Lighting up the heavens

Each year, Taunggyi, the capital of Shan State in northern Myanmar, plays host to the Tazaungdaing Festival. Also known as the Festival of Lights, this visual spectacle sees huge fire balloons launched into the sky on the night of the full moon day of Tazaungmon, the eighth month of the Burmese calendar (23 Nov this year). Similar to Yi Peng, held in northern Thailand, the illuminated balloons are lit in honour of a mythical pagoda in heaven and as a means of driving away evil spirits.

Photos by Claudio Sieber
MANDALAY

FUN FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY
The balloons are only part of the entertainment, with live music performances, stalls selling a variety of local snacks and a fun fair setting up at the festival grounds. The neon-lit rides (left and above) are often made of wood and need a helping hand to get started.

A SOCIAL GATHERING
A young Shan woman (right) dressed in a traditional outfit roams the festival grounds. The event is an excuse for people from all over Shan State to get together to drink, eat and celebrate. While the festival has its roots in Buddhist traditions, the modern event was inspired by a hot air balloon competition held by the British in Taunggyi in 1894.

ALONG FOR THE RIDE
Various teams from different villages compete to have the biggest and best balloon. To add to the dramatic effect, the balloons are often adorned with sein na pan (candles), which are hooked to the side of the balloon (below and right) or trail below it from bamboo frames.

SOARING EXPECTATIONS
The balloons are inflated by placing flaming torches underneath them (left). It’s not an exact science and there can be numerous false starts in trying to get these giant balloons to take off.
RAIN OF FIRE

The undoubted highlights of the festival are the fire balloons. Each carries a payload of handmade fireworks in a pallet hung beneath the main balloon. Set to explode once the balloon has reached a safe height, the reality is they can go off prematurely, forcing the crowd to run for cover.
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