

DOUG RICHARDS



**CAN WE** ✈️  
**RUN**  
**WITH YOU,** ⌚  
**GRANDFATHER?**

**SEVEN CONTINENTS:  
SEVEN DECADES**

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## Chapter 1

# From Bhuna to Burma

‘And the journey hasn’t ended yet.’

These were the words with which I finished my previous book, *Running Hot & Cold*, and as it turned out I wasn’t wrong. As before, it was no free-flowing journey through life but the usual mixture of euphoria followed by disappointment, and repeat.

Yes, I am the same ageing pensioner who, as a teenage boy who hated running, jumped on a bus when out of sight of his teachers during a school road run, to conserve his youthful energy. The same young man who believed sport was something you watched with a pint in your hand, rather than something you took part in. Even my token attempts at playing cricket were merely a prelude to the shenanigans in the bar after the match.

But eventually it caught up with me. Struggling to console a crying child because running up a single flight of steps had left me out of breath, I vowed to run a mile the next morning. It hurt; it hurt a lot, but I still felt pleased with myself. If you had grabbed me by my sweaty shoulders that morning and told me what the consequences of that single decision would be, there is no way I would have believed you. But it happened.

## CAN WE RUN WITH YOU, GRANDFATHER?

I have run during a Siberian winter. I have run along the Great Wall of China. I even ran away from angry elephants in South Africa and covered huge distances in the stifling heat of the Sahara Desert. And, in the immediate aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, I ran to the summit of that mountainside road in the devastated country of Sri Lanka, where a small child, standing by the roadside with a few of his friends, called out to me, 'Can we run with you, grandfather?'

Of course I said 'yes' and it is the minutes that followed as we ran and sang our way down the other side of the mountain that will forever live in my memory, and which sum up why I love running so much.

So, the journey hadn't ended yet. Now, where were we?

I had just completed a half marathon in Greenland, including a few kilometres on the mile-thick polar ice cap. Now, not many pensioners can claim that. I had also discovered, as a Leader in Running Fitness for England Athletics, the satisfaction of passing on my knowledge and experience to new runners, who were eager to incorporate exercise into their lives, which in this pressured day and age can bring so many challenges. That is something I will return to later. In the meantime, parkrun was becoming an increasingly important part of my life. I'm not looking for sympathy, but it is a fact of life that if you live on your own and retire from work, you are likely to spend an awful lot of time alone unless you make a concerted effort to make sure that doesn't happen. There was no danger of that happening to me when I was surrounded by such an enthusiastic running community.

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As we moved into the summer of 2014, another unforgettable life moment was fast approaching; the wedding of my only daughter, Angela. It had come perhaps a few years later than it might have done and Angela had been through a few tough times in her life, but there was no doubt in my mind that now she had found true happiness with Ben. You may recall that

it was Ben who graciously allowed Angela to fulfil her safari dream and come to Africa with me shortly after they had moved in together. Indeed, the date they had chosen for their wedding was 21 June, the second anniversary of 'Elephant Day', when Angela, on her sick-bed at the time, endured the sounds of roaring, trumpeting and gunfire that marked the escape of our party of runners from a chasing herd of angry elephants. Angela and Ben had since been blessed with a beautiful daughter, Josie, and were as happy as any family could be. Ever the gentleman, Ben even phoned me on the eve of Valentine's Day to seek my permission to ask Angela to marry him. I couldn't have been happier to give it and had a massive smile on my face when Angela phoned me the following day to ask if I had been keeping secrets from her! The wedding day could not have gone better. A wonderful venue in the shadow of the Sussex Downs and even the sun chose to shine brightly on us all. A proud moment for any father.

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One new hobby I had taken up when I initially retired from work in 2011 had been hen-keeping. Not on a commercial scale, of course, but I had a reasonable-sized, enclosed back garden and, not being at all green fingered, I was pretty tolerant of any damage that hens might do to any delicate plants. Korma, Tikka and Bhuna provided many happy memories, not to mention a relentless supply of eggs. Their names in no way reflected their eventual fate and I'm happy to say that they lived a life few chickens get to live. Fruit and vegetables would rain over the garden fence from my neighbours and every Sunday a carrier bag of potato and vegetable peelings would magically appear on my garden gate for consumption during the week. It was difficult, if not impossible, to look out of the kitchen window and not smile at their antics as they scratched around in the garden, pursued rogue magpies after their tit-bits or ganged together to chase any inquisitive cats back over the fence. My own cat, Nougat, very quickly learned

to keep her distance and would sprint for the safety of the cat flap when the coast was clear.

One downside, of course, was that hen-keeping was pretty time-consuming with early mornings to let them out of their coop and locking them away at night to keep them safe from foxes. Hens also produce a surprisingly large amount of 'waste material' which, when added to the compost bin, eventually produced a very fine fertiliser. Bhuna, in particular, tended to save up her droppings for one major effort. One of the highlights of any visit from my grand-daughter, Holly, would be the daily 'poo patrol' with bucket and trowel, and the search for the occasional 'Bhuna bombs'.

I was also heavily reliant on the goodwill of my neighbours when I wanted to spend any length of time away from home and this was always forthcoming, particularly from John next door, who sadly is no longer with us. Any absence of more than a single day meant more work than simply topping up food and water containers in order to keep the coop in a hygienic condition.

But all good things come to an end and it's never an easy time when they do. I lost Korma just before Christmas of 2013. She had never really recovered fully from a nasty respiratory infection and then I found her collapsed on the lawn one evening and she died in my arms within minutes. Tikka succumbed to an internal haemorrhage just six months later, but Bhuna seemed to be managing so well as a solo hen; she was always the strongest and most robust of the three.

It was after returning from Angela's fantastic wedding weekend in Sussex that John reported Bhuna hadn't seemed her usual perky self and had spent most of the final day hiding under a bush. Despite a trip to the vet and a course of antibiotics for a mild chest infection, she was never the same again. She ate less and less, even ignoring her favourite treats of tomato, banana or mealworms, and no longer did she have the energy to chase off the magpies. She looked forlorn, struggling to cope with the summer heat, and I knew deep

down her journey was run. We returned to the vets for the final time. It was likely that she was in kidney failure; they could do tests to confirm it but there was no treatment at her age. I stroked her black feathers for the final time and bade her a teary farewell, but I knew it was for the best. I couldn't watch her suffer any longer.

I look back on my hen-keeping days with fond memories and console myself with the fact that they all lived a happy life. I would love to have had more but they were a tie and restricted my time away from home. So there were to be no more, but the silver lining of ending this particular chapter was that it gave me a little more freedom, and my running shoes were getting restless again.

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Now it was me-time, and a bit of a holiday. Those who know me well know that I'm not a beach, swimming-pool, gin and tonic type of person; for me it's a question of where my running shoes could take me next. With a little more freedom after Bhuna's sad demise, I could look further afield. I would still have to rely on neighbours to look after my cat but at least she was capable of making arrangements for disposing of her own waste material! The dream of seven continents was still at the back of my mind, with South America, Australia and Antarctica still waiting to be ticked off, although the latter still seemed to be a financial impossibility. As far as distance was concerned, the half marathon still seemed to be the best option for my age and ability; long enough to provide a stern test in difficult climatic conditions but not so far as to risk being 'timed out' if the run didn't go according to plan. Dublin, Lisbon and Berlin were all half marathon possibilities but the lure of something a little more exotic was strong. In the end, I settled on a race that would do nothing to advance my seven continents dream but would take me back to the hot and humid conditions I had struggled with in Sri Lanka. I planned to return to Asia, a continent I had grown to love, and signed

up with Adventure Marathons again to run the Bagan Temple half marathon in Myanmar, more commonly known to the British as Burma, a country that had been largely closed to Westerners in recent times.

Whenever I consider running in a country that is not really on the tourist trail, my first port of call is to read the advice on the Foreign Office website, and then usually to ignore it and cross my fingers. Although political tensions had eased in Burma since the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, there were still parts of the country that were strictly off limits. Fortunately, our itinerary took us nowhere near those. 'Railway equipment is poorly maintained; fatal crashes occur although they may not always be reported,' the website stated. No problem, as the itinerary was free of any rail travel! 'There are concerns over safety standards of some airlines operating within Burma.' Not so good, as we had three internal flights scheduled. There was a high threat of terrorism and attacks could be indiscriminate, but then you could say that about London, or anywhere else in the world for that matter. The fact is that if I had taken heed of the advice before my trips to Jordan and South Africa, I might never have gone and, as a consequence, missed two fabulous experiences. Nothing in life is without risk and, as the Foreign Office site concluded, as long as you take sensible precautions, most visits are trouble-free. I signed the race entry form, booked my flights and, the next morning, passed on the news to my grand-daughter, Holly, who was staying with me at the time.

We looked at the globe to see where Myanmar was and, as is the way of the world these days, she immediately grabbed her tablet computer and began to research feverishly.

'Grandad, did you know that there are still wild tigers living in Myanmar?' A pause, and then, 'Grandad, some of the world's largest pythons live there.'

There was then a deep intake of breath before she said, 'You do realise that there are elephants living in Myanmar, don't you?' Then, with hands on hips, she delivered the final rebuke.

‘Grandad, why do you always have to run in countries where dangerous animals live?’

It was a fair question and, one day, I hope she will understand.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was also a time to think about a new chapter in my fundraising activities. For some time I had been supporting the Royal Air Force Association, including my runs in Rome, South Africa and Greenland, and now felt the need for a change. This time I chose the Midlands Air Ambulance Charity. Like many, I was stunned to discover that this absolutely vital life-saving service received not a penny of government funding, relying entirely on public donations to keep it operational. Anybody might require its services at any time, from the youngest infant to the oldest pensioner, and the access to immediate skilled medical help combined with a speedy transition to hospital can so often be the difference between life and death. Whether it be a road traffic accident or someone, like myself, with a love of the great outdoors who suddenly finds themselves in difficulties far from help, the helicopter is a lifeline.

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There were less than five months between Angela’s wedding and the race in Myanmar but it was a period when my running was well on track. From the time I had retired, my monthly mileage had progressively increased and 100-mile-plus months were becoming the norm. In fact, 2014 was to eventually prove to be my best annual mileage ever, even beating the time when I was preparing for the Marathon des Sables. And it wasn’t just the total distance I had run that was improving – my pace over the shorter distances was gradually advancing too. Over the course of the year, I was regularly running under 25 minutes for the parkrun 5k and now my personal best was edging towards that elusive 24-minute barrier. Now, I am not one of those people who can run eyeballs-out, week in week out. Don’t

get me wrong, I have every admiration for those who do but, for me, my parkrun performance often depended on how I felt on my mile-and-a-half warm-up run to the start. If I felt a bit below par, then it would probably end as a steady run, perhaps pacing someone to their target time with a bit of chit-chat along the way. If I felt good, then I may well have gone for it and tried to chip a few seconds off that elusive personal best.

The date 13 September 2014 was a very special day for me – the day I would complete my 100th parkrun and qualify to wear the black milestone ‘100’ T-shirt. I wouldn’t be the first of our regular Arrow Valley parkrun community to reach that prestigious target, as others had discovered parkrun elsewhere before I did, but I would be the first who had begun their journey at Arrow Valley, shortly after our event started in the summer of 2012.

I had made a secret pledge to myself beforehand. I would give it my all to try and achieve a personal best on that special day, which at the time stood at 24 minutes and nine seconds. I hadn’t told any of my friends for fear of putting myself under too much pressure. Unbeknown to me, one of my colleagues, John, had arranged for our coach, Ernie, to pace him to a personal best on that very day, too. Now John, who had a couple more birthdays under his belt than I did, might be described as one of my parkrun nemeses. The whole ethos of parkrun is that it is a run and not a race – the only person you are competing against is yourself. However, when you run every week, you get to know the people who run at a similar pace to you, and it would take a special type of person who didn’t feel at least a bit competitive with those around. To be fair to John, he finished ahead of me far more often than I did of him, but there was always an element of friendly competition between us.

If my memory serves me correctly, it was me who made the faster start but John came past me on the first of the two laps, with Ernie just a couple of yards behind, barking out instructions in his rich Glaswegian accent. It was only then that I realised they were working together and I tried to stay

as close to them as I could. I felt good, I felt strong, and on the second lap I moved past them both, although never that far away as I could always hear Ernie's constant urgings. As we entered the final couple of hundred yards, I picked up my pace to what, for me, was a full-on sprint.

'Come on, you can catch him, you can catch him,' shouted Ernie from behind and I could hear John's footsteps gradually getting closer, however hard I tried. John caught me just before the line. In horse-racing parlance, he took it by a short head, although we were both given the time of 23 minutes and 40 seconds, a personal best for us both that has stood to this very day. I had done what I had set out to do on my 100th parkrun, and my joy was as great the following day when I ran a 10k around the lanes and streets of Stratford in under 50 minutes for the first time in 12 years. If ever I was in good enough shape to take on one of my foreign adventures, it was now.

\* \* \* \* \*

Unlike the build-up to my Greenland trip, when I had been gripped by a bout of anxiety just a couple of weeks before departure, life was good as I packed my bags for the outward journey for Myanmar. Unlike most of my previous long-distance trips, where I had met up with the race organisers and fellow runners in London, Paris or Copenhagen, before flying onwards together as a group, on this occasion I would not meet anyone associated with the race until I reached the hotel in Yangon.

Travelling alone was something I was used to but memory can play funny tricks on you as you get older and I was constantly checking pockets and wallets to make sure I still had everything I needed at each stage of the journey. There was also a slight concern about my entry visa into Myanmar. The traditional approach had been to obtain one in person from the Burmese Embassy in London: yes, the UK Foreign Office still referred to the country as Burma. However, their website informed me that they were trialling a new online procedure

and this had the advantage of saving me a trip down to the capital. I filled in the requisite forms and was presented with a document, a pre-visa, which I would be required to present at immigration in Yangon. Rather worryingly, it stated that it did not guarantee me entry into the country. So, I could travel all the way to Myanmar and then be turned back at the border. Perhaps it would have been easier to have the visa stamp safely in my passport after all.

The first leg of the journey was a long flight to Singapore, most of which took place in darkness. The huge A380 aircraft was not too busy and I at least had the luxury of three seats to myself, which made sleeping easier, although I never find this anything but stop-start on a long flight. Between snatches of slumber, I was peering at the little screen on the back of the seat in front that was tracking our journey, and was surprised to see us flying directly over Kabul, albeit at 39,000 feet, at a time when it was far from peaceful on the ground there. Nevertheless, we arrived in Singapore safely and with just a few hours to kill before catching my connecting flight to Yangon, it gave me the opportunity to familiarise myself with Changi Airport as I would have a much longer overnight stay there on my return journey.

The onward morning flight to Yangon was uneventful, and then, it was cross your fingers time as I entered immigration. I joined a long and very slow-moving queue and when I eventually got to the front, presented my passport and 'pre-visa' form to the clerk behind the glass. I was immediately informed I had been in the wrong queue and was directed to a solitary uniformed official, standing by a gate. He took one look at my form, stamped my passport with the visa and opened the gate. I was in! Maybe the online option was the way forward after all.

There was just one more task; we weren't permitted to bring local currency into Myanmar and were advised to bring US dollars. I went to the exchange desk and my handful of dollar bills were instantly transformed into a huge bundle of

Burmese kyat banknotes, far too fat a bundle to comfortably fit into my wallet.

I stepped into the arrivals hall and scanned the faces and held-up placards in the forlorn hope that there might be a representative of the tour company to greet us, but to no avail. Predictably, and almost immediately, I was swamped by offers of help with my bag and transport to the hotel. It can be so easy to get ripped off in situations like this and the secret I had learned was to agree a price before stepping into any vehicle. I soon found a man, speaking perfect English, who was prepared to do the trip for the equivalent of nine pounds, which turned out to be a very good deal given that the journey took us the best part of an hour.

As we set off towards the city in the heat and humidity of the early afternoon, the driver chatted amiably about the reasons for my visit, whilst pointing out landmarks along the way. We very soon reached gridlocked roads; the traffic was horrendous. Apparently this was due to the government subsidising the purchase of cars in the capital in an effort to boost the economy although now, if anything, the traffic standstill was having the opposite effect. As we edged past glorious parklands, the driver would occasionally wind down his window, cough from deep within his stomach and then spit violently on to the road outside, before continuing with his tour guiding. Our party were due to leave Yangon the following morning, leaving me with only one evening to explore the city; clearly nowhere near long enough, but again the driver came to the rescue by informing me that my hotel was very close to the towering Shwedagon Pagoda, and this was a must-see.

As I dragged my heavy suitcase into the lobby of the hotel, I was relieved to see a lone figure in a pale blue T-shirt with 'Adventure Marathon' written on the back. First contact with the race organisers. Thor introduced himself before helping me through the check-in process and then sitting down to outline the programme for the following 24 hours. Apparently, very

few of the competitors had arrived thus far, including the person I would be rooming with, an American called Jeffrey. I explained that I wanted to visit the Shwedagon Pagoda and Thor assured me that Yangon was a very safe city to walk around alone, although he did advise against running in the streets, not because of the risk of being mugged, but the fact that you might fall down into one of the many holes in the pavement! Yangon is not renowned for its ability to maintain its public walkways.

I did set out alone for a walk to the Pagoda and, being fairly conspicuous as a tourist with a camera round my neck, was greeted by several locals in a friendly fashion. Some parts of the walk were very pleasant and photogenic, but on some of the side roads people were living in tents in extraordinarily squalid conditions and the stench was quite unbearable. The other instant impression I gained of Yangon was of the number of stray dogs on the streets, often with a family of puppies in tow. They seemed very placid but I wasn't going to approach any of them to find out and I was happy that my rabies jab was up to date. And Thor was not wrong with regard to the pavements. Huge, and I mean huge, holes appeared at regular intervals, often dropping six feet or more into the drains below.

In the end, I settled for taking some external photos of the Pagoda and then returned to the hotel in the hope of meeting more of my running colleagues. Still Jeffrey hadn't arrived but outside the hotel room window was a wonderful view, a beautiful lake with a few fountains spraying up into the air and, it seemed, a footpath all around it, with pairs of monks in their Buddhist tunics wandering at peace. My legs were tense and tight from the long flights and the walk to the Pagoda, and the prospect of a gentle run to ease them was just too tempting. It also meant I could add a run in Yangon to the ever-growing list of places I had run in. I quickly donned my vest and shorts and set out in the early-evening sunshine to the gates of the park. I had run barely 200 yards, when two men,

smoking cigarettes, rose from a bench and blocked my path. Was I being mugged? They would be sorely disappointed as I had nothing on me.

‘Five US dollars please,’ said one.

I held my hands out wide, showing them that I had no money.

‘I am sorry,’ he replied in a polite manner. ‘I’m afraid there is a charge of five US dollars to use our parks. If you want to run, you will have to run in the streets.’

I turned and left. We take it for granted that we can generally use our parks and open spaces without charge but this beautiful location was clearly a revenue stream for the city, or perhaps even for the men themselves.

I did get my run in Yangon. It was only about a mile and the humidity was oppressive. I chose a route that I had walked just an hour or two earlier and, although the light was beginning to fade, I knew exactly where the potholes were, and managed to avoid them.

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I ate pasta in the hotel restaurant that evening and, at last, began to meet some of my fellow runners. I was wearing my Petra half marathon T-shirt and race-wear is always a great way to start a conversation amongst runners who haven’t met before. After a couple of hours of lively reminiscing, I went back to my room for an early night – we had a 3.50am alarm call the following morning for our flight to Mandalay.

I was lying on my bed when Jeffrey eventually arrived.

‘Hello, I’m Jeffrey,’ he announced in a strong New York accent. ‘You must be Doug.’ There was a pause of a few seconds as we looked at each other with an unspoken ‘Don’t I know you from somewhere’ expression on our faces.

Then the penny dropped. Greenland, we’d met in Greenland. We hadn’t particularly spent much of that time together, occasionally chatting at mealtimes, but nevertheless, we had met before.

Jeffrey, a few years younger than me, was a New York lawyer. What set him apart on both this, and the Greenland trip, was that he wasn't a runner. He had been a fairly successful athlete in the past but no longer enjoyed it. He did, however, enjoy travel to unusual locations and loved the positive attitude to life that most runners have. Therefore, he tended to book his holidays with running travel companies, and then plan his own excursions while the rest of us were out running. On this trip, he had three friends travelling with him, only one of whom would be taking part in the race. He apologised in advance to me in case my sleep was disturbed as he liked to get up very early in the morning, and he also said he would spend a long time in the bathroom readying himself for the day ahead. We would not spend a lot of time together over the course of the holiday, but when we did, the conversation was always lively.

The alarm call came as scheduled. Jeffrey had been up since before 3am. We ate a brief breakfast before a coach took us to the airport for our 6am flight to Mandalay. It was on the coach that we first met our local guide, Sun Sun. She was a mother with a family of her own but would be giving up a week of her time to make sure we were as informed about our visit as possible. What Sun Sun didn't know about the history, culture, practices and politics of Myanmar wasn't worth knowing. She was absolutely superb.

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After the 90-minute flight to Mandalay, we boarded our coach for a sightseeing tour of the surrounding area. Now was really a chance to get to know some of our fellow runners, none of whom I'd met before but, as is usually the case on these trips, they came from all corners of the planet. On the coach, I sat next to Otto, who was a few years younger than me and a German general practitioner with a great sense of humour. We immediately bonded and would develop a lasting friendship.

First a visit to the U Bein bridge, whose history Sun Sun regaled us with. Built of teak in 1782, it spanned 1.2 kilometres across the Taungthaman Lake, making it the longest wooden bridge in the world. We walked along its seemingly fragile structure. In the waters below, colourful canoe-like boats were being punted along by their pilot standing at the rear, the remaining occupants seated and sheltering from the sun beneath their parasols. Fishermen and fisherwomen were everywhere; not just those on the shoreline of the lake casting their nets into the waters, but the lake was shallow enough to allow men and women in their brightly coloured costumes to wade out several metres from the shoreline, rod in hand, to fish for their evening meal. On a low, wooden jetty, seemingly floating on the lake's surface, two young women were bathing and washing their hair using buckets and pans. Running water was a luxury in these parts.

We moved on to the Mahagandayon Monastery, home to over a thousand Buddhist monks. It was their lunchtime and they queued patiently, black-lacquered bowl in hand and a brightly coloured napkin over their left wrist. Young and old, the senior monks in their purple tunics, the young boy novices in white. In the streets surrounding the monastery, young families sat at the kerbside, begging for offerings from the clearly more affluent visitors. The children, and many of the young women's faces, were smeared with thanaka paste, a feature of the culture of Myanmar; a cosmetic product accentuating their facial features, but also offering protection from the sun, and a sight we would get used to in the days to come. New buildings were still being erected at the monastery, the men working feverishly, but not very effectively, haphazardly applying mortar to the bricks in the hot sun, while women, canvas hats covering their hair, would carry eight bricks at a time, balanced on their heads, to the bricklayers.

We moved on again. A woodcarving and textile workshop, with skilled workers using not only their hands but also their

feet; just amazing. Next, the Mahamuni Buddha Temple, housing the Mahamuni Buddha Image, cast in bronze and weighing no less than six and a half tons. As kneeling monks recited from the scriptures, male devotees applied gold leaves to the face of the Buddha image. Only males were permitted to enter the front enclosure surrounding the image; a golden entry gate carrying a red sign stated 'Ladies are not allowed to enter'.

The relentless itinerary was briefly interrupted by a pause for lunch and a chance to get to know some more of our party; Alma, an emergency room medic from the US, and her friend Jill, who worked in the world of finance. At the time, *Running Hot & Cold* was just six weeks away from being published as an e-book and I wasted no opportunity to talk about the running adventures I had had. Being an author was a whole new adventure for me and I had no idea at the time where it would lead.

Our final visit of a busy day was to the carved wooden Golden Palace Monastery on the outskirts of Mandalay. Now this was absolutely extraordinary. The whole monastery was made of wood and the fine detail on the carvings was exquisite. To be honest, it is difficult to put into words just how intricate this building was, not only on the grand scale with its three-tiered wooden roof thronged with thousands of individually carved figurines, but also the detail on the carvings that adorned the wooden walls of the temple. My mind wandered back to the Mogao caves in China and, of course, to the Terracotta Army – the skills of the craftsmen in both ancient, and in rather more recent historical times, was extraordinary.

We now journeyed to our home for the night, the beautiful Sedona Hotel in Mandalay, its entrance bisecting two large pools of blue water alive with hundreds of Koi. There was such a contrast between the hustle and bustle of Yangon, and the relative tranquillity of Mandalay, yet this was nothing compared to the contrasts we would soon be seeing in the less affluent areas of Myanmar.

After booking into our splendid hotel, we spent a relaxing hour chatting by the large outdoor swimming pool in the warm afternoon sunshine before the idea was mooted that some of us might want to go for a run. It was not universally accepted; for many the attractions of the pool's warm, blue waters were just too great and there would be time for running later. In the end, just four of us met to go for the run; myself, Otto and a Swedish husband and wife, Henrik and Malin. Directly opposite our hotel was the old Palace of Mandalay, largely hidden by an imposing wall and surrounded by a very wide moat. The wall formed an almost exact square, each side being a little under a mile and a half long and we set off together to run around the whole perimeter. It was to be one of those magical runs – a beautiful setting in a far, far away city with great people for company. We shared our life stories; Henrik and Malin were both engineers and had a young family at home. Like me, Otto was divorced but had two sons. Henrik was a far faster runner than the rest of us but we stayed together, taking care not to trip on the sometimes uneven surface. The local people would look at us in disbelief – social running was obviously not widely practised in Mandalay – but a cheery retort of that all-purpose greeting in Myanmar, 'mingalaba', would bring a wide grin to their faces before they responded with the same and waved us on. Ahead, huge flocks of pigeons would gather across the entire pathway, not moving out of our way until the very last second when we would be engulfed in a whirlwind of feathers and dust.

As we turned south to run the final leg of the square, the sun was setting in the west. I did not have a camera with me to record that view, but it will be forever imprinted on my mind. The sky was a collage of reds, oranges, purples and crimsons; the waters of the moat carried the reflection, almost appearing to be on fire, and in between the palace buildings glowed in the colours of the sunset. It was a perfect run.

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The following morning we boarded a wooden boat for a trip up the Ayeyarwady River to Mingun, a dolphin protection area, although we were not fortunate enough to see any. The moorings were chaotic, with large boats being moored ten abreast and those nearest the shore seemingly having no chance of getting out on to the river. We boarded from a muddy bank along a 15-foot-long narrow plank, barely a foot wide. Two crew members, a young man and young girl, her cheeks painted with thanaka, held a long wooden pole to one side for us to grasp as we took it in turns to walk the plank. Soon we were on our way, our boat mercilessly barging other craft out of the way to create a channel to the wide river. Traffic was busy: houseboats and low-slung fishing vessels zig-zagged around in the shallow waters to avoid the sandbanks that, from time to time, penetrated the surface of the river. Of course, we were now a captive audience and very soon the crew had a range of local craftware out on display, urging us to purchase.

In time we arrived at Mingun, home of the monumental Unfinished Pagoda, built on the orders of King Bodawpaya but never finished as an astrologer had claimed that the king would die were it to be completed. The steep, sand-coloured outer walls were scarred by huge cracks caused by earthquakes over many centuries.

Once again, disembarking was a tricky procedure; there was no jetty as such, just a steep, slippery muddy bank to negotiate with the aid of the narrow plank. Once ashore, and perhaps for the first time, we encountered the true poverty that is the real Myanmar, and yet the people were so friendly and welcoming, if not a little over-zealous in trying to part us from our money with a rich and colourful variety of offerings of food, clothing and crafts. We visited the 90-ton Mingun Bell, the second largest functioning bell in the world, and then the spectacular Myatheindan Pagoda, a gleaming, white castle-like structure capped with a white dome and a golden tower. Outside, taxis were waiting to ferry us back to our boat but these were no motorised vehicles; two-wheeled wooden carts

with a knotted, wicker roof and drawn by two cattle. Most of us walked but a few took on the challenge.

We clambered, or were hauled, aboard and then came one of those moments that classically illustrated the contrast in culture between our two societies. Our pilot started the engine and pulled away before his crew had finished untying us from another vessel we were tethered to. A splintering of wood as a chunk of handrail on the other boat was torn off and fell into the water below. There were no insurance details to be exchanged, just a shrug between the two skippers and then as we moved off, the other pilot leant out of his boat to retrieve the broken pieces and set about fixing them.

There were further visits that day to gold-leaf and textile workshops and once again the levels of craftsmanship were eye-opening. One of the early stages of making the gold leaf was to hammer flat the small pieces of gold, each sandwiched between layers of fabric. Four young men stood side by side, naked to the waist, and slammed heavy, long-handled hammers from over their heads down on to the anvils to which the packages of gold and fabric were attached. It was a strictly choreographed process – bang, bang, bang, bang – pause – bang, bang, bang, bang – pause – and the sweat poured off them as they toiled.

But now it was time to move on from our brief but enticing visit to Mandalay to our final destination, where the true purpose of our visit, the running, would take place. The area around Bagan in central Myanmar is dominated by over 2,000 Buddhist stupas, pagodas and temples, dating back almost a thousand years, and it would be in this extraordinary landscape that we would run our race. We boarded a short flight to Bagan, arriving at our new hotel in darkness, so unaware of the beautiful temples and primitive villages that surrounded us as we ate dinner that evening by the pool in the moonlight.