



Tradition: A Myanmar woman lights incense sticks at the Shwedagon Pagoda.



Networking: New Zealander Andy Linton, demonstrates how to configure networking equipment at a Yangon University workshop. Photos: DEAN PEMBERTON.

Belmont-based freelance photographer **Dean Pemberton** recently went to Myanmar on an aid project aimed at fostering use of computer technology. He found a country struggling with internet access but keen to learn.

Computer students eager to learn

When I was contacted by a colleague to ask if I would be able to fill a vacant spot on an upcoming Internet training workshop in Myanmar, I didn't think very long before saying "yes".

What did take me a little bit longer was to realise what I was potentially letting myself in for.

The extent of my knowledge of Myanmar at that stage was:

- It isn't called Burma anymore.
- The country has been through a pretty tough time.
- The rate of Internet usage is particularly low.

The World Bank's 2011 internet usage stats puts Myanmar second only to Timor-Leste at the bottom of the list. Only one per cent of the population has access to the web.

Comparing that to New Zealand, which ranks 10th with 86.2 per cent, I was not at all sure what I would find when I landed.

The workshop that I assisted with was organised by the Network Startup Resource Center (NSRC). Based at the University of Oregon, the NSRC was established in 1992 to provide technical assistance to organisations setting up computer networks in developing areas for collaborative research, education and international partnerships.

In the last 20 years, the NSRC has worked with universities, research institutes, internet service providers, non-governmental organisations, governmental and supranational agencies, and

industry to help develop networks and cyber infrastructure resources in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Middle East.

We would be hosted by the University of Computer Studies in Yangon (UCSY), and would be taking 36 participants from more than 20 Myanmar universities through a five-day hands-on technical workshop focused on campus network design, network monitoring and management, with the goal of enabling them to develop a national research and education network throughout Myanmar.

Upon arriving in Yangon, we made contact with the other NSRC team members who had been there the week before.

They were busy getting ready for the workshop and making sure that we would have everything we needed.

The local hosts at UCSY were fantastic and ensured that we had everything from Internet access to bottled water.

With the workshop not starting until Monday, there was a bit of time for sight seeing.

If you are ever in Myanmar I would recommend seeing the Shwedagon Pagoda, a 100 metre tall structure plated in pure gold tiles.

The entire area around the pagoda was bustling with thousands of people, from those praying or lighting incense, to a small market selling souvenirs.

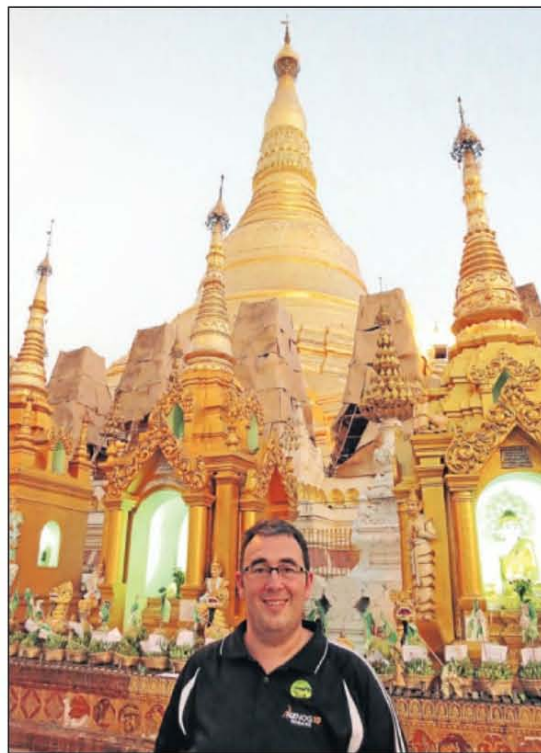
This is what ancient temples such as Angkor Wat – in Cambodia – must have felt like in their heyday.

Once the workshop got underway, I was amazed by the enthusiasm and ability of the participants.

Almost half the class had PhDs, Myanmar had certainly sent us its best and brightest to take advantage of this learning opportunity.

Another interesting point was that out of the 36 participants, only 10 were men.

Being used to teaching classes where you're lucky if you have even a single woman present, Myanmar



Change of culture: Dean Pemberton in front of the Shwedagon Pagoda.

does not seem to suffer the same IT gender bias we see here.

During the five days of the course, the participants learnt not only how to physically cable a single campus, but also how to build, monitor and maintain a full Internet enabled campus network, on a set of virtual equipment.

There was also an in-depth presentation on how to take each of these campus networks and bring them together into a single National Research and Education Network (NREN).

NRENs such as REANNZ in New Zealand and AARNET in Australia are deployed throughout the world and form the backbone of any academic-based collaboration efforts.

On the last day, we were able to set up and demonstrate a real

campus network on physical equipment that had been donated by Cisco and Google.

These donations are an important part of NSRC's work and for some of the participants it was the first time they had been able to touch networking equipment.

All too soon, the workshop was over and we were giving out the completion certificates to the class.

The lasting impression of my trip to Yangon was of a group of friendly people eager to learn and excited about what the Internet could do for their country.

Judging by the emails we have received since our return, they have taken up the challenge and are already looking to deploy some of the lessons learnt from the workshop.



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