

**Gabriel Safdie**  
*Explorations: Myanmar and Beyond*

## **Artist Statement**

The photographs in this collection were taken during my last trip to Myanmar this past year where my main focus was Bagan, Lake Inle, the Pilgrimage site Kyaiktiyo (Golden Rock) and the countryside in general. The renowned Bagan is one of the most outstanding heritage sites in East Asia and covers around 70 square KM strewn with temples, pagodas and stupas that were built during the height of Burmese history between 11C-13C. Of the 10,000 structures erected celebrating Buddhism and the might of the Burmese kings of the time, 2200 remain standing in varying conditions, with a significant number under restoration from damage caused during the recent earthquake of 2016.

There are endless vistas of stunning beauty that rise throughout Bagan, all the more striking as the day moves from sunrise, when the landscape is blanketed by mists that evoke a sense of deep mysticism. Gradually the temples emerge unfolding sharply as the sun rises, their apparitions altering with the progress of the sun around them, only to be shrouded slowly in long shadows into the night.

An especially rewarding way to get a sense of this magnificently sprawling temple site is to view it from a hot air balloon, and I was thrilled to have had the opportunity to float over this unforgettable landscape. Above all, Bagan serves as a monumental tribute to the inspiration and its spell on the people who built it out of their passionate dedication to their faith, while to this day it is remarkably apparent how these temples have remained as alive with worship as they currently are.

One is reminded throughout the country how devoted the Burmese are to their religion and how devoutly they pray. I was most struck by this manifestation of faith and worship on the journey up to the Golden Rock pilgrimage site, starting with the tightly packed bus ride, with buses driving up and down to the crowded mountain top non-stop throughout the day.

Lake Inle is so very integral to Burmese life that it encompasses the entire culture in all its facets from the rural to the fisheries from markets to the temples, and the region is teeming with the richness of the culture and folklore throughout.

I was informed that the country has become much freer of the sort of military checkpoints I encountered in 2011 on my first visit when I travelled in and around the two main cities Yangon and Mandalay. I was therefore more inclined to make this visit entirely by car, regardless of the distances, and am grateful for having decided to do so as I appreciated getting a sense of the mostly lush countryside and the colourful local sights from town to town. There is no escaping the poverty that one still encounters there, but the Burmese do put on a brave face.

Myanmar is a photographer's delight as no matter where one finds oneself there are always sights and events to feast one's eyes on as for example the three colourful ethnic processions I encountered along the way. Above all, most memorable are the people themselves, their friendliness and the warmth that they radiate making one feel so graciously welcomed.

## Gabriel Safdie

### bio

Gabriel Safdie is a well-known name in Stanstead where he is extensively involved in the Coeur de Stanstead project and the general revitalization of Rock Island under the heading of Centre Des Arts de Stanstead.

Safdie, who divides his time between Ogden and Montreal, is a writer and former professor of literature, creative writing and theatre in Montreal and continues to be actively involved in the arts in the city, particularly in the fields of literature, theatre and music. His work in photography began with his travels as he especially wanted to share his impressions of the far-reaching places he was visiting for business and exploration, such as East Asia and the Orient. He had in fact formerly taken some photographs to show places he had experienced for a travel magazine article.

Over the years he has developed a passion for photography and has been captivated by the process as a form of art. Meanwhile, his interest continues in capturing new areas he visits where he focuses in particular on people and place and the texture of life on location. What has changed most is that he now photographs a wider range of subjects.

He started making an annual calendar twelve years ago, selecting photos from his ever growing archives under a specific theme for each. It is through the dissemination of his calendars (at 1000 copies each) that his work has reached so many, but it is also how he came to be offered the opportunity to exhibit his work.

Safdie has shown mostly in Canada and China, where he had some major success with exhibitions under the name "Changing China through the Eyes of a Canadian Friend" (Beijing, Qingdao, Tai'An, Hangzhou, and others). He is scheduled for further exhibits in Montreal and will show again in China in the coming year. Currently he has embarked on compiling a book of photographs and text depicting the last third of a century in China.