

Venice of the East

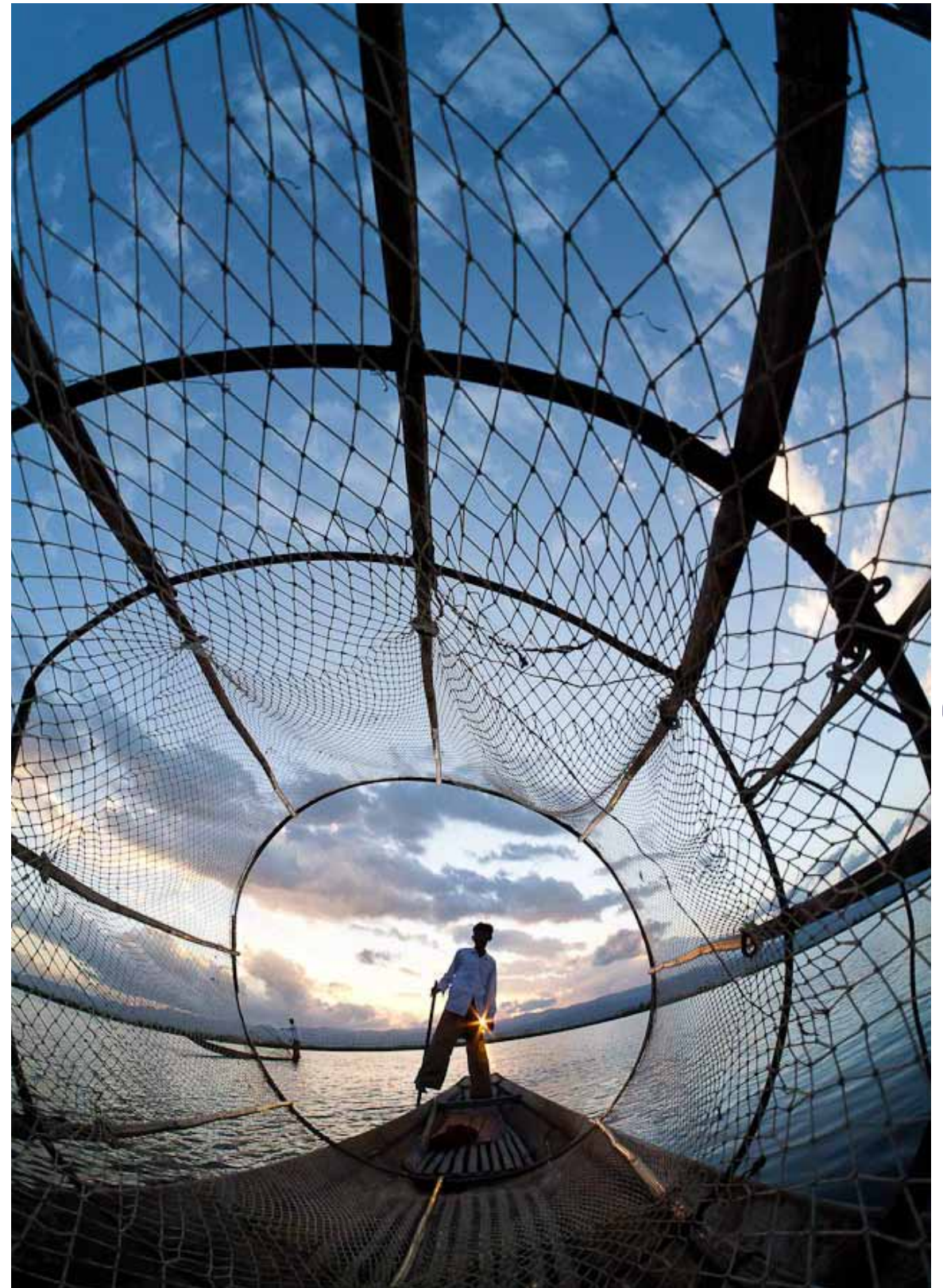
Myanmar has always held a certain fascination for me. Its magical cities and exotic sounding names always conjure up vivid images in my mind: Mandalay and its sunset backlit U Bein bridge; sunrise at the sweeping plain of Bagan with its thousands of temples; and evening at Yangon's incredible golden Shwedagon Pagoda. Now that Myanmar has become more accessible, I decided to go off the beaten track and explore one of the more remote parts of the country, Inle Lake. Nestled deep in Shan Hills at an altitude of 880 metres, this glassy blue freshwater lake's somewhat isolated location has allowed it to retain its natural character and traditions. Famous for the unique one-legged rowing style of its fishermen, the lake and its backwater canals are home to a diverse group of people, many of whom live entirely on the water, fishing, growing vegetables and making crafts.

WORDS & PHOTOS BY COLIN STEEL





Top and above: Lakes form the basis of life for the Myanmar people, who construct entire villages on the water and get around via small wooden row boats. All manner of everyday living takes place here, from clothes washing to schooling, shopping and, of course, worship, with the countless pagodas and temples affording you a chance to step back in time and experience an era past.



A familiar sight on Inle Lake come late afternoon, the “one-legged” fishermen practise a unique style of catching fish that involves rowing their shallow skiffs with one leg, freeing up their hands to handle small nets or traditional harpoon fish basket traps. Stay long enough and you might see them expertly agitating the water to drive the fish into nets or traps before spearing them with a harpoon.



Top: The Karen (or Kayah) people are best known for the brass rings adorning the necks, arms and legs of its women. There are a number of theories behind the practice – some believe it is intended as protection from tiger bites!
Above: Shwe Yan Pyay pagoda is renowned for its intricately decorated corridors and walls fitted with shrines boasting Buddha statues.



Top: Naturally skilled artisans, the Karen people have preserved traditional practices like fabric making, silk weaving, jewellery making and basketry. Unique to Inle Lake is a fabric from the fibres of the lotus plant that's used to weave kya thingahn or Buddha robes.
Above: Locals never leave the water, drawing life as they do from the lakes, essentially floating ecosystems on which they live, fish and farm.

Originally from Scotland and now based in Singapore, photographer Colin Steel is fascinated with Asia, its countries and its people. "I think it's incredibly important to find a way to express your views on life and I try to do this through photography by capturing glimpses of the world, its citizens, religions, cultures and places," he says.

SilkAir flies from Singapore to Yangon 14 times a week. From Yangon, take a one hour domestic flight to Heho, then travel an hour by car to the town of Nyaung Shwe, where boats can be chartered to access Inle Lake via the waterways.

