

Why write yet another book about the Shwedagon?

Visiting the Shwedagon is unlike visiting any other famous religious site in Southeast Asia, such as Borobudur or Angkor, because it is still used every day by hundreds of devotees as a living temple, and while one may wonder at the architecture, it is important to try and capture what the site itself may reveal on the religious, historical, and human levels.

It is not easy as the sights are dazzling: there is a profusion of gold and bright colours, people seem to be milling in all directions, bearing offerings, praying, maybe resting on the steps of a pavilion and just chatting. Others may be pouring water over small statues of the Buddha, the public address system is relaying chanting of the Scriptures. Suddenly, a whole line of devotees marches across the marble tiles, wielding brooms as they go along to sweep the floor. In the middle of it all, bemused tourists are snapping away with their cameras, tablets, telephones, and guides try to keep tabs on their flocks.

It may be enough to just wonder at it all and take away in one's head a series of "postcards" of a place that has its own magic, but I feel there is more. This is where my experience as a museum guide and ship lecturer comes in: I have had to present quite complicated subjects in a compressed format because of time constraints, so this is what I hope this booklet can achieve. By using my own photos as a focal point, I hope to give visitors an instant way of recognising (some of!) what they can see. Anyone really interested in the more complex doctrinal or architectural aspects of the Shwedagon can refer to the many more erudite and specialised books that have been published. This booklet is meant to be an introduction.

Visitors are given a map when they arrive. This is invaluable and should also be used, but it may not be enough as it is extremely easy to get disorientated while on the main platform, particularly if one tries to retrace one's steps to find something! Another complication is due to the fact that there are constant changes taking place: statues are moved, pavilions or shrines are demolished, which can be very frustrating. Books also disagree on the names given to some of the pavilions and spellings differ from one book/map to another which adds to the general confusion!

So, I hope that by reading these few pages beforehand, visitors may be better prepared. During their visit, it will be a help to complement the map, and after their visit, it may help identify one's photos as the temptation to take "one more" will be irresistible!

Happy wandering and wondering round the Shwedagon!

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