



BURMA

TEARING DOWN A BAMBOO WALL

Dinner hour had arrived. The bellman outside the old British colonial hotel waved down the first taxi to pass on the crowded river-front avenue. It was a faded red Volkswagen bus, circa 1970s. That bus was pretty much as good as it gets.

My colleague and I slid into the rattletrap Volkswagen, its uncomfortable, threadbare seats offering little protection from the exposed seat springs. As we settled in, the driver gunned the engine to claim a temporary opening in the evening rush-hour traffic — and exhaust fumes filled the cabin with acrid, lung-burning vapors. The engine whined and backfired as we motored through another sultry Rangoon evening on our way to a local sports-bar-cum-British-pub where European and Australian expats gather for a respectable pizza, European beers on tap and, depending on the night and the season, European or Aussie-rules football or rugby on flat-screen TVs.

Returning to the hotel later in the evening, we passed darkened streets lit only by the reflected lights from elsewhere in the city bouncing off the low-hanging clouds of another tropical storm