Myanmar – Land of a Million Pagodas

by ***Ir. Chin Mee Poon***

WHEN I was in Myanmar, I spent most of my time visiting pagodas. I was in that country for 12 days with my wife and eight friends, and we visited Yangon, Bago, Bagan, Inle Lake and Mandalay.

Myanmar is quite a large country by any standard. It has a population of about 55 million people from 135 races. A vast majority of the people are Buddhists. Myanmar is a member state of Asean. It is the only Asean country that requires fellow Asean nationals to have a visa before they can visit it.

Myanmar's roads are generally of low standard and in poor condition. Even the trunk road linking Yangon, the capital, with Mandalay in the north, the country's second largest city, is mostly in need of repair. And yet, we hardly came across any repair or upgrading work in progress.

On the few occasions when we did come across construction workers on the roadside, they were mainly women breaking up large boulders into small pieces of stone with a chisel and hammer, and we were told that they were paid only K3000 (about US$3) a day for such hard work.

Yet everywhere we went, the pagodas and temples looked most magnificent and impressive. The Shwedagon (Golden Temple) in Yangon which has long become an icon for the country, for example, rises 98m above its base and the solid bell-shaped stupa is covered with gold leaves. It is topped by a spire that is decorated with thousands of diamonds and other precious stones.

In Bagan, more than 1000 pagodas spread out on a plain. Standing on the top terrace of one of them with many other tourists, I enjoyed a spectacular sunset over scores of pagodas stretching from beneath my feet all the way to the dimming horizon. It was a most unforgettable experience.

It is estimated that there are more than half a million monks in Myanmar, about 10% of the country's population. Myanmar's tradition dictates that young Buddhist boys enter the monastery at least once in their lifetime as novices, and the ceremony is paraded with great fanfare. The pursuit of spiritual purification and enlightenment is obviously very important to the average Myanmar people.

To the less fortunate sector of the society, monastery life may mean an escape from hunger and an opportunity for education. However, when a large proportion of the population is taken away from the country's workforce, and becomes part of the rest of the population's responsibility and relies on them for support and sustenance, the country's economy will certainly be adversely affected. ■