

One Day's Adventure

Mrauk U, Burma, 2002

by Bill Greer

About the Author

Adventure travel expert Bill Greer is the founder of GORP.com, the early Internet era's leading community for outdoor and adventure travel, selected as one of the Top 50 sites on the web in 2000. More recently, he is the author of **The Mevrouw Who Saved Manhattan**, a novel of New Amsterdam that paints a real and bawdy portrait of Dutch life on the Hudson through the eyes of a sharp-tongued bride who comes among the first settlers. Visit Bill at www.billsbrownstone.com.

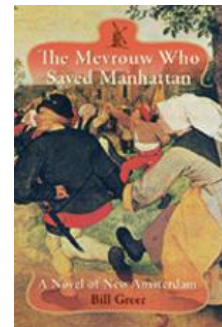
Reviews for The Mevrouw Who Saved Manhattan

**From de Halve Maen, Journal of the Holland Society
of New York, Summer 2009**

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“The engine has trouble,” Zaw Lin said. The Burmese guide had hired the boat the prior evening to carry us upriver to Mrauk U, capital of an empire that conquered western Burma and Bengal in the 15th century. The covered deck between the high prow and cabin had looked like a spacious spot to spend the next five hours. We expected the crew to roll out a couple of slingback chairs for our comfort. But this boat would not leave the dock today.

We clambered back into the row boat that had carried us across the channel. “We will have to take a smaller boat,” Zaw Lin apologized, indicating that he had one in mind as we hovered in mid-stream. A couple of vessels passed before one hailed us. An animated conversation carried across the water. This boat pulled aside a dock. We scrambled up to take a look. It was an open wooden hull with an exposed inboard motor sputtering amidships. A pot of rice bubbled on a wood fire in front of it. Offerings of white flowers and incense sticks adorned the prow. In the bow, a half deck provided a flat spot a foot above the water sloshing around the hull. We settled in there.

We headed into the mouth of the Kaladan River, at this stage more like a wide smooth bay. The engine pushed us steadily along. “We will arrive about 3:30,” Zaw Lin told us. An hour had been added to the trip.

Slowly the river narrowed. A band of grass lined the banks, the favored spot for water buffalo to feed and wallow. On the ledge above, where the waters would rise with the tide, low scrub covered the bank. An occasional channel cut into the shore, an outlet for water to flow into the rice paddies that spread just out of view. On the river itself, giant bamboo rafts floated downstream, cabins of woven mats sheltering the family that lived aboard. A man patiently rowed the oar attached to the front. Further along, cargo boats captured the wind in sails sewn into a collage of weathered bed linen and plaid longyis, the tubes of cloth that are the national dress of Myanmar.

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The rumble of the inboard suddenly ground to a halt. The three boatmen chattered among themselves. We drifted for several minutes. Finally one picked up a blackened can of grease and scraped oil into the engine. The kid who did the grunt work around the boat continued his bailing. Zaw Lin suggested this would be a good time to do whatever was necessary over the side of the boat.

“It’s probably a two-stroke engine,” I said to Diane. “You have to mix oil into the gasoline for it to run.” Whatever the case, the oil did the trick. A boatman cranked the starter. The engine coughed several plumes of black smoke into his face and sputtered back to life.

The breeze on the river and the movement of the boat kept us cool as the sun climbed. Zaw Lin came forward and inquired about changing money. “Do you have large bills?” he wanted to know. Normally, the moneychangers were eager to trade you Burmese kyats for your dollars. It was not like the old days when the black market rate was several times what the banks or the government would give you, but changing under the table was still a necessary act for making your way through Burma. The guide, however, had a different objective. He pulled out a couple of \$50 bills, a stack of fives and ones, and a few of the government’s FECs, the artificial currency designed to extract foreign exchange from the incoming tourists. “Will you change these to hundreds?” he requested. We had enough hard-currency expenses ahead on which we could use the FECs and a sufficient supply of large bills. We did him the favor.

The boatmen watched the transaction. “They are pig-sellers,” Zaw Lin said.

“How much do they earn?” Diane asked.

“About 1,000 kyats.” The amount converted to about \$40 a month, assuming that period covered by the answer was a day. Zaw Lin handed a \$100 greenback to one of the boatmen. He looked at Benjamin Franklin staring back, trying to comprehend such value. The bill passed among all hands on board before making its way back to the guide.

By noon, the sun blazed. The wind died as we hugged the shoreline, struggling against the weakest part of the current. “They don’t know this way to Mrauk U,” Zaw

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Lin said. "I told them which direction to head." The guide regularly escorted visitors so we expressed little doubt about his navigational ability through the maze of channels dividing the Kaladan delta.

As we cruised up one of the serpentine streams, the engine once again conked out. The boat turned sideways but there was little current to send it downstream. We drifted slowly as the engine sucked in more oil, then cranked to life.

By now, fishermen appeared frequently, setting their nets. "Mrauk U?" queried the pig-sellers as we passed. The normal response was a yell and an arm thrust upward in the direction we were heading. But as we turned up one stream, a fisherman replied with a disdainful look and what could only have been "Of course not, you fool," as he thrust his arm toward an alternative route. Our confidence began to lag.

Three-thirty came and went. We appeared back on track, reassured by a consistent supply of up-thrust arms in the direction we were heading. But the maze called for constant choices, and by 4 o'clock we had once again heard a fisherman scream no as we invaded his pool. We turned back and chose another channel.

We suffered one more engine failure but oil again proved the magic elixir. By 4:30, we had finished the bananas and most of the nuts that were supposed to get us through until a mid-afternoon meal. I was beginning to contemplate how to make myself comfortable on the foredeck for the evening.

As we continued onward, light spots appeared on the hills that had begun to rise in the distance. Gradually their outlines emerged as pyramidal shapes of stone and brick. The larger ones visible from a distance became crowded with smaller ones scattered all over the slopes. The ancient city of Mrauk U came into focus.

At 5:00, we tied up to the government ferry. It was a double decker that looked like a rusting relic from colonial days. We scrambled onto its lower deck chasing our bags, which were being hauled up the gangway. Diane eyed the ten-foot board, only a foot wide and set at a 45 degree angle against the shore, with trepidation. One of the locals offered his hand and helped her up. The laughter told me that I should climb up under my own power after we negotiated our return downriver.

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Diane lined up a couple of trishaws while she waited. These contraptions were in the uniquely Burmese style, a wooden sidecar with two seats back-to-back attached to a bicycle. I climbed into the front of one, with our bags piled in the rear seat. Diane and Zaw Lin shared the other.

A trishaw is an interesting vehicle. It moves lots of weight under human power, bags of rice, chords of wood or bamboo, a small family. But it takes some strain to build momentum for a 150+ pound load. Once a driver achieves it, he let's nothing slow him down, not groups of people standing in the roadway, shoppers darting among the market stalls or bicycles cruising slowly by.

The pavement was just wide enough for two trishaws to pass, perhaps five people could walk abreast. Diane's driver gained speed faster than mine and decided he needed to pass. His pride threatened, mine pedaled furiously to avoid being overtaken. Meanwhile, both bikes were ringing the bells attached to their handlebars, warning everyone else on the crowded roadway to stand aside. Seldom did these signals yield more than a laconic response.

Somehow we both avoided a collision until we ran face-to-face with one of the occasional jeeps who thought its steel and horn gave it right-of-way over all comers. My driver did not agree. He and I eyed the shoulder, set several inches below the macadam. Going that way risked sending the trishaw tumbling head-over-heels as its third wheel slipped down. We stood our ground. Amazingly the jeep lost heart and backed aside. We pedaled by in triumph.

"Get out," my driver motioned as we reached the base of a hill too steep for him to cycle me up. I was happy to walk. At its peak, we took to wheel again, using all the power gravity could provide to whisk us onward. Two massive temples stood to the side, domes and stupas reaching for the sky. We zoomed into the hotel driveway, teetering on the third wheel, and slammed on the brakes. We had arrived.

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“A very authentic ring ...
like etchings by
Van Ostade and Steen.”

– Charles Wendell, Ph.D., President of
the New Netherland Institute

A Novel of New Amsterdam

When Mevrouw Jackie Lambert opens her New Amsterdam tavern in 1626, she jumps aboard a madcap ride through New York history. With a razor-sharp tongue and the tastiest beer on either side of the Atlantic, Jackie spurs the tiny Manhattan settlement toward a head-on collision with the tyrannical Dutchmen who rule it. Poison, blackmail, murder, all are fair game as she fends off threats to the family she yearned for growing up as an orphan. And when peggleg Peter Stuyvesant would rather destroy the town than surrender his honor, Jackie must take history into her own hands or lose everything she has spent a lifetime building.



A Real Portrait

While a work of fiction, *The Mevrouw Who Saved Manhattan* paints a real portrait of life in New Amsterdam with all its humor, bawdiness, and conflict. It presents a window into how Dutch culture during the Golden Age of the Netherlands transplanted to the wilderness of the Hudson Valley. The thread of Jackie's life reflects the central theme of the Dutch period, the rebellion of the common people against their rulers, the Dutch West India Company and its Directors, a conflict that historians argue laid the foundation for the pluralistic, freedom-loving society that America became.

About the Author

Bill Greer has spent much of his working life in the heart of New Amsterdam. He is a Trustee and Treasurer of the New Netherland Institute, a membership organization supporting research and education in Dutch-American history. Visit him at www.BillsBrownstone.com for more on Mevrouw's world and old New York and to read an excerpt of fifty pages from *The Mevrouw Who Saved Manhattan*.

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Reviews

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