Far left to right: A traditional Chinese medicine display in Mong La’s central market; a baby black bear for sale as meat; fresh game meat fetches top prices; a Sambar deer.
THE ROAD to the town of Mong La in Myanmar’s Shan State twists through mountains of swayng forest and swirllng bamboo, sudden drop-offs and breathtaking vistas, turns past Buddhist shrines and temples and monasteries. It drops into valleys where the land flattens and shatters into brown and green rice paddies, marked by clusters of bamboo-sided and straw-thatched houses on stilts and animated by grazing water buffalo and con-eated farmers bent at the waist in the yellow sun, pulling up clumps of green rice and slapping them into the brown water. The setting is sereney pastoral, and since we have travelling during the dry season, the predominant col-our is brown, while the main smell and taste are subtly asso-ociated with dust... until, suddenly, from out of the dry land and the brown-watered valleys emerges a flood of lush, green grass surrounded by bright-green shrubbery and trees. It’s a golf course, which is immediately followed by a high gate, a pair of armed, grim-faced guards in military fatigue, and then, beyond the gate, the unfolding vision of a great white McPalace, a vaguely Greek revival statement in heavy rectan-gles and white stucco. One of my two travelling companions comments, as we drive past, ‘A lot of New York City junkies paid for this.’ Shan State’s Special Region 4 was created in April 1989 as a semi-autonomous piece of northeastern Myanmar after a ceasefire between the Myanmarese army and certain drug-dealing communist rebels. ‘Semi-autonomous’ means essen-tially autonomous. This is a place with its own visa require-ments, civil service and army, and with all public and private vehicles marked by the distinctive ‘SR4’ license plate. Sharing a border with China’s Yunnan province, Special Region 4 has also taken on a decidedly Chinese flavour. The telephone signals pass through Chinese networks. The cur-rency is the Chinese Yuan. Most ordinary conversations take place in Mandarin. The guy who appears to be in charge, Gen-eral Sai Leun rose to become a contender in Myanmar: a communist rebel leader and opium enterpreneur with enough influence to warrant his own mugshot on the official US list of interna-tional drug lords and criminals. Today, General Sai lives more modestly as the anti-drug lord for Special Region 4.

Welcome to Mong La

Green reverts to brown. The road rambles and wavers into the town of Mong La, which is the jewel in the crown of Special Region 4. We stop for lunch at an ordinary Chinese restau-rant, open to the street, and while savouring green tea after fried rice, are surprised by the sight of a large blue-and-white garbage truck backing up to some bags of trash. This just might be the only mechanised garbage pick-up in all of Myan-mar, I’m thinking, and as if to stress the distinction, a back-up warning signal beeps out an electronic rendition of ‘Santa Claus is Coming to Town.’ Still, Mong La is a Buddhist town, and after lunch and then a hotel check-in, we drive to the top of the hill at the centre of town and climb to the summit of the great golden temple and pagoda. Mong La is surrounded by high hills, but the upside-down ice cream cone of the golden pagoda reaches high enough to rival those hills, and in the late afternoon, we stand up there and look over the town, while the sounds of puttering motorbikes and chugging Chinese tractors, of children’s high-pitched voices and laughter, and a cock-a-doo-dle cacophony of cocks – those sounds rise and turn insub-stantial, and a mild breeze attenuates the heat of the day. Our translator, standing next to me, points to a green and watery area at the edge of the river flowing through town, and says, ‘All those rice fields used to be poppy fields.’

Located at the heart of Southeast Asia’s notorious Golden Triangle, Special Region 4 was ten years ago producing nearly 9,000 kilograms of raw opium annually. The opium was refined into morphine and heroin, smuggled through the mountains and across the border into northern Thailand, transported south to the hub of Bangkok, and then passed into the jetstream by Chinese criminal syndicates. On 22 April 1997, however, Special Region 4 was officially declared a drug-free zone, and to celebrate that auspicious moment, Mong La’s narcotics museum was opened. Located inside a pink and spiky bit of architecture not very far from the vehicle pagoda, the museum includes dramatic photo-graphs of dead addicts and live interdiction personnel, and, beneath cracked and taped-over glass, samples of dried pop-pies and the drugs manufactured from them. An extensive diorama illustrates, with the help of dressed-up mannequins, the degrading effects of drugs on addicts and the curative ef-fects of intelligent medical treatment and law enforcement. The drug museum’s historical section, meanwhile, describes the arrival of opium poppies on ships manned by Arabic and Portuguese traders during the 15th and 16th centuries, and it explains that 19th-century British colonialists introduced the phenomenon of addiction. At last, as I can read, ‘The state has raised the momentum of efforts in all sectors for prevention of the scourge of narcotic drugs, the enemy of all mankind.’
Papaver somniferum — ‘the opium poppy’ — grows easily and well in these hills, and a tribal farmer can make as much as US$350 per year farming them, a sum that is at once pitifully small and significantly better than any income he can hope to earn from other crops. A ban on opium could have a disastrous effect on the lives of hundreds of thousands of opium growers in these mountains. Still, the government introduced alternative cash crops for the small-plot farmers and provided, according to one pro-government report, the ‘necessary assistance to the local populace to help them meet the basic needs,’ as well as ‘income generating enterprises’ and ‘other suitable business enterprises.’

Income generation? Suitable business enterprises? As mentioned, Special Region 4 shares a border with China’s Yunnan province, and the town of Mong La sits right on that border. The Chinese people, then, represented a market and a potential tourist destination. But tourists of what sort? The guerrilla generals of Special region 4 had spent Mong La a potential tourist destination. But tourists of what border. The Chinese people, then, represented a market and provided, according to one pro-government report, the ‘necessary assistance to the local populace to help them meet the basic needs,’ as well as ‘income generating enterprises’ and ‘other suitable business enterprises.’

Myanmar royal Leisure Company. Even the amusement park known as Mongla National Paradise has fallen on hard times, with the polo-playing elephant polo ‘just outside town, dozens of luxury condos were being built, while, according to the same Canadian reporter, the night sky of Mong La is brightly lit by the neon lights of the gaudy casinos and posh hotels.’

As many as 600,000 Chinese tourists with several million dollars worth of Yuan in their pockets were crossing the border annually, streaming in on day-trip buses into Special Region 4 and determined to sample Mong La’s exotic and forbidden wares. Chinese high-rollers were tossing enormous sums onto the tables inside those grand casinos, and for those who had lost more than they could afford, industrious loan sharks were circling nearby and offering to pitch in for a small percentage.

But then, according to one newspaper account, the beloved relative of a well-placed Chinese official returned home from Mong La humiliated and poorer by the equivalent of US$100,000, and so the Chinese army was called out. Troops marched to the border, and, at least for those day-trippers without a sober or boring need to enter Special Region 4, the border gate was closed.

It is impressive to visit a few troops at a single spot can do. Mong La’s economy flipped like a switch from boom to bust, and now, as I visit the place during the 10th anniversary of the drug ban, it remains bust. The one luxury hotel still operating today is badly run by a skeleton staff. The Ladyboy Show is gone, the transvestites sent back to Thailand. It is impressive to visit a few troops at a single spot can do. Mong La’s economy flipped like a switch from boom to bust, and now, as I visit the place during the 10th anniversary of the drug ban, it remains bust. The one luxury hotel still operating today is badly run by a skeleton staff. The Ladyboy Show is gone, the transvestites sent back to Thailand. It is impressive to visit a few troops at a single spot can do.

For the kiddies, meanwhile, Mong La offered an amusement park, the Mongla National Paradise, complete with a Ferris wheel, a herd of polo-playing elephants, broad lawns and a large pond with plastic paddle-boats for rent, and even a great barn containing a bear farm.

So the new Mong La, though built with drug money, was by the start of the new millennium selling gambling and sex — and the Chinese began to buy. Suddenly there was, according to a reporter from Toronto’s The Globe and Mail, ‘a new economy of casinos, karaoke bars, golf courses, brothels, hotels, bowling alleys and tourist gimmicks such as the elephant polo.’ Just outside town, dozens of luxury condos were being built, while, according to the same Canadian reporter, the night sky of Mong La is brightly lit by the neon lights of the gaudy casinos and posh hotels.’

A Town Transformed

The Las Vegas-isation of Mong La happened quickly, and it began with a paving of the streets, followed by wiring for electricity to power the flashing lights that soon flashed happy thoughts in Chinese and English, such as, ‘Oh! That’s wonderful!’ Dozens of great, gaudy casinos, discos, and hotels were built. A non-stop pornography channel was cabled into the hotel telly. Prostitutes from Thailand and eastern Europe were shipped in, their phone numbers displayed prominently in each hotel room. Perhaps most famously, a glamorous Thai transvestite revue was established, and it became commonly known, for English speakers at least, as ‘The Ladyboy Show.’

For the kiddies, meanwhile, Mong La offered an amusement park, the Mongla National Paradise, complete with a
Our translator informs me that Special Region 4 includes about 85,000 residents (with approximately three Chinese for every native Myanmarese), so even while the decaying casino corpses litter the centre of town, Mong La still operates as a real place with people to feed and business to transact. Actually, prostitutes still gather in the red light district next to the central market, and one evening my travelling companions and I spend a half hour walking past the long row of sex boutiques, saying hello to some of the more friendly workers and trying to estimate their numbers: perhaps 50–100 slender young women inside the boutique stalls, watching TV, talking to each other, looking bored, a few of them playing netless badminton in the dark street outside the stalls. But where are all the customers?

And, although all the high-stakes gambling is closed down, the night brings out a much smaller and more amenable sort of gambling with, inside one rough shed, crowds of men sneaking off and a few women, all gathered around eight homemade tables marked with crudely hand-numbered squares. You place your money on a numbered square and set your hopeful gaze upon three giant wooden dice temporarily restrained by a rope at the top of a washboard-style slide.

The giant dice are released one at a time, whereupon they roll down in a wooden racket and come to rest on the numbered squares, instantly generating a human racket of raging shouts, cries, and screams. And that seems to be the big excitement in Mong La these days. But where are all the customers?

The purpose of a tiger skin is obvious: to service a psychological appetite, to raise the symbolic banner of someone’s limp ego. Tiger penises and tiger bones likewise have great symbolic value in this part of the world. Tiger penises are worth many Yuan as a traditional medicine supposedly good for putting the groin and purr back into your sex life; and, although my fellow tourists and I fail to find any clearly non-fake tiger penises, we do find many real penises from several other species.

Actually, penises are very big in Mong La, and late one afternoon, we spend some time looking over a selection of deer penises, gift-wrapped in elaborate red-and-gold boxes and being sold at one of the town’s more prosperous pharmacies. With the help of our translator, we ask the young woman at the counter what a deer penis is for.

‘For the man energy,’ she explains.

Older is better, interestingly enough, so one penis that’s supposed to be more than 10 years old sells for 6,800 Yuan, or about US$90, while a younger penis sells for slightly more than half that figure.

Although the woman says they have no tiger penises for sale at that time, they do, she assures us, manufacture and sell guaranteed tiger wine. As a matter of fact, we can see the brewing process right there in the pharmacy sales room: 20-gallon fish tanks filled with whitish ginger roots and a few curved bones within a brown, tea-coloured brew. The bones, we are told, are from a tiger, and they lend oomph to the final concoction, which is bottled in fancy decanters and sold to Chinese nationals who take them back into China.

Caged and Worse

I suspect there may some bears left in the woods of Special Region 4. Over a few days, we find 50–100 live bears in Mong La — all of them kept in cages so small the unfortunate creatures inside can barely turn around. These live animals started out as the babies left over when their wild mothers were shot or chased off with dogs, and many of them now are grown up: huge mute creatures with big sniffing noses and impossibly long tongues. But these days, so the dealers tell us, wild-caught bears are no longer coming into the market. Bears, too, are important piecemeal commodities for the business of traditional Chinese medicine. Their most valuable piece is the gall bladder, which is commonly sold in the markets and looks like an old, rather oily change purse. Meanwhile, pharmacists at the bear farm in Mongla National Paradise have embedded catheters inside their 50 live bears, all of whom are kept individually in steel-barred cages elevated — like huge birdcages — one metre above the concrete floor.

A happy-thought mural painted on the cinderblock wall at the far end of the barn shows wild bears playing gayly in a
Humans at Risk

Both China and Myanmar have signed the international treaty known as the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), which is meant to protect species threatened with extinction, such as tigers and bears.

spread globally and killed some 800 people before a radical series of quarantines and an official Chinese prohibition on the slaughter, cooking and selling of wild animals like the civet cat succeeded in curtailing, at least temporarily, the developing pandemic.

The public health issue may be the biggest cause for alarm in considering the wild animal capitalism of Special Region 4. After all, some three-quarters of all human infectious diseases, including AIDS, tuberculosis and the plague, originally came from animal microbes given the opportunity to migrate into human populations, while a number of human diseases long considered non-infectious – multiple sclerosis, for example – could also be the result of contact with microbes.

But what concerns me most immediately about the animal business here at Mong La is something at once harder to describe and to justify, which is my own personal sense of the cruelty involved.

Greed and lawlessness are common enough, but there is also that cold callousness, that strangely hard attitude I note describe and to justify, which is my own personal sense of the cruelty involved.

But aside from the legal aspects of a business that continues to violate CITES restrictions, and aside from the serious conservation issues raised by an activity that indiscriminately removes key species of wildlife from Myanmar’s northeastern forests, there is a very worrisome public health aspect to what is happening in Mong La. A visit to the town markets one morning turns up not only the usual – butchered dog’s head displayed alongside the head of a goat, various wild birds, wild cats, lizards, monkeys, pangolins, toads, turtles and snakes, along with assorted bones and feathers and organs, scales and skins – but also, I notice, a couple of dead civet cats.

Civet cats are actually unrelated to cats, and they look rather like big weasels or raccoons. They are also the direct source of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) virus that appeared and began spreading among humans in southern China during 2002. By 2003, the SARS virus had...
A baby-sitter from a tribal group tends to her young charges and watches over their father’s traditional Chinese medicine stall.

Law and Disorder

MANY OF THE REGULATIONS FOR MANAGING THE INTERNATIONAL WILDLIFE TRADE ARE ALREADY IN PLACE; THEY ARE JUST AREN’T BEING FOLLOWED.

CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) is an international agreement between governments to manage the trade in wild animals and plants so that their ultimate survival is not threatened. At the moment, CITES accords varying levels of protection to over 30,000 species of animals and plants. Another international organisation that works to monitor the wildlife trade is TRAFFIC, a joint programme of the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the World Conservation Union (IUCN).

The international wildlife trade encompasses millions of animal and plant specimens, ranging from live animals and plants to the many products derived from them (including medicines, food products, leather goods and tourist souvenirs). This trade is believed to be worth billions of dollars.

CITES lists threatened species on three appendices based on the level of risk they face:

- Appendix 1: all international trade is banned.
- Appendix 2: international trade must be monitored and regulated.
- Appendix 3: trade bans by individual governments, while others are asked to assist.

Although CITES is legally binding, it does not take the place of national laws but provides a framework for each country to adopt its own legislation to ensure the implementation of CITES.

But any form of regulation is toothless without the will for enforcement. Because the trade in wild animals crosses international borders, regulating it requires different countries to cooperate in order to safeguard threatened species from over-exploitation. Mong La is simply one example (by no means the most extreme) of what can happen when regulations fail without the will or ability to enforce them.

The News in 2007

In June 2007, CITES held its triennial conference at The Hague, Netherlands. The delegates adopted over 100 formal decisions to strengthen the regulations governing the international wildlife trade. Trade will now be forbidden for the slow lorris (Nycticebus coucang, Nycticebus bengalensis, Nycticebus javanicus, Nycticebus menagensis and Nycticebus pygmaeus), a primate native to Asia, among others species. Another issue on the agenda was the growth of the wildlife trade via the Internet.

Delegates also reviewed the progress being made by conservation programmes for the tiger, leopard, Saiga antelope, black rhinoceros, hawksbill turtle and sharks, as well as other CITES-listed species. The next CITES conference will be held in Qatar in 2010.

Resources
CITES
www.cites.org
TRAFFIC
www.traffic.org
World Conservation Union (IUCN)
www.iucn.org
Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF)
www.wwf.org

KARL AMMANN is a world-renowned photographer and conservation activist whose work has helped draw attention to the plight of endangered wildlife. Born in Switzerland, Ammann has spent over 20 years documenting the natural world in Asia and Africa, www.karlammann.com.

DALE PETERSON is the author of numerous books including Storyville, USA, Chimpanzee Travels: On and Off the Road in Africa and The Deluge and the Ark: A Journey into Primate Worlds. He is also the editor of Beyond Innocence: Jane Goodall’s Letters in Letters from Africa in My Blood: Jane Goodall’s Early Life in Letters, as well as the coauthor of Demonic Males: Apes and the Origins of Human Violence and Visions of Caliban: On Chimpanzees and People.

KARL AMMANN


DALE PETERSON

www.wwf.org

www.cites.org

www.traffic.org

www.iucn.org

www.wwf.org