



This is Thingyan

In Myanmar the new year is all about water



It's around 6am in the middle of April. I'm in the small town of Myeik on the coast of Myanmar. Not much has changed since George Orwell's times.

Citywide chanting comes on way too loud, echoing all through the streets. But today, no wake up call is needed. Everyone's up early. Every kid in town is already on the street, in front of their house, wearing a slightly evil and overexcited grin on their faces. They've been waiting for this day all year.

In their hands is a weapon of choice. The older ones tend to go for buckets, the younger kids stick to water guns or plastic bowls. Near each group there is a supply magazine — a giant water cooler — filled not just with water but ice. A motorbike appears on the horizon, the first victim. The grins stretch wider, excitement grows higher. Check your ammo, fix your grip on the weapon. Get ready... Four days of absolute madness is about to kick off. The countrywide water-war starts with a merciless... *Splash!*

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Water Wars

Non-participation during Thingyan, the Burmese New Year and Water Festival, is not an option. Neither is staying dry. Yet there's not a single grump in sight. The collective thrill is addictive.

So you climb onto the open-back minivan, one of many. Around a plastic tarp-covered speaker, which blasts bad pop way too loud for

comfort, you crouch around with a group of soaked locals. Their enthusiasm grows even higher — a white face is still a rare, giggle-inducing sight here. Then your fear kicks in as you see the real madness ahead.

Makeshift stages set up along the road, one after another, as far as you can see.

Forget buckets! Those bucket kids were amateurs! Here, they've got industrial strength water hoses shooting in every direction! Those damn things hurt! But you suck it up and as you open your eyes and shake the water out of your ears, among the wild bumper-to-bumper traffic, there's a crowd dancing around you, as if in a trance.

Bikes, cars, people on top of buses; anything on wheels. And hundreds, no thousands, on foot.

There are bicycles with creative DIY sidecars carrying whole families. Drops of water fly through the air in slow motion. The roads turn into rivers.

"That's such a waste of water!" you think, as kids nearby recycle dirty puddles to fill up their buckets. Then you get distracted with the sweet smell of *thanaka* — the traditional sunscreen and cosmetic — that hangs in the air. It's too much for the senses. Someone hands you a beer but your 'thanks' gets lost in the noise and you didn't even catch his face. You pop it open and you drink it in one go. Seconds later you're under water-cannon attack again.

Not for Everyone

After some hours, you feel relief when instead of hoses and ice water, you see kids with plastic containers. Especially the little ones — there's a good chance they'll miss and you get a bit of satisfaction when they do. Some taunt you with big, empty buckets, just to watch you scramble for cover as they laugh. Everyone around seems to have endless energy.

Well, you've had the thrill of your life but you're exhausted and cold. You hop off, ready to call it a day. And as you do, you face a young, reddish-robed monk, no older than six or seven. And you are gripped by sadness.

Monks don't participate in the water fun. He discreetly glances at his thoroughly-soaked peers swinging water left and right nearby and in his eyes there's so much longing, held-back excitement, envy.

Before you know it, an older monk rushes the boy along and he's gone. You're left on your own, in a brief moment of quiet contemplation... Apparently not brief enough.

Where the monk just stood, three kids have taken his place. *Splash!* And again. *Splash!* And another. *Splash!*

This is Thingyan. — *Matt Dworzanczyk*

Matt Dworzanczyk is a filmmaker, writer and a long-time Hanoi expat, currently on a motorbike journey from Hanoi, loosely headed towards Nepal. For more on Matt's films and travels, visit etheriumsky.com. You can follow his monthly trip diary in Word 