



Burmese Days

A tale of ballooning endeavour in the exotic East, by **Phil Dunnington**

Having first visited Burma/ Myanmar with Peter Blaser's expedition in the late 90s and again when Breitling II had to make its unscheduled landing there in 1998, it took the establishment of tourist flights to set my pattern for over 15 years of pilgrimage to this fascinating and beautiful country.

Sandwiched between popular destinations, Thailand and India, most people would scratch their heads if Burma was mentioned. Occasionally they'd quote from Kipling's Road to Mandalay, or from Orwell's Burmese Days, but mostly it was a confused image of dark politics and wartime railways.

The outcome of that initial involvement was Balloons Over Bagan whose well-founded reputation has built one of Asia's largest tourist businesses.

More recently a second operator, Oriental Ballooning, has come on the scene to expand the market and increase the choice of locations for ballooning in Burma, and here again I could not resist being involved.

For a small and outwardly bureaucratic country, Burma has a remarkably well-structured civil aviation regulator – the Department of Civil Aviation (DCA). Most of the key personnel are aviation

professionals with a great regard for the way in which countries like UK run their aviation enterprises. This has allowed the ideal build-up of solid business activity within a safety-conscious environment.

For many years there has been occasional ballooning activity outside the main Bagan tourist area. Peter Blaser's tours have included a large number of locations for sporting flights and Allie and I conducted five filming flights for the BBC near Gwa on the western coast in February last year.

Now Oriental Ballooning has added Mandalay as a new destination where tourists can experience the beauty of Burma from the air. The company is wholly-owned by Myanmar interests with well-established hotel and tour operator businesses.

Mandalay is a large city (Burma's second after Yangon/Rangoon, the commercial hub) of around 1.5m people. Lying on the eastern bank of the mighty Irrawaddy (Ayeyarwady) River it has been the focus of Upper Burma since before colonial times and is now an important centre for trade with China to the northeast. Although mostly a low-rise city, Mandalay sprawls across the flood plain from historic Mandalay Hill to the holy sanctuaries of Sagaing on the western shore.

Fascinating trade streets include stone carving and gold-beating (for the flimsy gold-leaf coverings for the myriad temples and pagodas).

A busy railway junction, Mandalay has (painfully slow) services to the further-flung parts of Upper Burma. Built by the British (usually for a second time following the Japanese occupation in WWII) these metre-gauge rails cross the Irrawaddy on the classic box-girder Ava Bridge contrasting with an adjacent spectacular new construction by the Chinese.

All these, and the world's longest wooden foot bridge, U-Bein, at Amarapura, make for superbly varied flights, but not without a certain amount of daunting challenges.

Chief pilot of Oriental Ballooning, Piers Glydon, assisted by Allie Dunnington, started test flying in October with little more than Google Earth for a map and a good eye for cloud movements. There's no reliable met forecast or records of past winds. Add to this the difficulty of obtaining helium for test balloons and the widespread flooding of all the land surrounding the city after a long summer rainy season and you can get a feel for the demanding flight profiles.

In addition to these uncertainties, Mandalay has a major international airport some 20 miles to the south and a downtown domestic airport (disused since 2003 but all-of-a sudden resurrected in 2013) plus a couple of sensitive military installations right where you'd prefer they weren't.

Launching from the domestic airport at Chanmyathazi seemed favourite if only because the manager was happy for us to drive up and down the 2km tarmac runway in search of a good angle to a landing site. Even remaining within the airport boundary was an option if things went wrong . . . and it was clean and dry when everywhere else was wet and muddy.

Test flights, training crew and familiarising the increasing stream of UK-based pilots (seven this season) , took more than a month before the DCA representatives came to check on progress and award the Air Operator's Certificate.

Soon after that, the trickle of paying passengers (fronted up by some Russians and Iranians!) took to the skies in Oriental Ballooning's fleet of six Cameron 160 and 250 balloons. Allie even persuaded a

German film crew to shoot scenes for a railway programme from above the tangle of rail tracks which surround the old airport.

Variety is certainly on offer for both pilots and guests. Mandalay has a shimmering spread of lakes, temples and monasteries ranging from the Mahamuni complex to the string of shrines climbing Mandalay Hill itself.

Always there is the backdrop of the broad river, bridges and river craft, whilst low down there is the opportunity to view Burmese domestic life at close quarters.

Pilot skills are challenged constantly with sandbank and football pitch landings, though as the paddy fields gradually dry out the options become more plentiful. Choosing a take-off site to suit the best downwind sights as well as landing spots is a finely-tuned skill which Bill (MacKinnon), Pete (Dalby), Chris (Oxby) and Richard (Ashford) have quickly developed. Now the downtown airport is operational there is great co-operation between balloon pilots and the fixed-wing crews of Myanma Airways with their Cessna 208 commuter turboprops. It just shows how, with good

airmanship, balloons and aeroplanes can safely intermix.

With Mandalay established, the plan is now to extend the service to other locations including Bagan – where it seems the other half of UK's CPL(B) pilots go in the winter!



Cheers! Allie Dunnington and her passengers raise a glass to ballooning in Burma



Balloon Insurance Scheme

The following coverages are available:-

1. Fully Comprehensive Balloon cover
2. Ground Risks only cover including Road Transit Risks
3. Third Party Legal Liability
4. Passenger Legal Liability

For competitive premiums matched with over 10 years experience of Balloon Insurance and reliability, please contact:

DARREN BOURNER or DAVID BACON
Direct Line: 020 7977 5694
Fax: 020 7702 9276
Email: darren.bourner@cspinsurance.com
Web: www.cspaviation.com