

time producing 5% of the global oil supply, was one of the world's first oil-exporting nations, having shipped its first barrel of oil at least six years before Edwin Drake drilled America's first oil well in Titusville, Pennsylvania. Now, natural gas and oil flow again from large onshore and offshore fields. Zinc, tin, tungsten, copper, coal and other commodities the world demands in great quantity all make an appearance somewhere in Burma.

And, yet, by 2012 I was tooling around a desperately poor city in a desperately poor country in a 1970s-era Volkswagen bus that flooded the cabin with cough-inducing exhaust every time the driver accelerated. Inept fiscal policies and economic mismanagement had eroded the ability of the average Burmese to live from day to day because the local currency, the *kyat* (sounds like "hot" with a "ch"), had deflated massively under military stewardship. The cost of basic food items such as salt, rice and cooking oil were, by the mid-2000s, 10 times their cost 20 years earlier. Consumer prices were moving up, or the value of the *kyat* was moving down — or some combination of both — by 12% a year, on average, every year. Income, however, had gone nowhere and as recently as 2008, the average Burmese was living on about \$0.80 a day or \$280 a year. More than one-third of the population at that point struggled below the poverty line, and much of the rest clung to life just barely above it. In essence, life in Burma was lived at the desperate edges of survival and behind a bamboo wall built by a maniacal, reclusive and oppressive military government determined to keep the rest of the world at bay.

And then along came Mother Nature to tear down that bamboo wall, pry open the hermetic government, and shove Burma into the modern world.