



The Victoria Foundation Overseas Cycling and Trekking Challenges



The Victoria Foundation normally arranges an overseas cycling and trekking challenge each year which raise vital funds and have been extremely popular with supporters. The challenge teams have raised over £450,000 in the last ten years which has helped to transform so many lives in our local and the wider community.

Lorna Votier, Development Director of the charity said, *"we are extremely grateful to all those supporters who personally cover the cost to take part in the challenges and all those who so generously donate and sponsor them. We very much hope to be able to arrange a challenge in autumn 2022 on The Camino Portugues Coastal Route, or Portuguese Way, which follows the Atlantic coast from Porto to Santiago for cyclists or Vigo to Santiago for trekkers and they will prove as popular as previous ones."*

All enquiries to Lorna at TVF on 07533 166552 or by email l.votier@thevictoriafoundation.org.uk

Memories and reflections of TVF Trekking Challenge in Myanmar (Burma)

Graham Ball, CEO of The Victoria Foundation, and supporters of the charity raised over £30,000 by taking part in a cycling and trekking challenge in Myanmar. Temperatures hovered round the 90F mark when the team of fifteen ranging from 38 to 69 years spent five to seven hours a day trekking or cycling from Mandalay to Inle Lake, through hilly countryside and rural villages. **Read the wonderful memories and reflections of the challenge by Gaynor one of our fabulous trekkers.**

Reflections from Gaynor – one of the fabulous trekking challengers



DAY 1 – Valentine's Day in Mandalay

Depending on your sense of humour I suppose Friday the 13th of February was as good as day as any to start our 6,800-mile journey to Mandalay via Bangkok. Christine, Graham, Martin, Lorna, and Dodo were on the flight from Heathrow along with me, Andy, a GP from Worthing who was endlessly patient and supportive as the Trek doctor. And Bob (*Gaynor's husband*) who was part of the Cycling Challenge.

The Trekkers were joined in Bangkok for the flight to Mandalay by: Jean, who had been on holiday in Goa. Elizabeth and her daughter Melissa (cyclist) and Pam who, along with Jean, spent a happy couple of days buying handbags and having clothes made in Bangkok! And last, but not least, there was Nikki who had spent an enjoyable few days with her brother who lives in Kuala Lumpur.

By the time the flight to Mandalay took off a full Cycle Challenge squad had also assembled and two hours later we landed in what was the last royal capital of Burma, which is now known as Myanmar. The airport there has to be one of the very few in the world that gives a decent foreign exchange rate, but they would accept only crisp new US dollars. Bob had a couple of 20 US dollar notes rejected because of very minor creases.

Separate coaches took Trekkers and Cyclists from the airport to our hotel. By now it was 1pm ish and it was back on the coach for a tour of Mandalay, during which I bought a beautifully carved boat with a hint of gold on the bows and a crew of ornate elephants. One problem was that it was too big to fit in the suitcases. But the guys in the backup truck on the trek took great care of it and I carried it on and off planes because Bob threatened to sink it in the Irrawaddy River!

We were taken up to the legendary Mandalay Hill where we saw a beautiful sunset and then back to the hotel, where I soaked in the most luxurious bubble bath. As I wash my hair and enjoy every second Bob is preening himself in the bathroom mirror in his new TVF cycling top. He knows that after the Saturday night the Trekkers will be sleeping in monastery floors, with no heat and virtually no electricity. But he insists on complaining that he couldn't get a really cold beer in the hotel and that the water in the swimming pool was far too chilly. I happily splashed bath water over his new top to shut him up. Over the next five days I would get just one more chance to wash in running water. And

then all that was available in one of the monasteries was a miserable little dribble of a shower. A freezing cold one at that!

There was a lovely surprise at dinner on the first night when we celebrated Valentine's Day in Mandalay. Firstly, Bob and I went over to talk to a group of Scandinavians, who included four men in wheelchairs, and I thought just how brave the men were to undertake such a testing trip. And they were lots of fun, too. Meeting these adventurers reminded me of the real reason we were all in Myanmar, which was to raise money to help change the lives of disabled children. If the kids, we help turn out anything like the Scandinavian brave hearts the effort will have been more than worthwhile. At the end of dinner Lorna, who is Development Director of the TVF, waved her magic wand and Lint chocolates and roses appeared for all the ladies. A wonderful end to the day!



DAY 3 - We are a complete shower! You'll Never Walk Alone!

We wake at around 6am to the dulcet tones of Andy, the ever jolly young doctor, standing laughing and saying that it is time to rise and shine. After almost 10 hours' sleep on the monastery floor, I fumble around in the semi-light for my Johnson Baby wipes and toothbrush. There is no running water. Only a tin bowl with brackish water from a well. My mind conjures memories of steaming hot baths loaded with Badedas Bubbles as the gentle aroma of the baby wipes smooth away the grime and creases of the night.

I have bought six packets of Scots Porridge Oats and have one for breakfast. All you have to do is add hot water and that is it. The delicious fried bananas that the cooks have rustled up add a bit of colour and sweetness. And one morning there was even a pot of honey as well. By now I have packed my pyjamas away but keep the fleece out because even though I am in full trekking gear it is still very chilly and within a very short time we are on parade and trekking along a dried upriver bed. The discipline and timekeeping is excellent. There is no hanging around and waiting for latecomers and the camaraderie is first class. Peculiarly moving, in truth.

By 9am the morning has warmed up and we are climbing, climbing, climbing ---up into a pine forest with the sun sending beautiful shards of multi- coloured beams dancing through the giant trees. Beautiful as the scenery may be, hill climbing is hard work, and I am taking sips of water from my Camel every 15 minutes and also having a glucose tablet every hour.

This morning I am walking with Jean and Elizabeth and the conversation turns to food, food, glorious food! Or should I say OUR favourite food. Jean's vivid description of the gammon steak dripping in parsley sauce with mashed potatoes that her mum used to make actually makes my mouth start to water. And Elizabeth adds to my hunger pangs when she tells how her mum would make her favourite cheese dumplings when she went back to see the family in Austria. Then I suddenly feel weepy when I think of my dear old mum in her pinny fussing over the deliciously tasty beef hotpots that my sister Vicky and I loved so much.

Noon is approaching as we finally get to the top of the hill and as we emerge from the forest on to a sort of plateau. And lo and behold there is a tiny wooden hut with a smiling old man selling Myanmar beer! And because of the altitude and the forest it was cold as well Forget the Bollinger, the Laurent Perrier and the Veuve Clicquot. Cold beer sitting on the floor of a Burmese pine forest, overlooking a sun-drenched green valley, has to be the treat of all treats. Four solid hours of hill climbing with the temperature touching the 30c mark had drained a lot of energy. But those beers, ice cold and frothy, put it all back again ----at fantastic speed. Another lovely lunch is cooked by the bearers over an open fire, and we sit crossed leg in a circle to chatter and laugh ---and rest.

Another two hours trekking then brings us to the mid-afternoon tea stop and Graham, who is CEO of The Victoria Foundation, suddenly produces letters of support from our loved ones. The letters were a wonderful and touching surprise. I have enclosed below the one Bob sent to me. There we were in the middle of a forest in the north of Myanmar, miles from another human being. I am feeling weary and more than a little fragile and I am not too proud to say that it brought a tear or two to my eyes.



*Darling Gaynor,
Forget Gerry and the Pacemakers. This beautiful song was written by Rogers and Hammerstein for the 1945 musical Carousel. If you are feeling a little weary in the heat of the afternoons on those high ridges, try humming it for a few minutes.
If the thought of me singing to you doesn't bolt you back to action goodness knows what will!
All my love, BOB xxx*

*When you walk through a storm. Hold your head up high. And don't be afraid of the dark
At the end of the storm There's a golden sky. And the sweet silver song of a lark
Walk on through the wind. Walk on through the rain
Though your dreams be tossed and blown. Walk on walk on with hope in your heart
And you'll never walk alone. You'll never walk alone
When you walk through a storm. Hold your head up high. And don't be afraid of the dark
At the end of the storm Is a golden sky. And the sweet silver song of the lark
Walk on through the win.d Walk on through the rain. Though your dreams be tossed and blown.
Walk on walk on with hope in your hear. And you'll never walk alone You'll never walk*

It had been a tough, tough day and Bob's letter of support gave me a terrific lift. But nowhere the boost that we were to get that evening when we marched up to another monastery where there was a truly beautiful, blood red sunset casting a glow over the valley below.

At the back of the monastery there a tatty sort of wall of corrugated iron alongside a well. If the wall had been made of 24 carat gold, it could not have been a more welcome sight. It may have been little more than a rusty old pipe with a sort of Rose on the end. But even though it produced the most miserable dribble of water it was a real live shower. We all strip off at speed and take turns to our hair and clean up in running water for the first time for days. We are laughing and giggling, swapping shampoos and cream and drying off in the sunset---and making a lot of noise ---as girls do! So much so that doctor Andy is forced to remind us at dinner that night we ARE in a monastery. He is young enough to be the son of every one of us but took a deep breath and said, with a straight face, that we must keep our shoulders covered under all circumstances. Because he was such a lovely lad nobody actually laughed, but I had to smile when I thought of the giggling and laughing and some of the real sights



DAY 4

The day starts with a two-hour trek upwards and upwards again to a paved road, where we board the team coach for a journey that takes us up to Kalaw. This quaint little town was founded by the British in Colonial times as a hill station for civil servants fleeing the searing heat of the plains. Kalaw is at an altitude of just over 1,300 meters, which is around 4,200 feet. Not too far short of the height of Ben Nevis. A mist drifting gently round the hills creates an effect like wisps of cotton wool round the lower slopes as we start walking again with a two-hour trek. At the end of that two hours, we are now, according to an app on the phone of one of girls, at a height in excess of 1,600 meters. And it has been very hard work indeed.

We eventually reach the Myin Ka, a tiny village, which is clean and pretty. Throughout the trek we have come across no nasty smells at all. It is a tribute to the standards that the villagers keep because life is far from easy. On the way to the village, we see a man carrying two panniers of water that he has drawn from a well further down the hill towards the valley. The panniers are hooked on the end of a piece of bamboo that stretches over his shoulders, and they are so heavy that even our very fit guide Mr Twenty cannot lift even one off the ground.

Another daily task is gathering wood for the fires on which food is cooked because there is no heat or electricity. And temperatures in the winter can drop as low as 7 c. But testing as life is for these hardy people, they still found time to greet us with smiles and genuine warmth through the many villagers we visited through the week.



FINAL DAY --THEY THINK IT'S ALL OVER

It was a case of hangovers all round for the bleary-eyed porters at the start of the final day after heroically singing and drinking until the early hours. Sergeant Major Andy, for one last time, is jollying us into action as head torches are switched on with dawn still a good hour away. Andy's patience with the reunion of the St Trinian's Class of 1975 was quite remarkable. Almost saintly!

We had spent the night on the floor of the private home instead of a monastery. The house, on stilts, had just one big room with a balcony where we ate that delicious fish curry and peanut sauce. I had learned early in the trek never to unpack anything that wasn't absolutely necessary and finally got into a routine that worked perfectly. Shame it was the final day!

I must admit breakfast smelt nice and the pancakes that the cooks were churning out looked quite appetising. A little thick perhaps. So, I stuck to my last packet of Scot's Porridge Oats and poured on mounds of the wonderful honey that Mr Twenty produced for the pancakes. Dawn is bathing the fields in a gentle grey light as Andy makes one final check to make sure that boaters and school satchels have not been left behind and we swing back into action.

It is quiet for an hour so and the conversation turns to where we will be going when the adventure is over. Some were having a short time in Bangkok. Others were heading to a hotel where Bob and I have stayed in Hua Hin, which is where the summer palace of the Thai royal family is located. Nikki tells us that she would be linking with her brother, who lives in Kuala Lumpur, for a few days in Kota Kinabalu. He had invited her to join him in climbing the 4,000 meters high (13, 000 feet) mount Kinabalu. She made us burst out laughing when she said how much she had appreciated his kind offer. She had told him that after sleeping on monastery floors and not having access to running water or electricity for days on end she would have just the opportunity to go mount climbing. She added: 'Sadly I had to explain to him that right in the middle of what would have been the Kinabalu climb I had booked myself in for a full day ----at the most luxurious spa I could find I the whole of Borneo.'

It was a really hot morning by 10 am and would reach 35c around 1pm but we are hammering along at a cracking pace because we want to beat the cyclists to a cafe on the banks of a river near Dein. It will be the first time we have seen the Cycle Challenge team since Mandalay, and we all want to see the look on their faces and as we sit there with a glass of ice-cold beer when they trundle in to view.

After a short rest we form up again and this part of the walk is along a dried up river bed. Mr. Twenty tells me that it is just two months to go to the rainy season when this dried up river bed will turn in to a raging torrent. and that is why the houses on either side are built on stilts. We are warned by Andy to be extra careful on this last leg of the trek. There are large rocks and stones to navigate on the riverbed and the last thing we need is a twisted knee or a broken ankle. I look over to a group of our girls. Christine is leading the way and I mentally take my hat off to her. She has had a really nasty cough for much of the trek but never complained once.

It had been really hard at times as we clocked more than 90 miles on the trek up fierce hills and on Day Three reached a maximum altitude of 1, 600 meters. So high, in fact, that my ears started to pop at one stage. Goodness me, it was difficult enough even without a chest infection.

We leave the riverbed and trek for another hour or so until we come to a bridge across another river, which is crystal clear after swirling down from the hills. Over the bridge we go and in past the ruins at Dein and towards a group of restaurants. Suddenly there is burst of clapping and cheering. The cyclists are on their feet applauding us over an imaginary finishing line. It gave us the most tremendous lift. I almost felt as if I had won an Olympic gold medal and then it was tears, and hugs and handshakes for everybody. But even better was the fact that there was a proper loo at the restaurant. An immaculately clean, sit down one with toilet paper and a soap dispenser which smelt divine. It was the first we had seen for almost a week!

We spent a happy hour scoffing lunch with and swapping tales with the cyclists. Then we walked to a little pier on the river where we were boarded, four by four, into James Bond-style long boats with a powerful, growling engines that created a huge frothy wake. The journey through canal-style

waterways, flanked by lush green jungle, took us out on to the very beautiful Inle Lake, where the boatman opened the throttle and let rip. The engine is roaring, and spray is flying as we bounce at tremendous speed across the lake. But nobody minds getting a soaking because the temperature has hit the 35c mark. We are in our trekking gear and the cooling breeze, and the spray is an absolute treat.

It was an hour and a half of pure bliss after the heat and dust of that dried riverbed earlier in the day. There was an even bigger treat when we eventually docked on the other side of the lake because after a 10-minute coach ride we are deposited outside a French -style winery, which was set on a hillside overlooking the lake.

More to the point we had beaten the cyclists there. To be fair, they did have to ride another 20 miles at the end of their boat trip. But we pointedly ignored minor details like that when we repeatedly asked what 'What kept you.' We had beaten them to the winery and in the finest of St Trinian's old girls' traditions we gave them an even bigger thrashing in the Wine Tasting Stakes.

The biggest cheer of the night at the farewell dinner came when chairman Graham announced that the sponsorship money raised for disabled children would top the £25,000 mark. There had been lots of hard work for both the Trekkers and the Cyclists. There had been lots of aches and pains. And lots and lots of fun but nobody forgot the main reason for the Myanmar Trek and Cycle Challenge.

