

InDepth

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THAUNG SU NYEIN

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MORE TRAVEL
MORE LIFESTYLE

6 STREETS OF YANGON

28TH STREET

Bob Percival walks 28th Street in downtown Yangon, uncovers Pakistani prayer mats, a fifties-style barber shop, wedding dresses, but not the elusive C.J.Richards.

It's 8.30am and the sun is just rising above the taller buildings. The cool of the early morning is gently being swept away. I am with my friend San Lin Tun, the writer. We have survived Thingyan and now want to just relax and walk the streets of Yangon. San Lin Tun is also looking out to buy an old C. J Richards book if possible. He is on a mission to make this little known English poet well-known again, if he ever was. It's hard to know.

At the bottom of 28th and Merchant Street the Burmese-Indian drivers and workers wait with their pickups ready to take anybody or anything, anywhere; how

about twenty people to Bagan for 200,000Ks, deal done. Not far away is the dosa stall, one pot boiling with rice, the other simmering with hard-boiled eggs; all this with potato and eggplant curry for 600Ks. Scattered along the bottom block are mobile stores, old colonial buildings, water sellers, family groceries and numerous suppliers of bathroom fittings. This is the place to buy your new toilet, sit-down or stand-up. The pick of the **lower block** is the aptly named Pak Store, selling all things Pakistani. Here you can find spices, rice, clothes, soaps, and high quality prayer mats (janamas) imported all the way from Turkey

(8000Ks). The owner's father moved from India to Myanmar in 1959 when things felt a bit safer.

Across to the **middle block** between Mahabandoola and Anawrahta Roads, and the street becomes a shopping area for chemical supplies and detergents. Shops like One Three Five overflow with test tubes, beakers, glass flasks and pipettes, as well as chemical reagents and thermometers. If you are in to some modern decor on your shelves at home, this is the store. Out in the street the sweet smell of stores selling fragrance and flavours wafts through the air. The aroma is truly



Photos by Bob Percival

STREETS OF YANGON 7



eclectic. Nearby is KoTharHla Hair Style, a single line of white porcelain barber chairs that take you back to the fifties. Here also is one of my favourite betel nut stalls, run by a Indian lady who seems to be always entertaining her women friends, smiling and laughing, some in traditional dress.

The upper block, heading towards Bogyoke Market, is mainly taken up by white-tiled seven-story apartments, all built in the last decade, plus numerous stores selling second-hand audio speakers and electricity regulators. There are nice old colonial buildings here as well. There are some interesting shop signs in the streets of Yangon, but the Myanmar As-

tro Research Bureau is probably one of the best. The place never seems to be open. Maybe there is no need for research anymore; across the road is a small and friendly Buddhist temple. Small tea and food stalls line the footpaths, full of customers on their way to work. Amongst the drab colour of its surroundings a bridal shop displays wedding dresses, in pink, blue, purple and aquamarine; a jewel protruding from bare rock. A cool breeze picks up, the cold air rushing down the narrow streets to the rising heated air of Rangoon River. Flags wave and banners ripple. At the end of the street on the corner is Than Aung's bookshop. He has been selling books here for forty years. We ask for the elusive C.J. Richards and any of his even more

elusive poetry books. Than Aung smiles, gold teeth gleaming in the morning light. He looks very young for sixty-eight. He is very interested in the poet but unfortunately cannot help. He will keep a look out for us in the future, just in case. Come and talk to Than Aung about books. All are welcome. ■

Bob Percival is a travel writer and historian now living in Yangon for over a year, after spending four years in Yunnan doing research for a novel. He is presently completing his PhD in Creative Writing. He loves Yangon and regularly does walking tours. Bob can be reached on projectsdada@mac.com

