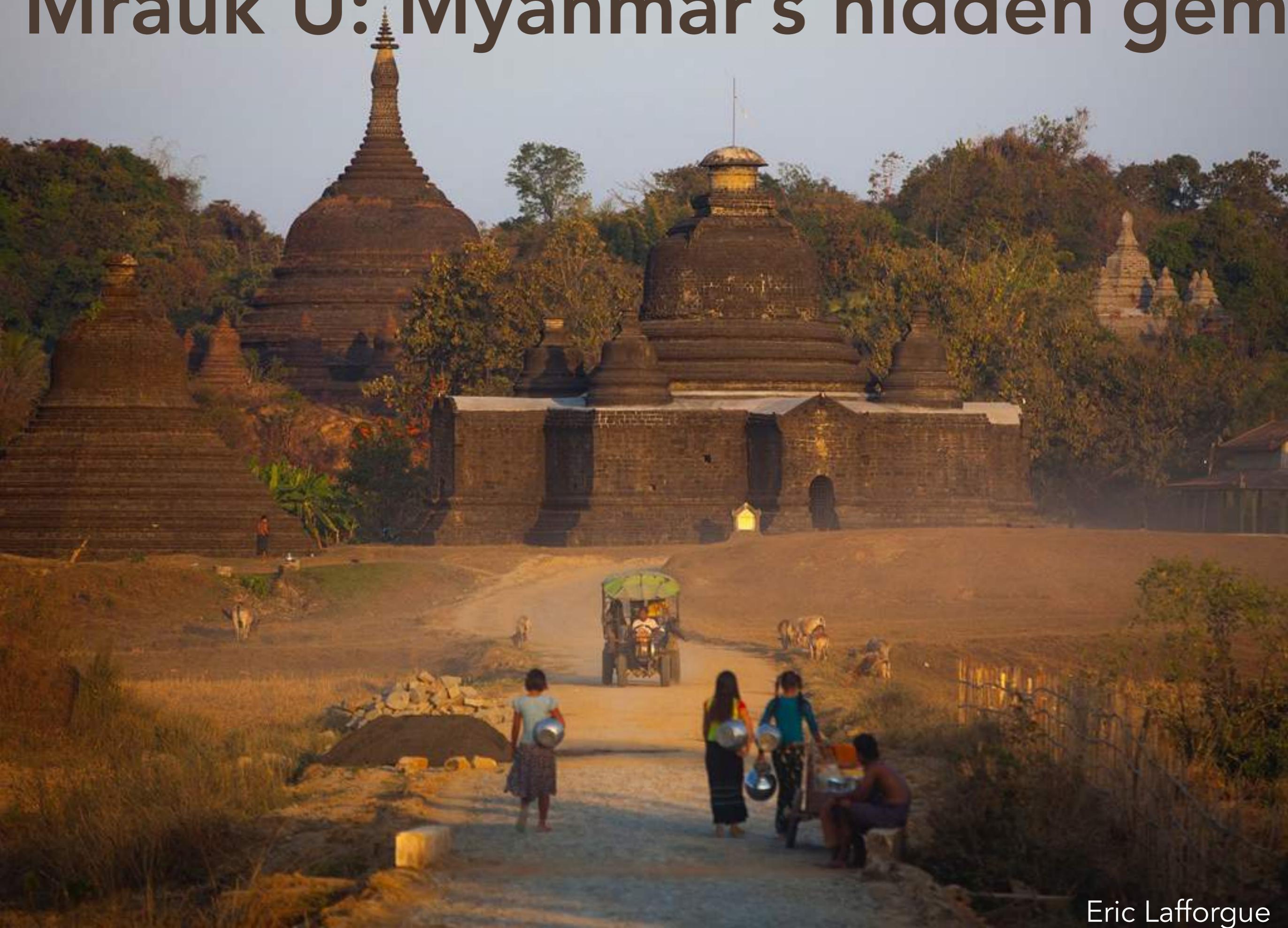


# Mrauk U: Myanmar's hidden gem





The best way to reach Mrauk U is to take a domestic flight from Yangon to Sittwe and then a 5-hour boat trip from Sittwe on the Kaladan River. Mrauk U is an abandoned city, which is home to hundreds of temples and pagodas and lies across rolling hilltops in the northern Rakhine State. It's a place that provides a unique experience in Myanmar as very few tourists have been there so far.



Backwaters, rivers, lakes, mangroves: before reaching the city, you can witness local life in an idyllic landscape... The Kingdom controlled large coastal areas from western Myanmar to India, all the way to the Ganges River.



Everywhere in Myanmar, locals welcome you with smiles. But in some places, attitudes are changing due to the continuous flocks of tourists, even though government billboards everywhere ask them to "respect the tourists [and] smile to the tourists." In Mrauk U, you feel like the first explorers who discovered the country.



Bicycles and horses in the town center. Forget about wifi, you're entering a totally different world!



Women wear huge hats that protect them from the sun and they all wear the famous thanaka, a cream and sunscreen that Burmese women have used for over 2,000 years and smells like sandalwood.



In Mrauk U, there are still old women wearing huge rings in their earlobes. The tradition is no longer followed, but elders are only too happy to show off their beautiful look.



The temples here are very different from the ones in Bagan. In Mrauk U, many are hidden in the jungle or in small farms, so the top of their structure is the only hint of their presence... Mrauk U has become a destination for tourists only recently and cleaning and excavation works have now started on the temples.



From the 15th to the 18th century, Mrauk U was the capital of the mighty Arakan Kingdom and was frequently visited by foreign merchants, like Portuguese and Dutch ones. The Arakan kings thought so highly of themselves that they spent fortunes on Japanese Samurai hired as their only trusted bodyguards.



If Bagan is home to thousands of temples, Mrauk U has only a few of them. But they all look different and the lack of tourists makes the place special. There is no need to wake up at 6 a.m. to avoid the crowds, like in Angkor Wat!



inside a temple, a man has come to pray and make a flower offering. Religion is strong in the countryside, where people are poor. Everywhere I go, my driver will never fail to pray and make donations.



The Ratanabon stupa, which name means "Pile of Jewels." According to local legends, jewels were once kept in the central stupa. The temple was built in 1612 and nobody has found any jewels. The temple has a lovely bell shape and is surrounded by smaller stupas. The sun changes the color of the stone throughout the day.



An old monk begging for food in the temple area. The tradition is to offer food to the monks in the early morning, when they leave their temple to go out for alms.



There is no running water in the villages, only wells and pumps. So, the bathroom is the street...



... or the area by a temple reservoir.



The locals in Mrauk U do not speak English, unlike in the main tourist sites in Myanmar. So, they may appear shy with foreigners. The culture of the Rakhine State is distinct from the rest of the country, in that it is mainly Bengali ethnically. People look different here.



At the end of the day, many young men can be seen playing chinlone. This is the nicest imaginable sports court: right in front of the Mrauk U temples. Sorry, nobody will harass you to sell postcards or cheap souvenirs here!



The Kothaung temple built in 1553 is one of the highlights in Mrauk U. It looks similar to the famous Borobudur temple in Indonesia. Its name refers to the 90,000 Buddha images it is said to contain.



Inside, you can wander alone in the swirling halls, passing hundreds of Buddha statues. The air is cool and silence is only broken by local children playing hide-and-seek!



Detail of the hand of a Buddha statue in Kothaung temple. Thousands were inside the temple. Most of them are still in good condition.



You'll be more likely to find locals coming here to pray rather than groups of tourists. The atmosphere is very mystical.



A giant Buddha statue outside of Kothaung temple. The landscape naturally lends itself to mystery, with statues and stupas jutting out of the rocks. You definitely feel like Indiana Jones at times!



Sakyamanaung Paya is very popular among Burmese people. It was erected in 1629 by King Thirithudhammaraza. The temple comprises one large multi-tiered pagoda with an octagonal shape. It is the only temple in Mrauk U where you can see brightly colored guardians like these elephant statues.



Anywhere you sleep in Mrauk U, you will be close to the locals or even surrounded by them!



Visiting the monasteries is a highlight of a trip to Mrauk U, as novices will welcome you like nowhere else in Burma. With vivacious curiosity, they try asking you questions despite their English being as poor as your Burmese!



Novices spend part of the day studying. But as soon as they can, they return to their favorite games like chinlone.



Le-myet-hna temple is one of the oldest temples in Mrauk U. It was built in 1430 by King Min Saw Mon, the founder of the Mrauk U Kingdom.



In the late afternoon, you can witness local life as it has been for centuries: girls going to draw water from the river while others are washing clothes in a scenic landscape...



The best hotel in Mrauk U: the Princess. A peaceful heaven, except when monks in the neighboring temples play extremely loud music in the early morning as they chant prayers.



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