On the Edge of Burma

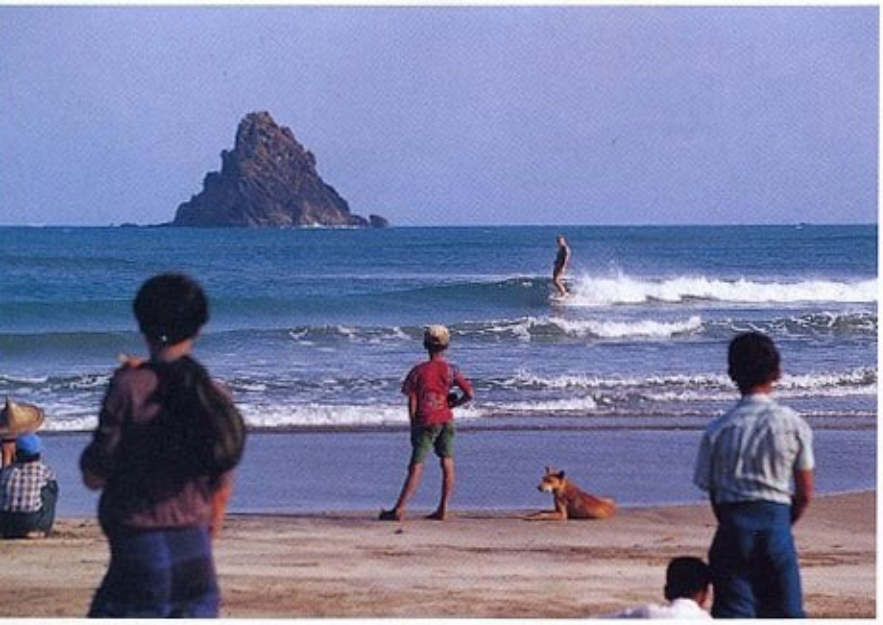
Three dedicated surfer/travelers test the tolerance of a Southeast Asian military regime...

by Tor Johnson

Photos by John Callahan

(facing) **Shwedagon Pagoda, Rangoon.**

(this page) **The author checks a morning lineup at The Rock.**



We stood surrounded by men and women in military uniforms beneath a large, garish red sign that said: "Welcome to Myanmar." All the tourists on our plane had gone off in taxis to see the temples of Rangoon, leaving Randy Rarick, photographer John Callahan, and myself at the mercy of an entire roomful of customs officials. Surfboards, camera gear, and personal belongings littered the floor around us. Two officials were rummaging through Randy's board bag.

"What are these?" one asked imperiously, pointing to the boards.

Randy is a resourceful surfer of fifty who directs the World Tour of Surfing in Hawaii. He's been around the surfing scene since pro surfing began and even had the envious job of location scout for the movie *Endless Summer 2*. Always prepared for any challenge on the road, Randy smoothly produced a copy of *Surfer Magazine*.

(above) **Rarick and Johnson, chart discussion at Restaurant Zaw.**

(top) **Randy Rarick, first wave ridden on the island.**

"Here," he said, pointing at a picture of a guy surfing a 10' Pipeline beast, "surfboards!"

"Yes," said the official, glancing vaguely at the glossy magazine. "Where are the motors?" his partner wanted to know. "And what are these?" he asked, pointing at the boards again. Never having seen a surfboard, or a wave for that matter, he was unable to make the connection between the photo and the boards in front of him.

Suddenly there was a commotion around photographer John Callahan. The customs agents lost interest in Randy and crowded around John's box of electronic gadgets. John began methodically explaining the concept behind his hand-held GPS, or global positioning system, to an older man in a white uniform decked out with medals. John pointed up to indicate the passage of a satellite, then at the GPS, then pointed to a detailed chart of the (officially off-limits) area we intended to visit. We'd be chartering local boats, he reasoned, and we needed to know where we were. Another official began inspecting John's internet-based satellite communicator, a device we hoped to use to receive swell forecast information.

This was a moment I'd been dreading. With no less than thirty guerrilla groups dedicated to the downfall of the state, a satellite communicator like John's could easily be considered a dangerous tool for subversive elements.

Burma, renamed "Myanmar" by the ruling military government, imposes very strict controls on the media and public access to information. Foreign journalists, especially those critical of the regime, are decidedly unwelcome. In fact, it was a tough decision to go in the first place. Because of Myanmar's abysmal human rights record and the generals' refusal to honor democratic elections, it's not considered politically correct to visit Myanmar at all in many circles. Others say foreign visitors help keep the country open to outside influences. But our trip was not a political one. I really just wanted to go and find out for myself what life is really like for the average Burmese. Plus, there was a chance of getting good surf with no one out.

Carefully avoiding the words "journalist" and "media," John explained that we were there for "vacation," "recreation," "swimming," and other lukewarm, inoffensive reasons. The GPS was just so we didn't get lost. He was smart enough not to start explaining the communication system. John kept pointing at the ceiling, the GPS, and the map. One of the female officials said something like, "Oh, I see, he's had too much to drink on the plane!" and they all began to laugh. Finally they helped us pack our mountain of gear and sent us on our eccentric way with a tolerant smile.

Our objective was a small island off the coast of Myanmar. Looking at the charts, we had picked this particular island for its exposure to the same long-range swells that made Indonesia a world-renowned surfing mecca. We might just find perfect surf, but the main draw was the adventure. Here was a chance to explore a completely unknown coast where very few foreigners had even visited, and no one had ever ridden waves.

Myanmar's military rulers have always distrusted the destabilizing influence of foreigners, which has meant that

many parts of Myanmar are still closed. In recent years, Burma has been slowly opening up, but permits to visit remote areas are granted on a completely arbitrary basis. So, although we'd picked out an island as our goal, we really didn't know if we'd actually be able to get there. We were fairly certain of only one thing—it would be a hard trip. In the remote areas there would be no hotels, restaurants, buses, maybe no roads. We'd be relying on local fishing boats for transport, staying wherever we could find shelter, and eating whatever we found to buy.

Our first mission was to get to the coast. There was said to be an old resort named Ngapali dating back to English colonial times, which is still used by Burmese elite and a few wayward foreigners. Expecting a twenty-four-hour, ass-numbing bus ride, we were shocked when we caught a flight to the resort of Ngapali from the airport within the hour. Here things began to get even stranger. Our plane was met at the coast by Oliver, German manager of the newly opened Bayview Hotel. He was driving a recycled Japanese excursion bus complete with karaoke lounge and even a glass chandelier. We were given cold drinks, whisked to an immaculate beachfront bungalow attended by uniformed maids, and were soon eating a gourmet candlelight dinner by the poolside on white linen. Oliver and his European backers had created a tiny pocket of refined luxury in a remote Burmese countryside surrounded by fishermen and subsistence farmers eking out a living from the land.

This wasn't our idea of a rough and adventurous bush trip. Not that we'd have had a moral problem giving up the whole concept of hardship and wallowing in the pampered luxury of our air-con bungalow. It was just that unfortunately the waves at Ngapali were nil. Another night of isolated numbness and we'd die of boredom. We had no choice but to get out to our island. Although none of us mentioned it, we all looked forward a bit fearfully to when the grunge would begin.

Unfortunately, this luxury outpost was the end of the road as far as foreign travel was concerned. Oliver, the manager, was full of information about Myanmar, but he didn't think it was even possible to travel to the offshore islands.

Our guidebook said that the owners of a local restaurant named Zaw sometimes arranged day trips to nearby islands for snorkeling. We stopped by the restaurant one evening to see if they could arrange a boat for a more ambitious open-ocean crossing. The TV was blaring the latest state-sponsored programming—a pseudo music video with a buxom Burmese girl rolling her eyes at the camera and lip-syncing as she pranced back and forth on a long white sand beach.

The owner looked up from his show and shook his head resignedly, mumbling something like:

"Uh, uh, can't go there, off limits, military, no way."

Then his pregnant daughter butted in:

"Sit down, Dad, I'll handle this!" she snapped (or something to that effect). He meekly went back to watching the mind-numbing TV show.

"My husband will drive you to Taungok, about 4-hour trip. There he will arrange boat for you," she said emphatically.

She then informed her husband exactly what he was to do, and actually wrote out his instructions on a piece of paper and gave it to him. When we left the restaurant, the TV was still on. Dad was still watching endless footage of the ruling generals attending the gala opening of their huge new beach resort, which by no coincidence just happened to be on the very same beach as the music video. Mrs. Zaw's husband was dutifully fixing the truck for the next day, and Mrs. Zaw was efficiently organizing the restaurant and the family. It seemed to me that with her at the helm, the Zaw business has a strong future.

We bombed through the countryside in the Zaw truck, with the husband alternately blaring his horn and consulting the instruction sheet his wife had given him. There are so few cars in Burma that the roads still belong to the pedestrians. Life moves at the stately pace of a walk in the peculiar hazy bronze light that permeates the country. Through this idyllic rural scene, we rampaged at over thirty miles an hour, rudely pushing cattle-

(above) **Offshore island, villagers with thatch preparing for the monsoon.**

(top) **Rarick at the beach break.**

immediately befriended us, asking all sorts of questions about the outside world. U Ba Shwe and The Godfather made us an offer we couldn't refuse, insisting on escorting us to the Military Authority and Immigration. On the way through the village, it became obvious that U Ba Hlaing was a prominent local citizen. He knew everyone, and they all greeted him with respect. He was particularly well acquainted with many of the town's beautiful young women, who passed by in a modest flutter of gorgeously colored and perfectly arranged sarongs. After a blistering hot trudge, we arrived at the residence of the Detachment Commander, a modest house with a telephone, TV, and VCR. The officer was a bit suspicious of us, but when The Godfather explained that we were here for recreation and as proof told him how I'd paddled a surfboard across the bay at an amazing speed (indicated with a skimming hand motion and a whooshing noise), he seemed to realize that we weren't spies and gave us permission to stay.

(above) **Villagers inspecting *Vanity Fair* at Mr. Fuu's.**

(top) **Tor on the path to the beach break.**

After another sweltering walk, we arrived at the immigration department where the young officer in charge was screaming into an ancient hand-crank telephone at the top of his lungs, in an office stacked to the ceiling with yellowing sheets of paper detailing the comings and goings of untold years. Since we'd already cleared the all-important Military Authority, we were whisked through immigration in a matter of hours, which U Ba Shwe assured us was very fast.

Walking back to town, U Ba Shwe told us that Burmese requesting a travel permit must wait for at least six months, even for a refusal. A man of endless curiosity, U Ba Shwe asked many questions about America and the West. He was surprised that most countries now have immigration and customs only once on entering and exit, and that traveling in Europe one is seldom even asked to produce a passport.

"I very much want to travel, but I cannot," he said sadly.

We were never quite sure whether U Ba Shwe was our friend or our "minder." Perhaps he was both. He was very kind and he and The Godfather seemed to have sponsored us. We wondered if he made reports on the comings and goings at the harbor to the military. With his status as a veteran, he would be the ideal choice to keep an eye on the harbor from his office on the wharf.

He told us later that night, "You write good things about Myanmar." He spread his hands, "If no good, bad things, maybe next time you come back, no visa!" He seemed to have an uncanny grasp of travel regulations for foreigners and I wondered why. His main complaint about his government was that he was unable to travel, but when we asked about the ruling generals, he reverently listed their names with an obvious respect.

We spent the night in the disused "government house," which ranked among the filthiest places any of us had ever slept, and chartered a boat with The Godfather's help the next day for the exposed western coast.

U Ba Shwe agreed to accompany us to the other side of the island. His family home was close to where we intended to stay, and he would help us find a place to live. Our boat coasted up to the long white beach in front of some peculiar domed thatched fishermen's huts. An amazed crowd of locals wearing printed longyi around their waists and matching shawls, who had never seen a foreign visitor, clustered around us. Many carried long, perfectly balanced curving knives cradled with their hands behind their backs. They looked for all the world like medieval samurai out of an old Japanese movie. There were no vehicles, and aside from the knives, very few metal implements. The beach was lined with bundles of thatch, apparently a local product. U Ba Shwe escorted us to the house of his cousin, Mr. Fuu, an important person in the community who traded in coconuts and rice. We couldn't speak with Mr. Fuu, but when U Ba Shwe asked, he and his wife agreed to let us sleep on the bamboo slats of his thatch hut in the middle of his coconut grove on the beach. They would make food for us. We would pay the costs. At the end of a week we were presented a bill for the grand total of eighteen dollars and twenty cents, for two meals a day for three hungry surfers and lodging.

We became the main attraction for the village, and people came from all over the surrounding countryside to see the strange white people. The house was open to the front, so we were constantly on display. A porch of bamboo slats extended out the front, which gave watchers a perfect place to sit and inspect us at close range. I would look over the top of my book, straight into ten pairs of patient, gentle brown eyes. A chapter later, those same brown eyes would still be there. We wondered what could possibly be so interesting about us.

John Callahan's copy of *Vanity Fair*, the glamorous arbiter of fashion and popular culture, entertained twenty at a time. Never having seen such a magazine, the locals considered this a major event. The privilege of turning the pages was allotted to one of the elders in the group. As he slowly turned each page, the crowd would point and excitedly discuss each photo. When they reached the more risqué and scandalous photos, the younger men craned their heads as the pages flipped to catch a last look. They appeared to be restraining themselves from grabbing the magazine and turning the pages back to the Calvin Klein ads.

The kitchen at Mr. Fuu's consisted entirely of a small adjoining room just tall enough to squat in, a fireplace of stones, a machete, and a small piece of board on which to prepare food. Smoke from the fire made our eyes water inside the house every morning. On our first night, a local fisherman came by with a bag full of live prawns. Mr. Fuu showed me how to remove the shells from the struggling creatures, leaving the edible head and legs attached so as not to waste food. Everything was prepared on the single piece of board, and washed occasionally in the cloudy well water. We threw the scraps on the ground, where goats, chickens, dogs, and cats fought for the spoils.

John, Randy, and I sat down a bit nervously to these prawns, which Mrs. Fuu had prepared in a chili sauce. Having watched the crude cooking process, their sweet, delicate taste amazed me.

Mr. Fuu generously offered us his fishing boat to search for surf. We looked all around the rocky coast of the island, finding a few good beach breaks, but unfortunately no well-formed reefs. We'd seen an island called Pyramid Rock on our chart, and when we passed by, it seemed to have a small right and a left wrapping around each side of the steep face and joining in the middle. John and I thought the waves looked small, rocky, and shallow, but Randy insisted we take a closer look. The waves turned out to be bigger than we'd thought. As we approached, we realized it was actually good surf. Randy was the first to paddle out, and he confidently positioned himself right between two nearby dry rocks, dropping into a long, clean right-hander, which he rode in smooth arcs all the way through into the channel. Not only had he sniffed out the best surf around, he'd picked off a great wave with perfect positioning and no hesitation.

I gingerly made my way out to Randy's takeoff point, nervous about setting up between the two nearby bare jagged rocks. My first wave propelled me down a nice wall with plenty of speed, but then I saw another rock drying out in the trough of the wave right in front of me. Just then, a large fish swam under my board and I lost concentration and fell, getting washed

safely over the top of the rock. We learned to surf around the rocks, timing our turns to make it around each one like an obstacle course. We had several good sessions in the fun, punchy walls at Pyramid Rock, and it became our "home break" —sort of a mainstay. Maybe because it was far offshore, it seemed to pick up more swell than anywhere else. We were lucky enough to escape without landing on any of the rocks.

There were several long beaches in the area, and one morning we set out in search of new breaks. We'd chased the shifting peaks of a fun beach break in tepid water during the heat of the day, and had each lost about a gallon of water sweating in the blistering, dry heat on the trudge home carrying a mountain of boards and camera gear. The rice paddies were dry and cracked in the arid monsoon season. Despite the heat, it seemed as though everyone was busy, tending vegetable crops

(above) **Tor, bustin' out a little at The Rock.**

(top) **Arrival at the island, Randy preparing to offload boards.**

or readying the fields for the first rains. We decided that in a subsistence economy like this, vacations must be rare.

Looking at a small hill close to the ocean, I noticed that the hillside had been bored into a series of caves. Assuming they were fortifications from World War II, we walked over for a closer look. They were ancient religious temples. The entrances to the caves were carved to resemble columns topped by elaborate snaking curlicues. The place seemed to have an aura of power about it, what the Hawaiians would call *mana*. Not normally superstitious, I told myself that even if the place were sacred, it was nothing to be afraid of. I peered into one of the seven small caves, and as my eyes adjusted to the dark, I was startled to make out a human form. It was an ancient statue of the Buddha, sitting in repose, once elaborately carved and decorated with mother of pearl, now crumbling in decay. Other caves housed headless Buddha's in various states of disintegration. I picked up a large rock, and as I turned it over in my hand, I made out the vague features of a much eroded carved head of Buddha. I suddenly felt as though we were trespassing on holy ground, and I replaced the head carefully where I'd found it.

Randy was feeding a banana he'd brought to a large multi-colored lizard in one of the caves. Unlike other similar creatures we'd seen, the lizard was strangely unafraid and watched us with cold, reptilian eyes while it munched slowly on the banana.

The time was coming for the journey back home, so we arranged with Mr. Fuu to charter his boat the next day for an ambitious overnight open-sea trip directly back to the luxury Bayview resort on Ngapali Beach. As long as the boat held up, this would cut out the lengthy and unnecessary military and immigration procedures, a night in the filthy government house in Man'aung, and the bruising road trip.

At this point, our friend U Ba Shwe mysteriously appeared. He'd ridden his bicycle around the entire island just to see us. We wondered if he hadn't actually come to check up on us. As our sponsor, he informed us that we would absolutely be required to go to Man'aung to clear the formalities, as we'd said we would on the way out. Not wanting to cause trouble for him or ourselves, we agreed.

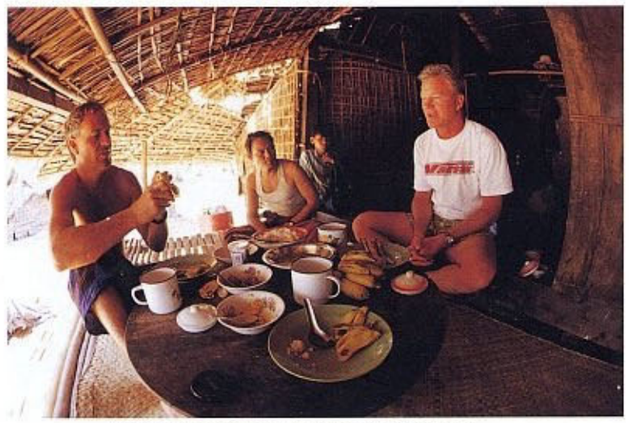
The next day we bid a sad good-bye to Mr. Fuu and his family and boarded Mr. Fuu's boat for the newly extended voyage home. The rudely hewn, unpainted teak boat had a bamboo and thatch awning housing an ancient two-cylinder motor started with a hand crank. There was just enough room under the awning to huddle out of the sun. John and Randy had already clambered aboard when I waded out and handed my surfboards up. One of the crew leaned over the rail a few feet away, and instead of a cheery "good morning," unleashed a stream of watery vomit.

Thinking he must be sick, I quickly began to pull myself aboard to avoid the slick.

"Look out for the shit," John said in his characteristic deadpan voice. Thinking this meant "don't get the gear wet," I tumbled onto the small deck, right onto a pile of cow dung. The crew had sensibly brought several large turds to cook with on the trip across and were drying it on the only deck space.

Another crewman grabbed a bamboo pole and unsteadily wobbled toward the rail to push the boat out. Inadvertently he gave John a solid whack in the back of the head, nearly sending him sprawling into the water. Our crew was dead drunk on coconut wine. After a half-hearted attempt at pushing the boat out, he gave up and joined his friend, who now had a wretched case of dry heaves, rolled up in a ball in the bilge next to the ear-numbing engine, and went to sleep. Neither of them emerged until many hours later.

At Man'aung we made the rounds to the military authority like good Burmese, bringing our total to sixteen inspections since arriving in Myanmar. To his delight, we left several copies of *The Economist* with U Ba Shwe. *Vanity Fair* and *Surfing* stayed with Mr. Fuu. I gave him my cassette deck and a Hank Williams tape that had been immensely popular with the locals, and he presented me with his prized long knife. Cultural imperialism aside, we'd given them a view on the outside world they'd never have otherwise had. For better or worse, they now know how the decadent Americans live.



(above) **Randy and Tor, lunchtime at Mr. Fuu's.**

(above right) **Mr. Fuu's beach house.**

We managed to catch the next tide out of the river and spent the night under a bright full moon. Before dawn, we stopped the engine to wait for light so that we could approach the land safely. The full moon was setting in a mist that melded the sea and sky into one. I lay in the bow watching the slow shimmer of the moon as an early fisherman rolled by, the rhythmic lonely popping of his engine making the night feel somehow even more quiet. As they passed by, they lit a smoky oil lamp. It was a very romantic scene in its solitude, until a cockroach ran over my legs, shaking me from my reverie.

Pulling out our GPS and chart, I showed the captain our position: one mile west of Drunken Sailor Rock, aptly named by British colonial forces in the last century.

We eventually located the Bayview Hotel on the rock-strewn coast, motored right up to the beach, and back to the 21st century. The crew was so glad to have made it to shore that they pitched the captain into the water, after which I threw the crew in. In the fun, even John forgave the guys for the bump on his head, and the water fight created a bit of a spectacle in front of the first-class resort.

This time it was a group of corpulent white European tourists who stared at us from the beach, rather than a group of Burmese. I could have sworn I heard "there goes the neighborhood" in German as we carried our filthy gear, surfboards, coconuts, and unshaven, sun-cooked selves off the teak "dung boat," straight up the beach to a spotless bungalow, where we reveled in the showers and savored the incomparable luxury of things like sitting in an actual chair.

We saw only a tiny portion of Burma, mystical and backward, full of gracious people and despotism. And they've got some good surf. I'll go back again, if they'll still give me a visa. ⊗

(The author would like to thank Patagonia for believing that this trip could be done, and the Fuu family for making it possible.)