

WITH HIS FINGERS. HE POINTED AN IMAGINARY PISTOL AT MY FACE, SPEAKING EXCITEDLY IN WHAT I ASSUMED WAS BURMESE. WITH HIS OTHER ARM, HE POINTED BEHIND US, TOWARD THE MOUNTAIN PASS I HAD JUST TRAVERSED. IT WAS CLEAR TO BOTH OF US THAT I HAD NO IDEA WHAT THIS SOLDIER WAS TELLING ME. I FAILED TO ASSEMBLE A LOGICAL STORY IN MY MIND, WHY WOULD HE STOP ME ON THE WAY OUT OF THE BASE AND OFFER AS EXPLANATION PERILS THAT EXISTED BEHIND ME?

# FINDING MYANMAR

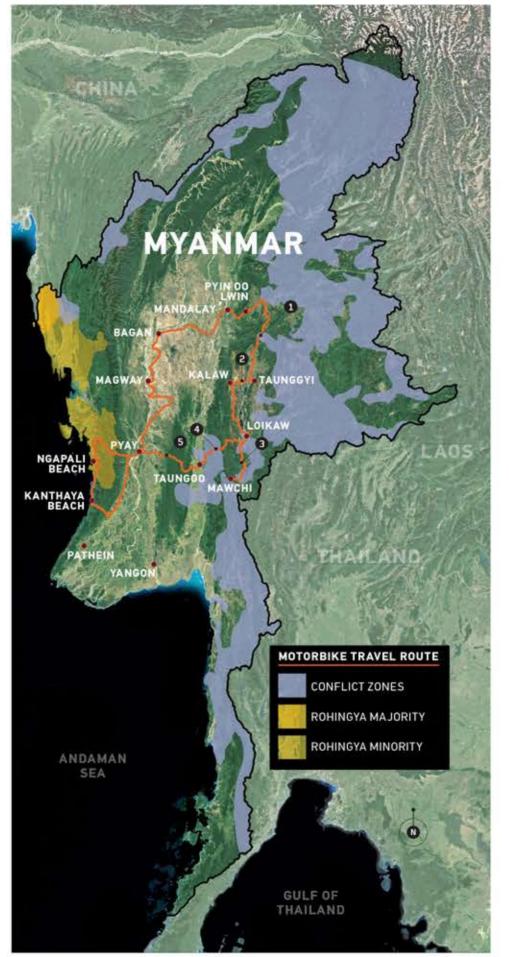
OFF-SCRIPT ON MOTORBIKE IN A SOUTHEAST ASIAN POLICE STATE.

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY ASH HODEN, ASLA

HOURS EARLIER, I WAS BARRELING ALONG AT 65 KILOMETERS PER HOUR. TOP SPEED ON MY "INFORMALLY" ACQUIRED CHINESE MOTORBIKE, WHEN THE COZY, WELL-PAVED

agricultural road devolved into a narrow dirt path market. Beyond national borders, information to Myanmar's supposed isolation from the global ests with lucid waterfalls.

as it ascended from the plains. I must confess was still hard to come by. There was war, and something here: I had not expected this turn of there were restrictions on where tourists could events. It was 2015. President Obama had relaxed and couldn't go. I knew nothing about road conditrade sanctions against Myanmar, and, after detions or the locations of restricted zones. I knew cades of isolation, the country had just recently only that I was illegally driving an illegally rented opened its doors to foreign visitors. Democracy motorbike because it was the best way for me to was in the air, and elections were slated for the stray from a routine script. Using my wits and a fall. I wanted to get in before the place was over- map I had purchased on the street in Yangon, I run with tourists and guided excursions, hoping planned to take the motorbike and drive it around to explore forests I presumed to be intact owing until I quite easily stumbled across mythical for-





Now I was on a glorified trail known as Highway 41. clambering up the first of how many passes? I was alone in mountains not at all resembling the lush, jungle-coated ranges of my imagination. At the crest, I gazed over a sea of barren hills, no end in sight. Despite the childlike joy I derived from navigating switchbacks and kicking up dust and loose gravel in my wake, the sight of endless ranges had the effect of multiplying the estimated duration of this crossing by infinity. Then I looked down, seeing before me only steep, twisting descents on loose dirt and gravel, the skimpy trail vanishing behind a corner of scrubby trees with mountains stacked up one after the next in the distance. Unless I stopped and walked, skidding was the only way to negotiate such switchbacks. Thirty-foot skids leading into a turn, pivot with inside foot planted, downhill by gravity and second gear, light brakes, skid into a turn, and repeat.

Coming through a curve, I encountered other people. A team of women and girls who were making rudimentary road repairs-as surprised to see me as I them-filled holes and divots with loose stones before spreading a layer of crushed rock over the entire roadway. This crew was the first of many I would encounter. Their work was preparatory, setting the foundation for other teams of women and girls who followed with hand-cranked rock crushers and barrels of tar heated over a small fire. The road was little improved by this initial crew. I would continue to skid and pivot down the pass, but it would soon be paved.



**TAUNGGYI TO KALAW** Kalaw is across the valley to the west of Taunggyi. I parked at a guesthouse, and an older man peered at me in shock. "This is not the

bike and drive it around," he stated, unknowingly

and visa numbers into his log, he explained that apparatus that tracked the movements of every single foreign visitor. It was connected to Interpol, and it was apparently more sophisticated than Singapore's apparatus. I listened, wondering to myself how extensively I was being watched.

grandfather was brought over by the British. I was

ABOVE

A view down one of the primary streets in central Kalaw, a frequent summer retreat for British colonists.

OPPOSITE

The journey skirted through areas of ongoing conflict between various militia groups and the military regime.

These mountains were not forested, in the sense This ostentatious display of surplus resources, it was dry, hot, stunted, and mangy, with little hint of life. The rare tree standing above six feet was but running down as a body with age. Exposed layers of thick, nutrient-rich, red-ocher soil stood in testimony of the transformation.

The track veered southward along the upper fringe of a canyon and opened to a view of a wide, swiftly flowing river. Perched over a bank where kind of country where you can just get a motorthe road and river aligned was a small, seemingly deserted cluster of bamboo structures. Then I pooh-poohing both details of my plan. "Whoever spotted a man. He stood shirtless before a hut rented it to you took a big risk." 100 feet upslope, wearing only a lungyi around his waist. I nodded, and he answered with a wave While checking me in, copying my passport of his hand. I was qualified to proceed, apparently, this being a military outpost stationed above the Myanmar had a highly sophisticated security only major infrastructure in the region: a steel and concrete bridge that links the dirt trail on this side of the river with the dirt trail on the other.

I continued onward, now zigzagging uphill in a welcome reprieve from gravity-fueled skid stops. The climb soon leveled out, resuming its I gathered the man's ethnic background lay in southerly course on flatter terrain. Midafternoon, another country. I asked how long he had lived nearly 100 miles into the ride, the road abruptly in Myanmar. Three generations, he said. His widened into a well-paved, tree-lined avenue with a planted median to separate the traffic flows. astounded. Here was a man who by all outward

104 / LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE MAGAZINE AUG 2020



appearance and manners looked to be newly arrived. Yet he was two generations removed from his family's homeland.

At this point, I had not yet recognized the extent to which tribalism permeated Myanmar's social and political landscapes. I was unaware of the degree to which the military used tribal identity as a basis for denying or granting citizenship rights, or that ethnicity itself was still defined in a colonial manner-viewed not

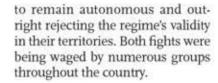
as a social construct but as fixed characteristics promises made through the original 1947 constiinherited at birth. The British had classified and tution that gave minority groups varying degrees segregated, imposing firm lines around fuzzy of autonomy. In 1974 the Tatmadaw government borders to differentiate and establish rank. The issued a new constitution that recognized eight British also governed according to terrain, more "national ethnic races," which were later divided forcefully controlling the agricultural lowlands into 135 ethnic groups. Rohingya Muslims, along ("Ministerial Burma") while affording the topographic hinterlands ("Frontier Areas") and the excluded from the official tally and granted lesser minority peoples therein a much greater degree or no rights. The Bamar group predominates in of autonomy. The fight for independence from Myanmar, with a population of about 30 milcolonial rule therefore meant different things lion who comprise more than two-thirds of the to different ethnic groups in various regions of country's people. The regime was making Bamar the territory, and the ongoing conflicts fall along identity central to national identity, placing Budsimilar oppositions as those established by the dhism at the core of this new, singular notion of British—lowland versus highland, majority ver-citizenship and attempting to overwrite a vast arsus minority groups.

heritage so as to claim that the country belongs to tion within an unsettled nation-state—a fight that, some people but not to others. Following the 1962 if won, would dilute or nullify the fictions being

ray of other cultural traditions, languages, belief structures, and histories. Unrecognized peoples By wielding ethnicity as a principal qualification, and autonomous minority groups who refuse to the regime linked citizenship with indigenous assimilate face the choice of fighting for recognicoup, the military regime began to undermine used to validate the military regime-or fighting

Timber waiting to be exported from this yard off National Highway 5. several hours south of

This group of roadside mechanics saved the day when the motorbike broke down at their doorstep. In total, the motorbike broke down five times always in front of a mechanic shop.



I shifted gears and asked about the potential to go trekking in nearby forests. The hotelier answered that the government cut down the forests and sold off the resources after sanctions were imposed, dashing my hopes of escaping to the jungle. He then speculated that the lumber primarily went to Europe and America after passing through China first.

His explanation was accurate, too. Corruption in Myanmar is rife, particularly relating to the exploitation

of human and natural resources. The country's percent of whom depend on the forests for their multi-billion-dollar lumber industry was con- livelihood-without preventing the human rights trolled by Chetta Apipatana, the "shadow presi-violations they were said to stand against. dent," who stole massive quantities of the highest grades of teak from the state-owned timber Since 1990, about 20 percent of Myanmar's formonopoly. Bribing and conspiring with upper- ests have been cut down. Beyond teak and other echelon military officials, Apipatana smuggled hardwoods that are made into yachts and furnihis spoils overland-mainly to China, India, ture and so forth, much of the deforestation is or Thailand-to supply an extensive business attributed to charcoal and fuelwood extraction. In network that was able to sell directly to Euro- regions bordering China, huge quantities of forpean and U.S. outlets despite trade sanctions. ests are decimated each year, the wood converted American and European sanctions, issued in to charcoal to fuel silicon smelters in Chinese the name of human rights violations, had severe factories. In 2014, it was estimated that 31 square

consequences for the people of Myanmar-70 miles of forest were consumed in the production

ABOVE Deforested mountains and a silted river outside Mawchi.

106 / LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE MAGAZINE AUG 2020 LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE MAGAZINE AUG 2020 / 107

ture. In 2016, that quantity was nearly doubled. mar; its movement through internal checkpoints to stop? Deciding yes, I accepted their offer. generated between \$1 million and \$10 million in quantities of fuelwood are consumed internally as well, providing fire and energy where centralized utilities are insufficient or don't exist.

The hotelier asked where I had thus far prowled. With my map opened before us, I described my journey from Mandalay. With his finger, he to Taunggyi. Within that circle, he said, there was war.

Immediately, I understood what the soldier had meant by pointing an imaginary pistol in my face. He was saying, "You could have been shot back there." Tactically speaking, I had counted on being stopped long before I stumbled into active battlegrounds. Now, I discovered, it was possible to wander (unnoticed?) into a war zone.

LOIKAW TO LOIKAW, VIA MAWCHI

Nearing 11:00 a.m., I entered a village and stopped at a roadside hut with gasoline bottles man seated in a chair inside the open structure. His wife and infant son sat with him. All three stopped for a beat. Things had become slightly more complex than they had been a second before. This moment came and went. The man saying only that it was dangerous. stood and poured two bottles into the tank. I asked the name of their village, pointing to my 
In debating the logistics, we were essentially debatmap as I spoke, and confirmed my location. I was ing the periphery of much deeper issues—an interion course. As I prepared to depart, the man's wife or inhabited by colonialism, resources, and the drug

of industrial silicon in China's Dehong prefec- her mouth. This triggered my own moment of reflection. It was a little early for lunch and there Most if not all of the charcoal came from Myan- was much road to cover. Did I have enough time

bribes each year for military officials. Enormous They led me to a second wooden hut that was set back from the road and presented a spot before a low table on the raised floor. The man sat beside me. His wife placed four separate dishes on the table with a bowl of rice, all of which were prepared in advance-originally meant for family consumption. There were meat, fish, or vegetables mixed into separate, tasty sauces. As I ate small portions circumscribed a large swath of the eastern part from each of the dishes, not knowing how much of the nation, including the previous day's trek to politely accept as a guest or customer, the man scrutinized my map. It had captured his attention from the start. Meanwhile, his wife attended to me and my eating needs. She conveyed that they were Karen, an ethnolinguistic group that accounts for less than 8 percent of Myanmar's population, and pointed to an image of Jesus hanging on the wall in a glittering frame.

Then an English-speaking elderly woman arrived, still carrying bags from her trip to the market. She had been summoned to talk with me. When I responded that I was bound for Taungoo, she said to turn back and take a different road from Loikaw. This idea did not sit well with me. First, it was at least four hours of backtracking. Second, my map displayed up front. I asked for two liters from a showed that the road I had taken-the one that was a mere 30 feet from where we sat-continued through Mawchi and onward to Taungoo. I asserted this detail by pointing to the unbroken line on the page. She insisted I could not go through,

asked if I'd like food by pantomiming a spoon to and weapons trade. Based on her refusal to clarify,



explanations strayed too far from the periphery to silt-choked river, the paving devolved into a dirt share with a foreigner who was traipsing through track. Grading efforts in select segments inditown on a fool's errand. Plus, people in Myanmar cated a fully paved thoroughfare of the future. are not able to speak freely about "sensitive" matters, particularly with a foreigner. I believed her. into the river, which was now murky brown. There was something in Mawchi I was not meant At ravines, lone motorbikes were often parked. to see, However, before having rented and driven Whining chain saws identified each motorbike's a motorbike, nearly everybody I consulted on the owner as a rogue logger, scavenging the few retopic said it couldn't be done. Some said it couldn't maining trees near the road. be done while I was in the act of doing it. Having already navigated much prohibited terrain-finding In Myanmar, colonial "Frontier Areas" have in

"May I go now?" she asked, making it known that she had only come to help, providing advice I was unwilling (and perhaps too stupid) to accept. local ecologies and economies are subsumed by

staying in close synchronization with a narrow, target for wholesale thefts of this nature.

the government lacking in its capacity to enforce its many ways become the capitalist frontier. The own barriers-I was primed to disregard naysayers. American anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, based on her research into similar conditions in Indonesia, speaks of such frontiers as manufactured edge spaces, peripheries where "bureaucrats and generals" who offer their spoils A few miles beyond the village, the road curved as "corporate raw materials." As an incomplete west. As it meandered deeper into the mountains, and largely unsettled project, Myanmar was a ripe

ABOVE

One of the least deforested stretches of forest encountered. seen on the second attempt to reach Taungoo, was far from untouched.

108 / LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE MAGAZINE AUG 2020 LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE MAGAZINE AUG 2020 / 109



Five months after my visit, a landslide would kill mining are a regular occurrence, and the streams of beverages. and drinking water sources are polluted with mine waste. One hundred jade miners would to lung disease and arthritis, and their children next in a series of denuded frontier spaces I would ride through.

Sun up, sun down, gate up, gate down, day in, day out. Such was the routine existence of the After reviewing the motorbike's registration soldiers posted for months without reprieve in and learning that I had rented it, not in the near the guardhouse before Mawchi. Across the dirt city of Loikaw, but in the very distant city of



but obstructing mine specifically, the gate swung down. A friendly soldier asked to see my passport. Pointing to the details inside, I handed it over. After answering that I was bound for Taungoo, he indicated that they would need time to review and approve such a request. He invited me to sit at a large wooden table inside a bamboo shade trellis behind the guardhouse.

A cold Sunkist orange soda and a cold bottle of water awaited my arrival. Additionally, the soldier instructed a rifleman to deliver us two sugary coffees. Facing me at the table, he again confirmed that I was bound for Taun-

goo. He also confirmed that I was traveling alone, at least 28 people in Mawchi as a direct result of as in, without a guide and without permission. haphazard tin-mining operations run by the state- Affirmative. He then excused himself to the comowned monopoly. Landslides that result from munications room and left me alone with a trio

In time he returned, now assuming the role of die in a collapse in another part of the country host as we awaited the verdict. He was a captain, that same year. In Mawchi, tin miners are prone three months into his six-month post, and he was exceptionally kind. He even apologized for the frequently succumb to disease. This was just the delay in getting an answer, as though the military was unnecessarily troubling me and my off-script agenda. He also assured me that Myanmar was now at peace.

highway, obstructing all vehicular movement Mandalay-where a much taller tale separated

Ash Hoden, ASLA, and the captain who detained him outside Mawchi.

# RIGHT

The soldiers at the military post in Mawchi were gracious hosts, offering a trio of beverages to their



ABOVE Cloud cover spliced along straight lines over Google Earth's aerial photography conceals the activities surrounding Mawchi.



All of this elevated the decision beyond the state of Kayah. As a state-hopping foreigner, crossing multiple realms of authority, I was now a federal issue. A general was required to make this call, I was told. Images of hastily arranged emergency sessions came to mind, called forth by the general, who was seated at the apex of a long table surrounded by a team of high officials-all hopped up on Sunkist orange sodas and sugary coffees. Such was the state of my thinking while I sat and awaited my fate. (I later attempted to discover the secrets of Mawchi using Google Earth, but heavy cloud cover, spliced along straight lines on photo-edited maps, obscured large swatches of territory in the region.)

consequences, wanting to know from whom I

had rented the motorbike, where I had been, and

where I was headed.

After three hours of detainment the verdict was delivered. I was told to return to Loikaw because a bridge had given out and no traffic (licit or otherwise) was getting through. It wasn't that I didn't have a guide or a permit or that I was illegally driving an illegally rented motorbike (all with streams and hills and cascading waterfalls over the place). It was an infrastructural matter. I accepted this elaborate tale as a form of détente. They weren't going to let me through, but they In this village I likely could have recruited a person also weren't going to detain me any longer.

# **LOIKAW TO TAUNGOO**

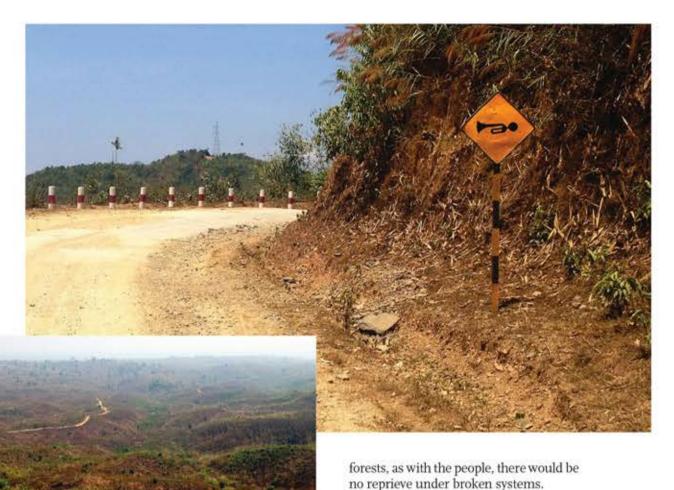
In the morning, I found the road from Loikaw I had been advised to take the previous day. Soon, I was plying mountains abundant with somewhat intact forests, finally. Among the trees, the path was notably cooler and more humid, presenting a stark reprieve from the parched heat that suffocated vacant terrain.

Climbing up and down, in and through, the road wrapped above and around a highland water course with swirling rice terraces filling the valley. Where paved, the road was often torn and potholed and far more punishing than the unpaved sections that dominated the drive. Beside the road, teams of men in orange vests dug a deep, perfectly sheer trench by hand. Scattered at various points along the full length of the mountain pass, these crews slowly extended and joined sections of trench, preparing the way for some form of utility to breach the mountains from the plains.

The way ahead descended again, etched as a tangled thread into contoured hillsides. It straightened course at the trough and crossed a small bridge into a serene village parked at the confluence of two streams. Here, I foresaw, one could indulge in an abundance of jungle explorations. All the ingredients were there: forests unquestionably nearby.

to guide me through the jungles and falls, but I was

110 / LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE MAGAZINE AUG 2020 LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE MAGAZINE AUG 2020 / 111



What was a fairly straight line on my map

was a koan on the ground. By day's end, the distance traveled, requiring 10 hours door to door, was nearly twice the distance shown. When gravity did the bulk of the work in drawing me from the hills, the road straightened and the mountains tapered. Where my path met the highway, carrying with it the bodily and psychological trauma of multiple days in harrowing remoteness,

done with that fantasy. I was too fatigued, unsure there was a stoplight. Truly. Four full lanes of traffic passed before me. Upon the light's change of color, I turned left and parked at the first hotel in sight.

about whether to continue at all. My resolve diminished with each loose stone beneath the wheelsone cringe of shock after another stiffening jolt to the spine, my sinuses now infected.

The forests and jagged roadway continued, along ridges and through valleys. Clearings had been cut; other patches had been burned. In this were well paved from beginning to end. The forhealthier forest rogue loggers were more present ests were decimated. Vast treeless hills-rounded than in Mawchi. I even passed a young boy who and empty, one after the next. In certain regions, was sitting alone at a parked motorbike, his father teak had been replanted in geometric rows, sold presumably behind the nearby chain saw wails. both literally and emblematically as ecological

# TAUNGOO TO PYAY TO NGAPALI BEACH

The roads over and through the Bago Yoma Elsewhere I passed a group of three men walking plantations. In other, presumably less devasthe road with saws slung over shoulders. For the tated, open-to-foreigner regions, the teak industry

An old-fashioned horn sign instructs drivers to honk before blind corners on the Rakhine Yoma.

Clear-cut hillsides as far as the eye can see on the Bago Yoma. The Rakhine Yoma looked much the same.



elephants. Otherwise, treeless.

road curved, rose, descended, and I went along bones in warm waters. with it all. Mindlessly cruising through scrubby

I had never seen before, what few outsiders were or Rohingya, but ultimately all would be Bamar. allowed to see. In that the journey was alive.

At the coast I turned south, ultimately reaching a wide and prosperous, finely paved, tree-lined

was supplemented with tourism and working road that steered spenders to big resorts stacked along Ngapali Beach. In fewer than five minutes I went from lobby to bungalow to salty sea, avoid-I drove like I was on the clock. The smooth, easy ing plastic debris while nursing my road-weary

wastelands—cutting across the land like a rogue After some recovery days at the beach, I swooped southward around the Arakan Mountains, returning north to Mandalay through hot, dry plains. From Pyay over the Rakhine Yoma the ride was There would be no more mountain crossings or much the same: paved roads, chopped forests, tropical dreams. The admittedly naive impetus to barren hills. Again, I drove like a commuter, explore pristine wilderness served instead to reveal passively experiencing time as cargo. However, I a very specific place at a stark moment. Each day may have overlooked the significance of the expe-felt as though I were racing through a collapsing rience. A clear-cut mountain range, a controlled tunnel, slipping through one crack after another burn, a river, small tree stands, triangular signs in the final moment before procedures were esdepicting curvy old-fashioned horns before blind tablished and protocols enforced, forever closing corners, warm air, slight humidity, shadows of whichever loopholes I was exploiting. Elections clouds-whether beautiful or repulsive or neutral would be held and a more cohesive civil order and unnoticed, it was from beginning to end a established in some distant future. Nonconformfirst for me. I was driving through a nation that ing societies would be slaughtered or compelled had been isolated for decades, seeing something to assimilate. People might remain Karen or Shan Myanmar was becoming a nation-state. •

> ASH HODEN, ASIA, IS A LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT, WRITER, AND ARTIST BASED IN THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA.

at one of the seaside resorts on Ngapali Beach.

112 / LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE MAGAZINE AUG 2020 LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE MAGAZINE AUG 2020 / 113

ABOVE

A parallel universe