

# Learning with The Irrawaddy, No. 26

To accompany the **February 2008** issue of The Irrawaddy magazine.

Selected article: *The Railway Bazaar*, adapted from the online article

## A. Activities before reading

### Activity 1 Who takes the train?

The topic of this article is train travel in Burma. What kind of people do you think take the train? In pairs, look at the list below and discuss which people you think take the train in Burma. When you have finished, discuss your answers with another pair, explaining your reasons.

- Teachers
- Army Generals
- Taxi drivers
- Fruit sellers
- Tourists
- Students
- Chinese businessmen
- Beggars

### Activity 2 Organise the story

The sentences below make a story that describes Mo Aye's journey to work by train. They are in the wrong order. Read through them with a partner and rearrange them so they are in the correct order. Compare your answer with another group.

Then I paid for my food and walked to the station.  
Eventually the train came at 7 am and we left for Rangoon.  
While I was eating I met some friends and we chatted for a while.  
We arrived in Rangoon at 9.25am and I was late for work again!  
This morning I woke up at 5.30am, took a shower and left the house.  
I was worried that I would be late if we didn't start moving again soon.  
When I arrived it was very busy, I bought my ticket and went to the platform.  
On my way to the station I stopped at the teashop for some breakfast.  
On the way the train stopped moving and the driver spent 40 minutes fixing the problem.  
The train was supposed to arrive at 6.30am, but by 6.45am it had not come.

### Activity 3 Train Timetables

Train timetables provide information about when trains depart from and arrive at different stations. Below is a timetable of trains travelling from Yangon (Rangoon) to Mandalay each day. Use the information in the table to fill the gaps in the passage.

## Yangon ► Mandalay

Train number:	31	5	3	11	1	7	29
Yangon (Rangoon)	03:15	05:00	05:30	06:00	08:30	12:00	12:45
Bago (Pegu)	05:05	06:51	07:21	07:50	10:36	13:50	
Taungoo	09:27	11:28	12:19	12:38	17:08	18:23	19:00
Pyinmana (Naypyitaw)	11:45	13:48	14:36	15:13	20:09	20:43	21:05
Thazi	-	16:56	18:03	18:38	00:40	-	00:03
Mandalay	-	20:10	21:30	22:00	06:00	-	03:00

There are \_\_\_\_\_ trains to Pyinmana everyday, only \_\_\_\_\_ of these trains go all the way to Mandalay. On Saturday I will take the 5 am train from Rangoon to Mandalay, the train will stop \_\_\_\_\_ times before arriving in Mandalay. I will arrive in Mandalay at \_\_\_\_\_. The journey will take \_\_\_\_\_ hours and \_\_\_\_\_ minutes. My cousin, who lives in Bago, will go to visit his family in Thazi tomorrow. His mother asked him to arrive before 7 pm, so the latest he can leave by train is \_\_\_\_\_.

### B. Activities during reading

#### **Activity 4** Match the captions

A caption is the text that is used to describe a photo. There are eight pictures in this article. Below are eight captions. Try to match each caption with the correct photo.

- a) **Photo** \_\_\_\_: It's a free ride for youngsters who cling to the backs of Rangoon's trains
- b) **Photo** \_\_\_\_: Hard floors, hard seats – Burma's trains are slow and uncomfortable
- c) **Photo** \_\_\_\_: Burmese monks walk the tracks on their morning alms round
- d) **Photo** \_\_\_\_: A train leaves platform 3 of Rangoon's main railway station for the two-hour run to Pegu
- e) **Photo** \_\_\_\_: Life between the tracks- everything stops for tea in Rangoon
- f) **Photo** \_\_\_\_: In the driver's cab – changing lines at Rangoon's main railway station
- g) **Photo** \_\_\_\_: The railroad tracks offer slim pickings for boys who collect wayside rubbish
- h) **Photo** \_\_\_\_: Standing Room only – Burma's trains are often hopelessly overcrowded

#### **Activity 5** Vocabulary

Read through the text and find the words listed below. Try to match each word with its definition.

<b>Rickety</b>	<b>Assigned</b>	<b>Consequence</b>	<b>Inconsistent</b>
<b>High-ranking</b>	<b>Provision</b>	<b>Commuter</b>	<b>Hiked</b>
	<b>Hawkers</b>	<b>Precariously</b>	<b>Plying</b>

- a) Increased very quickly
- b) Someone who travels regularly from one place to another
- c) The effect or result of something which happened earlier
- d) Likely to break or fall apart
- e) Something provided or supplied
- f) Not in agreement
- g) Given a task, role or duty
- h) Working busily
- i) Not safely
- j) People who sells things by calling out
- k) People who sell things
- l) To have a senior position at work

**Activity 6** Paragraph summaries

The sentences below are summaries of five paragraphs from the article. Read the text again and try to match each summary with the correct article.

- a) Recently, more people in Burma have been taking the train.
- b) The military Government has failed to make train travel better.
- c) Some people use the train to ask for money.
- d) Even people with a lot of money have begun taking the train.
- e) Several problems prevent Burma’s rail network from improving.

Now read paragraph 5 of the text and write a sentence of no more than 10 words to summarise what is written.

**Activity 7** Describing pictures

Below are 2 paragraphs that each describes a photo from the article. Read the descriptions and match them with the correct photo.

- a) A man carrying a plastic bag is walking past a train in the station. There are some people holding onto the back of the train. One of the people is holding a big sack. In the background there are some women talking.
- b) There are many people in this picture. Some are sitting and some are standing. One of the people has a food container and another has a big book. In the middle of the picture there is a pregnant woman surrounded by three children.

Now look at photo H. In the left column of the table below, write what you can see. In the right column, write down what you can imagine.

When you have completed the table, use your information to write a paragraph describing the picture.

What can you see?	What can you imagine?

### C. Activities after reading

#### Activity 8 Driver's diary

Photo F shows a picture of a train driver and his assistant. What do you think the life of a train driver is like in Burma? Do you think it is a difficult job?

Try to imagine you are a train driver in Burma and write a diary entry describing a day at work.

#### Activity 9 Meeting on the train

Everyday you commute between your village and Rangoon. The journey takes two hours. Often you see the same people everyday. One morning you sit next to someone who you recognise, but don't know. After traveling for a while you start speaking to each other.

Write a dialogue of this conversation – remember you have never met before. What would you say? After you have written the dialogue, practice for a while. Your teacher will ask some of you to perform your conversation.

#### Activity 10 Retell the story

Look back at the story in Activity 2. How do you think Mo Aye was feeling during his journey to work? Do you think he was feeling good the whole time? Or did his mood change along the way? In pairs try to complete the table below by describing times in the story when Mo Aye was feeling good or bad. We have given you an example.

Feeling Good	Feeling Bad
<i>Meeting friends at the teashop</i>	

Now, use what you have written in the table and the information in the original story to retell the story in your own words. Try to use about the same number of sentences as the original.

## The Railway Bazaar

By Yeni

### Rangoon's rickety railways a slice of life

1 Overcrowded and overheated carriages, backbreaking hard seats and rickety railroad tracks—this is the reality of traveling by train in Burma. Although the government has tried to improve many major lines in the past few years, most remain in poor repair and are not passable during the monsoon season.



Photo A

2 In a 1999 report by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, Burma was assigned a "significant role" in the development of a trans-Asia railroad network, linking China, Southeast and South Asia.



Photo B

3 Yet major obstacles remained, the report said. "The speeds of freight trains are heavily restricted on all existing links as a consequence of poor track and bridge conditions. The maximum speed for freight trains has been quoted as 24 km per hour, suggesting that commercial speeds on this section could be as low as 12-14 km per hour."

4 The report concluded: "Clearly, operation at such low speed levels would be inconsistent with the future provision of an efficient and competitive rail container service."

5 Burma has a railroad network totaling 3,991 km (2,480 miles) in length, with more than 320 locomotives and 4,000 carriages. The 11 locomotives on Rangoon's own suburban loop line, totaling 45.9 km, call at 39 stations and provide a major commuter service, selling about 150,000 tickets daily.

6 The popularity of the Rangoon commuter line leapt when fuel prices were hiked in August, 2007, and rail travel became considerably cheaper than the city bus service.

7 A Rangoon civil servant told *The Irrawaddy* that the cost of his daily journeys to and from work had halved since taking the train.

8 “Before September, only low-paid civil servants, vendors and laborers regularly traveled by train,” he said. “Nowadays you can see even high-ranking officials and businessmen on the train.”

9 Less desirable elements also favor train travel—drug addicts, for instance, who turn the carriages into “shooting galleries” when they reach the relative safety of the outer suburbs.

10 Beggars ride the train, including former servicemen disabled by war. Hawkers clamber precariously from one carriage to another along the connecting links, crossing them like a tightrope before plying their trade with cries of “Snacks, snacks!”



**Photo C**



Riding the Rangoon commuter train is a good way to see a cross section of Burmese life.

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**Photo D**



**Photo E**



**Photo F**



**Photo G**



**Photo H**