



KARL MALAKUNAS/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Comedians Lu Maw, center, and Par Par Lay, the Moustache Brothers, and their cousin Lu Zaw, left, at a Mandalay street theater.

Big Brother . . . is not laughing

By Lloyd Frost
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

MANDALAY, Burma — What do you say when a former political prisoner invites you to his home?

This is neither a flippant question nor the beginning of a joke. Burma has been run by military junta since 1962; since 1989, the country's rulers have called it Myanmar. Citizens who criticize the powers that be can be jailed, for years.

It was a sweltering, bone-dry afternoon, and tiny clouds of dust billowed around our feet on the dirt streets of Mandalay. My friend Hannah and I were waddling back to the sumptuous Sedona Hotel, after a filling and cheap lunch at the Too Too Restaurant. A dozen small courses had cost just under \$5. On the nearly deserted street, a middle-aged man wearing a wide-brim hat and longyi (a sarong-like skirt worn by many Burmese men) slowly pedaled by on an old bicycle. As he looked over, I was expecting yet another offer to rent a trishaw or a taxi. Instead he called out excitedly, "Mou-stache Brother!" Seconds later he braked and slowly approached us with a friendly smile. He pointed first to himself, then to my friend's guidebook. Then he exclaimed again, "Mou-stache Brother!"

Sure enough, he sported a mustache and goatee that stood out prominently against his clean-shaven golden skin. But what the heck was this guy selling? He motioned to Hannah's guidebook and she passed it over. He rifled to his desired page, where a photo of himself and his two Moustache Brothers smiled out at us.

"I Par Par Lay, Moustache Brother Number One," he assured us, and leaned back on his bicycle. Now it was Hannah's turn to get excited. "Oh, yes, he and his brothers perform traditional Burmese theater in their home. They are quite well known, we should go and see them!"

Par Par Lay's English was quite limited. After he gave us his card and we agreed to see his act that night, he smiled and wheeled off into the heat.

I really didn't know whom I had just met. The Moustache Brothers have a 30-year history of performing traditional Burmese "a-nyeint," a vaudeville-like smor-

gord of comedy, song, dance, and music. Two of the "brothers" have spent time in jail, most notably Par Par Lay, 57, for performing jokes about the ruling powers. His first sentence was six months for subtly comparing his large hat to the protection that the elected National League for Democracy could offer. (The NLD won a majority of seats in the 1990 election but was never allowed to take power.)

At the 1996 Independence Day celebrations hosted by Aung San Suu Kyi, Lay joked about army generals who took bribes. That time he received seven years, with hard labor and no family visits. Amnesty International's involvement led to his release after four

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years. Possibly the ultimate punishment is that he is no longer allowed to perform in public.

That evening, we hired a cab driven by a slim man in his 30s. "So, you like to go somewhere tonight?" he asked.

"We'd like to see the Moustache Brothers tonight," I said. "How about you take us there, and pick us up after their show?"

Our driver stared away in silence.

"Um. No. Is not good for me to go there."

"What?"

"Yes. Is not good. People are watching, who comes and who goes." The man was scared. I wondered if I should be likewise. Instead, I consulted our city map.

"Well, how about you drop us off at this restaurant two blocks away, then we'll meet you there after the show?"

He thought about this. "Yes, at the restaurant."

Dust swirled in the occasional car's headlights as we walked down 81st Street. A couple of folks pedaled by on bicycles. Most of the illumination was from people's homes, or the restaurant we had just left. Pretty grim for an evening stroll in a city where elec-

tricity brownouts are common.

But the energy was flowing in the Moustache Brothers home on 39th Street.

Par Par Lay, now dressed in sparkling white shirt and trousers with a natty vest, greeted us as we entered their performance space. The comfortable ground-floor room was bedecked with traditional Burmese puppets and masks, also an aged cabinet with television and VCR. The dozen chairs filled quickly as other travelers arrived.

Brother Lu Maw kicked off the evening, welcoming us in fluent English with his energetic comedy routine, beginning with a few comments about his country. He slyly lamented how a galloping inflation rate makes Burmese bank notes obsolete, then quickly shifted to his infatuation with Hollywood starlets, particularly his profound disappointment that when Demi Moore married, he had lost all hope of her being his "sugar mummy."

As Par Par Lay picked up a drum and seemed to wander out the door, Lu Maw glibly recounted his brief reign as Brother Number One during his elder brother's imprisonment. He popped a tape into the VCR and treated us to the scene from "About a Boy," where Par Par Lay's plight is fleetingly brought to Hollywood's silver screen. I was finally getting the picture. While the military rules, and there is reportedly government surveillance of their home, only foreigners show up.

Then Par Par Lay returned, pounding his drum as the two brothers, joined by Lu Zaw ("Moustache Number Three" but in truth a clean-shaven cousin) and an unnamed sister-in-law, sang, joked, and danced their way through the evening.

Sadly, the show was over too soon. For their finale, the Moustache Brothers crouched together, holding signs with bold red lettering. "KGB" read Lu Zaw's, Par Par Lay's proclaimed "Most Wanted," and Lu Maw's warned "Moustache Brothers Are Under Surveillance." The three grinned widely, reminding me of another brother act by a famous entertainment family — named Marx.

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If you go . . .

How to get there

There are no direct flights to Burma from North America. Singapore Airlines flies nonstop from Newark to Singapore in 18 hours, then sister company Silk Air connects to Burma's capital, Rangoon. Air Mandalay (www.airmandalay.com) flies from Rangoon to Mandalay in 1½ hours. Singapore travel agents are well versed in arranging flights inside Burma and personalized packages.

Where to stay

Sedona Hotel Mandalay
Corner of 26th & 66th streets
www.sedonamyanmar.com
A modern North American-style hotel with all the amenities including an outdoor pool on a well-maintained lawn, gym, bar, ice cream shop, generous buffet breakfast, and attentive staff. North-facing rooms offer the dramatic view of the Mandalay Palace and moat. From \$90.

Where to eat

Too Too Restaurant
27th Street, between 74th and 75th
Traditional Burmese food is served from a long line of pots; point and super friendly staff will use their smattering of English to explain what you've ordered. Plastic dishes, casual and clean atmosphere, filled with local citizens. A meal for two, about \$5.

What to do

The Moustache Brothers
The troupe performs nightly at 8:30, with a suggested donation of about \$2.50.

Mandalay Fort

Immense palace compound built in 1857 and surrounded by a moat, now home to Burmese soldiers. A spiral staircase leads to the top of a 108-foot-high watchtower for panoramic views. Admission \$10; passport required.

Mingun

One of several ancient cities outside Mandalay, reached by a one-hour boat ride on the placid Irrwaddy River. \$20 charters a boat. Wander the Buddhist shrines. Restaurants and craft shops abound.

Budget adds an option to gassing up rental cars

By Bruce Mohl
GLOBE STAFF

Budget Rent A Car is offering customers a third flat-fee option for gassing up their vehicles at the end of rental.

The Sensible Traveler

Most rental car companies offer two options: to prepay for a tank of gas at the time of rental and return the car as empty as possible, or to return the vehicle with a full tank or else pay a steep premium for any gas the company must add.

Budget's new option is to pay a flat fee of \$9.50 as long as the car is driven less than 75 miles.

Susan McGowan, a spokeswoman for Budget, said it saves time and money for travelers making relatively short trips because they don't have to top off the tank before returning the car or pay for gas they don't need.

"It's simple," she said. "It's geared to business travelers or anyone making a short trip."

Avis, which like Budget is owned by Cendant Corp., is also experimenting with the flat-fee fuel option at select locations, but only Budget has rolled it out nationwide.

Rental car companies have long used gasoline as a means to wring more money out of their customers. Budget's flat-fee option doesn't end the problem, but it helps.

I usually choose the full-tank option, because I think it's easier to fill up the tank before returning the car than to prepay for a tank of gas and try to return it empty. Neither option is ideal.

I have been on a lot of trips where I am short of time and dashing around to find a gas station. I also have been on trips

where I have prepaid for a full tank but returned it half full. Mostly, it seems you can't win.

The penalty under the full-tank option is particularly annoying. Rental car companies charge steep premiums, often more than 100 percent of the prevailing retail price, for every gallon of gasoline they have to add to return the tank to full. At Orlando International Airport, Budget was charging more than \$4 a gallon, Enterprise Rent-A-Car \$3.50, National Car Rental \$5.99, and Hertz Corp. \$6.39 a gallon.

The regular price in the area, which the companies were charging for the prepay option, ranged from \$2.05 to \$2.49 a gallon in a weeklong period.

Rental car companies say the premium they charge customers who fail to return the tank full is partly to cover their extra costs

and partly as a deterrent.

"We want to deter people from taking that option and returning the car empty," McGowan said. "We are not a service station per se."

Maybe, but companies have no problem filling the tank for the prepay option and Budget is now refilling the tank with its new \$9.50 flat-fee option.

Laura Bryant, a spokeswoman for Enterprise, said rental car companies do pump a lot of gas, but that the steep premiums for customers who do not return their tanks full are designed to cover unplanned costs.

"It's a matter of planning and allocation of resources and time," she said.

Contact Bruce Mohl at mohl@globe.com.

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