

International experts help Bagan to enlist as UNESCO World Heritage Site

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Bagan is home to over 2,000 ancient pagodas, temples and monasteries. About one in five of these monuments were damaged by an earthquake that hit the region some six months ago. The Dhammayan Gyi Temple, the largest temple in Bagan, is seen being covered with waterproof cloth on Feb. 15, 2017. [Photo: CRIENGLISH.com]

Aarcheologists from around the world have gathered in the ancient town of Bagan to discuss the best solutions for restoring and preserving the hundreds of historic sites in the country.

The Myanmar government is hoping to get Bagan onto the UNESCO World Heritage list, after an earlier attempt failed.



Situated in central Myanmar, Bagan is home to over 2,000 ancient pagodas, temples and monasteries with the oldest dating back to the 9th century, attracting hundreds of thousands of foreign tourists every year.

But about one in five of these monuments were damaged by an earthquake that hit the region some six months ago.

UNESCO conservator-restorer of paintings Rodolfo Lujan-Lunsford says there is an urgency to carrying out the restoration work.

"The mural paintings of Bagan, they are absolutely important. Not another place in Southeast of Asia has that amount, the quality, and the span in time as this site has."

But with the country about to enter the monsoon season in around three months, there comes a threat.

"The biggest threat usually is water in all of its forms, vapor, liquid or solid. So in Bagan, the main problem is water infiltration from growths. And in some places where the topography of the land is around higher than the temple, then we have problems of water raised by capillary reaction that wets the base of the walls and so on."

But that's not the only major problem, as Yuan Yujie, a senior researcher with the Chinese Academy of Cultural Heritage explains.

"Their previous restoration work shows their weakness. For instance, this pagoda is partly damaged. Some local residents would come and casually repair it with bricks and mud. Their intention is good. But problems easily occur because of the defects in the quality, materials, and techniques. We've found a lot of damaged parts of the pagoda we've been surveying were repaired that way."

Myanmar's bid to put Bagan on UNESCO's World Heritage list in the 1990s was rejected due to poor management and the way the monuments had been conserved after the 1975 earthquake.

The country is giving it another shot, submitting a proposal to UNESCO in September to attain the World Heritage status.

"The scale of Bagan's monuments is no second to Cambodia's Angkor. The monuments here are magnificent. There are several thousand of them across the time span of several centuries. So I think it's worth a World Heritage site status in terms of its own value."

Of course with some do's and don's to be noted.

"Minimum intervention, the most important thing. The use of materials must be compatible and similar to those used in the origin when the paintings or monuments were done."

Experts from countries including China, India, Thailand, Germany, the U.S. and Japan are attending the two-day conference scheduled to end on Thursday.

At the opening of the conference, Chinese Ambassador to Myanmar Hong Liang announced new aid of 1 million US dollars to Bagan's monument reservation and conservation work.

