

Gallery VIIIA
A Stroll Through Old Rangoon

Words and Photography by Kennie Ting

Downtown Yangon is like an open-air museum; an ode in brick, mortar and cast iron, to the British Empire (and the British Raj, of which Yangon was the Eastern-most point, until Burma became a colonial possession in its own right). If it weren't for the fact that so many of the buildings were in a state of dereliction; and those that weren't had delicate Burmese script dancing all over the front, one would think that one had stepped out of the hansom cab, into Old Rangoon.

British Burma existed for just over half a century (1885 – 1942), but Lower Burma and Yangon were British colonies from 1852. In its heyday at the turn of the 19th century, Yangon was a key node in international trade and finance networks. In outlook, it was almost indistinguishable from many of the port cities and treaty ports that dotted maritime and continental Southeast and East Asia.

Which is to say that it was largely a foreign city in its own land. The Burmese were a minority here, and since they lived mostly in the suburbs, one would be hard-pressed to come across them in the city centre.

The overwhelming majority of the population in Old Rangoon was from the Indian Subcontinent – Klings from the Coromandel Coast, Indian Muslims from Bangladesh, Sikhs, Parsis and Gujaratis. In colonial times, they made up an entire class of military officials, civil servants, merchants and money-lenders. But today, they are no longer allowed to occupy formal positions in the government, military and civil service.

The Chinese are also here, but are far less distinguishable from the Burmese themselves. Like the rest of the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia, the Chinese here are from the South, belonging to the Hokkien, Cantonese and Hakka dialect groups primarily. Some still speak the language. As in the rest of continental Southeast Asia (where the Chinese have largely assimilated with the indigenous population), the

ethnic Chinese have held strong positions of power: General Ne Win, former Prime Minister of Burma, was ethnic Chinese; so is Khin Nyunt, another former Prime Minister.

This gallery presents two views of Old Rangoon. The first is a glimpse into colonial Rangoon – where can be found some of the finest Victorian architecture still standing this side of London. This part of the stroll takes place East of the Sule Pagoda, where these monumental civic and governmental buildings are concentrated. Here, the street names still recall London – Strand Road, Bank Road, Merchant Road, Pansoedan Road (once Phayre Road); and the atmosphere is reminiscent of Shanghai or Singapore.

The second part of the gallery presents multi-cultural and multi-religious Rangoon. West of and around Sule Pagoda, in Chinatown and Little India, the intrepid wanderer may find secreted in the orderly British-imposed grid of old quarter, more than a dozen different places of worship for Yangon's many religions and peoples. Most of these are still active, and sit alongside shophouses and apartment buildings from the early 1900s, that still house bustling communities of people, living as they probably did more than a century ago.

Yangon's vibrancy and timelessness is its strength, and I do hope that with sweeping political and economic change taking place right now, just enough attention is paid to the issue of heritage preservation, both built and intangible, such that the city never entirely sloughs its older skin.

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Fig. 1 – The gleaming white façade of the British Embassy, Strand Road. Formerly the J & F. Graham & Co. Building.



Fig. 2 – Romanesque balustrades of the Myanmar Port Authority Building, Strand Road.



Fig. 3 – The Accountant General's Office, corner of Strand Road and Pansoedan Road.



Fig. 4 – The sun sets over Bulloch Bros & Co. Building, Strand Road. It is currently a post office.



Fig. 5 – The Customs House, Strand Road.



Fig. 6 – The New Law Courts Building, Strand Road.



Fig 7 – Former Bank of Bengal Building, Strand Road and Sule Pagoda Road.



Fig. 8 – First Private Bank, Bank Street.



Fig. 9 – Reserve Bank of India, Sule Pagoda Road.



Fig. 10 – Chartered Bank of India, Australia and China Building, Pansoedan Road.



Fig. 11 – Sofaer & Co's Building, Pansoedan Road and Merchant Road. Note the new apartment block coming up to the left.



Fig. 12 – Rander House, Pansoedan Road



Fig. 13 – Ascott & Co. Building, Merchant Road.



Fig. 14 – Oriental Life Assurance Building, Merchant Road. Now the Indian Embassy.



Fig. 15 – S. Oppenheimer & Co. Building, Merchant Road.



Fig. 16 – Government Telegraph Office, Pansoedan Road.



Fig. 17 – Rowe & Co. Building, undergoing refurbishment. Mahabandula Road and Mahabandula Garden Street.



Fig. 18 – High Court, Mahabandula Garden Street.



Fig. 19 – Central Fire Station, Sule Pagoda Road.



Fig. 20 – The Secretariat Building, where Bogyoke Aung San was assassinated, Bo Aung Kyaw Street.



Fig. 21 – Government Press Buildings, Thienphyu Road.



Fig. 22– Bogyoke Market, formerly Scotts Market, Bogyoke Aung San Road.



Fig. 23 – Sule Pagoda.



Fig. 24 – Immanuel Baptist Church, Mahabandoola Garden Street.



Fig. 25 – St Mary's Cathedral, Bo Aung Kyaw Street.



Fig. 26 – Yangon Central Railway Station.



Fig. 27 – Trinity Cathedral, Shwedagon Pagoda Road.



Fig. 28 – Sri Sochi Vinayagar Temple (1858), 24th Street.



Fig. 29 – Shophouses, just beside the Hindu Temple on 24th Street.



Fig. 30 – Ornate façade of the Liao San Tao Temple (龍山堂), Latha Road.



Fig. 31 – Thein Gyi Market, occupying an entire block. This façade sits along Mahabandoola Road and 25th Street.



Fig. 32 – Musmeah Yeshua Synagogue.



Fig. 33 – Minarets of the Mamsa Mosque, 26th Street.



Fig. 34 – Cast iron architecture, Mahabandoola Road.



Fig. 35 – Ornate Romanesque architecture of the Shree Jain Schwetamber Murtipujak Temple, 29th Street. Note the human figures in between the top-floor windows.



Fig. 36 – Mogul Shiah Masjid, established by the Iranian community, long since gone. 30th Street.



Fig. 37 – Local Indian family visiting the Shri Kalima Temple, Konzedan Road.



Fig. 38 – His Highness The Aga Khan Building, Ismaili khanaqah, 28th Street.



Fig. 39 – Another beautiful Hindu Temple, all white. Probably the Sri Kamichi Temple on Bogyoke Aung San Road and Bo Sun Pet Street.



Fig. 40 – Distinctive architecture of the Islam Building, Bo Soon Pet Street.



Fig. 41 – More Romanesque architecture, Bo Soon Pet Street.



Fig. 42 – St John's Church, Bo Soon Pet Street.