to nine each way.

Our entire team of ten left the boat and started hiking. What used to be a bullock-cart path was widened to allow for passage of cars some seven years ago. The sun soon wore us down and even for someone like me who rarely sweats, I was drenched from my own wetness. I took off my shirt to cool off, but Bill got concerned and offered me some sun tan lotion, which I applied to only my shoulder area. At the first straw shed by the roadside, we went under the shade for a rest. The owner of the farm was very hospitable and offered us some water. By now we were about seven or eight kilometers into the hike but the mountain still looked miles away.

Our helper Chaw Su was chatting with the farmer. Suddenly I heard the word “Tuolaji” among a garbled string of spoken Burmese. I quickly interrupted, as I knew that must be the word they adopted from Chinese to mean a tractor. Surely enough, the farmer was saying that someone nearby had a tractor. Within a short moment, I was riding in the back of the farmer’s motorbike, on my way to look for that “Tuolaji”. In a matter of ten minutes, we stopped by a road side shop, and the owner, indeed had a tractor under a straw-shaded “garage”.

Soon we were on our way, with me sitting on the side of the driver, going back to the farm to fetch our exhausted troop. What had been a most torturous dirt road suddenly felt like a highway, despite the obvious bumps and potholes. The rest of our journey was smooth and refreshing, with wind blowing on our faces, though the climb to the crater got our tractor huffing and puffing before negotiating a final turn at the top.

While from the satellite image, the crater looked edgy and filled with cracks, reality was different. The jungle had taken over, covering the burnt surface below. To our great surprise, down by the lakefront several orderly buildings were lined up as were long pools as if for swimming laps. As we got down to the bottom, we found the premises fenced in, and upon inquiry, it turned out to be a facility for making special algae vitamin supplement pills.

We were allowed a free tour, though only after being cautioned not to take pictures of the secret process inside. The green algae was obtained, or cultivated, in the lake water, percolated in the pools, and later dried and processed into pills or drink concentrate. The brand Spirulina is supposedly famous throughout Myanmar. We left with a bottle of this magic potion. The return trip was like a breeze, as the tractor took us all back to the boat by the bank of the Chindwin River.

As if the hike wasn’t enough exercise, the following day the entire team went on a twenty-five kilometer bike ride to visit a lacquerware making village. I got smart and took one of the battery-assisted bikes. Had I known the battery would only last for a couple of hours, I should have opted for a real bike with 21-gears. As my battery ran out, I was left with one gear to finish the return journey.

Soon my entire team left the boat at Monywa. I was left alone with my crew to rush and finish my two upcoming books. The writing had been finished some months ago and what was left was the selection of pictures to illustrate my stories. This I intended to focus on without disruption on the boat as it sailed slowly back toward Mandalay. Soon the work was near completion and boredom set in. I again itched to try something new.

At a mooring by the Irrawaddy next to the confluence with another river, I urged the crew to put in the Zodiac for me to explore upriver. It was just past breakfast. I remembered how Bill and Paul, our biologists, staggered out of...
bed early and left for their bird watching trek into the jungle. I always felt a bit disgusted on hearing about various exotic birds but not being able to see one. Though birding is best done at first break of light, I thought along the bank there might be late rising birds like me. Wielding my real camera with a 300mm lens, we cruised upstream.

Luck and reward usually goes out to hardworking individuals, and I had just labored for three days in finishing two books. Within two hours, I came back with pictures of two superb species of kingfisher, the White-throated Kingfisher and the Pied Kingfisher, perching and in flight. One even had food in its mouth, disappearing shortly into the tree above, likely to feed its chicks. Another picture was of three unknown birds.

But in order to impress Bill and Paul, now I must get busy searching our Myanmar bird guide to identify these little fliers. Amateur birder I may be, a seasoned photographer can successfully capture with his camera what he sees with his eyes. Perhaps this would be my turn, not just to tell them, but to show them. Perhaps this would be their turn to feel disgusted.
In many parts of the world, especially in rural area, people are often caught stranded due to the lack of bridges, usually hindered by a river or a stream. In other cases, it may be during monsoon and rainy season when habitual flooding occur which interrupt regular passage. At times such problems are alleviated by building of simple and temporary bridges. Organized efforts, especially in modern times and in more resourceful regions, took care of such problems with large or small infrastructure construction.

In Hong Kong, one group Wu Zhi Qiao (Endless Bridge) was founded just to resolve such problems in rural China. It had done some great work, even award-winning bridge design, in some of the remotest corners of China. As a founding advisor to the group, I must say I have given little advice, though always felt heartwarming to hear about their results. A recent experience at one of our project sites in Myanmar may now allow me to play a more active advisory role regarding bridge building. If this exercise is successful with impact to other parts of the world, perhaps we’ll be building a bridge, both literally and figuratively.

The CERS Exhibit House sits on stilts over water of Inle Lake, a pristine natural area of northern Myanmar now fast becoming the best tourist destination.
attraction for the newly re-opened country coming out of a long hibernation. Using board-walk over water and an elevated cantilever bridge, the house is connected to my friend’s Silk Shop/Factory with a restaurant-cafe. Surrounding our house is lotus pond and some dikes which can serve as a recreational or exercise walkway. One short gap is connected by an arch bridge.

However there is still one section with a gap, making any walk a dead-end as the person has to double-back to the house. During the current dry season, there is no water between the gap and one can go down the ditch to continue the walk. But once the rain comes, which soon it will, the ponds would be filled up. A simple bridge with perhaps 30-foot span would make the loop complete and perfect. Thus was born an idea in my head.

I have seen several bamboo bridges in our neighborhood as well as in other parts of Myanmar. It looks obvious to me that such bridges should be
The material, readily available throughout the area, is also far more sustainable than wood. Sustainable not in terms of how long it last, but how easily it could be grown and harvested. It took twelve guys, including two in supervisory role, one day to build. I was told it would last at least a year, before some parts need to be replaced as maintenance.

I asked our local contractor one evening to build a bridge. He was at the time constructing a bamboo house for our education purpose in the vicinity. The following morning at about 8am, ten guys showed up in their boats hauling over a score of long bamboo poles. Quickly they set about working to build our bridge. It looked easy and simple as I observed over the next eight hours how a bamboo bridge was built. I went back maybe three times during the day and each time was nicely surprised to find out how fast progress was made within a matter of hours.

I decided to use a few pictures to illustrate the evolution of a bamboo bridge being built. It took less than one day’s work shift, and at the end it was strong enough to support twelve people on it at the same time. I am convinced when and where situation calls for it, a bamboo bridge is the way to go. It is not a remedy for all situations, but certainly can take care of small problem which probably represents most of the cases. It cost us USD130, including parts and labor.

Now our premise in Myanmar has three diverse, yet all local type of bridges, a cantilever one, an arch one, and last but not least a bamboo bridge. Somehow, I love this last one the best.
It is not customary for someone to write about death on a birthday, but I am compelled to do so. I received news this morning of Daniel’s passing as I was getting ready to spend a quiet day on our exploration boat here in Myanmar. His last message to me was in mid-June when he emailed two lines as a Foreword for my upcoming new books. The last time I saw Daniel was May 30 when I picked him up at his home to visit a new CERS project site in Shek O.

Part of that project relates to the documentation and archiving of early Cantonese Operas. Upon hearing about our plans, Daniel told me that his father was an opera fan and that he must dig up some of those relics at home. The next day I received in my office several albums, each with eight plastic vinyl records, rare recordings of some of the most iconic Cantonese opera singers from long ago. Daniel had sent over whatever he could find in storage from ages ago. He must have felt an urge to do so quickly.

I called him, though I knew lately he rarely answered his phone. But he picked up and answered in his somewhat coarse voice. Recovering from an illness had greatly affected his vocal cord. “Daniel, I need some stories to go with the display of these records,” I demanded. “What can you tell me about your father?” “I was just a kid and the only thing I remember was that whenever one side of play ended, I was made to turn the record over, and I got a dollar tip now and then,” came his answer. A dollar was a hefty sum in those days. Daniel’s father was a famous architect and contractor of Hong Kong in the 1920s and 30s. The Pedder Building, now still standing in Central, was designed and built by Mr Ng Wah.

The spirit of that kid had stayed with Daniel throughout his life. His love for simple food, like wonton noodles, spam and Maggi sauce, was famous among his family and close friends. Of course he could always take down a Big Mac, the name of the iconic burger and also of the economic index, which Daniel invented. The index has been adopted by the Economists in its yearly survey, a surprisingly good measure of currency exchange as well as the cost of living in different countries of the world. Ironically Hong Kong’s Big Mac prices, under the watch of Daniel, is the only one that defy and offset that index. Most businesses squeeze cost to provide higher margin and profit. Daniel did so to provide the lowest possible meals for his customers.

Life was not always that sweet as having a Big Mac. Daniel once told me that during the War, his family had to starve. One time he got hold of a full loaf of bread and ate it down so fast that he suffered an engorged stomach for long after.

I first met Daniel in 1992, introduced by Bobby Kwan, Daniel’s counterpart at McDonald’s in Singapore. Our first meeting was at the coffee shop of the Parklane Hotel, close to the first McDonald’s Daniel opened in Causeway Bay in 1975. Daniel ordered wonton noodles whereas I had a burger. He seemed fascinated by my stories of exploration in China and offered to help. Soon we met again in Los Angeles where I was living at the time.

With his wife Rebecca, we headed up to my home, a small wooden cabin inside the Angeles National Forest. I apologized for squeezing them into my VW beetle, but Daniel told me that they had always used a VW. Indeed later on I found out that both Rebecca and Daniel each had their own small VW Golf in Hong Kong. This visit was momentous for my final decision of moving back to Hong Kong, as Daniel promised his help in organizing CERS into a more sustainable organization.

Together with a couple dedicated new friends, Daniel helped get CERS off the ground in Hong Kong, registration, setting up an office, giving lectures and securing financial support. I recalled Daniel taking down the sunroof on his convertible VW in order to haul the outboard motor we bought to be used on a tiny dinghy for crossing Tai Tam Bay to our barely renovated quarters in a remote fishing village. Subsequently several village houses there became the CERS research center with library and dormitory space. Daniel spent much splendid times there over the next twenty years, especially during special holidays like the Moon Festival, Winter Solstice Festival, and even his 72nd birthday in 2009, together with several CERS directors.

In time, Daniel served as CERS Chairman. He served for the longest period of time, fifteen years in total, and stayed on as a Director until only a couple of years ago. I recalled one morning in the mid-1990s when Daniel told me that he would soon retire from McDonald’s, as the company had offered to buy him out. While preparing for his exit, we went together to Wong Chuk Hang and looked at office properties, as he was setting up his own private office with the intention of outfitting a CERS office next to his. Soon we both moved into the SouthMark Building where we both have stayed now for almost twenty years.

Frugal towards himself and quietly generous to others, Daniel often flew Economy, while his corporate executives were flying Business up front. On business trips, the boss was sitting in the back! But his one indulgence was in piloting small airplanes. I remember taking off from Kai Tak with him in a twin-prop once, a tiny bird squeezed among a long line of Jumbo jets for our turn to take off. He bragged about test-driving new airplanes as the airplane companies always thought he must be a likely client. One time, they even came to Kunning to pick him up after one of our board meetings in Yunnan.
He never did buy a private plane.

Daniel was a fast driver, taking his VW around corners like Speedy Gonzales. One day, Daniel showed up at the office with a dark-colored Porsche. For a moment, I thought finally Daniel was splurging on a sports car. It turned out to be a pre-owned Porsche he had bought from one of his McDonald’s subordinates. Early on another morning, around 7am, I left Tai Tam driving to work in Wong Chuk Hang. At the intersection of Repulse Bay and Deep Water Bay, I saw Daniel’s Porsche crashed into the center island and the plastic signs there. I happened to be the first one at the scene. Stopping to check if he was alright, he gave a wry smile, shrugged his shoulders with his arms up on both sides and chuckled, “The airbag worked”. Typical Daniel!

When he laughed, sometimes at jokes about himself, he laughed like a child, with his tongue hanging out. Once he camped out with us in China, going into the wilderness to observe the Black-necked Cranes. He often recounted his first experience with CERS in the field with a laugh, “I didn’t know I was supposed to inflate the mat, and ended up sleeping on the hard floor”.

Directing our board meetings, we always had a lot of fun and jokes from Daniel, but somehow the business part also got done. Many friends have told me that Daniel had a soft spot for me, as I was just as stubborn and defiant as he was. Not surprising, as we both have the Ox in our Zodiac. His style was to the point, short and snappy. Always a hands-on frontline operations man, he had the perfect demeanor of someone who was trained as an engineer. No wonder McDonald’s ran such a successful supply chain in crowded Hong Kong with the cheapest meal in the world. Few knew Daniel as Dr Ng, with his PhD in Chemical Engineering from Imperial College London. His inventions while at the Institute of Gas in Chicago were patented and used in space flights.

Daniel’s finale in life, his last twenty years, is perhaps well known to all his close friends. While supporting the arts, in particular classical music, he accumulated a fine collection of manuscripts by composer Richard Strauss that have been kept in his office cum niche museum in Wong Chuk Hang. I had the rare opportunity of browsing through these drawers of relics, as we were virtually neighbors, first with adjacent offices, and more recently upstairs/downstairs premises. I once had the rare chance to observe Daniel practicing conducting with the HK Physician Orchestra, under the tutelage of his teacher, Boston Symphony conductor Ben Zander.

When the New York Philharmonic visited HK, I attended a concert as a guest of Daniel. He quipped that no one was allowed on stage or back stage to touch any of the chairs, let alone the piano and other instruments. The New York union was so strong that the orchestra traveled everywhere with a team of stage workers in tow. But Daniel boasted that he could get on stage or back stage as he pleased, having joined the New York stage workers union, in order to roam free. He was also very involved with the Manhattan School of Music for a number of years.

Too many memories come back when I now think of Daniel, almost all sweet memories. I remember just two years ago in 2011 when Daniel and Bobby went on stage at our annual dinner to grill ten mini-burgers to be auctioned off to raise funds for CERS. Even the image of him stomping into my office to scold me about some mischievous maneuvers I had done in running CERS seemed like parental care and concern, never out right negativism. I often consoled myself that both Daniel and I had that “can-do” attitude, except I took it to more extremes.

As I took our inflatable Zodiac out on a river run today, I suddenly saw a twin rainbow descending from the sky. I took a few pictures as a thought came through my mind. They must represent two of the first CERS directors who passed away within the last four months: John Farrell, former President of Coca-Cola China and later Chief Global Strategy Officer at Coke, passed away April 29 in Atlanta at age 58. Daniel introduced John to CERS, and John also became a long-time CERS director and supporter.

When my time should come, perhaps I can myself ascend a rainbow to heaven. When I should see Daniel and John again, I will say, “Sorry guys I came late, but I was caught up waiting for my take-away order….Here’s your Big Mac and Coke. I don’t think they serve it up here.” I can just see Daniel chuckle away with his familiar laugh.
C E R S  I N  T H E  F I E L D

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
Myanmar biologist Aung Myo Chit.

Moon Chin, long-time CERS friend, senior pilot and founder of two airlines after WWII, celebrated his 100th birthday in San Francisco. How Man presented pictures and film from his native village of Taishan where he left at the age of 9.

Animation film awards – Audience Choice Award – Best short film by young adults 15-22 years old.

A group of students from Duke University, led by Professor Ralph Litzinger, visited and stayed at the Zhongdian Center.

Dr John Studley, with funding support from CERS, is studying the impact of sacred mountains beliefs has on wildlife and forest conservation in northwestern Yunnan.

CERS Caving Team offered two training sessions on tree ascending and descending techniques by request of the Gaoligongshan National Nature Reserve in Yunnan. This is the first time such training was offered to nature reserve staff in China. Thirty four reserve staff participated in the training course.

CERS team reciprocated visit to Slovenia and Austria as part of their routine collaboration effort. The team also explored four caves at a Buddhist temple site in Baoshan of Yunnan.

Dr Bleisch together with CERS caving expert Zhou Shensu offered tree climbing technique training at the Ailaoshan National Nature Reserve.

The Artifact Studio at Cape D’Aguilar near Shek O in Hong Kong is now fully functional, with storage, inventory, working and some display area. Some select guests of CERS have begun visiting the Studio, next door to How Man’s Photo Studio.

First of three thatch-roofed houses, together with objects on exhibit, is now completed in a remote village of the Tsou aboriginal people of Ali Shan in Taiwan.

The Strategic Management Plan and Operational Management Plan for Phong Nha - Ke Bang National Park World Heritage Site of Vietnam was completed, approved and submitted to the UNESCO World Heritage Site Management Authority. Dr Bleisch, working in Quang Binh Vietnam and Hong Kong, facilitated the entire planning, process, and compiled the Strategic Management plan.

CERS hosted Professor Yu Shuenn-der of Academia Sinica Taiwan at our Zhongdian Center during his two weeks ethnographic research on Tibetan community at neighboring Gongbing Village.

Two teachers James Serach and Ilana Sachs from Lawrenceville School joined CERS in Myanmar with students interning at CERS sites in the country.

Photographs by Wong How Man will grace the walls of the Myanmar Consulate in Hong Kong following a gift of a set of photos to Consul General Wailwin Than.

CERS field scientists Dr William Bleisch and Dr Buzzard initiated collaboration with

Myanmar biologist Aung Myo Chit.

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CHINA EXPLORATION AND RESEARCH SOCIETY PAGE 35
The Jebsen Company has offered a three-year pledge as corporate patron to CERS which includes providing funding and products.

Coca-Cola China renewed a three-year support program of funding to CERS.

Omega renewed their multi-year support program as corporate patron with CERS.


Table gift donors for CERS annual dinner – William E Connor & Associates, Cultures by Toni P Ltd, Omega, Shanghai Tang, Shun Hing Group, Toppan Vite Limited, UBS AG, Yen Sheng Factory Limited.

Wendy O’Neill continues her long years of funding support to CERS.

Peter Ho offers complimentary rooms for CERS to stay at The Riviera Taipei Hotel.

Shanghai Tang has made T-shirt with special design featuring HM Explorer, our new exploration boat.

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The mission of the China Exploration and Research Society is to enrich the understanding of our cultural and natural heritage.

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