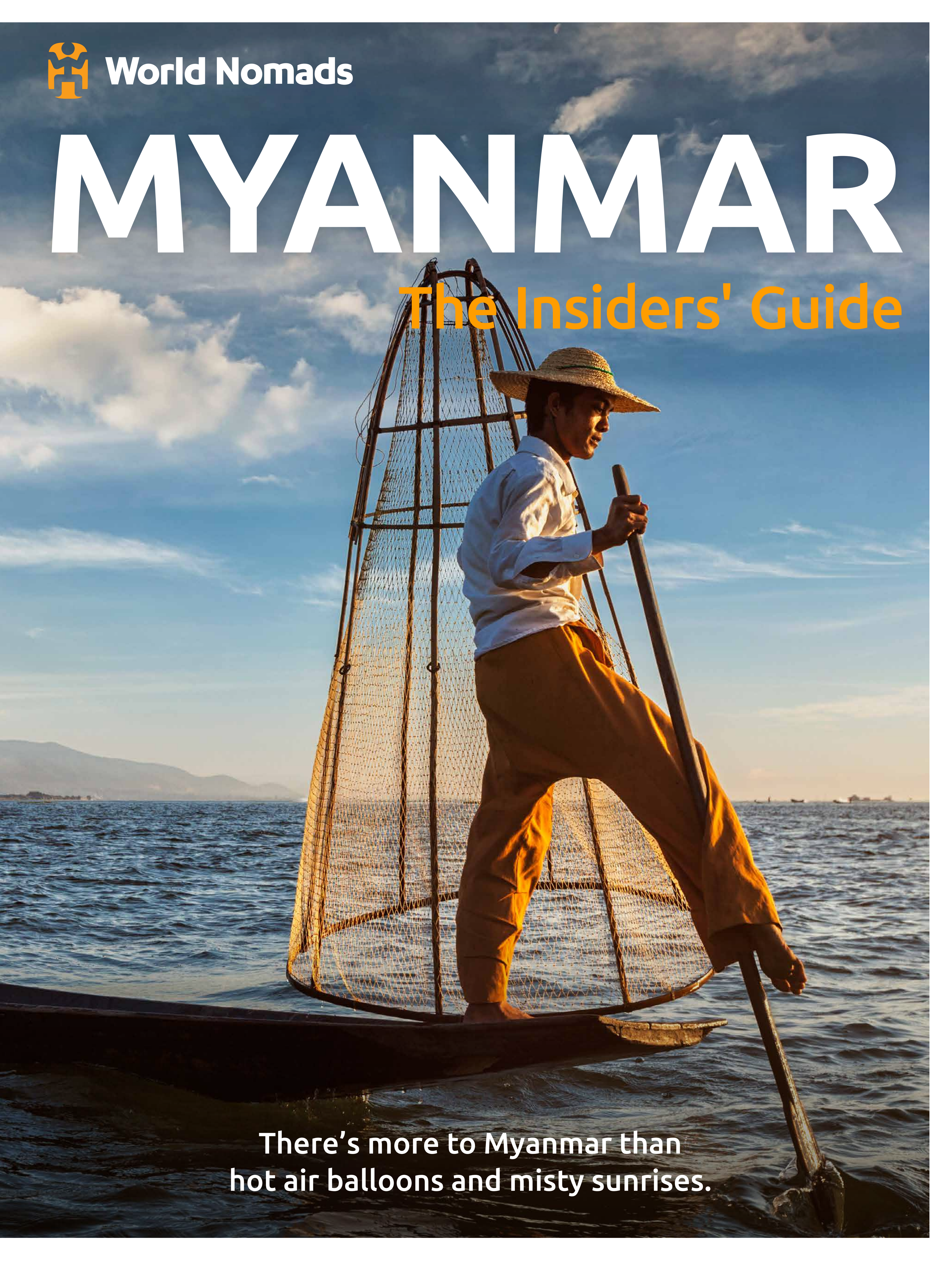


MYANMAR

The Insiders' Guide

A fisherman in a traditional conical net boat on the water. The fisherman is wearing a white long-sleeved shirt, orange trousers, and a wide-brimmed straw hat. He is holding a long wooden pole that rests on the water. The net is a large, conical structure made of bamboo and mesh. The background shows a blue sky with scattered clouds and a distant shoreline with mountains.

There's more to Myanmar than hot air balloons and misty sunrises.



Kyaukse Pagoda

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Welcome!

Myanmar isn't all about temples and sunsets. Hike to rural villages in Hsipaw, slurp delicious shan noodles on the streets of Yangon, discover secluded beaches in the south, and crawl through limestone caves in Hpa An. Choose your method of transport wisely, and enjoy Myanmar's secrets while they're... secret.

Our Pick of the Top 10 Experiences in Myanmar

Witness a Bagan sunrise

Watching the sunrise over the temples of Bagan is a highlight for most travelers, but there are two ways to do this. Either you choose to take the luxury method of a hot air balloon ride, or watch from the top of a temple.

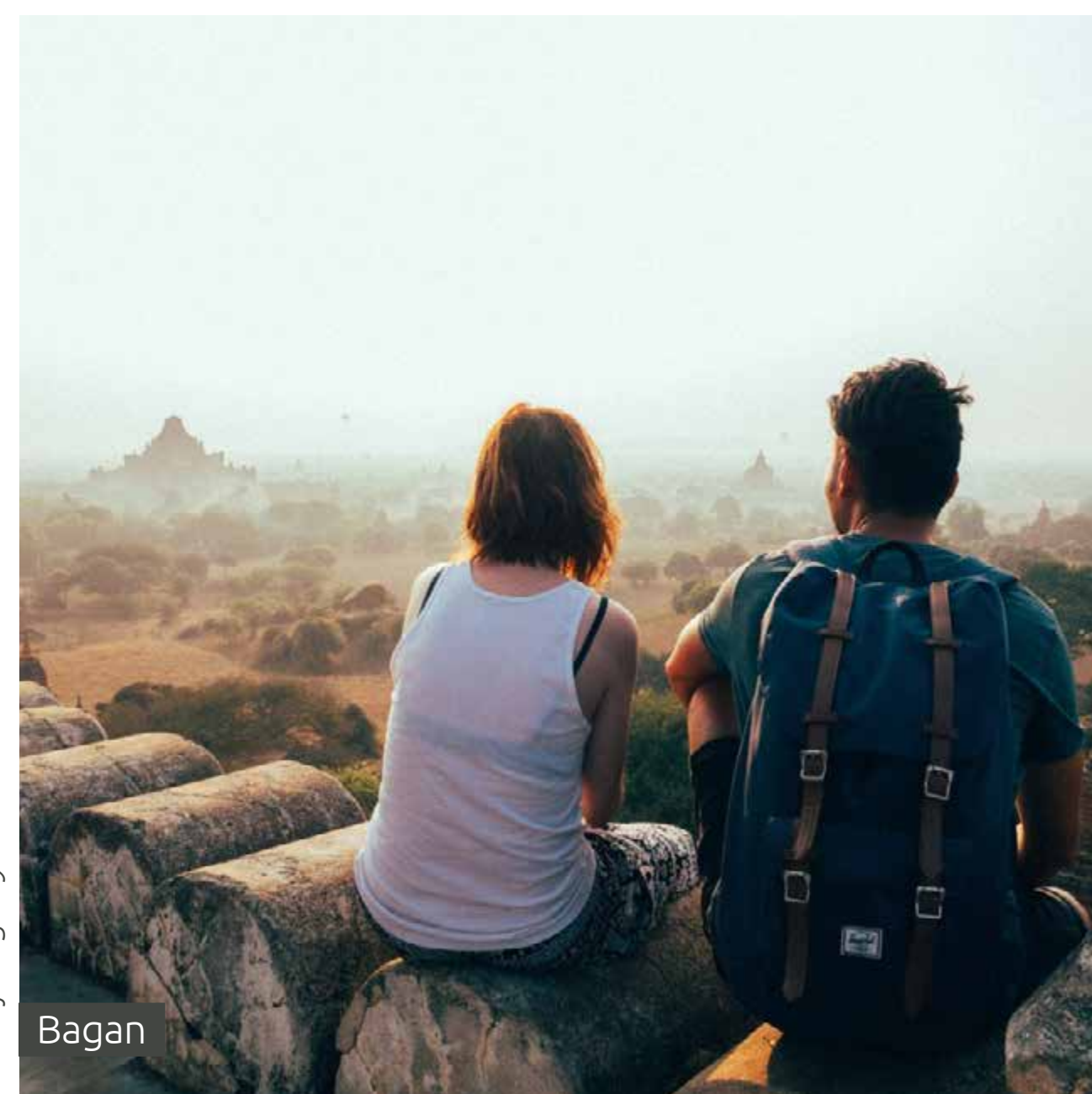
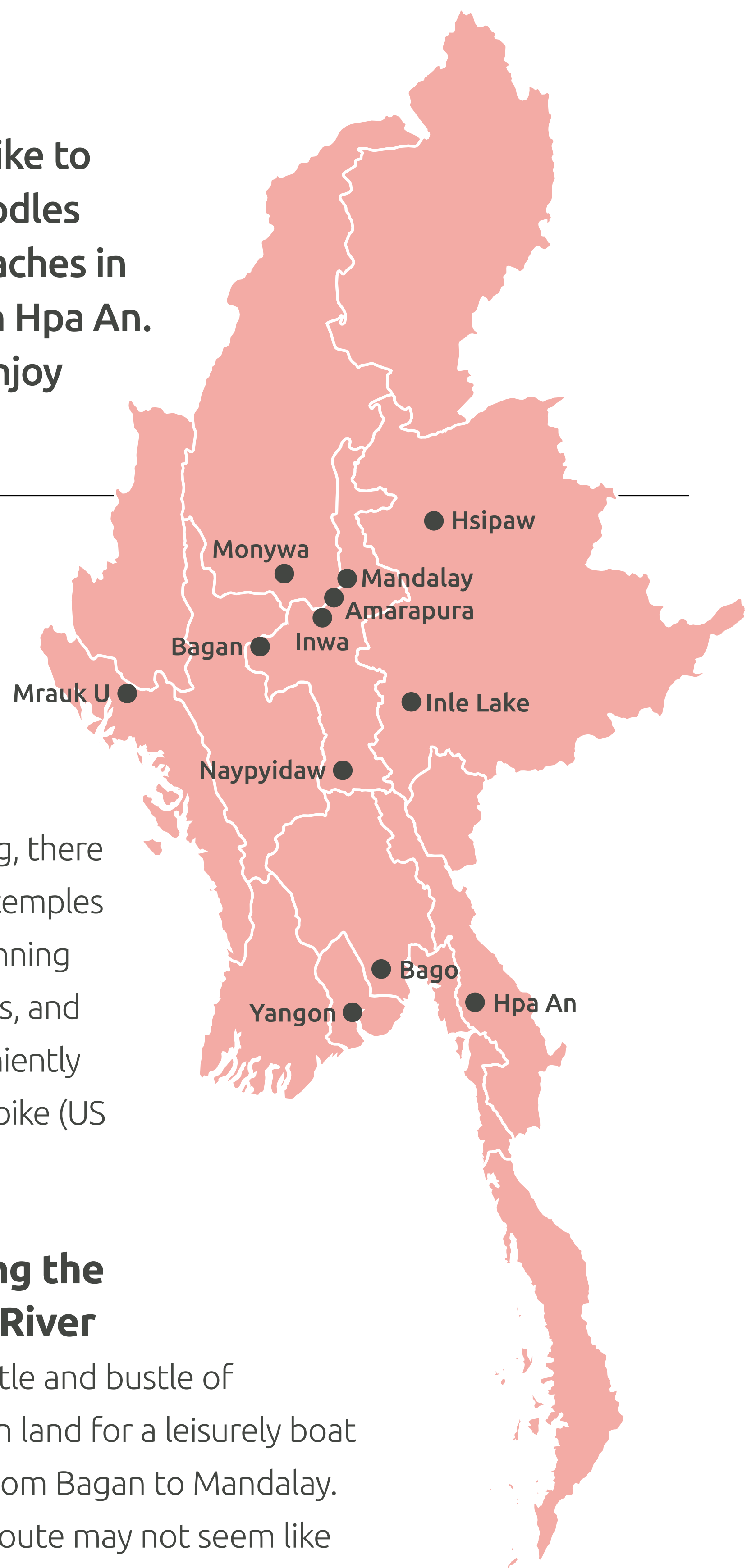
If you've got your heart set on ballooning, know that it's pricey – around US \$300 – and needs to be booked well in advance. Balloon rides also only occur between October–March. For those who travel outside of this period, or can't quite afford the

hefty price-tag, there are plenty of temples that offer stunning vantage points, and can be conveniently reached by e-bike (US \$5–\$10/day).

Cruise along the Irrawaddy River

Trade the hustle and bustle of sightseeing on land for a leisurely boat ride upriver from Bagan to Mandalay. Cruising this route may not seem like the most obvious choice – buses make the trip in six hours, compared to 12 on the river – but it's the best way to discover rural life along the river banks.

Many boats make afternoon stops at riverside villages, like Yandabo, an historic town known for pots and other goods made of river clay. From the deck, see kids playing and bathing in the river, farmers tending their fields, and fishermen reeling in their catch-of-the-day.



Pete Rojwongsuriya

Bagan

“““

If you've got your heart set on ballooning, know that it's pricey – around US \$300.

Chasing waterfalls and hot springs in Hsipaw

Set at the foot of snow-capped mountains and alongside the Duthawadi River in northern Myanmar, take a hike through rice paddies to find ancient *payas*, natural hot springs, and rushing waterfalls in Hsipaw.

Ask your guesthouse owner for a map, and take an easy two-hour hike through the jungle to find Nam Tuk waterfall – a moss-covered cliff, towering over a bubbling pool below.

There are a few hot springs around Hsipaw that are an easy day-hike from the center of town. If you go there late in the afternoon or early morning, you'll meet locals who are often relaxing in the warm water.

Meet the one-legged fishermen on Inle Lake

Dotting Inle Lake are the famous one-legged fishermen, who steer their boats by wrapping one leg around the oar. Their impressive balancing skills will leave you wanting to sign up for a yoga class. Enjoy their catch-of-the-day at one of the stilt-restaurants that rise above the lake.

Take a hike up Mandalay Hill

Walking up Mandalay Hill will take about 30-45 minutes, without stopping. If you choose to walk, keep an eye out for snakes – especially after dark. If you're not a fan of working up a sweat, get your driver to take you to the top.

This popular pilgrimage site has several pagodas and monasteries to



Will Hutton

“Dotting Inle Lake are the famous one-legged fishermen, who steer their boats by wrapping one leg around the oar.”

check out. A highlight is Sutaungpyei pagoda on top, which has several lookouts where you'll be rewarded with panoramic views. If you're chasing sunsets in Myanmar, this is a spot to add to the list.

Trek from Kalaw to Inle Lake

If bucket showers and squat toilets aren't your thing, skip this multi-day-trek. Still got your attention? Great. A trek to Inle Lake from Kalaw will put you in the heart of Myanmar's wilderness, and take you back to basics.

Heading west out of Inle Lake, you can trek directly to the former British Hill Station of Kalaw. While this trek has become popular, there's a chance you won't see any other tourists on the path. Hire an English-speaking guide who'll be able to translate for you once you reach the Pa'O, Palaung, Taungthu, and Danu villages.



Food in Yangon

Explore Sadan Cave in Hpa An

Hidden away in the mountains around Hpa An are several impressive caves, which can be easily explored over two days. The most remarkable of these is the colossal Sadan Cave. It spans the entire underside of the mountain, and takes you right through to the other side via a network of dimly-lit tunnels and cavernous chambers filled with depictions of Buddha.

On the far side, you'll discover a secret lake covered in water lilies, where a small wooden canoe will take you back under the mountain.

Sample Burmese cuisine on the streets

Hands-down, Yangon is the best place to try street food. With so much to choose from, you can eat on the curb every day for a year and still have more to try. Be sure to try the south-Indian-inspired dosa sandwich, the tasty quail egg snack *mont lin ma yar*, and classic *shan* noodles. Finish off a day of food delights with a sticky-rice and shaved coconut. In Mandalay, don't miss *mont di*, which is thick rice noodles with chickpea flour.

There's also a lot of skewered meat to try on most street corners. Accompany a stick of pork, chicken, fish, or shrimp with a small curry, and you've got yourself a cheap and delicious meal.

Always check the stall before you order, making sure cooking surfaces are clean. Remember, the busy stalls are always your best option – the locals know best.

Long journeys equal big rewards on Myanmar's coast

Take a 16-hour bus from Yangon to Dawei to escape the tourist trail and kick back in tropical Myanmar. To reach truly untouched beaches and fishing villages, you'll want to rent a motorbike to explore the Dawei peninsula. Take the journey (1.5 – 3 hours from Dawei) to reach Grandfather's, Sin Htauk, and Paradise beach.

Get a super-soaker and experience Thingyan Water Festival

Myanmar's answer to Thailand's Songkran Water Festival, the Thingyan Water Festival is held during Burmese New Year (usually around mid-April) and is a major Buddhist celebration in the country.

The festival is basically a massive water fight, where people throw water at each other from any vessels they can find. Some use super soakers, some use pots from the kitchen, and others have massive water cannons! It's easy to join in the fun – you can hit the streets with your water-weapon of choice, and start soaking everyone you see.

General Cost Guide

It's not difficult to explore Myanmar on a budget, but you should still be savvy with your cash.

Street food in a small town:
US \$1

Street food in larger cities:
US \$2-\$3

Western dinner:
US \$10-\$15

Dormitory bed:
US \$20/night

Private room in a hostel:
US \$30-\$40

Luxury accommodation:
US \$100/night

One-way bus ticket for a 6-8 hour journey:
US \$15-\$20

Long distance trains:
US \$15-\$25

ATMs are readily available in major cities and tourist towns, although functionality cannot be relied upon 100%. It's a good idea to carry back-up funds, and attempt withdrawals in advance.

If you want to use US dollars, bills will need to be in pristine condition.

Climate & Weather

The best time to visit Myanmar is between November–April when it’s sunny, dry, and cooler – but most importantly, it’s festival season. Before you pick a time to go, keep in mind the balloons over Bagan only fly between October–April. If this is on your bucket list, you’ll need to plan accordingly.

Cool season

During the cool season November–February the climate offers warm temperatures with relatively dry air. Just remember this is peak tourist season, so expect larger crowds and higher prices for accommodation. Always book in advance: don’t leave it to chance!

Hot season

It’ll be hot between March–May, with temperatures reaching 85°F (30°C). This is still a great time to travel if you can stand the heat – as there’s less chance of rainfall. Choosing to travel in the hot season just means you’ll need to pack appropriate, quick-dry clothing, stay hydrated, and use plenty of insect repellent.

Monsoon season

If you choose to travel during monsoon season, June–October, expect there to be plenty of rainfall.



Buddhist shrine

Spaces Images

This isn’t actually all that bad, as you’ll still have a few dry days here and there, less crowds, and much lower prices. Trekking, however, can be hit and miss during monsoon season, with the rain often turning the muddy paths into slip-and-slides.

Book a Trip to Suit Your Style

Where to go for adventure

Multi-day treks offered from Kalaw to Inle Lake are sure to satisfy adventure junkies. Although a fairly easy trek, the views offered and authentic experiences at the homestays will make it all worth the blisters. For a more off-the-beaten-track experience, Hsipaw and Hpa An also offer unreal trekking adventures and otherworldly views.

Where to go for spirituality

There’s no shortage of spirituality in Myanmar, but the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon has got to be one of the most impressive and spiritually uplifting places of religious importance.

Where to go for history

With over 2,000 temples and pagodas on the Bagan plains, and the remains of over 10,000 temples and monasteries built between the 11th and 13th centuries, a trip to Bagan will no doubt be in order for anyone that loves a bit of history.

Where to Stay

Once upon a time, there was a shortage on accommodation, but now there's a range of options to suit every budget from backpackers to luxury vacationers and everything in-between.

Hostels and guesthouses

Hostels and guesthouses are a great place to socialize and meet like-minded people from all over the globe. Myanmar doesn't have a huge backpacker hostel scene, but it's definitely growing – especially in Bagan, Inle Lake, and Yangon.

You can snag a dorm bed for as little as US \$5 – however, this can rise to US \$15 in high season, especially if you want a room with air-conditioning. Hostels predominantly cater for foreigners, so you don't have to worry about squat toilets, or using the bum gun (bidet).

Guesthouses are usually just as social as hostels. If you're traveling with a buddy, it's often cheaper or around the same price to get a private room. You'll find a double-fan room with shared bathroom facilities for as little as US \$10.

The majority of guesthouses and hostels are pretty basic, so don't expect hot water, 24-hour electricity, or Wi-Fi everywhere you go.

Homestays

The majority of travelers experience a homestay in Myanmar while trekking,



stopping at ethnic minority villages, or opting for a cultural experience with a local family instead of the hostel crowd.

But, is a homestay right for you? The accommodation and facilities are usually pretty basic in homestays. You'll either sleep on a bamboo mat with a mosquito net, or a thin mattress with no mosquito net. You share the bathroom, and could potentially have to bathe with a bucket of water, rather than an actual shower.

Homestays are an important source of income for locals looking to preserve their way of life, instead of moving to the cities in search of work. Don't let the lack of modern facilities deceive you. It's a rewarding experience. They're a particularly great option as the money goes directly to the local family, rather than a big corporation owned by the ethically-questionable government.

“Homestays are an important source of income for locals looking to preserve their way of life, instead of moving to the cities in search of work.”

Key Burmese Phrases

Master these Burmese phrases to impress the locals you meet while traveling around Myanmar.

Hello/Goodbye:

Mingalaba

My name is ___

(male): *Ja nor na meh ___ ba*

My name is ___

(female): *Ja ma nau na meh ___ ba*

What's your name?

Nah meh be lou kor d'le

How are you?

Neh kaun la?

I'm well:

Neh kaun ba deh

Thank you:

Cezu tin ba deh

Sorry:

Wun neh bad eh

Please:

Kyeizu pyu yue

Yes:

Ho de

No:

Ma hob u

Help:

Keh ba

Where is the bathroom?

Ein tha be ma shit ha le?

May I take a photograph?

Da poun yai lo ya mala?

How much?

Be lau le?

Very expensive:

Zei mya de

Can you reduce the price?

Nae nae htat shot pay par oo



Hotels

Budget hotels start from US \$10, but you can find a decent hotel with lovely modern amenities and facilities from US \$20.

Check online for the best deals. You might find that hotels are more expensive when you walk in and book a room at the reception desk. Sometimes, it's worth the extra few dollars for a little more comfort, especially if there's a pool! The major downfall with staying at a hotel is the

lack of common areas for socializing.

Alternatively, AirBnB is starting to catch on in Myanmar, and it provides a great opportunity to find high quality apartments at a decent price.

Free accommodation and camping

If you're trying to save money on accommodation, you can sleep for free at Buddhist monasteries. You'll be sleeping on the hard floor, and have little security for your belongings – but it's a unique experience waking up to Buddhist prayers and chanting. If your travel partner is of the opposite sex, you'll have to follow Buddhist ethics and sleep in separate rooms.

Camping is illegal in Myanmar. Some trekking tours offer camping within their packages. If you do choose these packages and go camping, your insurance won't cover you, as illegal activities are excluded.



Getting Around

Getting from A to B in Myanmar might prove to be a trickier task than expected. First thing's first: don't underestimate long distances or the language barriers you'll face. While the locals will always be happy to help out, these distances can be massive – and if you're traveling on a budget, you might be limited to local transport or hitchhiking.

Bus travel

Public buses are great for exploring cities like Yangon and are dirt cheap. If you can figure out the public transport system, you'll save a heap of money on getting around.

Long distance VIP buses are probably the most comfortable mode of long distance transport. They are air-conditioned, have reclining seats,



Yangon train station



Yangon

a place to charge your phone, and the ticket includes a pillow, blanket, snack, and water bottle.

We'd recommend paying an extra few dollars (US \$2-\$3), and traveling by long distance VIP bus – as opposed to the local bus.

Trains

Trains aren't just a great way to get around, they also make for an enjoyable, scenic ride. You'll pass through so many rural areas, so be sure to get yourself the window seat. Of course, this all depends on what type of train you're on.

All personal space goes out the window in lower class. You'll share a hard wooden bench with the locals, which can become very crowded. However, it has its rewards. You'll get to know your neighbor very well on long journeys, and may pick up a few

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Trains aren't just a great way to get around, they also make for an enjoyable, scenic ride.

A Cheap and Nasty Bus Trip from Mrauk U to Bagan

I tried to save a couple of bucks traveling from Mrauk U to Bagan, and it backfired big time. I was stuck on a bus with no reclining seats, air-conditioning, or legroom, traveling along a bumpy dirt road through the Arakan Mountains for 11 hours.

It was 104°F (40°C) outside and the windows were open, filling the bus with dusty air and blinding my eyes. I was breathing in dirt, and sweating something fierce, as they crowded more and more people onto the already full bus.

A long distance bus is uncomfortable enough, there's no need to torture yourself like this just to save a couple of *kyat*.

– Will Hatton,
The Broke Backpacker



Myeik

tips of what to see and do.

Upper class is only a couple of dollars more, and far more comfortable with reclining seats. While you won't get the same local experience as you would in lower class, it's definitely the better option for longer journeys.

Scooters and motorbikes

Probably the best way to explore the south of Myanmar is by motorbike. Rent a bike in Dawei to explore untouched beaches like Po Kyauk. You'll pass through remote villages and see kids running to the road waving, screaming *mingalaba* (hello). Just make sure you're properly licenced at home and in Myanmar. If you're not, and you have an accident, your travel insurance won't be able help with your medical bills.

In Bagan, it's a good idea to rent an

e-bike to explore the temples. You're supposed to bring the bikes back at night, but if you tell them you're into astrophotography you might be able to score a 24-hour rate – leaving you free to head out into the wild on an overnight adventure with your bike.

Taxis

Taxis are reasonably cheap in Myanmar, however travelers are often scammed in tourist hot-spots like Bagan. To avoid getting scammed, always ask the driver to use the meter, or agree on a price before taking a seat.

Boats

Boats are only available in peak season, however most short-distance ferries are available year-round. The slow boat from Mandalay to Bagan is well worth catching, and it is probably the most interesting way to do the journey.

Cuisine

Burmese cuisine may not have struck the international food scene yet, but that doesn't mean foodies can't rejoice at the plethora of taste-bud-tingling options to try in Myanmar.

Street Food

Street food is a big part of the food scene in Myanmar, and meals on the curbside are not to be missed.

Always take a look at the stall before you order and check the cooking surfaces to make sure they're clean. Keep your eyes peeled for busy food stalls – the locals know the best spots to eat!

In Yangon, make sure you try the south-Indian-inspired dosa sandwich, the tasty quail egg snack *mont lin ma yar*, and classic *shan* noodles.

In Mandalay, don't miss *mont di*, which are thick rice noodles with chickpea flour. There're a lot of skewered meats to try on most street corners.

Curries

There are so many different types of curry in Myanmar that you could order a different curry every day, and each will have a unique flavor and spice to it. Add a different protein (fish, egg, shrimp, pork, chicken, mutton) and you'll have enough combinations to outlast your 30-day tourist visa.

Nangyi thoke

This dry noodle dish is a favorite



Fiveday Market, Inle Lake

among backpackers in Myanmar. It's cheap, delicious, and filling. The dish consists of thick, round rice noodles, topped with chicken, fish cake patties, bean sprouts, with a sliced hard-boiled egg on top.

Mohinga

This is typically a breakfast dish, but you might be able to hunt one down

Best Locations to Try...

Seafood curry: Check out the Green Elephant Restaurant in Bagan for delicious and spicy curries of all sorts – their seafood curry is to die for. There are also locations in Yangon and Mandalay.

Street food: Yangon is the best place to try street food. With so much to choose from, you can eat on the curb every day for a year, and still have more places to try.

Kay kyi hnyat: This dish is best tried in the south of Myanmar. If you love pad Thai, you'll love the Burmese version too.

Dessert: Be sure to finish off a day of food delights with a tasty sticky rice with shaved coconut in Yangon.



Pete Rojwongsuriya

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You really can't go wrong with a nice slab of pork, chicken, fish, or shrimp on a stick!

for lunch or dinner. It's basically a hearty soup made with rice noodles, a spice-and-herb-based broth, and often finished off with crisp banana tree pith.

Kat kyι hnyat

The Burmese version of pad Thai, this tasty rice noodle dish is typically found in the southern coastal areas of the country. It's made with a variety of meats, seafoods, raw bean sprouts, beans, and fried eggs.

Burmese biryani

Biryani is a rice dish that finds its roots in India, but the Burmese have perfected their own version using tasty ambrosia, as well as the typical veggies, spices, and meats.

Meat on a skewer

You really can't go wrong with a nice slab of pork, chicken, fish, or shrimp

on a stick! Accompany it with some rice and a small curry, and you've got yourself a cheap and delicious meal.

Flavors of Myanmar

The flavors in Myanmar's diverse dishes have been influenced by many different cultures, including Chinese, Mon, Shan, Thai, and Indian. The ingredients used in Burmese cooking are often highlighted in a way that showcases one ingredient, while mixing others to form a well-rounded flavor profile.

There are plenty of spices in Burmese cuisine that combine to make amazing flavors. Many are typical Indian spices like curry, mint, and chili, but you'll also taste pickled tealeaves, ginger, and kaffir lime.

One unique flavor that may stand out to those not used to it is *ngapi*. This is a salty, fermented fish or shrimp paste, used in everything from soups and salads to condiments and main courses. *Ngapi* is considered the cornerstone of Burmese cuisine, and although it may not sound very appetizing to a western palate, when added with other spices and ingredients, it truly enhances the dish (think fish sauce in a Pad Thai).

Dishes are typically served with some sort of starch, and, more often than not, this will be either rice or rice noodles – which is no surprise, given that Myanmar is the sixth largest producer of rice in the world.

The more Indian-influenced dishes may have bread as the starch, like *aloo puri* (puffed bread with potato), which is typically served with curry.

Cultural Highlights

Get a dose of culture at one of Myanmar’s vibrant festivals, see traditional life in rural villages, and experience age-old religious practices at one of many pagodas or temples throughout the country.

Festivals

Thadidyut Festival of Lights takes place during full moon in the month of *Thadingyut* (October), and marks the end of Buddhist Lent (*Vassa*). At this time, the country is at its wettest, the rivers are at their fullest, and they celebrate a bounty of harvest, fresh water, and the coming of cooler weather.

The Thadingyut Festival is known as “The Festival of Lights” because it celebrates Buddha’s return to Earth from the heavens. To symbolize the enlightening power and radiance of Buddha, the Burmese light millions of



Taunggyi balloon festival

candles, lights, and oil lamps – bringing to life many pagodas, monasteries, and *banyan* trees throughout the country.

During the festival, travelers can witness *zat pwe*s (Burmese musicals) and free stage plays on streets across the country. You may hear some firecrackers going off while you walk around the streets sampling street food, and being entertained by the spectacle – both on the stages and in the streets.

The Thadidyuy Festival is best seen in larger cities like Mandalay and Yangon, but you can also witness quieter versions in small villages, as the entire country celebrates.

Myanmar’s answer to Thailand’s Songkran Water Festival, the Thingyan Water Festival is held during Burmese New Year (usually around mid-April), and is another major Buddhist celebration in the country. This time,

“**Myanmar’s answer to Thailand’s Songkran Water Festival, the Thingyan Water Festival is held during Burmese New Year.**”



Thingyan Water Festival

the water is meant to cleanse the soul from sins, and from the second day onward, it's complete mayhem.

The festival is basically a huge water fight, where participants throw water at each other from any vessels they can find. Some use super soakers, some use pots from their kitchen, and others have massive water cannons!

It's easy to join in the fun – you can hit the streets with your water-weapon of choice, and start soaking everyone you see. If you can make it, try to be in Yangon or Bagan during April.

Pagoda festivals

There are well over a dozen Pagoda Festivals held at different times at different pagodas (holy places of Buddhist worship) throughout the country. Some of these celebrations continue for more than 20 days, and pilgrims from all over the country travel long and difficult journeys to attend them.

The Phaung Daw Oo Pagoda Festival is one of the largest of its kind in Myanmar, and it takes place on Inle Lake. Spectators can cheer on boats full of men and women who showcase the incredible feat of balance of traditional one-legged rowing. Images of Buddha are placed in an incredibly ornate, gilded vessel, and are paraded around the lake by a series of long boats manned by countless one-legged rowers.

If rowing competitions and parades on Inle Lake aren't your thing, consider checking out the Shwedagon Pagoda Festival, which is held at the



Phaung Daw Oo Pagoda Festival

Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon each year. The event takes place in March (*Tabaung*) every year. Thousands of candles are lit, and the city comes alive at night. Travelers can join the crowds and enjoy the incredible ambiance throughout Yangon.

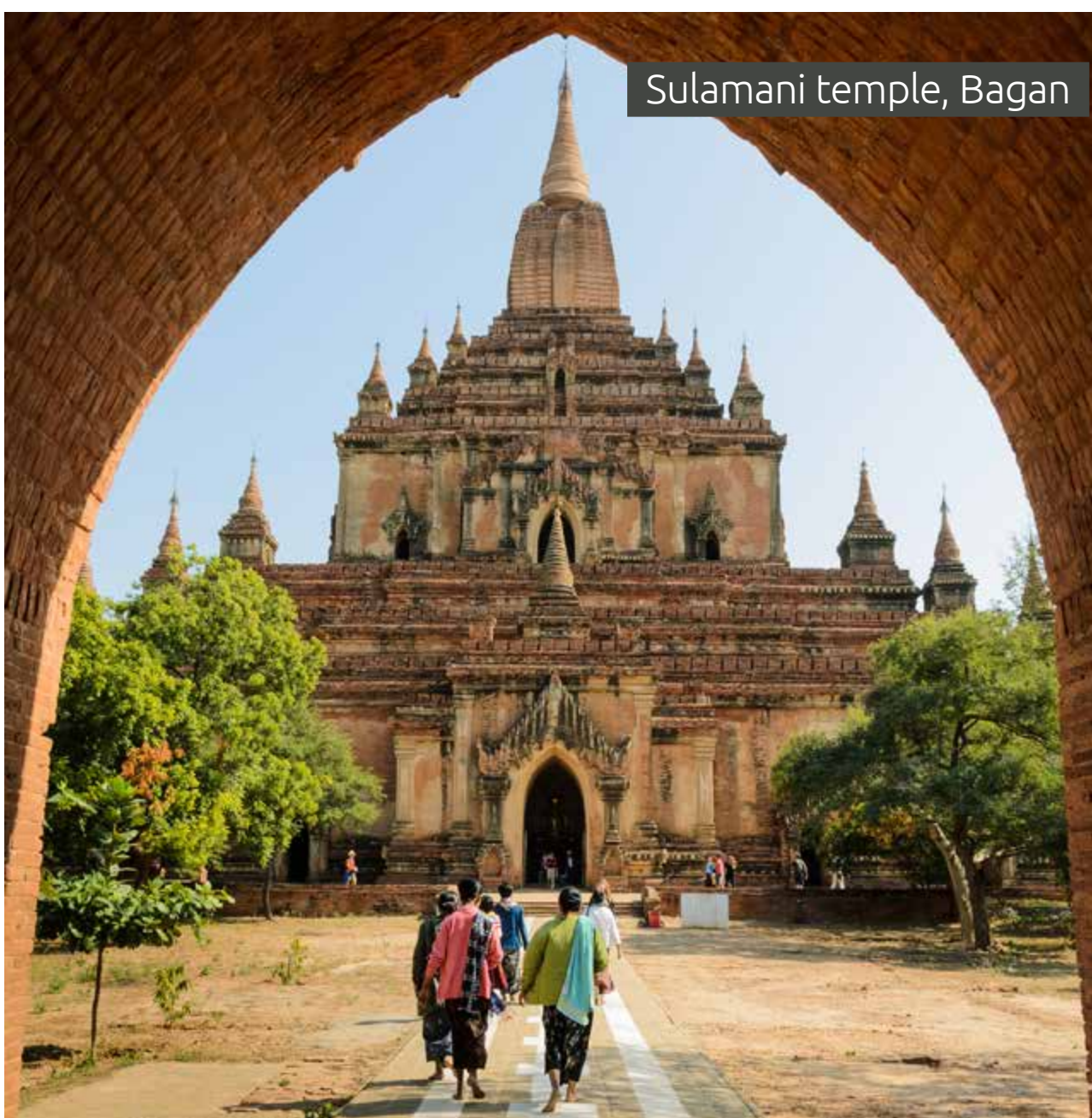
Local tribes

Traveling or trekking to remote villages and meeting local ethnic groups is a great cultural experience, and Myanmar is hands-down the best country in Southeast Asia to meet with tribes that still live a traditional existence.

In recent years, ethnic minority groups in Myanmar have been struggling to protect their culture. Sustainable tourism can play a huge role, by helping to protect a tribe's identity and, hopefully, future initiatives will enable the people of Myanmar to benefit from the influx of tourist dollars.

The World-Famous Burmese Beautifying Balm

Thanaka is a yellowish-white paste made from the ground bark of a Thanaka tree. It's been used by Burmese women (and many boys and young men) since the 14th century. It's applied in various designs on the face, from circular patches on each cheek, to more ornate, leaf-shaped patterns. This cooling paste provides protection from sunburn, and is said to have various beautifying properties.



Sulamani temple, Bagan

The Chin people are a large ethnic group in Myanmar, and they live in remote areas close to the Indian and Bangladeshi border. The H'mong people are known for their beautiful textiles and weaving, and are in the Pu Dao region. The Moken tribe, or sea gypsies, in the Mergui Archipelago are no doubt one of the most fascinating cultures in Myanmar – unfortunately their way of life is under threat, with the government attempting to assimilate their culture into society. The Shan people are one of the largest ethnic groups in Myanmar, however much of the Shan state is still restricted due to ongoing conflict between tribal groups and government forces. Karen people live between Myanmar and Thailand in small mountain villages. The long neck Karen women, known as *Padaung*, attract tourists from around the world.

When you visit Myanmar, it's extremely important that you try to engage in ethical tourism, and, if you choose to visit tribal groups, please do so in a responsible way. To reduce the environmental and cultural impacts

of tourism, it's recommended visiting these communities in small groups. Don't bring foreign items like alcohol, cosmetics, and energy drinks with you into the villages.

Monasteries and temples

Bagan is the largest archaeological zone in Myanmar, home to over 2,200 temples, pagodas, and ruins. Rent an e-bike for the day to explore the thousands of temples scattered across the plains.

The shimmering gold Shwedagon Pagoda is undoubtedly one of the most iconic sights in Myanmar. While you're in Yangon, visit Botataung Pagoda overlooking the Yangon River, Chaukhtatgyi Buddha Temple to see a giant 66m reclining Buddha, and check out Buangdawgyoke Pagoda – the snake temple. This fascinating, lesser-known temple is home to about 50 massive Burmese pythons.

In Mandalay, Kuthadow Pagoda is known as the world's largest book, with 729 inscribed marble slabs of Buddhist teachings. The Shwenandaw Monastery is made of finely-carved teak wood, located next to the Mandalay Royal Palace. It's also on the same grounds as the Atumashi Monastery, which is bursting with intricate woodcarvings.

Venturing beyond the major cities, a trip to Hpa An would be incomplete without visiting the Bayin Nyi Monastery. It has its own natural hot spring, and was built into a cave. If you go to Mrauk U, find Kothaung – the temple of 90,000 Buddha images, Shitte-thuang, and Htukkanthein Temple.

The Karen People, Between Myanmar & Thailand

Karen people live between Myanmar and Thailand in small mountain villages. The long neck Karen women, known as *Padaung*, attract tourists from around the world. Women stack their neck with brass rings, which give the long-neck illusion.

Karen mythology claims the tradition arose to prevent tigers from biting their necks! This sadly has given rise to 'long neck zoos'.

When visiting tribal groups, use your gut – if something feels wrong, it probably is. You should aim to meet tribal groups on their terms, in their villages, and in a manner where they will directly benefit from any money exchanging hands.



Etiquette & Faux Pas

After years of political isolation, the presence of foreigners can still fascinate and occasionally offend the locals, as their prominent Buddhist beliefs are challenged by travelers who didn't quite get the memo on these etiquette tips...

Etiquette in the homestay

Although the thin mattress on the floor may not be the comfiest, don't sit on your pillow to try and cushion your behind. In Burmese culture, the head is considered the most sacred part of the body, while the bottom... not so much.

Every household will have a family shrine: be mindful of how you're positioned when sitting around it. It's considered disrespectful to point your feet – which are considered impure – towards the shrine, other people, and at images of Buddha.

Speaking of feet, shoes should also be taken off when entering a household – so wear matching socks.

Dressing appropriately

While visiting places of religious importance, dress respectfully by covering your shoulders and knees. Beat the heat by donning a traditional *longyi* that the majority of the locals wear – it's a traditional piece of cloth that resembles a sarong and is super comfortable.

Be mindful of your clothing when visiting villages too. As the locals say,

you're visiting rural communities, not taking a beach holiday – so leave some things to the imagination.

Photography etiquette

The locals are extremely curious about foreigners, so don't be surprised if you have a line of locals wanting to take photos with you, and claim you on Facebook as 'my new friend!' Even the monks play tourist at popular sites, taking photos of one another on their phones.

There are plenty of insta-worthy locations in Myanmar, and you'll definitely be tempted to snap pictures of the locals in their traditional clothing and *thanaka* makeup. But before you take photos of others, simply ask if it's okay first.

The locals are incredibly friendly, and in most cases will be happy to pose for you. Taking photos of mediating monks, however, is considered especially rude. Snapping Buddhist images is also considered disrespectful, so put your camera down inside religious places.

Shaking hands

As you travel through Myanmar, you'll come across friendly monks who will be eager to practice their English on you. If you're a female, don't try to shake their hand. Monks are not allowed to touch females, so your outstretched hand will be left hanging.

Giving gifts to children

Giving gifts to children is not encouraged. Your assumed good deed of giving the kids a notepad and pen will actually encourage them to pursue a career in begging.

Public displays of affection

Affection between loved ones should only be shared in private. You'll even see trains displaying signs that read, "No kissing".

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The locals are extremely curious about foreigners, so don't be surprised if you have a line of locals wanting to take photos with you.

Safety & Scams

When it comes to crime in Myanmar, it's a good idea to be on your guard for touts, pests, and petty theft in the larger cities. For those of you venturing off-the-beaten track, research the destination carefully to avoid any restricted areas.

Scams

When traveling through Yangon, Mandalay, Bagan or Inle Lake, vendors will likely increase their prices, trying to scam tourists into spending more than they need to. However, in remote areas, the prices stated are fair, and the locals will be transparent about costs and recommendations.

Touts

When touts approach tourists to recommend a hotel, they'll do anything to dissuade you from your pre-booked accommodation, probably suggesting "That hotel is no good, foreigners can't



stay there." This is almost certainly a lie.

Remember that these touts make their money by collecting commissions from the hotels they direct visitors to. If you know where you want to go, politely but firmly tell them, and they'll back down.

Crime

Pickpocketing and purse snatching is rare, likely due to strict penalties imposed on criminals. Police presence is prevalent, with many stations boasting large signs in English that read, "May I help you?"

Standard safety measures should be exercised in Myanmar, such as keeping valuables concealed and a firm grip on your bags, just in case.

The Myanmar–Thai border can be a hazardous location due to army presence and drug trafficking, but police don't allow foreigners to visit

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Standard safety measures should be exercised in Myanmar, such as keeping valuables concealed and a firm grip on your bags.

areas where there's a significant risk of violence. Burmese people know that tourism is a very important part of the economy, so they are doing everything they can to keep tourists safe.

LGBT safety

While it's still illegal to be gay in Myanmar, the culture is far more accepting than other countries in Asia that ban homosexuality completely – including Malaysia, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and India.

LGBT travelers who stay on the fairly well-trodden tourist trail (Mandalay, Bagan, Inle Lake, Yangon) will find the locals are so accustomed to tourists, that you'll experience no problems here. In rural areas, the locals are not used to seeing LGBT people, but you may find they are curious and simply want to know more.

Myanmar is a devoutly Buddhist country, so all couples should avoid public displays of affection (this goes for straight couples too!), and always dress modestly, covering knees and shoulders – especially when visiting temples.



Will Hutton



Aung San Suu Kyi, the pro-democracy activist, and now the country's leader, has spoken out against Myanmar's antiquated anti-gay laws. There have been pride festivals and film festivals — but on a very small scale.

Travel Restrictions

- The ministry of hotels and tourism is in charge of making restricted areas known to the public. For up-to-date information, visit: <http://www.myanmar-tourism.org/index.php/tourist-information/permited-areas>.
- There are numerous restrictions for travel in the north of Myanmar. It's a good idea to research these areas before going too far. These include the Sagaing Region, Kachin Region, some areas of the Shan State.

Border Crossing Tips

- Get all your *kyat* changed to US dollars or Thai baht before leaving Myanmar, as you'll find it extremely difficult to find an exchange place willing to exchange Myanmar *kyat*.
- Double check you have your exit stamp before arriving or departing Myanmar.
- Check to see if you will require government permits before you reach the border crossing.
- To enter Myanmar, you'll require a printed copy of your approval letter, and a photocopy of your passport. If you do not have these documents printed, they will turn you around at the border.

Visas & Vaccinations

Planning your trip to Myanmar will require a few tedious tasks – namely sorting out your visa, and getting those vaccinations in order.

Visas

It's far easier these days to obtain a visa for Myanmar, thanks to the new online e-visa system. It takes about 3-4 business days to process your visa, after the payment is made.

You can enter either by land through the Tachileik, Myawaddy, and Kawthaung checkpoints, or by plane through Mandalay or Nay Pyi Taw airports.

Over 100 countries are eligible for an e-visa. To view a full list of e-visa countries, visit: <https://evisa.moip.gov.mm/>. Some nationalities, such as Iranians, are required to obtain their visa for Myanmar directly from the embassy.

Both e-visa and consulate visas for Myanmar cost around US \$50, and are valid for 28 days. Make sure you take passport-sized photos and US currency with you to the consulate. Find the closest Myanmar embassy to you here: <https://myanmarvisa.com/mynembassylist.htm>.

Unfortunately you can't extend your e-visa or Tourist visa in Myanmar. Overstaying will cost US \$3 a day, but we wouldn't recommend more than 14 days.

Vaccinations

There are no legally-required vaccinations to enter Myanmar, unless you're coming from a country like Gambia, where Yellow Fever is rife.

But, it's better to be safe than sorry. Check with your doctor to make sure your routine vaccines and disease preventions are up to date against Hepatitis A and B, Diphtheria, Polio, Tetanus, Japanese Encephalitis B, Rabies, Tuberculosis, Yellow Fever, Typhoid, and Malaria.

Health and hygiene

Finding proper healthcare is rare in Myanmar, and local healthcare facilities should only be used out of desperation. Your best luck is in Yangon or, better yet, over the border. It's best to be prepared with medications from home by packing your own medical kit, and avoid buying over-the-counter medication in Myanmar altogether.

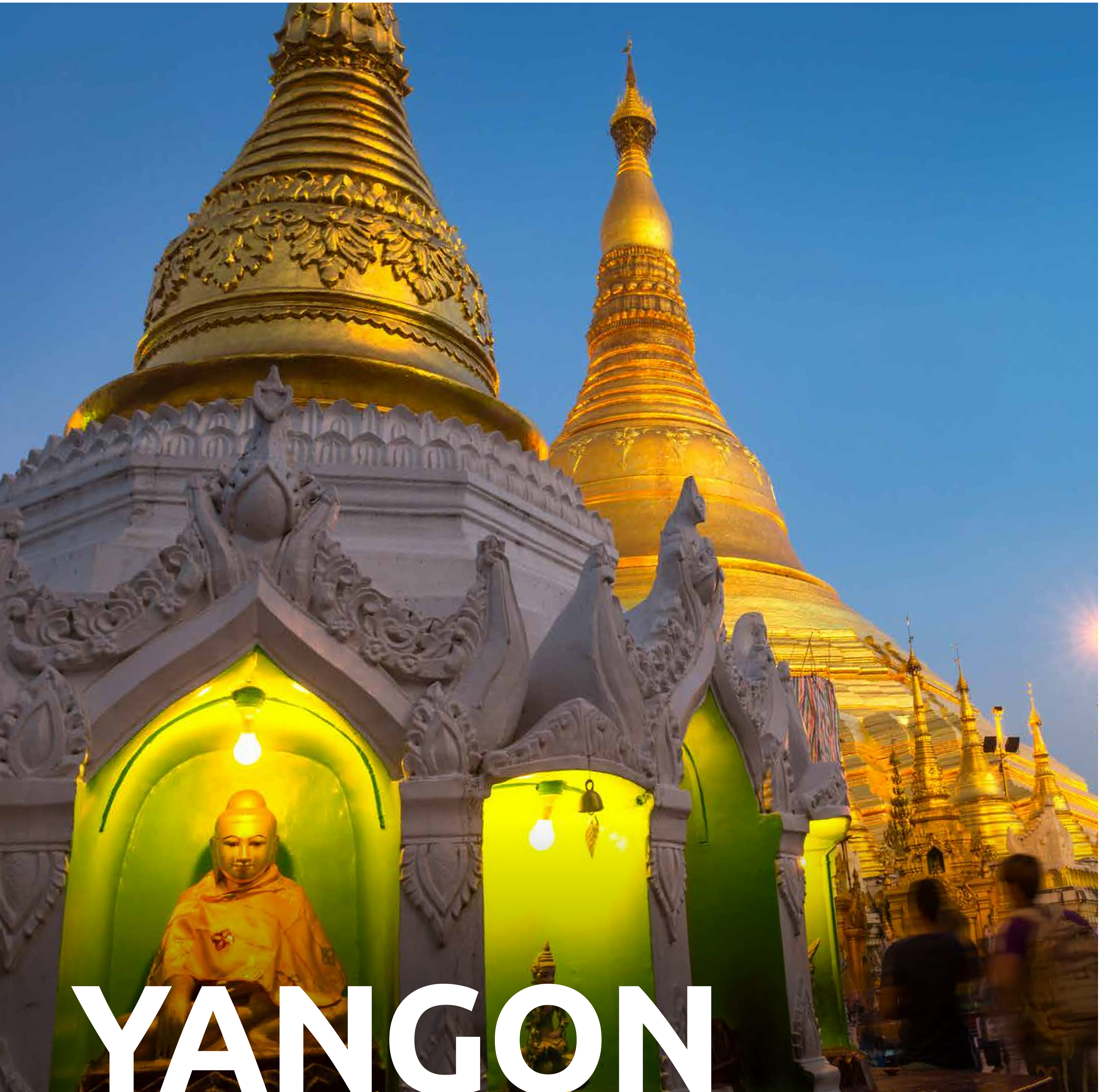
Check your mattress for bed bugs along the seams after turning on the light, and before placing any of your belongings on the bed or sleeping in it.

Avoid drinking tap water, and water with ice at all costs. Sealed bottled water is cheap in Myanmar, but try to take a water purifier to avoid contributing to plastic bottle waste.

There is no reason to completely avoid street food stalls, as food is usually cooked to order in front of you. But use caution when food has been sitting around, such as in a buffet. Eat only fruit that has a skin that can be peeled, and vegetables that have been cooked.

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Finding proper healthcare is rare in Myanmar, and local healthcare facilities should only be used out of desperation.



YANGON and Southern Myanmar

Explore the bustling streets of Yangon, discover limestone caves and authentic charm in Hpa An, visit the ancient kingdom of Bago, and stumble upon secluded beaches in southern Myanmar.



Yangon

Myanmar's largest city has something for everyone. Previously cut off to the outside world, there's now more to Yangon than religious relics, with pristine parks, modern bars, restaurants, and gyms being built to meet the demands of visitors and locals alike.

Shwedagon Pagoda

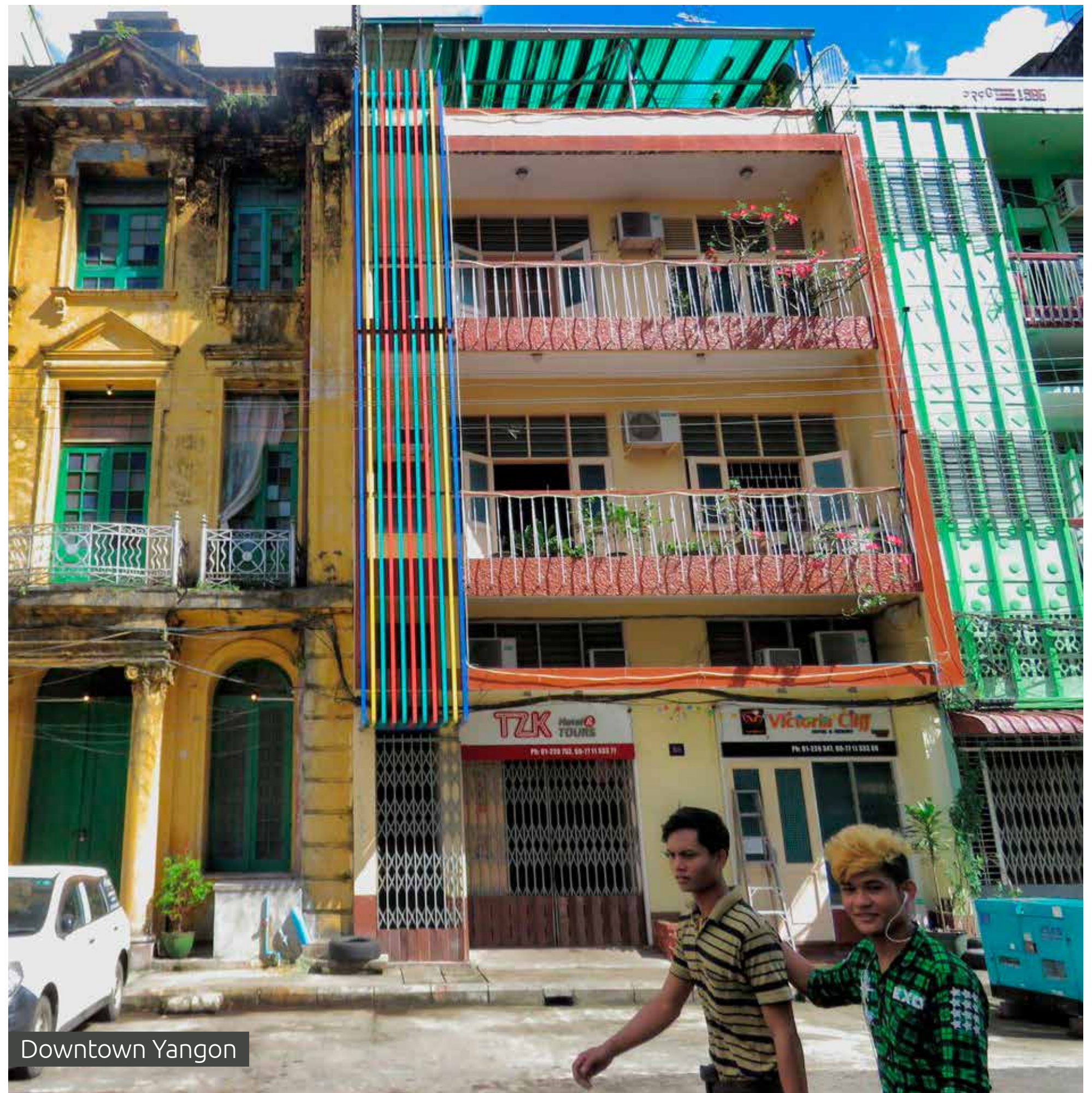
Shwedagon Pagoda is Myanmar's symbol of national identity. Undoubtedly Yangon's greatest landmark and top attraction, the 324ft (99m) high pagoda is best seen at sunrise and sunset, when natural light enhances the iconic artistry – believed to be over 2,600 years old.

When visiting religious sites, it's important to dress modestly, with shoulders and knees covered. *Longyis* and scarves are available for purchase at the entrance to Shwedagon, and shoes are to be removed before entering pagodas.



Anika Mikkelsen

Sule Pagoda



Downtown Yangon

Anika Mikkelsen

Chauk Htat Gyi and Nga Htat Gyi

Northeast of Shwedagon on Shwegondaing Road, two monumental Buddha statues – Chauk Htat Gyi and Nga Htat Gyi – are situated across the street from one another.

The intricate designs on the soles of Chauk Htat Gyi Buddha Temple's six-story reclining statue, and the teak carvings surrounding Nga Htat Gyi's five-story seated figure, are testimonies to the fine craftsmanship of religious icons around the country.

Sule Pagoda

In the heart of downtown Yangon, Sule Pagoda is a beacon that shines night and day near the city's main Maha Bandoula Park.

Its location is particularly interesting due to its proximity to Immanuel Baptist Church and Bengali Sunni Jameh

“In the heart of downtown Yangon, Sule Pagoda is a beacon that shines night and day.”

YANGON AND SOUTHERN MYANMAR

Mosque. This serves as a reminder that though a predominately Buddhist country, Myanmar is home to a myriad of religions.

Dining out

From street food to upscale dining, Yangon's food options are expanding as quickly as an eager tourist's waistline. Chinatown's 19th Street remains a staple for a night of cheap dining, with outdoor grills and plastic tables on the dimly-lit street growing crowded at sundown.

For western eats and treats, opportunities are endless. The ever-popular Rangoon Tea House, Green Gallery, and House of Memories remain staples in the Yangon Foodie diet.

Nawaday Street, just north of Yangon's Central Railway, and Pearl Condo in Bahan Township, are home to a plethora of restaurants offering cuisines from around the world. Whether you're craving Mexican, Indian, or Italian, you'll find exactly what you're looking for at a range of prices.

Bars

Watering holes around the city are

more luxurious than ever, now offering glistening views of the skyline and the iconic Shwedagon Pagoda.

Penthouse, YangonYangon, Eclipse, and Atlas Bars keep the party going to the wee hours of the night. Dress in style, and don't make plans for the day after a visit to one of these rooftop bars!

Kandawgyi and Inya lakes

Visit the manicured lawns and mirrored waters of Kandawgyi and Inya Lakes for a break from Yangon's traffic, and enjoy a slice of serenity. Early morning is the perfect time for a jog around the parks' winding pathways, and as the sun goes down, couples swarm the parks, remaining hidden under the shadow of patterned umbrellas.

Maha Bandula Park and Dala township

In the city center, Maha Bandula Park is a common gathering site for families and festivals. Just south of Maha Bandula, tourists can cross Yangon River to Dala Township for an overhyped tour.

Better yet, skip the ferry; opt instead for a picnic at one of the quiet jetties while watching boats take commuters to and from work.

Shopping in Yangon

Junction City is a state-of-the-art retail, dining, and entertainment complex on Bogyoke Aung San Road.

Across the street, Bogyoke Market sells local curios, antiques, fabrics, and artwork galore. This covered market is a top pick for souvenir shopping.

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Visit the manicured lawns and mirrored waters of Kandawgyi and Inya Lakes for a break from Yangon's traffic.

Tour the Town

Several new companies are popping up in an attempt to offer an insider's view of Myanmar's cultural capital. Unchartered Horizons arranges tours to the nearby town of Dala on bicycle, while Myanm/Art Gallery offers single-day gallery tours within the city, in addition to their multi-day, multi-city tours.

Wired on 39 is an art gallery, which invites visitors into their studio and takes groups on photo tours through interesting streets in Yangon.



Anika Mikkelsen

Chinatown, Yangon

Bago

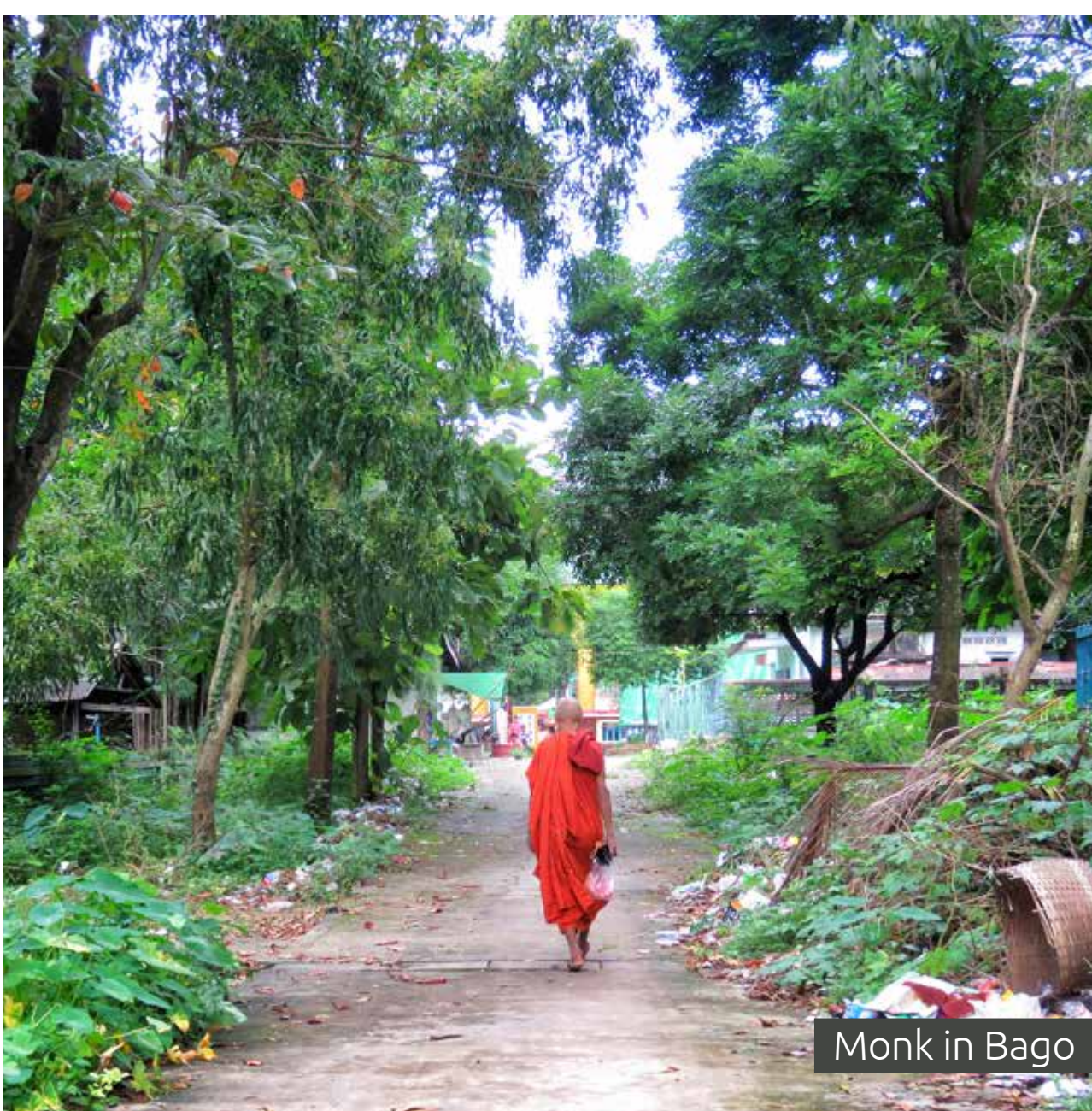
Sporting an ancient palace, a shining pagoda taller than Yangon's infamous Shwedagon, and a slew of golden relics, the ancient Hanthawaddy Kingdom of Bago is an easy visit from nearby Yangon.

Planning your visit

Accessible by rail and road, a visit to Bago can be arranged as a day trip, weekend away, or stopover on the way to the country's more northern cities.

With six morning arrivals and six evening departures, tickets for the train between Yangon and Bago may be purchased on the day of travel, with presentation of a passport.

The train's calming sways provide a slow-paced experience, taking passengers through emerald fields, and past villages dotted with golden pagodas. Upon arrival in Bago, visitors should inquire about return tickets to Yangon before leaving the train station.



Anika Mikkelsen

Monk in Bago



Shwemawdaw Pagoda

Anika Mikkelsen

Hinthagone Pagoda

In the northeast corner of Bago, the hilltop Hinthagone Pagoda offers a panoramic view of the city, and easy access to the city's palace.

Kanbawzathadi Palace

Since its original construction in the mid-1500s, the once-stunning Kanbawzathadi Palace has faced arson, heavy looting, and now is home to few original details, and a fungus growing as thick as the pack of wild dogs overtaking the grounds. While it would be easy to be dissuaded from visiting the palace, the museum and exterior details are well worth a look.

Shwemawdaw Pagoda

Nearby, Shwemawdaw Pagoda is undeniably the city's most iconic structure. Taller than Yangon's own Shwedagon, the 375ft (114m) high stupa can be seen across the city.

Getting Around Bago

While it's easy to get around by foot, motorbikes or private cars can be hired for the day, allowing for quick trips between Bago's sites.

To visit the city's main attractions, a 10,000 *kyat*, archaeological-zone pass must be purchased, along with an optional 3,000 *kyat* camera pass. These passes can be obtained at Shwemawdaw Pagoda or Kanbawzathadi Palace, and allow access to four of the city's main attractions.

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The 53ft (16m) long reclining Buddha Mya Tha Lyaung lies draped in a golden cloak on the city’s western edge.



Mya Tha Lyaung

Anika Mikkelsen

A walk around the pagoda can take an hour or more, as hundreds of smaller surrounding stupas and buildings adorn the grounds, and provide cultural and religious insights.

Mya Tha Lyaung

A masterpiece of giant proportions, the 53ft (16m) long reclining Buddha Mya Tha Lyaung lies draped in a golden cloak on the city’s western edge. Once concealed by overgrown jungle, the Buddha’s slight

smile and casual gaze were handcrafted over a millennium ago, and only rediscovered in the 1880s.

Shwethalyaung Buddha

While Mya Tha Lyaung remains exposed to the elements, a short distance away lies a covered, reclining Buddha. Shwethalyaung Buddha is just 6ft (2m) longer than its outdoor neighbor, and is accessible via an indoor pathway lined with excited artisans.

Kyaik Pun

Between the reclining Buddhas and Bago’s railway station, a final stop at Kyaik Pun – literally translating to “Four Buddha” – is the perfect end to a busy day. These four 88ft (27m) high Buddhas have sat together, uncovered and back-to-back, since the 7th century. Nearby, a statue of the city’s iconic golden Hinta birds resting one on top of the other, can be found.



Bago Palace

Anika Mikkelsen

Hpa An

Surrounded by dramatic limestone mountains and with a host of impressive caves to explore, Hpa An's spectacular scenery and authentic charm make it a memorable place to spend a few days.

Around town

There's little to see in the town itself, though its laid-back, friendly locals make it a pleasant base to explore the surrounding countryside. With budget-friendly accommodation and limitless opportunities to explore outside, it's becoming a firm favorite among independent travelers.

The best way to explore is by renting a bicycle or motorbike from one of the shops in town, or, if you're more comfortable on three wheels, ask your hotel to arrange a tuk-tuk tour of the main sights.

Explore Hpa An's caves

Hidden away in the mountains surrounding Hpa An are several



Kyauk Kalap Temple



Hot spring cave, Hpa-An

Charlotte Rose

impressive caves, which can be easily explored over two days. The most remarkable of these is the colossal Sadan Cave. It spans the entire underside of the mountain, and takes you to the other side via a network of dimly-lit tunnels and cavernous chambers filled with Buddha images.

Once on the far side, you'll discover a secret lake covered in water lilies, where a small wooden canoe will take you back under the mountain with stunning views of the surrounding countryside.

Other caves worth exploring include the impressive Kawgun Cave, which contains thousands of 7th century Buddha images. Indulge your inner Indiana Jones in the narrow tunnels of Yathaypyan, or take a dip in the steaming hot springs at the elaborate Bayin Nyi Cave.

At sunset, visit the Bat Cave, where

“”
You'll discover a secret lake covered in water lilies, where a small wooden canoe will take you back under the mountain.

““

The rows of Buddha statues that surround the base of the mountain make for a breathtaking sight.

Mount Zwegabin



Charlotte Rose

thousands of bats streaming out over the mountains make for a mind-boggling spectacle.

Climb Mount Zwegabin

The steep, four-hour climb up Mount Zwegabin is a popular Hpa An excursion – though it’s not for the faint-hearted. Wear proper walking shoes, leave at sunrise to escape the heat, and enjoy magical views of the mountains shrouded in mist.

If that sounds like too much hard work, the rows of Buddha statues that surround the base of the mountain make for a breathtaking sight, minus the effort.

Shweyinhmyaw Pagoda

After a long day of exploring, the riverside Shweyinhmyaw Pagoda in the northwest of town is a popular place to sit and watch the sunset.

Alternatively, take a ferry from the jetty next to the pagoda and cross the river to Mount Hpar Pu, where a thirty-minute hike uphill will take you to a pagoda, where you can enjoy fantastic views over the surrounding rice fields and limestone hills.

Kan Thar Yar Lake

In the evenings, locals gather at the serene Kan Thar Yar Lake on the outskirts of town, where you can enjoy sunset views over the mountains with a cold beer, and BBQ snacks served up by various mobile vendors.

Coffee With a Conscience

Conveniently located on the south side of Kan Thar Yar lake, Veranda community café is a great spot to refuel with a light lunch and fresh coffee after a morning of sightseeing.

The café operates as a social enterprise, with the proceeds going to support local youth. The friendly staff are always happy to chat and share little-known travel tips.

Beaches to Explore

With 1,200mi (1,930km) of unspoiled coast and more than 800 islands to explore, the journey south to Myanmar's beaches may not be easy, but it sure will be worth your while.

Ngapali Beach

While Ngapali is the most developed beach in Myanmar, it's got nowhere near the level of infrastructure that Phuket has – and let's hope it stays that way.

Tourism is flourishing in Ngapali, with many local agencies now offering cycling tours, guided hikes through nearby mountains, scuba diving, snorkeling, and kayaking.

If you're looking for a taste of the local culture, hire a motorbike or bicycle and ride to the fishermen's village at the southern end of the beach. You'll see their traditional way of life and get a sense that things really haven't changed much in the



Sin Htauk, Dawei

Sergio Molino Aguado



Maungmagan Beach, Dawei

Sergio Molino Aguado

past decade.

At the end of the day, take a walk along Ngapali beach as the sun sets, and stop in at one of the local restaurants to taste delicious seafood.

If you're catching a bus to Ngapali, Thandwe is where you'll hop off, and up the northern end of the beach you'll be able to find accommodation for US \$20/night.

Chaung Tha

Chaung Tha is the most popular beach among locals. For a truly local experience, this is the place to go – plus you'll find affordable accommodation.

Chaung Tha hasn't got infrastructure like Ngapali, but you'll still be able to go snorkelling, horse riding, or cycling in the area.

If you're there on a national public holiday or long weekend, it'll be

“”

Step inside to peer onto the busy streets below like the Rajput women of the royal household once did.

YANGON AND SOUTHERN MYANMAR

far more crowded with locals from Yangon who've ventured to Chaung Tha for a bit of relaxation.

Ngwe Saung

Ngwe Saung is the closest beach to Yangon, where you'll find mid-range accommodation and white sand beaches.

Hire a motorbike and ride across the long stretches of sand, stopping at local restaurants to enjoy some more fresh seafood.

If you venture to the southern end of the beach, it's far more deserted, and you might even have the whole beach to yourself!

If you've got a loose budget, boats and guides can be hired to explore nearby islands, where you'll snorkel in crystal-clear waters that are teeming with bright-colored fish.

Dawei

Head to the Andaman Sea, where an unspoiled Myanmar awaits those who are willing to make the long journey there. Dawei is the main city in this area on the banks of a river, but not far from the coast.

You'll need to take a bus or hire a motorbike and ride half an hour before you reach the first beach, Maungmagan.

If you're feeling up for an adventure, take the journey 1.5–3 hours from Dawei to reach a few of the most amazing beaches in Myanmar. Grandfather's, Sin Htauk, and Paradise Beach are among them. These three beaches have a few bamboo



Paradise beach, Dawei

Sergio Molino Aguado

bungalows with basic facilities (no Wi-Fi, and no electricity – just solar power) for US \$20–\$30/night.

Mergui Archipelago

The most convenient way to visit the Mergui Archipelago is by daily tours from Myeik, which cost around US \$60–\$100/day.

While you're there, you'll no doubt go snorkelling and scuba diving. Many cruises and yachts come from Thailand and stay for a few days to enjoy unique diving spots, full of untouched marine life.

If you'd rather stay above the water, go kayaking through the mangroves, or trekking through the jungles of the bigger islands.

This archipelago of islands is home to the Moken people, one of the many minorities of Myanmar who are informally referred to as "sea gypsies". These nomadic people live off the sea, jumping from island to island. Some of the Moken people can even see underwater, after years of diving beneath the salty seas to fetch their food!

Getting to the Beaches

While it won't be cheap or easy to reach these beaches, it's the inconvenience that has left them unspoiled and secluded. The two main regions for beach tourism in Myanmar are the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea.

By Bus

From Yangon, the most accessible beaches are Chaung Tha and Ngwe Saung, which will take around 6–8 hours.

A bus to Myeik will take approximately 26 hours, Dawei will take 16 hours, and Ngapali around 14 hours.

By Flight

Your most expensive and comfortable option is to catch a flight. There are airports near Myeik (Mergui Archipelago), Dawei, and Ngapali.

By Train

Trains aren't well developed in these areas – and if there is a train line, it'll take a long time to reach the final stop.



MANDALAY

and Northern Myanmar

Northern Myanmar is quite the change of scenery – replace ancient pagodas with snow-capped mountains around Hsipaw, trek through rice paddies to find rushing waterfalls, or learn about spirituality and Myanmar’s past in and around Mandalay. A trip to the north will no doubt come with a bit of effort, but it’ll be well worth the long journey.

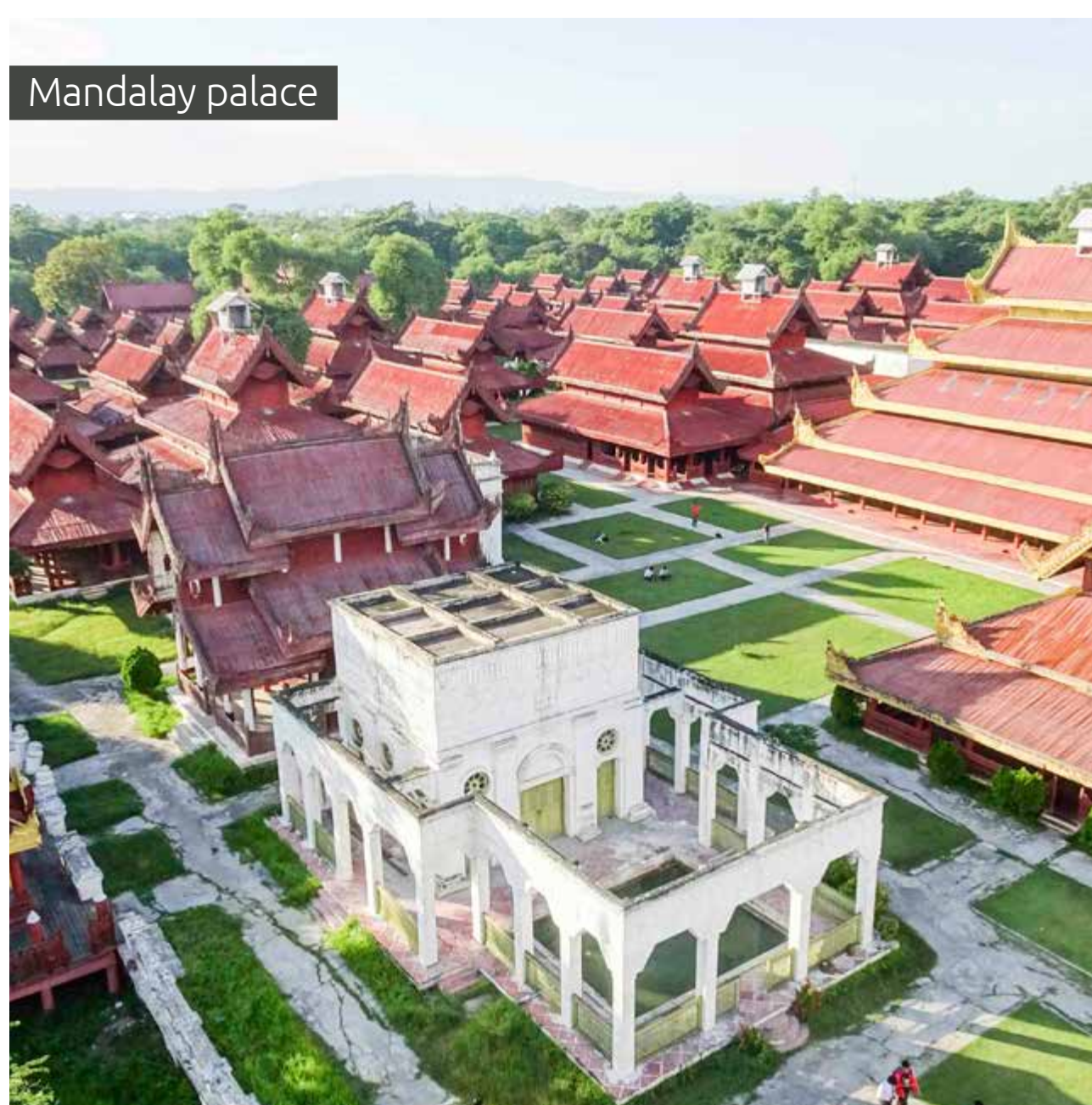
Mandalay

If the northern reaches of Myanmar interest you, you'll no doubt arrive in Mandalay eager to hop on a bus and escape the city walls. Before you get away, take time to see pagodas, find trinkets at the night markets, watch a marionette show, and go for a hike.

Mandalay Hill

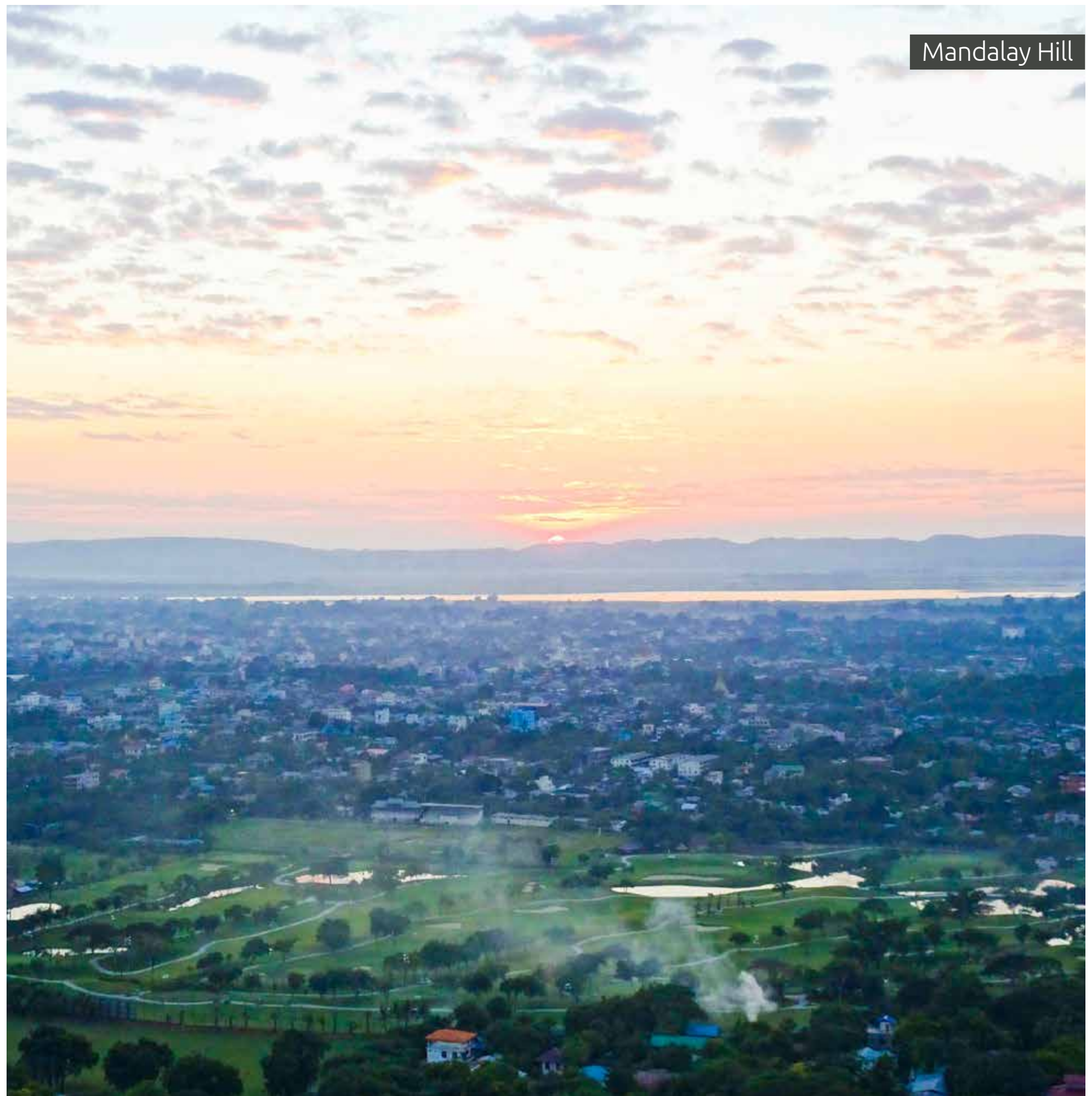
Mandalay Hill is a popular pilgrimage site, with several pagodas and monasteries to see. The highlight is Sutaungpyei Pagoda on top, which has several lookouts to see stunning panoramic views – it's especially beautiful at sunset.

Walking up the hill will take about 30-45 minutes without stops. If you choose to walk, keep an eye out for snakes – especially after dark. If you're not a fan of snakes or working up a sweat, get your driver to take you to the top.



Mandalay palace

Hannah Logan



Mandalay Hill

Hannah Logan

Mandalay Palace

Mandalay Palace is a large, walled complex that was originally constructed in the mid 1800s. Most of it was destroyed during WWII, however it has since been rebuilt.

Most of the buildings are open to visitors, including the watchtower which is worth climbing for the view of the palace grounds below.

Shwenandaw Monastery

This beautiful Buddhist monastery was once part of Mandalay Palace, but was moved to the base of Mandalay Hill. The building is known for the teak carvings, which depict famous Buddhist myths.

Mahamuni Buddha Temple

This famous Buddhist pilgrimage site is said to be one of the five likenesses of Buddha made during his lifetime. Men

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Mandalay Hill is a popular pilgrimage site, with several pagodas and monasteries to see.

MANDALAY AND NORTHERN MYANMAR

pay respect to the Buddha by applying gold leaf to the statue, which has distorted its shape over time.

Kuthodaw Pagoda

This complex is made up of a large, golden pagoda (which resembles Bagan’s Shwezigon pagoda), and more than 700 ornate white stupas.

What makes this attraction so unique is that together, all the stupas create the world’s largest book. Each stupa holds a stone tablet ‘page’ from the Tipitaka, the Buddhist scriptures.

See a traditional marionette show

Marionette shows are a historical treasure in Myanmar. They were once a revered art enjoyed by royalty and common folk alike – but today, have

become a dying tradition. It’s possible to see one of these traditional shows at the Mandalay Marionettes theatre. To avoid disappointment, tickets should be purchased in advance.

Hsinbyume Pagoda

This gorgeous white pagoda was modelled to resemble Mount Meru from Buddhist mythology. It was built by the king in dedication to his first consort and cousin, who died in childbirth.

Amarapura

Twice throughout history, Amarapura was the Burmese capital. Today, it’s a township of Mandalay. There are several interesting sites and attractions, including the famous U Bein bridge.

Markets of Mandalay

The Mandalay night market is made up of more food stalls than trinket vendors, but it’s a great place to grab a meal, meet some friendly locals, and experience the city life.

Another popular market is the Jade market, which deals jade chips, and pieces of all quality and sizes.



Marionettes show

Hannah Logan

Amarapura

Better known for the famous U Bein Bridge, Amarapura makes for an easy day-trip from nearby Mandalay. While it no longer holds the title of royal capital, there's plenty to see and do.

U Bein Bridge

Stretching 0.75mi (1.2km) long, this is the largest teak wood bridge in the world. While it's beautiful at any time of day, it's certainly most stunning at sunset. For the best photo opportunity, get off the bridge in the middle and stand in the fields to capture the bridge's silhouette against the fiery, orange-red sky.

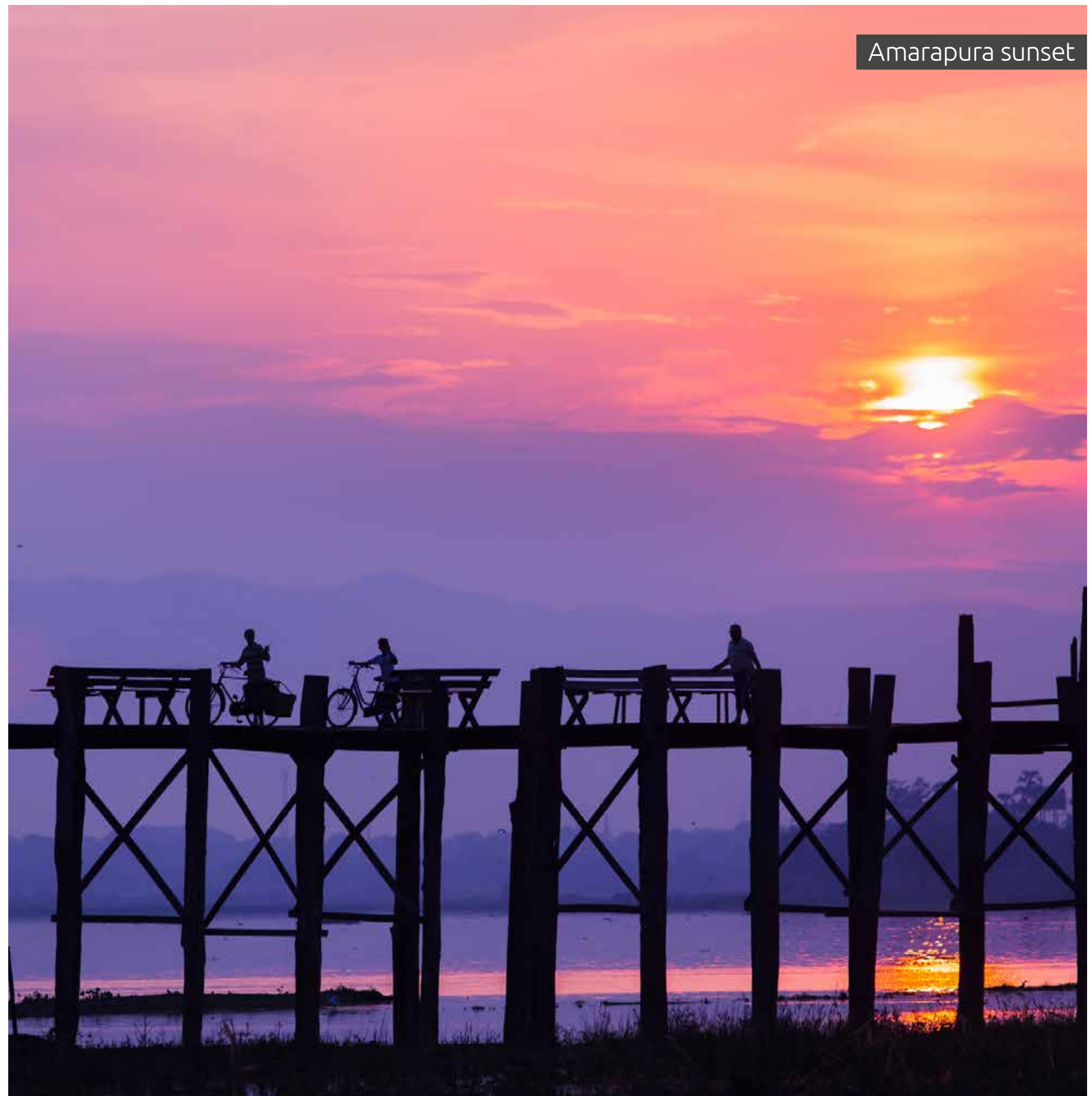
Local fishermen will be happy to take you out on the Taungthaman Lake by boat – for a small fee. Keep in mind that early morning and late afternoon are the busiest times of day for local commuters.

Kyauktawgyi Pagoda

This beautiful, white Buddhist temple was built to model Ananda temple in Bagan. It's located near the U Bein Bridge, and best known for the frescoes decorating the interior and the Buddha statue inside – which is said to be carved from a single block of marble.

Weawsana Jade Pagoda

Just outside Amarapura, Weawsana Jade Pagoda is made entirely of (you guessed it) jade. Its appearance gives it an otherworldly feel – which has been jokingly likened to kryptonite.



Amarapura sunset

Pahtodawgyi Pagoda

Pahtodawgyi was built in the early 1800s in the southern region of Amarapura, and modelled after the Mahazedi of Sri Lanka. If you climb to the highest terrace, you'll be rewarded with a panoramic view over the countryside.

Mahar Wai Yan Bon Thar Monastery

Don't miss this five-story Buddhist monastery, which was built with the traditional tiered roofs featured in Burmese architecture. There are over 20,000 wooden carvings in the temple, 500 images of Buddha within the grounds, and ancient manuscripts written on palm leaves within the library.

Amarapura Palace ruins

See the former splendour of the treasury building, watch tower, and tombs of two of the kings.

Give Mahagandayon Monastery a Miss

Mahagandayon Monastery is included on almost every tour, however there's good reason to give it a miss.

Tour groups will almost always arrive at the teaching monastery right on time to see all the monks line up for lunch. While this sounds like a cultural experience, it's become too popular, and you might get the feeling you're at a zoo – not a religious site.

Inwa

Inwa was once the capital city of Burma, and to this day appears to be one of many hidden secrets in Myanmar. But is a day-trip to Inwa worth your while?

Sightseeing circuit

Since Inwa is relatively large, there are locals waiting to take visitors around the typical sightseeing circuit in pony drawn carts. However, this method of transportation around the vast city does limit your chance to explore on your own, and take your time.

Travelers often report getting ripped off with transportation in Inwa, from the ferry to the carriage rides. Before you go, find out what the going rate is, and agree on a price before you take a seat.

Bagaya Kyaung Monastery

Constructed in teak and incredibly well preserved, the Bagaya Kyaung Monastery is still in use today.

Young monks use the Bagaya Kyaung Monastery as a place of learning, with elegantly-carved desks and eager students inside. Outside of the Bagaya Kyaung Monastery, there's an impressive carving of a mythical creature, identified as half-woman half-bird.

Pagodas and villages

Explore Inwas' many pagodas, see the old city wall, and wander through the fields and local villages to get a taste for the slower pace of life.

The Mandalay archaeological zone ticket (US \$10) will give you access to



the Maha Aungmye Bonzan Monastery, as well as other sites around Inwa and Amarapura too.

Tourist trap or must-see?

Some might say Inwa is more a tourist trap than a day-trip. While the only way around is by horse and carriage, these horses look unhealthy and overworked.

When you ask to stop, it'll cost you additional *kyat* – on top of the carriage fee – and when you do stop, you should expect to be approached by dozens of vendors, all trying to sell you trinkets.

See the ruins in Mingun

Just 7mi (11km) north of Mandalay, catch a small boat to the ruins of Mingun. These ruins are far less-frequented by crowds of tourists and locals, and are equally as impressive and unique. The boat trip to reach Mingun is exciting, and feels like more of an epic adventure.

Take a Day-trip from Mandalay to Inwa

Only 12mi (20km) from Mandalay, Inwa can be reached by taking a bus, taxi, or motorbike from Mandalay to Myint Nge. Motorbikes tend to be faster, taking only 30 minutes to reach the rivers edge, where a small ferry transports you across the river to Inwa.

Hsipaw

Set at the foot of snow-capped mountains and alongside the Duthawadi River in Shan State, Hsipaw is surrounded by rice paddies, ancient *payas*, natural hot springs, and rushing waterfalls.

Little Bagan

While Little Bagan might not be comparable to the UNESCO-listed Bagan further south, it's still well worth hiking from Hsipaw village to see. You'll find mini *payas* (religious structures) wrapped in vines, rushing rivers, water buffalos feasting on grass, and pass through rural villages on your way there.

Visit Naloy village

Naloy village is a 30-minute walk from Hsipaw, where there was once a Taiwanese-run English school. If you take a walk around town, say hello to the locals – they might speak a bit of English thanks to the classes that were held there a few years back!

Nam Tuk Waterfall

Hike to this beautiful spot in the jungle, where water cascades down a moss-



Waterfall in Hsipaw

Sergio Molino Aguado

covered cliff into a bubbling pool. There's nothing quite like a quick dip to cool you off after a long day of hiking.

It takes about two hours to walk to Nam Tuk from Hsipaw town, and most guesthouses can give you an easy-to-follow map.

Natural hot springs

There are a few hot springs around Hsipaw that are an easy day-hike from the center of town. Ask your guesthouse for a map, and head out to explore for yourself.

These are great places to meet the locals, who are often relaxing in the warm water late in the afternoon or early in the morning.

Multi-day trek to nearby Shan villages

For a real taste of rural life in northern Myanmar, hire a guide to take you on a multi-day trek to the nearby Shan villages. Make sure your guide can speak English so he can translate for you, and you can have meaningful conversations with the people in the villages.

Getting To and Around Hsipaw

Most people will come from Mandalay – six hours by bus.

Bus

Two services leave from Mandalay per day. Both take six hours, and cost around 4,000–5,000 kyat (US \$3–\$4).

One leaves the Mandalay bus terminal at 7am arriving at 1pm, and the other leaves at 3pm arriving at 9pm.

From Inle Lake, for 15,000 kyat (US \$11) there's a daily departure from Nyaungshwe that departs at 5pm, and takes 14 hours.

From Yangon there's a bus that takes 14 hours, costs 14,500 kyat (US \$10.50), and departs at 5:30pm. Note this service comes from Lashio, so you should book a day in advance to guarantee a seat.

Train

Trains are the less popular option, but leaves Mandalay at 4am, and arrives at Hsipaw station around 3:15pm.

To take the train from Yangon or Inle Lake to Hsipaw, you'll have to stop and change trains at Mandalay Station.

Accommodation

Most people who visit Hsipaw stay at Mr. Charles Guesthouse. This little place feels like a homestay, is in a convenient location, has excellent hand-drawn maps, and the staff can help you organize multi-day treks to nearby Shan villages, and homestays there too.



BAGAN

and Central Myanmar

Catch a glimpse of traditional Burmese life at a local village, explore the temples of Bagan without crowds of tourists, take a boat trip down the Irrawaddy river, and watch the one-legged fishermen paddle around with ease on Inle Lake.

Bagan

As the UNESCO-listed Bagan becomes more popular among travelers, don't fret – with over 2,000 temples to explore, it's still easy to get off-the-beaten-path.

Witness a Bagan sunrise

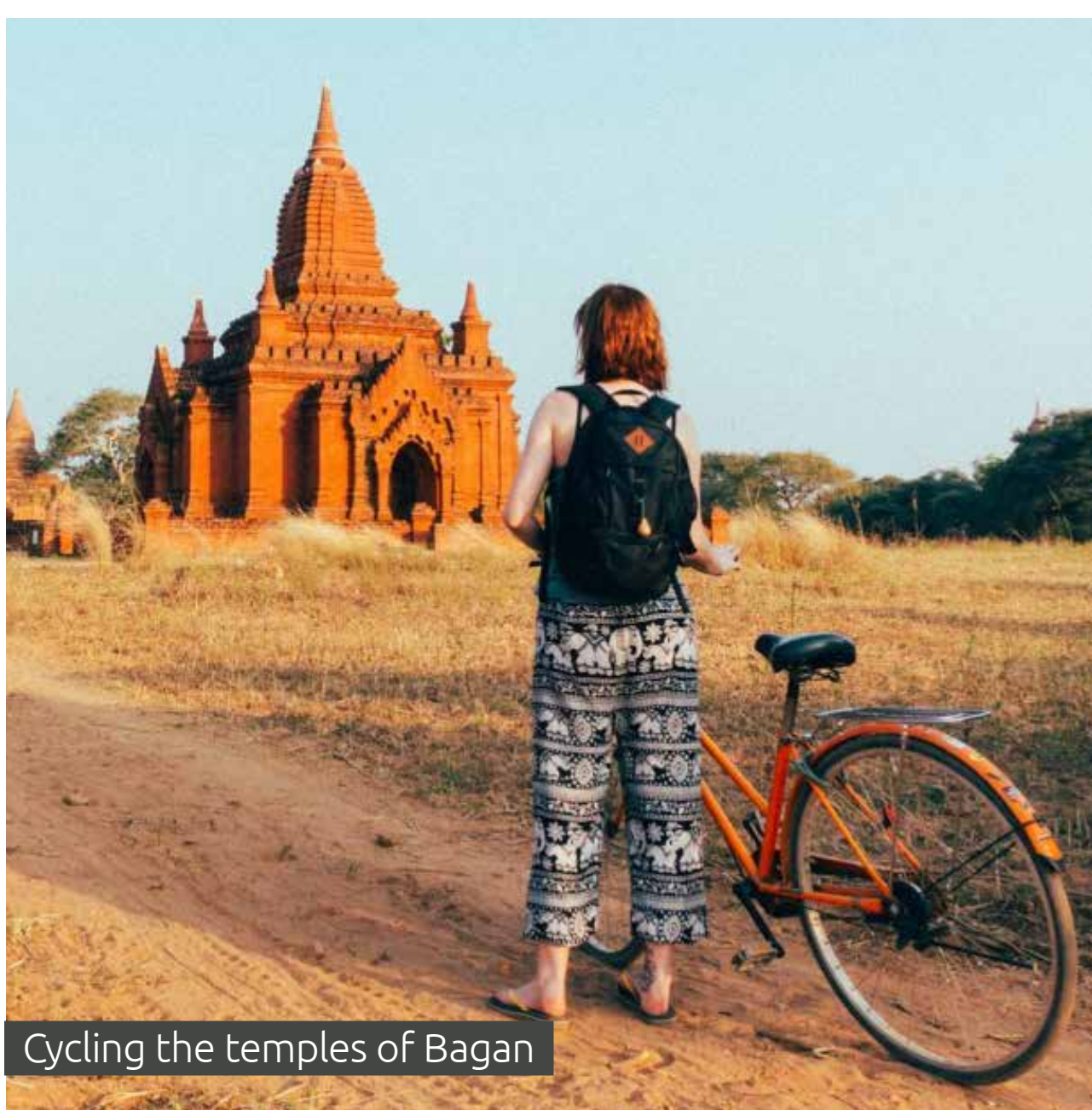
Watching the sunrise over the temples of Bagan is the highlight for most travelers, but there are two ways to do this. Either you choose to take the luxury method of a hot air balloon ride, or watch from the top of a temple.

If you've got your heart set on ballooning, know that it's pricey – around US \$300 – and needs to be booked well in advance. Balloon rides also only occur between October–March.

For those who travel outside of this period, or can't quite afford the hefty price-tag of a balloon ride, there are plenty of temples that offer stunning vantage points.

Explore the temples by e-bike

Bagan is not walkable. With three



Pete Rojwongsuriya

Cycling the temples of Bagan



Bagan sunrise

Will Hatton

separate towns (Nyuang U, Old Bagan, New Bagan) and over 2,000 temples in the area, it would be impossible to see it all by foot.

Renting a car with a driver, hiring a push bike, or taking a horse and carriage are all possibilities, however you've got a lot of ground to cover, and these rather slow options put a limit on how far you'll get.

E-bikes are the best way to get around and explore the area, especially if you want to get away from the hoardes of tourists. An e-bike can be rented for as little as US \$5/day for the small size, and US \$10/day for the larger size. By using an e-bike, you can explore the famous temples such as Ananda, Shwezigon, Dhammayangyi, and Sulamani – among other lesser-known and unmapped temples. Just be sure to check the brakes before you ride off to the temples.

“E-bikes are the best way to get around and explore the area, especially if you want to get away from the hoardes of tourists.”



Ballooning Over Bagan

Ballooning Over Bagan

With a 5:30am pick-up and a 6am flight, companies brief all flyers with a safety talk before taking to the skies. Balloons take off on the southern edge of the plains and fly across a section, following the winds and promising spectacular views of some of the biggest and most iconic temples.

Although balloons are relatively high up, the sunrise combined with the endless views of temples, grasslands, and other hot air balloons littering the sky is one of the most incredible sights.

You'll be up in the skies for one hour, so you'll have the whole day ahead to explore the temples up close, by e-bike or foot.

Combining both experiences will give you the best of both worlds.

Catch a glimpse of traditional Burmese life

The temples may be the main attraction, but take some time to talk to the friendly locals in Bagan as well.

Visit Minnathu Village to learn about the rural Burmese life, including learning how to make *thanaka*. Or stop by one of the many lacquer ware shops, where you can see the process behind this artisan trade.

Take a day-trip to Mount Popa

There's enough in Bagan to keep you busy for a few days, but if you want to see something different, head to Mount Popa – an extinct volcano about 1.5 hours from Bagan.

Hire a private car, or get there by bus, and climb 777 stairs to reach the monastery at the top. Before you start the climb, you'll have to slip off your shoes.

Watch the sunset over Bagan

Sunrise may be the big 'must-do' when in Bagan, but the sunsets are pretty spectacular too.

It's possible to venture out to one of the many temples to watch from the top, but another option is to take a boat cruise on the Irrawaddy River. Several hotels will be able to organize this for you, but there are plenty of locals that'll approach to see if you're interested as well.

Inle Lake

Home to the unique floating gardens and villages comprised of stilt-houses, Inle Lake offers a tranquil view into the lives of the Intha people – who base their existence entirely on water.

Long tail boat ride

Hire a wooden, long tail boat and discover the magic of Myanmar while floating along the lake, with views of mountain ranges all around.

Cycle around Inle

Biking around Inle is a great way to discover its beauty from a different angle. If you're hiring a bike, consider a trip to the Red Mountain Estate Vineyard, located on the lower slopes of the mountain rim, and offering stunning vistas down the valley – it's a worthy half-day activity.

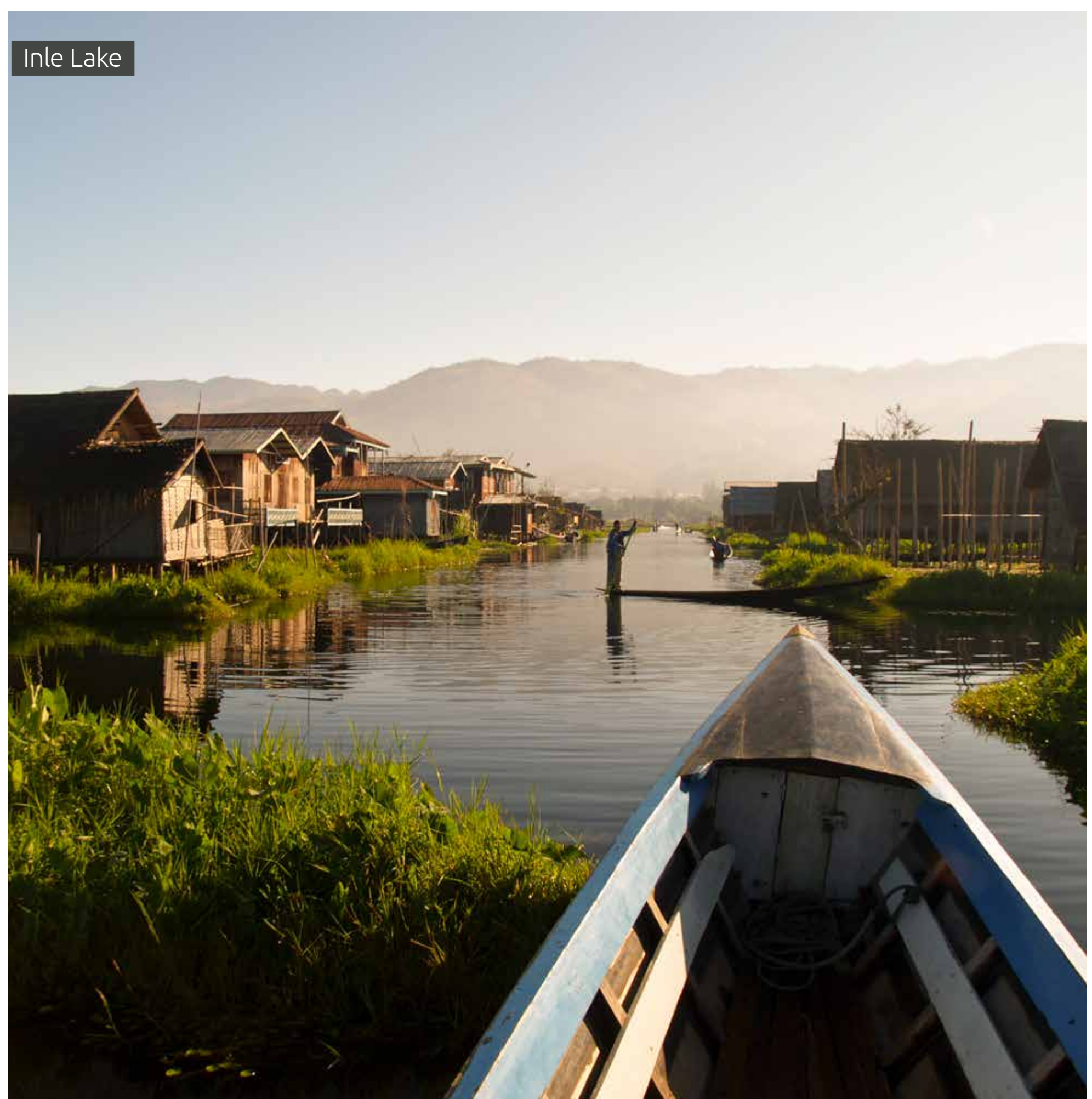
Local fishermen

Dotting Inle Lake are the infamous one-legged fisherman, who steer their boats by wrapping one leg around their oar – their impressive balancing skills will leave you wanting to sign up to a yoga class.

Enjoy their catch-of-the-day at one of the stilt-restaurants that rise above the water lining the lake.

The Padaung tribe

Found in the Ywama village on Inle Lake, you'll meet a group of women from the Padaung tribe – a subgroup



from the larger Kayan tribe.

Weaving brightly-colored scarves, bags, and selling their handicrafts, these women wear brass rings around their necks to give them the illusion of being elongated. The women are extremely friendly and encourage photographs, just don't treat this like a trip to the zoo. Always ask politely before snapping photos, and do your best to say hello in the local language.

Trek from Kalaw to Inle Lake

Known as Myanmar's trekking mecca, and where most travelers begin their journey to Inle Lake, Kalaw offers a variety of options for exploration.

The multi-day treks to Inle Lake put you in the heart of Myanmar's natural surrounds, and takes you back to the basics – if bucket showers and squat toilets aren't your thing, then you'll struggle on this trek.

Take a Trip Along the Irrawaddy River

Trade the hustle and bustle for a leisurely boat ride upriver from Bagan to Mandalay. Cruising this route may not seem like the most obvious choice – buses make the trip in six hours, compared to 12 on the river – but it's the best way to discover rural life along the banks.

Many boats make stops at riverside villages, like Yandabo, an historic town known for pots and other goods made of river clay.

Monywa District

Not only is Monywa home to the world's second tallest standing Buddha, the hills surrounding this sleepy riverside town are crammed with ancient religious monuments and glittering pagodas – not to mention some of the most eccentric temples in the country.

Since few visitors make the trip here, you may even have them all to yourself. Be sure to give yourself two days to explore these must-see sights.

Thanboddhay Pagoda

The brightly-colored Thanboddhay Pagoda is famed for its astonishing number of Buddha images, as well as its Disney-esque exterior complete with candy-striped towers and concrete elephants. The temple's maze-like interior is just as impressive, with row upon row of glittering Buddha statues.



Burmese boats, Monywa District



Thanboddhay Pagoda

Charlotte Rose

Time your visit right, and you'll wander through its passages to the sound of dozens of chanting monks – though take care not to photograph them while they are meditating.

On the road from Thanboddhay Pagoda to Bodhi Tataung, stop off at the row of small bamboo stalls selling local snacks. Menu items are limited to dried rabbit and pigeon meat, while the beverage of choice is palm toddy made from sap, and collected by men who climb high into the trees using narrow bamboo ladders. The toddy tends to be sweeter in the morning, and becomes sharper throughout the day as it ferments.

Bodhi Tataung

Anywhere else, the sight of 1,000 Buddhas sitting in a forest of banyan trees would be something to write home about. At Bodhi Tataung,

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On the road from Thanboddhay Pagoda to Bodhi Tataung, stop off at the row of small bamboo stalls selling local snacks.

BAGAN AND CENTRAL MYANMAR

however, they are overshadowed by the towering Laykyun Sekkya Buddha – the second tallest standing Buddha in the world.

At 424ft (129m) high – almost 10 times taller than New York’s Statue of Liberty, and over 13 times taller than Christ the Redeemer in Rio – it’s a truly jaw-dropping sight.

Be sure to climb the 31 stories into the Buddha’s chest, though don’t expect scenic views. Each floor contains galleries of kitschy paintings depicting gruesome visions of hell, in which sinners are tortured by demons in a variety of disturbing ways.

If all that doesn’t satisfy your appetite for giant Buddhas, lower down the hillside lounges an enormous 312ft (95m) reclining Buddha, while a massive seated Buddha is under construction nearby – it’s colossal headless skeleton making for a curious sight.

Hpo Win Daung Complex

An hour’s drive from Monywa, this mysterious cave complex of 492 Buddha chambers, carved between the 14th and 18th centuries, makes for a fascinating visit. To get the most out of your trip, it’s worth taking a guide who, as well as explaining the history of the site, will likely throw in a few entertaining tales of captured princesses.

After a long day of exploring, complete the kitsch-fest with a visit to Las Vegas – a tropical-themed eatery serving a fine mix of Chinese and Thai dishes.



Laykyun Sekkya Buddha

“Be sure to climb the 31 stories into the Buddha’s chest, though don’t expect scenic views. Each floor contains galleries of kitschy paintings depicting gruesome visions of hell.”

Visiting Local Tribes and Respecting the Local Culture

Locals are very polite and accommodating to foreigners. However, sadly, there are plenty of visitors to Myanmar who act without thinking. Always be considerate and ask before taking a picture, this isn’t a photo shoot. Show them the photo once you’ve taken it – better yet, if you’ve got a polaroid camera, giving a photo as a gift will go a long way.

If you bring a gift to break the ice, hand it over with your right hand, putting your left hand under your elbow – it’s a sign of respect.

Learn the local language: thank you or hello in the tribe’s native tongue goes a long way. “*Tar Blu Pador*” is Karen for “thank you very much”.

To reduce the environmental and cultural impacts of tourism, it’s recommended visiting these communities in small groups. Don’t bring foreign items like alcohol, cosmetics, and energy drinks with you into the villages.

Naypyidaw

Cities don't come more eccentric than Myanmar's new, multi-million-dollar capital. Dusty, deserted, and entirely un-photogenic, Naypyidaw may not be everyone's idea of a good time – but its post-apocalyptic streets and outlandish attractions make it one of the most surreal sights in Myanmar.

Moving the capital

Little more than a decade old, the city was unveiled as Myanmar's new capital in 2005, after the government unexpectedly decided to move it from Yangon. The reason for this move remains a mystery: some believe the new capital was a government vanity project, while others speculate that the nation's then leader, Than Shwe, was following the advice of an astrologer.

Curious visitors will find no shortage of eccentricities in the capital, which



Irawaddy River



Naypyidaw, capital city of Myanmar

boasts twenty-lane highways, glitzy shopping malls, a Vegas-inspired hotel zone, and no fewer than four golf courses – all plonked in the middle of the jungle.

Attractions may be few and far between, but the sheer absurdity of the place makes for a fascinating, if unconventional visit.

Life in the new capital

When it comes to experiencing local life, there's no better place than a bustling capital city, right? Except Naypyidaw, which is less bustling capital and more empty ghost town.

Officially, the city's population is around one million, but many doubt this is anywhere close to the real figure. The vast highways are so quiet that you could easily go for hours without encountering any life at all – aside from a few lonely

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Attractions may be few and far between, but the sheer absurdity of the place makes for a fascinating visit.

BAGAN AND CENTRAL MYANMAR

street sweepers and the odd buffalo wandering outside the sprawling government buildings.

Things to do

When it comes to recreational activities, Naypyidaw has little to offer except for a deserted gemstone museum, and the colossal Defence Services Museum – simultaneously the emptiest and most well-cared-for museum in the country.

Even the golden Uppatasanti Pagoda, a brand-new replica of the ancient Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon, rarely sees a visitor.

It's worth hiring a driver for the 45-minute journey to the Disney-esque Naypyidaw Zoo, where you can hop on a safari tour bus and hang out with the locals. Bizarrely, the zoo used to be home to a group of penguins – sadly, the air-conditioned enclosure that was

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In the evening, locals congregate at the water gardens in the center of the city, a water fountain complex which hosts a musical light show each night.



built for them wasn't enough to protect them from Naypyidaw's blistering heat.

In the evening, locals congregate at the water gardens in the center of the city, a water fountain complex which hosts a musical light show each night. The park itself is characteristically garish, but it's a good place to meet local people – though expect to pose for a lot of selfies.

Visit the man-made beach

Few visitors to Naypyidaw know that it has its very own man-made beach. Ngalaik Lake Gardens is a 165-acre recreational park that includes an eco-resort with water slides, a spa, and a beach on the shores of the lake.

Café Flight

Feeling peckish? Café Flight is a restaurant built inside a salvaged passenger jet, which was written off in an accident and brought to Naypyidaw as an attraction for visitors.

The food may be more budget-airline fare than fine dining, but eating in a plane is a great way to top off the bizarre Naypyidaw experience.





ADVENTURE in Myanmar

Myanmar has long been known as the cultural and historical haven of Southeast Asia, but if you take a sidestep off the otherwise well-trodden tourist trail, you'll find yourself in thick jungles, remote villages, and stumble upon hidden waterfalls that can only be reached on foot, or by bike.

Hiking and Cycling

If you love traveling on foot or pedaling your way around new places, from day-trips to overnights, Myanmar has it all. Pack your hiking boots, and check the weather before you go – you're in for a wild adventure.

Day hikes and cycling around Inle Lake

Set among rice paddies and Pa'O villages, Inle Lake is the perfect area to go for a day-hike or a peaceful cycle in central Myanmar.

From the main town of Nyaungshwe, follow the dirt path south towards the Pa'O Villages on the east coast of the lake. After visiting a few villages, you can hop on a boat (around 6,000 kyat) to take you back across the lake.

You can also ride your bike (15 minutes) or walk (55 minutes) from Nyaungshwe to the Red Mountain Estate Vineyard for beautiful views over the lake, a tasty lunch, and delicious Burmese wine! It's best to only do a small wine sampling if you're riding your bike home.

Day hikes and cycling around Bagan

Hiking and cycling around the temples of Bagan is a must. Who wouldn't want to explore this 40mi² (104km²), UNESCO-listed, 11th century temple



wonderland? You don't really have to follow a specific route on this day trip. Simply grab a map (and a rental bike if you're cycling) from a guest house, choose a few temples you don't want to miss, and set off.

As the area is so large, you'll be able to see a lot more from a bike – but it's possible to walk too. Just know that it can be sweltering around midday, so it's recommended that you go early in the morning or late afternoon.

Late afternoon is also the best time for photographs, when the shadows of the temples grow, and the sun lights up the clouds around sunset.

Multi-day hike from Inle to Kalaw

If a simple day trek isn't satisfying enough for you, there are a few excellent, multi-day treks to conquer. The trek from Inle to Kalaw is one

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Hiking and cycling around the temples of Bagan is a must. Who wouldn't want to explore this 40mi² (104km²), UNESCO-listed, 11th century temple wonderland?

ADVENTURE IN MYANMAR

of the most popular, mostly due to the fact that it's relatively easy to organize, and because it's near Inle Lake – one of the main attractions in Myanmar.

Heading west out of Inle Lake, you can trek directly to the former British Hill Station of Kalaw. Even though this trek has become popular, there's a chance you won't see anyone else on the path.

It's well worth hiring an English-speaking guide to translate when you reach villages, such as the Pa'O people, the Palaung, Taungthu, and Danu. If you choose the more challenging route between Baw Nin Khone and Than Dang, a great place to spend the night is at the Tithein Monastery.

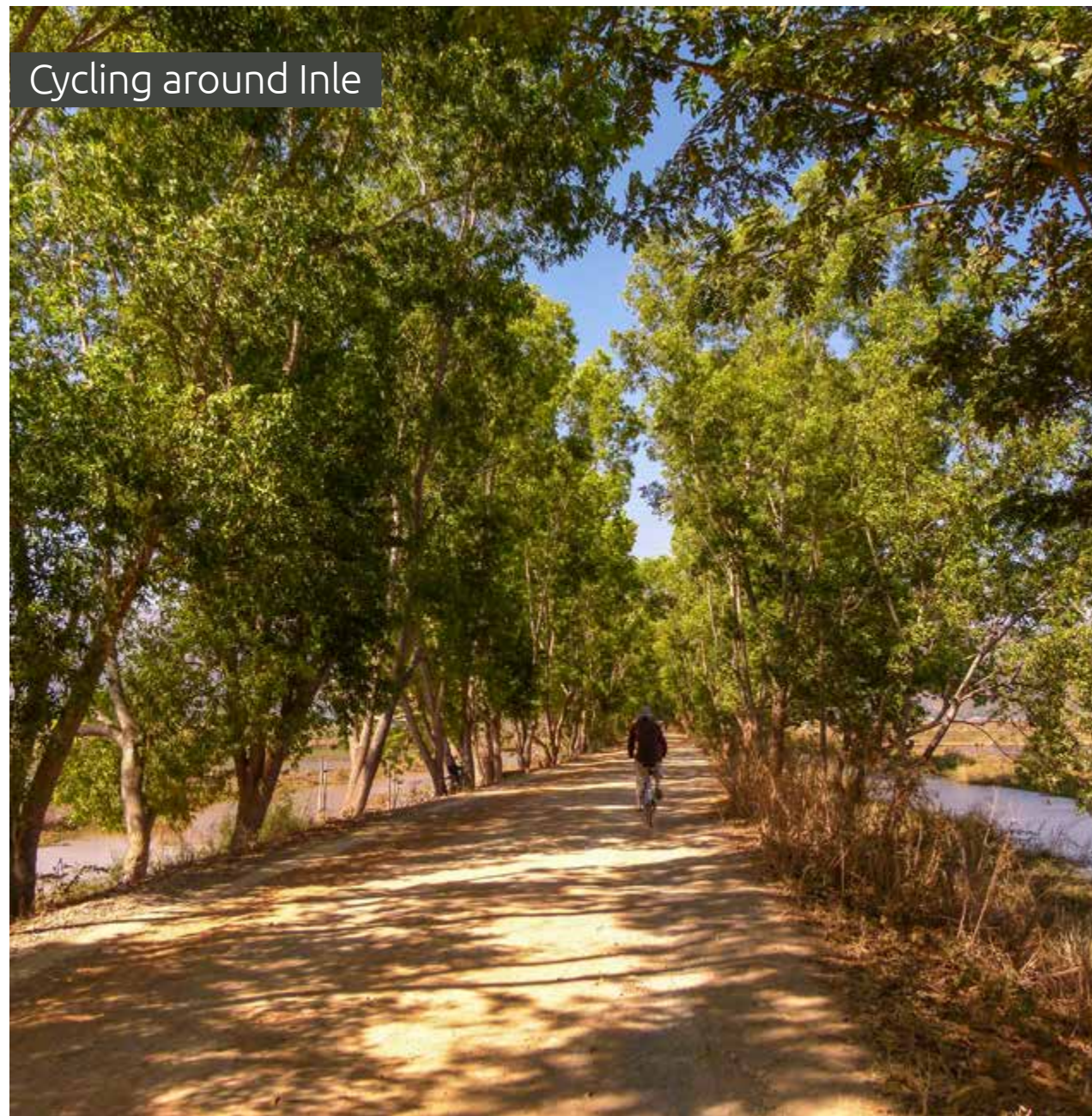
Cycle from Inle to Kalaw

This route is also possible to do by bike. There are a few outfitters in Inle and Kalaw who can set you up with a rental for the trip, and a guide as well.

On the bike, the trip doesn't have to be overnight, but it's still fun to sleep at the monastery – so you may want to leave late afternoon on day one, and end in Kalaw the next morning.

Multi-day hike from Hsipaw to Palaung Village

Hsipaw has long been a well-known hiking and trekking destination in Myanmar. Located just 6.5 hours north of Mandalay, Hsipaw is a stunning mountain village that, despite a recent influx of tourism, still remains delightfully Burmese. Almost



Cycling around Inle

Coats on the Road

“On the bike, the trip doesn't have to be overnight, but it's still fun to sleep at the monastery – so you may want to leave late afternoon on day one.”

every guesthouse in the village can arrange day treks here. One of the best is an overnight trek to a nearby Palaung Village. You'll likely spend the night on the floor of a monastery and wake up to the rising sun over sunflower-clad hillsides.

Some Useful Tips Before Planning Your Adventure

- Accommodation on these treks is going to be very basic. You'll likely be sleeping on the floor in monasteries on a thin mattress. Sometimes, you'll have a mosquito net, other times you may be eaten alive.
- Trekking and hiking in Myanmar is relatively new, so be aware that the infrastructure isn't as well established as other countries, such as Nepal.
- Bring a hat to protect from the sun, and long, light clothing for the early morning and late afternoons when bugs are at their worst.
- Always carry insect repellent and some sunscreen, and try to plan your trekking and cycling in the early mornings or late afternoon, when the air is cooler and the sun isn't as strong.
- Hiking is always free unless you decide to hire a guide, which shouldn't cost more than US \$20–\$25/day.
- A simple bike will cost around 1,500 *kyat*/day (US \$1.10), while a mountain bike will cost as much as 15,000 *kyat*/day (US \$5) – depending on where you rent it from, and the quality of the bike.
- While you can do many independent hikes and treks around Myanmar, it's always nice to have a guide – not only to show you the way, but to help the local economy by putting money back in their pockets. Often their translations will lead to real interactions with the locals, and that's the best part.

Caves

Take a break from temples and pagodas to explore beneath the surface of Myanmar, where limestone caverns lead to un-interrupted views of the Burmese countryside.

Sadan Cave

Located near Hpa An, this is one of the largest caves in Myanmar, dominated by dozens of Buddha statues, intrinsic wall carvings, and with bats hanging from the ceiling. Bring a headlamp to help guide your way through the pitch-black chambers to see marvelous stalagmites, stalactites, and sparkling crystal walls. Wear grippy shoes: the slippery rocks make navigation a little tedious, and the passageways are narrow – not the best if you're claustrophobic!

The pungent smell of bat feces fills the air, and at times the bat squeals might be deafening – but it's all worth the journey once you break through the massive cave and see the view from the other side. As you emerge from the darkness of the cave, you'll be rewarded with views of a lake. Stay a while and watch the sun set over the mountains in the distance. You'll feel like Batman as clouds of bats come storming out of the cave behind you.

Po Win Daung

West of Monywa, you'll find one of the most sacred caves in Myanmar. There are around 950 caves carved into the side of a cliff, which were built in the 14th century as a dedication to Buddha. Po Win Daung's interior is decorated



Will Hatton

with murals covering the walls, and a vast collection of Buddhist statues. They stretch across several terraces, boasting a lovely view of the city below.

The caves are popular among Burmese tourists, but you're unlikely to see many travelers there.

Keep an eye out for boisterous monkeys – they will try to steal your stuff!

Kawgun Cave

Kawgun Cave was constructed in the early 7th century, and is located near the town of Hpa An. This ancient cave is a sacred site that attracts many Buddhist monks, who come here to worship. The well-preserved cave has a mystical charm, with incredible murals and wall carvings featuring thousands of images of Buddha.

If you climb to the top of Kawgun Cave, you'll get a marvelous view of the surrounding area from above.

Pindaya Cave

Pindaya Cave is tucked away in the highlands of the southern region of Shan State, and is an easy jump from the popular Inle Lake.

Catch a pickup into the hills, and follow in the footsteps of Buddhist pilgrims who, for hundreds of years, have journeyed from far and wide to visit this cave system filled with over 8,000 Buddha statues.

Keep your eyes peeled: you'll find statues hidden in every nook and cranny. These golden Buddhas follow you with their eyes as you explore.

Mrauk U

If you're looking for an authentic experience without hordes of tourists, visit ancient Mrauk U. Before you get too excited, know Mrauk U is difficult to get to, and not an easy day-trip from Mandalay.

History

From 1430 to 1785, Mrauk U was the capital of the most powerful Rakhine Kingdom in history. By trading and plundering neighboring kingdoms with the biggest fleet in the region, Mrauk U built its rich empire.

Many temples were erected during two golden centuries, where Arakanese kings were protected by samurais from Japan.

The most remarkable temples that still stand today are: Shite-thaung Temple (the Temple of 80,000 Images), Htukkanthein Temple (Htukkan Ordination Hall), and the Koe-thaung Temple (Temple of 90,000 Images).

Things to do

You won't need a motorbike to explore the temples of Mrauk U, you can walk from temple to temple without any trouble – unlike a trip to Bagan where you'll need an e-bike or motorbike to get around. If you'd prefer two wheels, your best option would be to hire a cheap bicycle in town.

Take a simple day-trip up the Lay Myo River from Mrauk U to the Chin



Old Pagoda, Mrauk U

villages by boat. There, you'll see the tattoo-faced women, and learn about their interesting history. There are only a handful of these women left: in a few years, you'll only hear their stories, not meet them in person.

Life in Mrauk U

When the Military Junta saw potential in Bagan for tourism, thousands of people who lived around and in between the temples were displaced to new villages.

In Mrauk U, people still live around the temples, so you will see local farmers, children playing in the fields, and devotees going to pray. In Bagan, you'll find tourists with selfie sticks and pushy locals trying to sell you anything they possibly can.

Perhaps a visit to Mrauk U might be the cultural adventure you're after, if a trip to Bagan was a disappointment?

The Chin People, Chin State

On a visit to the Chin villages, I spoke to one of the tattoo faced Chin ladies. My guide translated that to protect her from being stolen by marauders, her parents attempted to make her "ugly and undesirable". At the age of eight, her aunty tattooed a spider web, using a sharpened bamboo stick, over her face and even her eyelids. It took a week to finish her tattoo, and she cried herself to sleep every night as the pain was so unbearable.

*Will Hatton,
The Broke Backpacker*

Essential Insurance Tips

With the political situation still fairly uncertain, plus a lack of modern infrastructure in much of the country, there're two main things travelers need to bear in mind while exploring Myanmar: avoiding the numerous "do not travel" zones and Dengue Fever.

"Do not travel" zones

Myanmar has experienced one of the world's longest-running civil conflicts (since 1948), with more than an estimated 200,000 deaths as a result.

While the country has become much more stable in recent years with the dissolution of the military junta and introduction of civilian government, the military is still powerful.

In many areas of Myanmar, ethnic tensions and armed conflict continues, and this ongoing conflict can affect your travel insurance coverage.

It's important to read what you're covered for – before you end up off-the-beaten-track – as not all policies are the same.

Some policies can cover you if you travel to a particular region that has a government warning against travel, while other policies exclude any expenses that arise from your travels there. This includes medical expenses and medical evacuation if you're injured as a result of unrest. As

Myanmar's medical infrastructure is still developing, without travel insurance covering you, it can be very costly to get yourself the care you need, and even more so if you need to get evacuated to the nearest hospital – so it's a good idea to plan your trip accordingly.

Travel warnings also have implications on cancellation cover. While not all policies include cover for a change in government warnings advising against travel, for those that do, it's important to read through the exclusions. Events such as war and terrorism are often general exclusions, and none of your expenses will be covered if you can't travel there, even if it changes after you've bought a policy. Do your research before you buy to make sure there aren't any surprises.

Common regions that many countries have flagged as "do not travel" zones include:

- Parts of Rakhine State including Maungdaw and Buthidaung townships (but not Sittwe, or the resort areas at Ngapali Beach, and travel between the resort and Thandwe airport). Risks include armed civil unrest.
- Kachin state, parts of Chin State and Northern and Central Shan State where there's armed civil unrest and military activity.
- The border areas with China, Laos, Thailand – including official border crossing areas, and the border areas of Bangladesh and India where you could be caught up among armed civil conflict, drug smugglers, and landmines.

“““

Some policies can cover you if you travel to a particular region that has a government warning against travel, while other policies exclude any expenses that arise from your travels there.

Dengue Fever

A number of our travelers have reported contracting Dengue Fever after traveling to Myanmar, where it is found in various locations throughout the region.

For most people, Dengue starts with flu-like symptoms, a high fever that comes in waves, pain behind the eyes and/or severe headaches, muscle, joint, and bone pain, and a rash with red spots. If left untreated, it can progress to become Dengue Haemorrhagic Fever (DHF) which can be fatal.

All of World Nomads' travel insurance policies can help cover your overseas medical expenses, including hospitalization if you're traveling in the regions that your government, or other official body (Centre of Disease Control (CDC) or World Health Organisation (WHO)) doesn't restrict. However, there are different limits of cover that apply depending on the policy that you purchase. Dengue can see you end up receiving up to two weeks' treatment, and the costs of care over that time period can add up, so you may wish to consider that before you buy a policy.

If you think you may have Dengue,



you need to call our assistance teams immediately. Our team can guide you to the most appropriate medical facility, and in extreme situations, evacuate you to suitable medical facilities. This may be to a close town or city, nearby country, or back to your own country.

As with all insurance, you won't be covered if you purchase a policy after you begin to fall ill. Insurance is there to cover you for unforeseen illness – not after the event.

All of the information we provide about travel insurance is a brief summary only. It does not include all terms, conditions, limitations, exclusions and termination provisions of the travel insurance plans described. Coverage may not be available for residents of all countries, states or provinces. Please carefully read your policy wording for a full description of coverage.

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