

Awesome Shwedagon Paya:
More than a great temple,
it offers a serene and
cool ambience



travel lite

Mesmerising Myanmar

Aung San Suu Kyi's homeland is a must-visit,
thanks to its myriad Buddhist temples, colonial buildings
and bustling markets

by Sreerema Banoo

Tell family and friends that you've just returned from a holiday to Myanmar (formerly Burma) and they would ask about security ("Were you watched by the junta?") or gems ("Did you buy any rubies?"). And that, in essence, has been the view of outsiders towards this country,

which has been virtually sealed off from the outside world since the military junta took control of the government in 1962. (The answer to the two questions are "no", by the way.)

Undoubtedly, the decision to travel to Myanmar should not be taken lightly. The debate for and against visiting the country has been going on for a long time, and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi has opposed tourism to the country until recently.

But ask any tour guide, taxi driver and hotel employee and very likely they will tell you that tourism dollars have helped them put food on the table, send their children to school and given them the opportunity to meet and engage with people from around the world. If you do decide



This is just a third of King Bowdaphaya's stupa, which he planned to be the biggest in the world

to visit Myanmar — and you really should — then, it's best to be an informed traveller. Opt to be an independent traveller, engage a local tour agency to help you plan your visit (or do it yourself, which is easy thanks to the Internet), eat at local eateries and stay at non-government-run hotels. (For additional reading, visit http://www.lonelyplanet.com/shop_pickandmix/free_chapters/myanmar-10-should-you-go.pdf.)

For the Malaysian traveller, there are a few options for travel into Yangon (formerly Rangoon). Apart from Malaysia Airlines and Myanmar Airways International, you can opt for budget carrier AirAsia, which recently started its KL-Yangon service. When we checked two months before our trip, a return flight on AirAsia was RM220 while on Malaysia Airlines, it was RM980 per person, including taxes.

You'll need to obtain a visa (RM80 for a three-day processing period and RM150 for same-day



Sunset on Mandalay Hill

processing) from the embassy in KL. (Effective Sept 1, visa on arrival is no longer available.)

If you have a week to spare, it's best to do a small circuit of the country, starting in Yangon before heading to Bagan and Mandalay. You can plan your entire trip — from booking hotels and domestic flights — from home. You can also get a tour agent in Yangon to do it for you, as many of them have Internet presence and are happy to advise you on your itinerary. You'll also be able to score better deals on hotel rates and domestic flights if you go through an agent.

Choosing when to go can also yield some bargains; the peak season is from November to February, when it's cooler; in the central dry zone of Bagan, it can get quite nippy at night

and early morning. However, the monsoon season between June and October needn't be a bad time to visit — there are discounts to be had on room rates and local tours, and there are far fewer visitors.

Yangon: Of stupas and colonial relics

For most visitors, the former capital city is the gateway into Myanmar. A taxi ride from Yangon International Airport into the city costs 7,000 kyat (RM21); the trip takes about 30 to 45 minutes, depending on traffic. In terms of accommodation, you can choose the downtown area (around Shwedagon and Kandawgyi) or towards the north of the city (around Inya Lake). If you're planning to explore the city on foot — and that

really is the best way to do it — stay in the city centre. A good value deal at around US\$75 (RM233) a night is Traders Hotel on Sule Pagoda Road.

From here, you're a stone's throw from some of the city's main sights, such as Sule Pagoda and the famous Bogyoke Aung San market (a warren of stalls selling anything and everything, from gems to handicraft, textiles, T-shirts and souvenirs).

Downtown Yangon also boasts many colonial buildings that serve as a reminder that this was once a major financial and administrative centre during British rule. Some of the more impressive buildings are on Pansodan Road (walk south towards Strand Road). When you reach Strand Road, turn east and you'll come to the Strand Hotel (built by the Sarkies brothers of Singapore's Raffles Hotel fame). Even if you don't stay here (at about US\$240 a night, it's beyond most travellers' budgets), it's worth a peek. What's more, the hotel's cafe is a great place to escape the heat of the day. A few drinks and snacks for four cost us US\$20.

The highlight of any visit to Yangon is the Shwedagon Paya, considered to be the most sacred of all Buddhist sites in Myanmar. Entry for foreigners is US\$5 each, which includes a lift ride up to the raised platform of the stupa. According to legend, the stupa is 2,500 years old but evidence suggests it was built sometime in the 6th to 10th centuries. It is said that two brothers, upon meeting the Buddha, were given eight of his hairs to enshrine in Myanmar. Once the deed was completed, a golden stupa was built on the spot. Over the years, various kings renovated and enlarged the stupa, making it taller and grander (from its original height of 66ft, it now stands at 326ft). Guides are available for hire (near the ticket office or around the Shwedagon) or

TIPS

1 You have to go barefoot if you're visiting the temples, whether in Bagan, Mingun or Sagaing. So, leave the shoes at home, stick to sandals or slippers.

2 The temples, no matter how ancient, are still places of religious worship, so dress modestly.

3 Although you may be approached — very cloak-and-dagger like — to buy rubies or other gems, it's advisable to buy stones from government-registered merchants (or better yet, don't buy them at all), as you may need to show a receipt of the purchase upon your departure.

4 Credit cards are not widely accepted, except at upmarket hotels. When bringing US dollars, ensure that the notes are clean and not crumpled or torn, and fairly recently issued.

5 There is no international roaming in Myanmar, but GSM SIM cards are widely available (minimum stored value is US\$21). Free WiFi is available at most upmarket hotels.

you can just wander about on your own. There is a great vibe here, calm yet purposeful. The best time to visit is sunrise or sunset.

Bagan: Stupa-studded landscapes

An 80-minute plane ride from Yangon (US\$95) takes you to Nyaung U, the gateway to the temples of Bagan, one of Southeast Asia's most enigmatic sights. While the temples of Angkor in Cambodia may be

individually more exquisite, what sets Bagan apart is the fact that in its 40-sq-km area, there are more than 2,200 stupas built between the 11th and 13th centuries. The landscape is literally dotted with stupas, a view best appreciated from the peaks of a few stupas that are accessible to visitors.

Generally, set aside two days for Bagan — any longer, you may suffer temple fatigue, unless you're a serious archaeology buff — which gives you enough time to check out the main temples, visit the neighbouring towns or villages, the very lively Nyaung U morning market as well as the lacquer workshops that Bagan is famous for.

Of all the Bagan temples, one of the finest, best preserved and most revered is the Ananda temple, said to be built by King Kyanzittha around 1105AD. The perfectly proportioned temple houses four 9.5m standing Buddha images, as well as glazed tiles depicting the life stories of the Buddha. Other major temples include Thatbyinnyu (at 61m, it's one of the highest), Nathlaung Kyaung (the only Hindu temple remaining in Bagan), Gawdawpalin (one of the most imposing), Shwezigon and Shwesandaw (for sunset views of the plains). A more modest-sized stupa, and one of the oldest (dating back to around 850AD) is Bupaya, which is also a great spot to view the sunset over the Irrawaddy River.

To get around the temples, you can hire an air-conditioned car or van with guide, or go native and opt for an ox-cart, though it can get very humid and hot during the late mornings and early afternoons. Or you could rent a bicycle and explore the temples on your own.

In terms of accommodation, you have the choice of staying in Old Bagan (which lies at the core

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