

Myanmar (Burma)

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Bagan** – witness the beauty of a misty dawn breaking over 4000 Buddhist temples on the shores of the Ayeyarwady (p562)
- **Inle Lake** – take to the water at this pristine lake (p547), a mythical landscape of floating villages, stilted monasteries and aquatic gardens
- **Around Mandalay** – Burma's former capital (p559) is the gateway to the intriguing old cities of Amarapura with its famed teak bridge, and some stupa-pendous views from Sagaing
- **Yangon** – forget Naypyidaw, Yangon (p528) is the social, economic and cultural capital of the country, home to the dazzling Shwedagon Paya where all that glitters *is* gold
- **Kalaw** – something of a backpacker scene, Myanmar's trekking HQ (p550) is the spot to view pretty scenery and visit friendly minority villages
- **Off the beaten track** – make a pilgrimage to the gravity-defying golden rock of Kyaiktiyo (p544), a sacred and surreal sight

FAST FACTS

- **Budget** US\$15 to US\$25 a day
- **Capital** Naypyidaw is the new one, but it's still Yangon to you and me
- **Costs** guesthouse US\$3 to US\$8, four-hour bus ride US\$2 to US\$3, big bottle of beer US\$1.50
- **Country code** ☎ 95
- **Languages** Burmese, English
- **Money** US\$1 = about K1250 (kyat)
- **Phrases** *min gala ba* (hello), *thwa-ba-oun-meh* (goodbye), *chè zù bèh* (thanks)
- **Population** about 52 million
- **Time** GMT + 6½ hours
- **Visas** around US\$20 for 28 days, issued by Myanmar embassies and consulates abroad



TRAVEL HINT

Many visitors use up a 28-day visa travelling in and around the 'big four' – Yangon, Inle Lake, Mandalay and Bagan. Don't try to pack too much in, as overland travel takes time. If you're flying out, you can easily overstay your visa by a week or more, at a penalty of US\$3 per day (see p582).

OVERLAND ROUTES

It is possible to enter Myanmar from Ruili in China, and from Mae Sai and Ranong in Thailand.

'This is Burma', wrote Kipling. 'It is quite unlike any place you know about.' How right he was, and more than a century later Myanmar remains a world apart. Contemplate 4000 sacred stupas scattered across the plains of Bagan. Stare in disbelief at the golden rock teetering impossibly on the edge of a chasm. Encounter men wearing skirt-like *longyi*, women smothered in *thanaka* (traditional make-up) and betel-chewing grannies with blood red juices dripping from their mouths – and that's just the airport! Meet the multitalented monks who have taught their cats to jump. Ride a Wild West stagecoach past grand British mansions. Trade jokes about the rulers who move capitals on the whim of a fortune teller. Indeed, this is Burma.

Turn back the clock with a trip to this time-warped country where the adventure travel of old lives on. This is the authentic Asia with creaking buses, potholed roads, locals who greet you like long lost family and not a 7-Eleven in sight. Forget the internet for a moment and connect with a culture where holy men are more revered than rock stars and golden buddhas are bathed every day at first light. Drift down the Ayeyarwady in an old river steamer, stake out a slice of beach on the blissful Bay of Bengal, trek through pine forests to minority villages around Kalaw – there are so many experiences awaiting in Myanmar that one trip is simply never enough. It's a country that fuels your emotions, stimulates your senses and stays in your soul.

Isolated and ostracised by the international community, the country is in the grip of tyrants. Most travellers avoid a visit, backing the boycott, but the long-suffering people are everything the regime is not. Gentle, humorous, engaging, considerate and inquisitive, they want to play a part in the world. They are some of the sweetest people on earth and deserve a brighter future.

CURRENT EVENTS

Events took a surreal turn in November 2005 with the relocation of the capital to remote Naypyidaw, about 400km northeast of Yangon (Rangoon). The name means 'Royal City' or 'Abode of the Kings', suggesting the generals have delusions of grandeur. Foreigners are not officially allowed to visit and embassies are staying put in Yangon. Many government staff were forced to relocate under the threat of arrest and imprisonment.

Changing capitals aside, it has been business as usual. Democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi remains under house arrest, which was extended for another year in May 2006. Sanctions remain in place, although they don't seem to be hurting the leadership, only the average person in the street. Asean continues to duck the subject of Burmese democracy in the interest of 'noninterference', although this seems to be creating a split in the organisation, with 'southern' members such as Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore being more critical of the regime and 'northern' members such as Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam almost apologetic. EU pressure at least saw several important regional meets in Myanmar cancelled.

Hardline General Than Shwe continues to wield power. A secret video of his daughter's lavish wedding made its way on to YouTube in 2006, and further outraged the international community with its excess. It is in stark contrast to the way 'the lady' is forced to live under house arrest, denied basic communication.

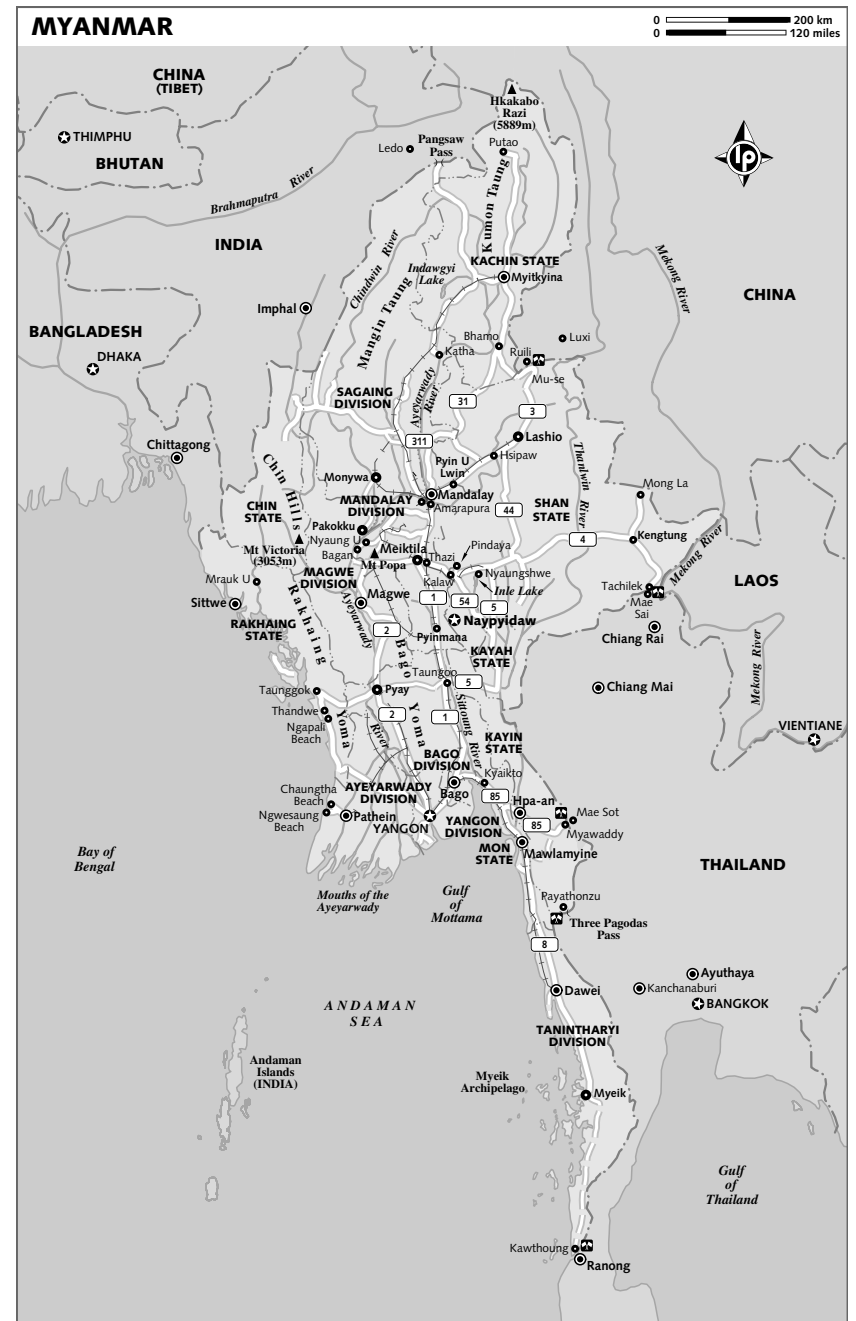
Systematic abuse of ethnic minorities, verging on ethnic cleansing in the case of the Rohingya and others, continues in remote border regions of the country. Opium poppies and the 'Big H' (heroin) provide money and arms to forces on both sides of the conflict. Meanwhile the country's assets such as timber and minerals continue to be sold off at a pinch in return for political legitimacy in Beijing.

In August 2007, the military regime suspended fuel subsidies, sending the price of petrol skyrocketing. Monks took to the streets in an outpouring of popular protest and when the army opened fire on demonstrators, anger spread nationwide. For a moment, it looked like Myanmar might enjoy its own saffron revolution, but the army cracked down hard.

The international reaction was swift and strong, but its impact was muted by the silence of China and India, two of the regime's biggest backers. However, the government has lost any lingering legitimacy with its brutal treatment of the monks, and have been forced to accept the return of UN envoys. There is a glimmer of hope that a compromise can be reached, but it may simply be yet another smokescreen put in place by the generals.

HISTORY

Myanmar was ruled with an iron fist long before the current regime came to power. From the early 19th century until WWII, the insatiable machine that was the British Empire held sway over Burma. Before the



British, there were the kings of old, who rose to power by eliminating rivals with claims to the throne. Tracing the conflicts back to the 9th century, we find the Himalayan Bamar people, who comprise two-thirds of the population, at war with the Tibetan Plateau's Mon people. The fight went on for so long that by the time the Bamar came out on top, the two cultures had effectively merged.

The 11th-century Bamar king Anawrahta converted the land to Theravada Buddhism, and inaugurated what many consider to be its golden age. He used his war spoils to build the first temples at Bagan (Pagan). Stupa after stupa sprouted under successive kings, but the vast money and effort poured into their construction weakened the kingdom. Kublai Khan and his Mongol hordes swept through Bagan in 1287, hastening Myanmar's decline into the dark ages.

British Colonialism

There's not much known about the centuries that followed. History picks up again with the arrival of the Europeans – first the Portuguese, in the 16th century, and then the British, who had already colonised India and were looking for more territory in the East. In three moves (1824, 1852 and 1885), the British took over all of Myanmar. The Burmese king and queen were exiled to India and their grand palace at Mandalay was looted and used as a barracks to quarter British and Indian troops.

The colonial era wrought great changes in Myanmar's demographics and infrastructure. Large numbers of Indians were brought in to work as civil servants, and Chinese were encouraged to immigrate and stimulate trade. The British built railways and ports, and many British companies grew wealthy trading in teak and rice. Many Burmese were unhappy with the colonial status quo. A nationalist movement developed, and there were demonstrations, often led, in true Burmese fashion, by Buddhist monks. Two famous nationalist

monks, U Ottama and U Wizaya, died in a British prison and are revered to this day.

WWII & Early Independence

During WWII, the Japanese, linked with the Burmese Independence Army (BIA), drove the British out of Myanmar and declared it an independent country. But the Japanese were able to maintain Burmese political support for only a short time before their harsh and arrogant conduct alienated the Burmese people. Towards the end of the war, the Burmese switched sides and fought with the Allies to drive out the Japanese.

Bogyoke Aung San emerged from the haze of war as the country's natural leader. An early activist for nationalism, then defence minister in the Burma National Army, Aung San was the man to hold the country together through the transition to independence. When elections were held in 1947, Aung San's party won an overwhelming majority. But before he could take office, he was assassinated by a rival, along with most of his cabinet. Independence followed in 1948, with Aung San's protégé U Nu at the helm. Ethnic conflicts raged and chaos ensued.

Ne Win's Coup

In 1962 General Ne Win led a left-wing army takeover and set the country on the 'Burmese Way to Socialism'. He nationalised everything, including retail shops, and quickly crippled the country's economy. By 1987 it had reached a virtual standstill, and the long-suffering Burmese people decided they'd had enough of their incompetent government. In early 1988, they packed the streets and there were massive confrontations between pro-democracy demonstrators and the military that resulted in an estimated 3000 deaths over a six-week period. Once again, monks were at the helm. They turned their alms bowls upside down (the Buddhist symbol of condemnation) and insisted that Ne Win had to go. He finally did, in July 1988, but he retained a vestige of his old dictatorial power from behind the scenes.

The 1989 Election

The shaken government quickly formed the Orwellian-sounding Slorc (State Law and Order Restoration Council), declared martial law and promised to hold democratic elections in May 1989. The opposition, led by Bogyoke

SHOULD YOU GO?

Lonely Planet believes anyone thinking of going to Myanmar must consider this complicated question before undertaking a trip.

Myanmar is ruled by an oppressive military regime. Some refugee and human-rights groups urge foreigners not to visit Myanmar, believing that tourism legitimises the government and contributes to its coffers. Others have reversed their stance in recent years. National League for Democracy (NLD) general secretary Aung San Suu Kyi urged outsiders to boycott Myanmar during the government's 'Visit Myanmar Year 1996' campaign, in which the forced labour of tens of thousands (maybe more) of Burmese was used to rebuild infrastructure and some sites such as Mandalay Palace. Suu Kyi asked visitors to 'visit us later', saying that visiting at the time was 'tantamount to condoning the regime'.

Much of the international criticism is directed towards package tourists, who spend the most money and stay in expensive joint-venture hotels that are often in cahoots with the government. Thai, Chinese and Japanese tourists are the main visitors, with Germans, French and Americans leading the way in the West. Tourism in all its forms brought in US\$164 million in 2006, possibly 12% of which went to the government. (This compares with US\$2.16 billion in natural-gas exports that year.) Obviously the less you spend, the less that 12% figure will be. A pro-NLD, pro-tourism Yangon resident told us, 'Don't come in with your camera and only take pictures. We don't need that kind of tourist. Talk to those who want to talk. Let them know of the conditions of your life.'

Tourism remains one of the few industries to which ordinary locals have access in terms of income and communication; the vast majority of locals seem to want you here. And there are plenty of other reasons to consider visiting. Human-rights abuses are less likely to occur in areas where the international community is present; keeping the people isolated from international witnesses to internal oppression may only cement the government's ability to rule. The government has stopped forcing foreigners to change US\$200 into government notes upon arrival, so the majority (possibly over 80%) of a careful independent traveller's expenses can now go into the private sector.

The boycott debate will rumble on, but right now, with oil and gas, minerals, heroin, timber and other resources to draw on, and with sanctions-busters such as China and India as close allies, tourism is pretty much loose change to the generals, but not to the people trying their hardest to survive.

If You Go

Here are a few ways to minimise the money that goes to the government:

- Avoid government-run hotels (often named after the city, eg Mrauk U Hotel) and stay in cheap family-run guesthouses. See p574 for more.
- Try to avoid government-run services: Myanmar Travel & Tours (MTT) is the government-operated travel agency and Myanma Airways is the government airline. Nearly all buses are independent, while IWT ferries and trains are government-controlled. See p525 for more.
- Spread the wealth – don't take care of all your needs (food, beer, guides, taxi, toilet paper) at one source (eg a guesthouse).
- Buy handicrafts directly from artisans.
- Try to get off the beaten track a bit, including towns not covered in this book.
- Read about Myanmar – see p574 for some book suggestions. It's important to know about Ne Win's coup, the events of 1988 and Aung San Suu Kyi before coming.

About this Chapter

We believe travellers to Myanmar should support private tourist facilities wherever possible. We've not reviewed any restaurants, hotels or shops known to be government-run. We flag any government-run services (such as trains or MTT).

Read Lonely Planet's expanded 'Should You Go?' coverage in the Myanmar guidebook or get the free download at www.lonelyplanet.com/worldguide/destinations/asia/myanmar.

A NATIONAL JOKE

A popular joke that has been doing the rounds in the streets of Yangon is that George Orwell wrote not one novel about Burma, but three: *Burmese Days*, *Animal Farm* and *1984*. It would be funny if only it wasn't so poignantly true.

Aung San's charismatic daughter, Aung San Suu Kyi, organised an opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD). Around the same time, Slorc changed the country's official name from the Union of Burma to the Union of Myanmar, claiming 'Burma' was a vestige of European colonialism.

While the Burmese population rallied around the NLD, the Slorc grew increasingly nervous. It placed Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest and postponed the election. In spite of this and other dirty tactics, the NLD won more than 85% of the vote. Sore losers, Slorc refused to allow the NLD to assume its parliamentary seats and arrested most of the party leadership.

The Plight of Aung San Suu Kyi

Aung San Suu Kyi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 and was finally released from house arrest in July 1995. She was arrested again in 2000 and held in her home until the UN brokered her unconditional release in May 2002. She was rearrested in May 2003 and remains under house arrest. Aung San Suu Kyi continually refuses offers of freedom in exchange for exile from the country and, despite an ongoing debate in the pro-democracy movement over future strategy, her stature throughout Myanmar is as great as ever.

For more on recent developments in Myanmar, see p518.

THE CULTURE

The National Psyche

Although isolated, subjugated and poor, the Myanmar people are as proud of their country and culture as any nationality on earth. Locals gush over ancient kings, *pwe* (festivals), *mohinga* (noodles with chicken or fish) breakfasts, great temples and their religion. For the majority, Buddhism is the guiding principle and life centres on the monastery. A typical Burmese values meditation, gives alms freely and sees his or her lot as the consequence

MUST READ

Living Silence: Burma under Military Rule (2001), by Christina Fink, is a very readable account of Myanmar's military years, and offers humanising glimpses into both sides of the conflict.

of sin or merit in a past life. The social ideal for most Burmese citizens is a standard of behaviour commonly termed *bamahsan chin* (or 'Burmese-ness'). The hallmarks of *bamahsan chin* include showing respect for elders, acquaintance with Buddhist scriptures and discretion in behaviour towards the opposite sex. Most importantly, *bamahsan chin* values the quiet, subtle and indirect over the loud, obvious and direct. Burmese also love a good laugh, and puns are considered a very high form of humour.

Lifestyle

Families are generally big and several generations may share one roof. Electricity remains in short supply and even running water is uncommon in the countryside, where farming is the backbone of life. Visitors find it easy to engage with city folk, particularly the older generation, who often have good English.

Life is one long struggle for survival for many in Myanmar, thanks in no small part to a government that governs in the interests of a small military elite and not the wider nation. Higher education is disrupted every time there's a hint of unrest in the country, as the government shuts down the universities. The banks are under government control, so savings can be (and have been) wiped out at the whim of the rulers. Nominally, Burmese people have relative economic freedom, but just about any business opportunity requires bribes or connections. The small elite has modern conveniences, good medical treatment, fancy, well-fortified homes and speedy cars. Peaceful political assembly is banned and citizens are forbidden to discuss politics with foreigners, although many relish doing so as long as they're sure potential informers aren't listening.

Population

The population is made up of around 135 ethnic groups indigenous to Myanmar, including the Bamar (or Burman, around 68%), Shan

(9%), Kayin (or Karen, 7%), Rakhaing (4%), Mon (less than 3%), Kachin (less than 3%), Chin (less than 3%) and Kayah (1%). There are still large numbers of Indians and Chinese in Myanmar, but only a sprinkling of other foreigners and immigrants.

RELIGION

About 87% of Myanmar's citizens are Theravada Buddhists, but this is blended with a strong belief in *nat* (guardian spirit beings). Many of the hill tribes are Christian, and smaller Hindu and Muslim communities are dotted throughout the country.

For the average Burmese Buddhist everything revolves around the merit (*kutho*, from the Pali *kusala*, meaning 'wholesome') one is able to accumulate through rituals and good deeds. One of the more common rituals performed by individuals visiting a stupa is to pour water over the Buddha image at their astrological post (determined by the day of the week they were born) – one glassful for every year of their current age plus one extra to ensure a long life.

Every Burmese male is expected to take up temporary monastic residence twice in his life: once as a *samanera* (novice monk), between the ages of five and 15, and again as a *pongyi* (fully ordained monk), some time after the age of 20. Almost all men or boys

MUST SEE

Burmese Harp (1956) by Japanese director Kon Ichikawa is a classic anti-war film told from the perspective of a Japanese soldier disguised as a Buddhist monk.

under 20 years of age participate in the *shin-pyu* (initiation ceremony), through which their family earns great merit.

While there is little social expectation that they should do so, a number of women live monastic lives as *dasasila* ('ten-precept' nuns). Burmese nuns shave their heads, wear pink robes and take vows in an ordination procedure similar to that undertaken by monks.

Buddhism in Myanmar has overtaken, but never entirely replaced, the pre-Buddhist practice of *nat* worship. The 37 *nat* figures are often found side by side with Buddhist images. The Burmese *nats* are spirits that can inhabit natural features, trees or even people. They can be mischievous or beneficent.

The *nat* cult is strong. Mt Popa (p569) is an important centre. The Burmese divide their devotions and offerings according to the sphere of influence: Buddha for future lives, and the *nat* – both Hindu and Bamar – for problems in this life. A misdeed might be redressed with offerings to the *nat* Thagyamin, who annually records the names of those who perform good deeds in a book made of gold leaves. Those who commit evil are recorded in a book made of dog skin.

ARTS

Burmese fine art, at the court level, has not had an easy time since the forced exile of the last king, Thibaw Min. Architecture and art were both royal activities, which have flourished and faded without royal support. On the other hand, Burmese culture at the street level is vibrant and thriving.

Marionette Theatre

Yok-thei pwe, or Burmese marionette theatre, was the forerunner of Burmese classical dance. Marionette theatre declined following WWII and is now mostly confined to tourist venues in Mandalay and Bagan.

MUST READ

The River of Lost Footsteps: Histories of Burma (2006), by UN diplomat Thant Myint U, is a beautifully crafted assessment of the country's current plight in the context of its long and complex history.

DOS & DON'TS

- Don't touch anyone's head, as it's considered the spiritual pinnacle of the body.
- Don't point feet at people if you can help it, and avoid stepping over people.
- Burmese women don't ride atop pick-ups as it can be insulting to men beneath them.
- Hand things – food, gifts, money – with your right hand, tucking your left under your right elbow.
- Dress modestly when visiting religious sites – no shorts, tight clothes or sleeveless shirts.
- Take off your shoes when entering temple precincts, usually including the long steps up to a hilltop pagoda.

Music

Traditional Burmese music relies heavily on rhythm and is short on harmony, at least to the Western ear. Younger Burmese listen to heavily Western-influenced sounds – you're likely to hear Burmese-language covers of your favourite oldies. A few Burmese rock musicians, such as Lay Phyu of the band Iron Cross, produce serious tunes of their own. **Myanmar Future Generations** (www.mm-fg.net) is an anonymous rap collective that posts politically charged songs online.

Pwe

The *pwe* (show) is everyday Burmese theatre. A religious festival, wedding, funeral, celebration, fair, sporting event – almost anything can be a good excuse for a *pwe*. Once under way, a *pwe* traditionally goes on all night. If an audience member is flaking at some point during the performance, they simply fall asleep. Ask a trishaw driver if one is on nearby.

Myanmar's truly indigenous dance forms are those that pay homage to the *nat*. In a special *nat pwe*, one or more *nat* are invited to possess the body and mind of a medium; sometimes members of the audience seem to be possessed instead, an event that is greatly feared by most Burmese.

ENVIRONMENT

Myanmar covers an area of 671,000 sq km, which is roughly the size of Texas or France. From the snow-capped Himalaya in the north to the coral-fringed Myeik (Mergui) Archipelago in the south, Myanmar's 2000km length crosses three distinct ecological regions: the Indian subregion, along the Bangladesh and India borders; the Indochinese subregion in the north, bordering Laos and China; and the Sundaic subregion, bordering peninsular Thailand. Together, these regions produce what is quite likely the richest biodiversity in Southeast Asia.

At the moment, deforestation by the timber industry poses the greatest threat to wildlife habitats, with Chinese demand for hardwoods fuelling the destruction. Optimistically, about 7% of the country is protected by national parks and other protected areas, but most of these are just lines on maps. Wildlife laws are seldom enforced, partly due to corruption. While many animals are hunted for food, tigers and rhinos are killed for the lucrative overseas Chinese pharmaceutical market.

BURMA OR MYANMAR?

The government changed most of the country's geographical names after 1988's uprising, in an attempt to purge the country of the vestiges of colonialism, and to avoid exclusive identification with the Bamar ethnic majority. ('Burma' is actually an English corruption of 'Bamar', and never has been the name of the country locally, at least since Marco Polo dropped by in the 13th century.) So Rangoon switched to Yangon, Pagan to Bagan, Irrawaddy River to Ayeyarwady River and so on.

In this book, 'Myanmar' is used in text to describe the country's history and people. 'Burmese' refers to the language, the food and the Bamar people.

TRANSPORT

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

All international flights arrive at sleepy Yangon airport (RGN), except direct flights from Chiang Mai to palatial Mandalay airport (MDL). The most common route is via Bangkok, a good place to pick up cheap tickets to Myanmar. From there a one-way ticket to Yangon starts at US\$90, cheaper still with an Air Asia budget fare. Flights also connect Yangon with Kolkata, Delhi, Dhaka, Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur, Kunming and Singapore.

It is important to reconfirm outgoing flights from Myanmar for all airlines other than Thai International Airways (THAI) and SilkAir. You do not need to show onward tickets to enter Myanmar.

The following airlines have regular links to (and offices in) Yangon.

Air Asia (code AK; ☎ 01-722299; www.airasia.com) Budget airline serving Bangkok.

Air China (code CA; ☎ 01-505024; www.airchina.com) Flight connections to Kunming.

Air Mandalay (code 6T; ☎ 01-525488; www.airmandalay.com) Connects Mandalay with Chiang Mai.

Bangkok Airways (code PG; ☎ 01-255122; www.bangkokair.com) Connects Yangon and Bangkok.

Biman Bangladesh Airlines (code BG; ☎ 01-240922; www.bimanair.com) Has connections with Bangkok and Dhaka.

DEPARTURE TAX

The official departure tax is US\$10, payable in US dollars only, not kyat.

Indian Airlines Limited (code IC; ☎ 01-253598; <http://indian-airlines.nic.in>) Flights to Bangkok and Kolkata.

Malaysia Airlines (code MH; ☎ 01-241001; www.malaysiaairlines.com) Connects Yangon and Kuala Lumpur.

Myanmar Airways International (MAI, code 8M; ☎ 01-255180; www.maiair.com) National carrier offering connections with Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore.

SilkAir (code MI; ☎ 01-255287; www.silkair.com) Daily connections with Singapore.

Thai Airways International (code TG; ☎ 01-255499; www.thair.com) Connects Yangon with Bangkok and Chiang Mai.

Land

Most of Myanmar's borders are closed. The following sections outline when and how to cross into Myanmar by land. It is not possible to reach Myanmar by sea or from Bangladesh, India or Laos.

CHINA

You can enter Myanmar from China, but it is not possible to exit Myanmar this way. To enter from China requires a 28-day tourist visa – get one at Kunming's **Myanmar consulate** (☎ 0871-360 3477; www.mcg-kunming.com; Room A504, 5th fl, Longyuan Haozhai, 166 Weiyuan Jie; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 1-4.30pm Mon-Fri) for Y185 to Y285.

To cross from the Chinese town of Ruili (20 hours from Kunming), it is necessary to book a multiday 'package trip' to go from Mu-se, Myanmar (at the border), and on to Lashio (northeast of Hsipaw). This will end up costing a hefty US\$175 to US\$225.

THAILAND

It is possible to cross from the northern Thai town of Mae Sai to dreary Tachilek. See the boxed text on p552 for more. It is also possible to cross from the Thai town of Ranong to the southern tip of Myanmar at Kawthoung. See p546 for more details. Visitors from Thailand can enter Myanmar for the day at the Mae Sot–Myawaddy border and Three Pagodas Pass, but tourists in Myanmar can't enter Thailand at these points; see p726 and p716 for information on these crossings.

GETTING AROUND

Unless you fly, all travel in Myanmar takes time. Lots of time. Much of the country, unfortunately, is off limits, including places not covered here, such as Chin State and much of Shan State. However, there is no law against stopping in villages between places listed in this chapter and having a look around.

Air

Four airlines, including three private companies and the government-run Myanmar Airways, ply Myanmar's skyways (and 66 airstrips). Bear in mind that some of the private airlines are pretty closely connected to the government, otherwise they wouldn't be allowed to operate.

The following are the domestic airlines operating in Myanmar:

Air Bagan (code W9; ☎ 01-513322; www.airbagon.com) Privately run domestic carrier. However, the company has close links to senior generals.

Air Mandalay (code 6T; ☎ 01-525488; www.airmandalay.com) Singapore-Malaysia joint venture.

Myanma Airways (MA, code UB; ☎ 01-374874) The government's airline.

Yangon Airways (code HK; ☎ 01-383106; www.yangonair.com) Thai joint venture.

One-way tickets are half the return fare and should be bought at least a day in advance. You'll need to have your passport and US

GOVERNMENT-OWNED TRANSPORT

Be aware that the government profits from the use of transport services that it owns and/or operates. Try to avoid the following government companies:

- Inland Water Transport (IWT) – Foreigner pricing means the government is profiteering.
- Myanma Airways (domestic) – We do not recommend this airline, as much for its safety record as its ownership.
- Myanma Five Star Line (MFSL; ships) – Few travellers use its services, as schedules are so hard to come by.
- Myanmar Railways – Try to avoid its overpriced sleeper services between Yangon and Mandalay. Foreigner pricing exists on all services.

dollars handy to pay for the ticket. Travel agencies tend to sell tickets for slightly less than airline offices. All prices should include the US\$3 insurance fee. There's no domestic departure tax.

MA's fleet is a bunch of old Fokkers and the airline has a hit-and-miss safety record. Schedules are approximate at best, although prices are often US\$10 or US\$20 less than the private carriers.

Boat

There is 8000km of navigable river in Myanmar. Even in the dry season, boats can travel on the Ayeyarwady (Irrawaddy) from the delta to Bhamo, and in the wet they can reach Myitkyina. Other important rivers include the Twante Canal, which links the Ayeyarwady to Yangon, and the Chindwin, which joins the Ayeyarwady a little north of Bagan. The main drawback is speed: boats typically take three to four times as long as road travel, with the exception of some speedboats. Most ferries are operated by the government's Inland Water Transport (IWT).

The Mandalay–Bagan service is popular among travellers. A ferry runs daily, but better still is the **Malikha speedboat** (www.malikha.com). If you take the slower local boats, this trip can be extended to Pyay (Prome) or even all the way to Yangon. Arguably the best long-haul river trip – in season – is drifting south from Bhamo or Myitkyina. The most rewarding short trip is between Mawlamyine (Moulmein) and Hpa-an.

The government's Myanmar Five Star Line (MFSL) travels very infrequently and irregularly from Yangon's MFSL Passenger Jetty (south of Strand Rd), heading north to Sittwe (Akyab) and south to Kawthoung. Ask at Myanmar Travel & Tours (MTT; p531) or call the **MFSL office** (Map p530; ☎ 01-295279; 132-136 Thein Byu Rd) in Yangon.

Bus

A handful of the long-distance buses are new and comfortable. More common are the older ones that are packed to the ceiling with people and goods and are often hours late. They break down often, too, and the roads are so bad in most places that two vehicles travelling in opposite directions can't pass without pulling off the road. On the other hand, bus travel is cheap and frequent, and it's easy to meet local people. Long-haul buses make a

rest stop every few hours. Buy your ticket as far as possible in advance so as not to get stuck sitting on a sack in the aisle. On mini-buses, beware of the back seat – on Myanmar's rough roads, you'll be bouncing around like popcorn. Have a blanket handy for air-con or trips through mountains.

Bus tickets are priced in kyat. There are usually different prices for foreigners and citizens, particularly on popular tourist routes. Bear in mind that prices have risen dramatically in recent years, due to the ending of government subsidies and high oil prices. Guesthouse staff can save you a trip to an often remote bus station to buy tickets.

Car & Motorcycle

The cost of hiring a car and driver is tied to the black-market price of petrol, which can fluctuate. Older cars without air-con cost about US\$50 to US\$70 per day (including driver and petrol) from Yangon.

Many locals remain reluctant to rent motorcycles to foreigners, but it is possible in some places, such as Mandalay.

Local Transport

In most places, bicycle rickshaws or trishaws (*sai-kaa* – that's pidgin for sidecar), horse carts (*myint hlei*), vintage taxis (*taxi*), tiny four-wheeled Mazdas (*lei bein*, or 'four wheels') and modern Japanese pick-up trucks (also called *kaa*) double as public transport. Rates are negotiable. There are some sample rates in this chapter, but prices can and do change.

Bigger cities – including Yangon, Mandalay, Patheingyi (Bassein) and Mawlamyine – have public buses plying the main streets, from K20 to K200 per ride.

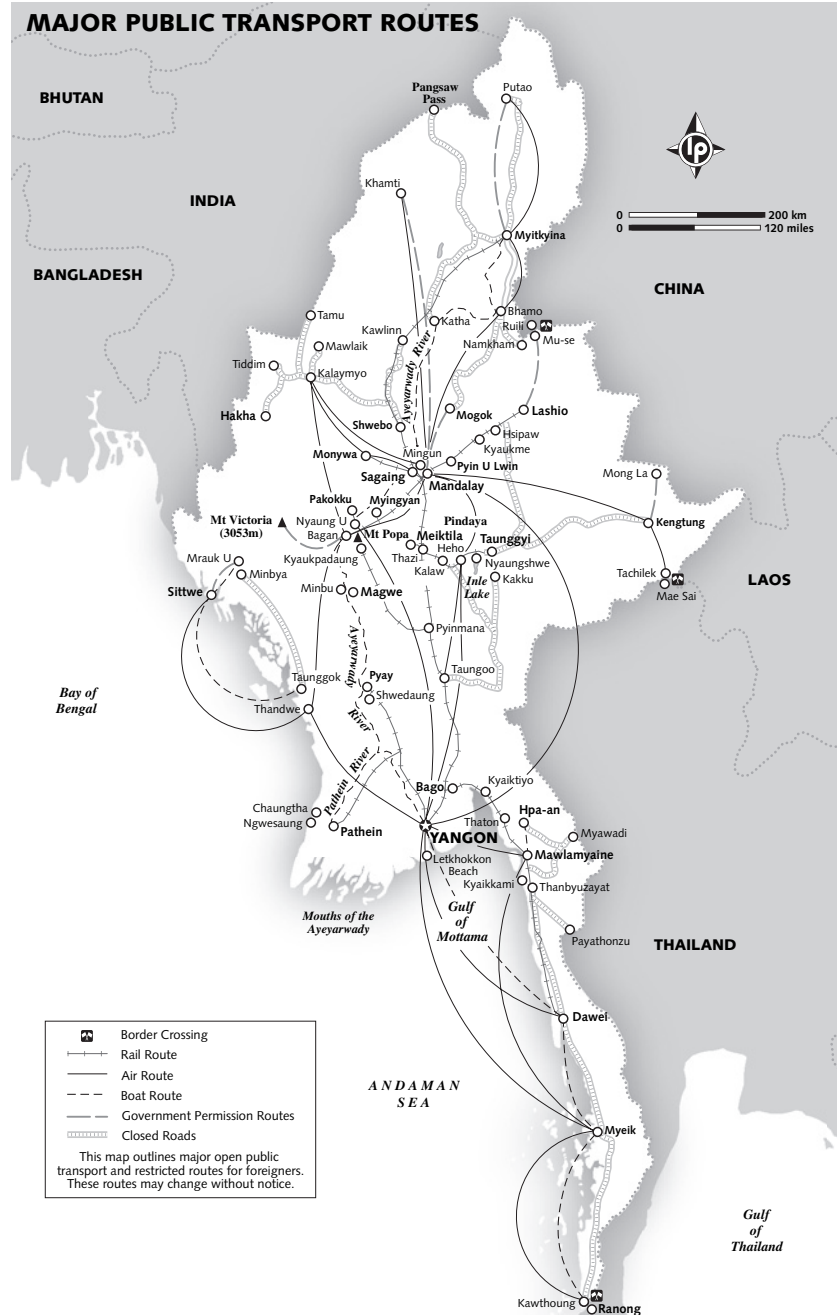
It's possible to rent a bicycle almost anywhere in Myanmar. Rates range from K500 to K2500 per day.

Pick-Up

You can get almost anywhere in Myanmar on the ubiquitous trucks with bench seats known variously as pick-ups, *lain-ka* (linecar) or *hi-lux*. They leave when full and make frequent stops. They're a bit cheaper than buses. Usually you can pay 50% more to sit up front with the driver. Journey times are wildly elastic.

Train

We do not recommend travelling by train as Myanmar Railways is government owned and



operated and foreigners pay about six times (or more) the local rate, meaning a wad of US dollars for the government's coffers. On top of this, trains are usually much slower than buses, and derail quite frequently. The Yangon-Mandalay 'express' ought to take 15 hours but often takes double that. The popular sleepers from Yangon to Mandalay no longer operate, as the government juggled the schedules to suit the new capital near Pyinmana. Foreigners are supposed to travel only in upper class, but some travellers manage to buy ordinary-class tickets. Upper class involves international-style reclining seats and air-con, 1st class is hard-backed seats with some cushioning and ordinary class is wooden seats. The Mandalay-Lashio line is

probably the most scenic ride, particularly around the Gokteik Gorge (see p562).

Train tickets must be paid for in US dollars. Reservations and ticketing can be done at train stations and English-language information is available through MTT.

Visit the excellent 'The Man in Seat Sixty-One' website for reasonably up-to-date information on the train network in Myanmar: www.seat61.com/Burma.htm.

YANGON (RANGOON)

☎ 01 / pop 5 million

Stripped of its status as capital in 2005, Yangon nonetheless continues to be the hub of

economic activity, a hive of underground intellectual debate and the gateway for most international visitors. The stunning Shwedagon Paya is the centrepiece of the city, a gleaming golden stupa visible from all over town. Closer to the waterfront, downtown Yangon is a warren of historic streets concealing some of the best British colonial-era architecture in the region. Forget the cosmetic renovations in Singapore: this is the real deal. A walk along the Strand or Pansodan St is like strolling down Pall Mall, albeit without the paint job.

Vibrant and dynamic, sweaty and steamy, reaching for the future but trapped in the past, Yangon is a fascinating introduction to Myanmar. It's diverse too – home to Burmese, Shan, Mon, Chinese, Indians and Western expats. Aung San Suu Kyi remains under house arrest here in her home on University Ave. General Than Shwe is rumoured to return on weekends, perhaps unable to survive the boredom of sterile Naypyidaw, the new 'capital'.

ORIENTATION

The city is bounded to the south and west by the Yangon River (also known as the Hlaing River) and to the east by Pazundaung Creek, which flows into the Yangon River. The whole city is divided into townships, and street addresses are often suffixed with these (eg 52nd St, Botataung Township).

INFORMATION

German Embassy.....	1	C2
Italian Embassy.....	2	B2
Japanese Embassy.....	3	C2
Korean Embassy.....	4	B1
Nepali Embassy.....	5	D3
New Horizons Travels & Tours.....	6	C2
Singapore Embassy.....	7	C2
Vietnamese Embassy.....	8	B2

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Bogyoke Aung San Museum.....	9	C2
Chaukatgyi Paya.....	10	C2
Mahasi Meditation Centre.....	11	C2
Sedona Hotel.....	12	C1
Shwedagon Paya.....	13	B3
Suu Kyi's House.....	14	B1

SLEEPING

Motherland Inn II.....	15	D4
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EATING

Café Dibar.....	16	B2
Sandy's Myanmar Cuisine.....	17	C3

DRINKING

Lake View.....	(see 17)	
Mr Guitar Café.....	18	C2
Patty O'Malleys.....	(see 12)	

GETTING INTO TOWN

Walk past the taxi stands in the airport terminal (about 15km north of the centre) and negotiate with drivers outside. It's about US\$5 to the centre of Yangon and it is best to have small bills handy. Most buses arrive at the Highway Bus Centre (Aung Mingalar Bus Terminal), a few kilometres northeast of the airport; a taxi to town will cost about the same as the airport run.

Most travellers stick with downtown Yangon, which has a grid-style layout and is easy enough to explore on foot.

The *Yangon Tourist Map*, produced by Design Printing Services, is pocket-sized. Some places give it away free, others charge up to K1000.

INFORMATION

Bookshops

There are lots of bookstalls (Map p532) across from Bogyoke Aung San Market and along 37th St near the corner of Merchant St, selling pulpy Buddhist comics, maps and old books, some in English.

Bagan Bookshop (Map p532; ☎ 377227; 100 37th St; ☎ 9am-5.30pm Tue-Sun) A favourite for its eclectic selection of English-language books. The friendly owner has reprints of lots of old English-language books on Burma.

Inwa Bookstore (Map p532; 232 Sule Paya Rd) Stocks some maps, coffee-table books and general English titles, plus has recent news magazines.

Cultural Centres

Alliance Francaise (Map p530; ☎ 282122; Pyidaungsu Yeiktha Rd; ☎ Tue & Fri) Check the *Myanmar Times* for film and concert listings.

American Center (Map p530; ☎ 223140; 14 Taw Win Rd; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri) English-language magazines and books.

British Council Library (Map p532; ☎ 295300; 80 Strand Rd; ☎ 8.30am-8pm Mon-Fri, to 4.30pm Sat) Excellent collection of English-language Burmese-history books located in the UK embassy.

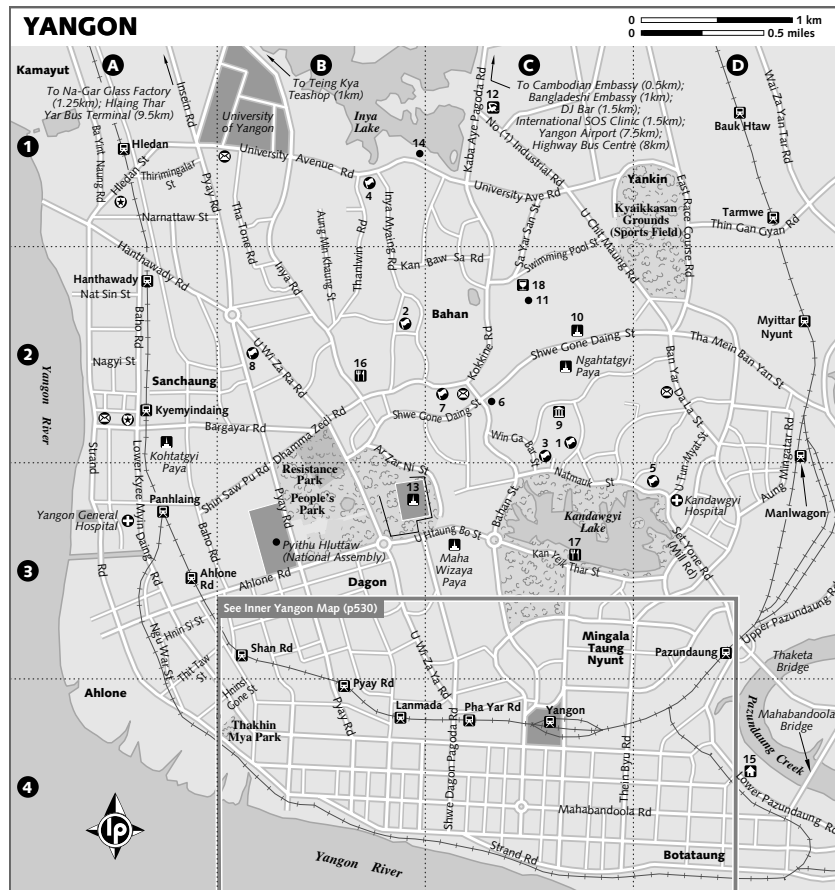
Emergency

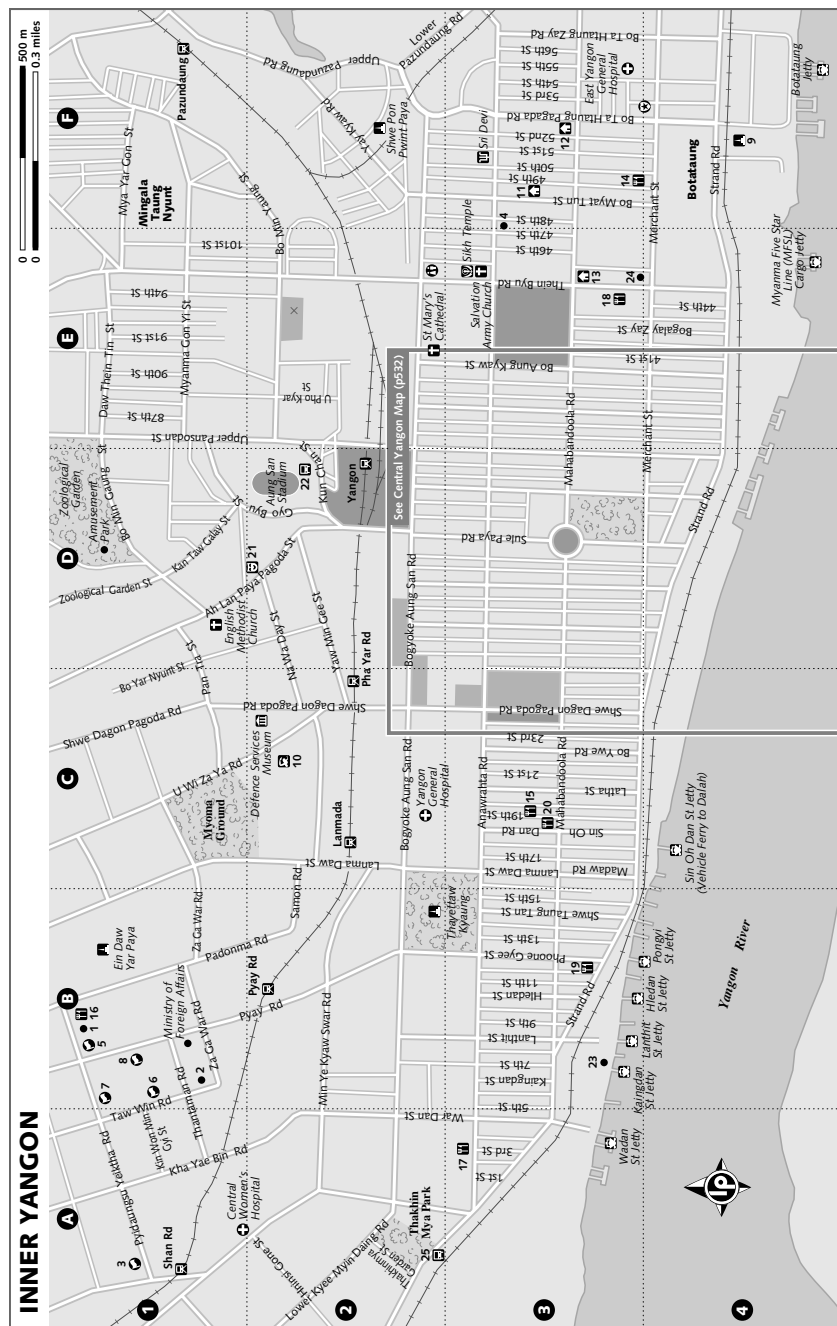
Your embassy may also be able to assist in an emergency.

Ambulance (☎ 192)

Fire (☎ 191)

Police (☎ 199)





INFORMATION		SLEEPING		DRINKING	
Alliance Francaise.....	1 B1	Haven Inn.....	11 F3	Monsoon.....	(see 18)
American Center.....	2 B1	Three Seasons Hotel.....	12 F3	ENTERTAINMENT	
Chinese Embassy.....	3 A1	YMCA.....	13 E3	Pioneer.....	21 D2
City Mart Supermarket.....	4 F3	EATING		TRANSPORT	
French Embassy.....	(see 1)	50th Street Bar		Bus Ticket Offices (Long-Distance Buses).....	22 D2
Indonesian Embassy.....	5 B1	& Grill.....	14 F3	IWT Office.....	23 B3
Lao Embassy.....	6 B1	Barbecue Grills.....	15 C3	Myanmar Five Star Line.....	24 E3
Malaysian Embassy.....	7 B1	Feel Myanmar Food.....	16 B1	Tha-khin Mya Pan-gyan Gate Terminal (Pick-ups to Bago).....	25 A2
Thai Embassy.....	8 B1	Maw Shwe Li Restaurant.....	17 A3		
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES		Botataung Paya.....	9 F4	Monsoon.....	18 E3
Botataung Paya.....	9 F4	Singapore's Kitchen.....	19 B3	Snack Stalls.....	20 C3
Yangon Swimming Club Pool... 10 C2		YMCA.....	(see 13)		

Internet Access

Many guesthouses offer internet connections, but it's usually cheaper to go to a dedicated internet café.

Cyber World (Map p532; 246-248 Sule Paya Rd; per hr K1000) Central location with a reasonably fast connection.

Medical Services

City Mart Supermarket (Map p530; cnr Anawrahta Rd & 47th St) Well-stocked shop that includes a pharmacy.

International SOS Clinic (off Map p528; ☎ 24hr alarm centre 667879; 37 Kaba Aye Paya Rd) On the ground floor of the Dusit Inya Lake Hotel on the east bank of the lake, this is an international-standard option in Yangon when it comes to emergencies.

Money

Yangon generally offers the best exchange rate in the country. Touts around Sule Paya or the northern end of the adjacent Mahabandoola Garden offer the best rates, but you shouldn't make the exchange before counting all the kyat. Hotels and guesthouses are the safer option.

At a pinch, a couple of top-end hotels (such as the Sedona Hotel; p533) accept credit cards.

Post

DHL office (Map p532; Traders Hotel, 223 Sule Paya Rd; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri) To send or receive anything valuable, head here.

Main post office (Map p532; Strand Rd; ☎ 7.30am-6pm Mon-Fri) Grand old building for all postal services, but not phone calls.

Telephone

Central Telephone & Telegraph office (CTT; Map p532; cnr Pansodan St & Mahabandoola Rd) Can set you up (literally) with overseas calls at US\$3 to US\$6 per minute.

Tourist Information

Myanmar Travel & Tours (MTT; Map p532; ☎ 275328; 77/91 Sule Paya Rd; ☎ 8.30am-5pm) Government-run travel agency. Partake of its free maps, but not its services. A useful stop to get the latest story on off-limits areas of the country.

Travel Agencies

Privately run travel agencies are a good option for hiring a car or guide, checking on travel permits to off-limits areas, or extending a visa.

Columbus Travel & Tours (Map p532; ☎ 255123; www.travelmyanmar.com; Sakura Tower, 339 Bogyoke Aung San Rd) Convenient location to buy competitively priced air tickets.

Good News Travel (Map p532; ☎ 501904; good-news@mptmail.net.mm; 4th fl, FMI Centre, 380 Bogyoke Aung San Rd) Very well-run agency, though usually geared to high-end travellers.

New Horizons Travels & Tours (Map p528; ☎ 542949; tun@mptmail.net.mm; 64 B2R Shwe Gone Plaza) Some way out of town, this place books trips for overseas groups and is quite responsible.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Many travellers report being overcharged when buying bus tickets from the kiosks around Aung San Stadium. Moneychangers on the street are unlikely to do a runner, but they might slip in a few torn (therefore unusable) bills.

SIGHTS Shwedagon Paya

The glorious golden spire of the gilded **Shwedagon** (Map p528; admission US\$5; ☎ 5am-10pm), located a couple of kilometres north of the centre, is the defining image of Yangon and a symbol of Burmese identity. Rising 98m from its base, it positively glistens on a sunny day. Dating back 2500 years – if legend is to be believed –

CENTRAL YANGON

INFORMATION

1 Australian Embassy.....	1 D 4	High Court Building.....	16 C3	Maw Shwe Li Restaurant.....	34 C3
2 Bagan Bookshop.....	2 D3	Immigration Office.....	17 C2	Nilar Biryani Shop.....	35 B2
3 Bookstalls.....	3 B1	Independence Monument.....	18 C3	Pizza Corner.....	36 B1
4 British Council Library.....	(see 12)	Law Court.....	19 C4	Yakiniku Japanese Barbeque Restaurant.....	37 B1
5 Central Telephone & Telegraph Office.....	4 C2	Pedestrian Bridge.....	20 A2	Yatha Teashop.....	38 D3
6 Columbus Travel & Tours.....	(see 21)	Sakura Tower.....	21 C1	Zawgyi House.....	39 B1
7 Cyber World.....	5 C1	Strand Hotel.....	22 D4		
8 DHL Office (Traders Hotel).....	6 C1	Sule Paya.....	23 C2		
9 Good News Travel (FMI Centre).....	7 B1			DRINKING	
10 Indian Embassy.....	8 C3			Silver Oak Café.....	40 D3
11 Inwa Bookstore.....	9 C1	SLEEPING		Star Millennium Café.....	41 D4
12 Main Post Office.....	9 C1	Central Hotel.....	24 B1	Strand Bar.....	(see 22)
13 Myanmar Travel & Tours.....	10 D4	Daddy's Home.....	25 A3	Thiripitsaya Sky Lounge.....	(see 21)
14 UK Embassy.....	12 D4	Golden Smiles Inn.....	26 B3		
15 US Embassy.....	13 C3	Mahabandoola Guest House.....	27 B2	SHOPPING	
		Mayshan Hotel.....	28 C2	Bogyoke Aung San Market.....	42 B1
		Okinawa Guesthouse.....	29 B3	Theingyi Zei.....	43 A2
		White House Hotel.....	30 A3		
				TRANSPORT	
		EATING		Myanma Five Star Line (MFSL) Passenger Jetty.....	44 C4
		999 Shan Noodle Shop.....	31 C2		
		Bharat Restaurant.....	32 D2		
		Café Aroma.....	33 C1		

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Bogyoke Aung San Market.....	(see 42)
City Hall.....	14 C2
Customs House.....	15 C4

Shwedagon is an absolute must. Every good Buddhist in Myanmar tries to make at least one pilgrimage here in their lifetime; many come for the **Shwedagon festival** held on the full moon in February/March. Any national festival quickens the pulse here.

The compound, with its main stupa and 82 other buildings, is astounding any time of day, but evening and sunrise – when slanting light illuminates the gilding – are the most magical times to visit.

The *paya* ('holy one', a religious monument) is said to be built upon the hill where Buddha relics have been enshrined, including eight hairs of the Buddha. In the 15th century, Queen Shinsawbu gilded it with her own weight in gold, beaten to gold leaf. Her son-in-law offered four times his own weight and that of his wife's. The *zedi* (stupa) has reportedly accumulated more than 53 metric tonnes of gold leaf. The top of the spire is encrusted with more than 5000 diamonds and 2000 other stones.

In the compound's northwestern corner is a huge bell that the British managed to drop into the Yangon River while trying to carry it off. Unable to recover it, they gave the bell back to the Burmese, who refloated it using low-tech lengths of bamboo.

The entrance fee supposedly goes to pagoda upkeep. There is a lift large enough to accommodate a wheelchair, an impressive rarity when it comes to ancient sites in Southeast Asia. To get here, either take packed bus 37 from the east side of Mahabandoola Park, or grab a taxi (about K2000 one way).

Other Attractions

One of Yangon's top *paya*, the slightly kitsch riverside **Botataung Paya** (Map p530; Strand Rd; admission US\$2) is named for the 1000 military leaders who escorted Buddha relics from India 2000 years ago. Its *zedi* is, unusually, hollow, so you can walk through it. There are good river views nearby.

If you don't make it to Bago (Pegu), the reclining Buddha at **Chauktatgyi Paya** (Map p528; Shwe Gone Daing St) is nearly as impressive.

Although it may not be possible to visit Aung San Suu Kyi's present home, you can see where she grew up at the **Bogyoke Aung San Museum** (Map p528; ☎ 541359; Bogyoke Aung San Museum St, Bahan Township; admission US\$3; ☎ 10am-3.30pm Tue-Sun). Dedicated to her fa-

ther, an independence leader who was assassinated in 1947, the museum is just north of Kandawgyi Lake.

The **Na-Gar Glass Factory** (off Map p528; ☎ 526053; 152 Yawgi Kyaung St, Hlaing Township; admission free; ☎ 9.30-11am & 12.30-3.30pm) is a fun place to explore. Glassblowers here made the mesmerising eyes for a reclining Buddha in Yangon's Chauktatgyi Paya, and the owner is a genial host. Some drivers aren't familiar with the factory, so getting there requires some patience.

For the best 360-degree views of Yangon, including the Shwedagon Paya, take the (free) lift to the top of the **Sakura Tower** (Map p532; cnr Bogyoke Aung San & Sule Paya Rds).

For more Yangon sights, see the walking tour (p534).

ACTIVITIES

Good strolling grounds can be found at **Kandawgyi Lake** (Map p528), north of the city centre. About 3km north, **Inya Lake** (Map p528) offers little chance for shade, but is five times larger, and not far from **Suu Kyi's home** (Map p528; 54 University Ave).

The **YMCA** (Map p530; ☎ 294128; Mahabandoola Rd; ☎ beginners 7-9am Tue, Thu & Sat, experienced 3-5pm Mon, Wed & Fri) offers first-rate kickboxing instruction.

If you feel the need to take the plunge and do some **swimming**, most top-end hotels allow dips for a few dollars; one of the nicest pools is at the **Sedona Hotel** (Map p528; ☎ 666900; 1 Kaba Aye Pagoda Rd, Inya Lake; admission US\$5). Or try the **Yangon Swimming Club Pool** (Map p530; U Wi Za Ya Rd).

COURSES

Yangon is a popular centre for *satipatthana vipassana*, or insight-awareness meditation. Meditation centres around town:

Chanmyay Yeiktha Meditation Centre (☎ 661479; www.chanmyay.org; 55A Kaba Aye Rd) There's also a second location outside town.

Innaya Meditation Centre (☎ 535549; 31A Inya Myaing Rd)

Mahasi Meditation Centre (Map p528; ☎ 541971; http://web.ukonline.co.uk/buddhism/mahasi.htm; 16 Thathana Yeiktha Rd, Bahan Township) Myanmar's most famous meditation centre.

Panditarama Meditation Centre (☎ 535448; http://web.ukonline.co.uk/buddhism/pandita.htm; 80A Than Lwin Rd, Bahan Township) There's also a second branch outside town.

DOWNTOWN WALKING TOUR

The streets of downtown Yangon (Map p532) are bursting with majestic government buildings from the British era. Tucked away down the narrow side streets are row upon row of grand apartment buildings from the 1920s and 1930s. There is nowhere else quite like it in Southeast Asia and the best way to soak it up is to wander about on foot. Try starting at 2200-year-old **Sule Paya**, a big-time Buddhist traffic circle with an unusual octagonal shape. Just east is golden **City Hall** and, further east, the **Immigration Office** (Mahabandoola Rd), once a mammoth department store.

Continuing east, the **High Court Building** (Pansodan St) is on the right. Heading south on Pansodan St is a real joy, passing monumental old buildings that wouldn't look out of place around Trafalgar Sq, before hitting Strand Rd. To the left is the colonial stand-out **Strand Hotel**, with an air-conditioned (expensive) bar if you want a break, and the **British Council Library** (p529).

West on the Strand is the 1915 **Customs House** and the colonnaded **Law Court**. Head north to the popular **Mahabandoola Garden** (admission K50), a slightly faded park that is home to the **Independence Monument** (and some shade). Just north is the Sule Paya. Walking west, through the chaotic Indian and Chinese quarters, there's a great **pedestrian bridge** for photos of Yangon traffic. Then wander north to **Bogyoke Aung San Market**.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Several festivals and events centre on Yangon, although some of the more political ones may shift to Naypyidaw in time. Independence Day on 4 January includes a fair at Kandawgyi Lake; Buddha's birthday in April or May is a big event at Shwedagon Paya; Martyr's Day commemorates the assassination of Bogyoke Aung San on 19 July; and Tazaungdaing sees speed-weaving competitions at Shwedagon Paya in October or November. For more details, see p576.

SLEEPING

The best bargains are found in the downtown area, by far the liveliest part of the city. Not only is this the heart of Yangon, but staying here will save you a small fortune in taxi fares. All prices include a free breakfast.

Okinawa Guesthouse (Map p532; ☎ 374318; 64 32nd St; dm US\$5, s US\$9-13, d US\$13-17; 🏠) Hidden away down a side street, but just a stroll from Sule Paya, this is a lovingly furnished, warm and welcoming home. Rooms with bathroom cost are at the higher end of the price range. The dorms are a good budget option.

Golden Smiles Inn (Map p532; ☎ 373589; myathiri@mptmail.net.mm; 644 Merchant St; s US\$5-8, d US\$8-12; 🏠) Tucked away down near the waterfront, this guesthouse is housed upstairs in a rambling old building. As the name suggests, the welcome is warm, but the rooms are quite basic.

White House Hotel (Map p532; ☎ 240780; whitehouse@mptmail.net.mm; 69/71 Kon Zay Dan St; s US\$6-14, d US\$10-18; 🏠) Rooftop hammocks, cold

beer and expansive views reward those willing to tackle the steep climb here. One of the longest-running budget hotels in town, its rooms are clean, although some are strangely shaped. Pricier rooms include a private bathroom. There is a useful travel desk downstairs for onward travels.

Motherland Inn 2 (Map p528; ☎ 291343; www.mymotherlandinn.com; 433 Lower Pazundaung Rd; s US\$7-10, d US\$10-15; 🏠) A little way from the action, the Motherland has long been popular with travellers. Rooms come in a variety of combinations involving bathrooms, fans or air-con. All are clean and well furnished. There is a free airport shuttle running twice daily.

Haven Inn (Map p530; ☎ 295500; phyuauang@mptmail.net.mm; 216 Bo Myat Tun St; s/d US\$10/15; 🏠) Small, but, according to some, perfectly formed, Dr Htun's five well-furnished rooms are often fully booked in the high season. No rooms have windows, but they're finished with a wood trim and have private bathroom and air-con.

Three Seasons Hotel (Map p530; ☎ 293304; phyuauang@mptmail.net.mm; 83/85 52nd St; s/d US\$15/20; 🏠) Same email, same family as Haven Inn, this is another little haven. The polished wood floors sparkle so brightly you can skate across the room. Higher prices reflect a slightly smarter finish than the Haven.

ourpick Mayshan Hotel (Map p532; ☎ 252986; www.mayshan.com; 115 Sule Paya Rd; s/d from US\$15/20; 🏠) When it comes to location, this place is hard to beat, looking on to Sule Paya as it does. Run by a friendly family, the rooms are smart and comfortable, including satellite TV

and hot water bathtubs. The lift is a bonus, as is the fast access to internet email.

Central Hotel (Map p532; ☎ 241001; www.myanmar.net/central; 355-357 Bogyoke Aung San Rd; s/d from US\$30/35; 🏠) Hidden under the shadow of the giant Traders Hotel, this is the closest you're going to get to the major league for this kind of money. The rooms are large and clean, and include everything you might crave after an adventure upcountry, such as international news 24/7 and hot water.

Other recommended places in the centre: **Mahabandoola Guest House** (Map p532; ☎ 248104; 93 32nd St; s/d with shared bathroom US\$3/5) Housed in a decaying old colonial relic, this place has oodles of potential, but the interior is almost as decrepit as the building itself.

Daddy's Home (Map p532; ☎ 252169; 107 Kon Zay Dan St; s US\$5-8, d US\$6-10; 🏠) Reliable stand-by choice if the nearby White House is full.

YMCA (Map p530; ☎ 294128; 263 Mahabandoola Rd; s US\$8-10, d US\$16-19; 🏠) The old wing has large, spartan rooms, while the new wing has smarter rooms with reliable hot water.

EATING

Yangon has Myanmar's best range of restaurants. There are lots of inexpensive Bamar, Shan, Chinese and Indian restaurants in the downtown area. Slightly smarter restaurants are tucked away to the north of the centre on various embassy rows or around the pretty lakes. Footpath stalls are the cheapest eats in town. Remember that many places close early, by 9pm.

Bamar & Shan

For a lively local night out, head to the open-air **barbecue grills** (Map p530; 19th St; 🏠 after 5pm) in

Chinatown, located between Mahabandoola and Anawrahta Rds. The area is wall to wall with smoking grills. Pick some skewers from the meat, fish and vegetable selection (from K200 each) and down a chilled Myanmar Beer while your dinner's cooking. If you're going to get to the major league for this kind of money, pick up some 'mouth-watering snacks' (crickets and the like) at the **snack stalls** (Mahabandoola Rd) around the corner to accompany the beer.

999 Shan Noodle Shop (Map p532; 130B 34th St; noodles from K500) This blink-and-you'll-miss-it tiny place behind City Hall has an English-language menu for sampling Shan meals such as *hkaung sweh* (thin rice noodles in spiced chicken broth).

ourpick Feel Myanmar Food (Map p530; ☎ 725736; 124 Pyidaungsu Yeiktha Rd; mains from K1500) Want to get a feel for Myanmar cuisine? This is the place to do it, with dozens of traditional dishes available each day. Just point and eat. Staff speak enough English to help with selections.

Sandy's Myanmar Cuisine (Map p528; ☎ 249255; 290 U Weizara Rd; mains K1500-5000) In a peaceful setting overlooking Kandawgyi Lake, Sandy's Myanmar Cuisine is one of the more stylish addresses to get to grips with Bamar cuisine. The prices aren't bad for such a top spot, and the menu includes some authentic curries.

Maw Shwe Li Restaurant (Map p530; ☎ 221103; 316 Anawrahta Rd, Lanmadaw Township; mains K2000) This popular Shan eatery lies west of the city centre. Specialities include a tasty fried dried eel with chilli. There is now a more central branch on Mahabandoola Garden St (Map p532).

'MOUTH-WATERING SNACKS'

Tha yei za (literally 'mouth-watering snack' in Burmese) come in a mind-boggling array of sizes and shapes and are a real bargain. Seek them out at 'night markets' in Yangon and at street stalls around the country. Makeshift desserts come in the form of multicoloured sticky-rice sweets, poppyseed cakes, banana puddings and the like. Others test local claims that 'anything that walks on the ground can be eaten' and are definitely in the unidentified frying object category:

- *wek thaa douk htoe* (barbecue stands) – footpath stools selling graphic, sliced-up pig parts; about K50 a hit
- *pa-yit kyaw* (fried cricket) – sold on skewers or in a 10-pack for about K300
- *bi-laar* (beetle) – prepared like crickets; locals suggest 'suck the stomach out, then chew the head part'
- *thin baun poe* (larva) – insect larva, culled from bamboo, are lightly grilled and served still wriggling

Other Asian

There is a huge number of Indian restaurants in the city. Along Anawrahta Rd, west of Sule Paya Rd, there are many super-cheap Indian biryani shops (*keyeththa dan bauk* in Burmese) and roti-and-dosa makers set up at night. All-you-can-eat thali meals or biryani cost K500 or so. **Nilar Biryani Shop** (Map p532; Anawrahta Rd) is a reliable spot.

Bharat Restaurant (Map p532; ☎ 281519; 356 Mahabandoola Rd; veg mains K700) Specialising in southern Indian food, Bharat offers cheap dosas and a range of thalis with vegetable, mutton, chicken or fish.

Yakiniku Japanese Barbecue Restaurant (Map p532; ☎ 374738; 357 Shwe Bontha St; barbecue dishes from K1500; ☎ lunch & dinner) Yakiniku has anything you can think of to barbecue and some you can't. Cook things up on your very own gas-fired grill or go wild and sample the sushi.

Singapore's Kitchen (Map p530; ☎ 226297; 524 Strand Rd; mains from K2000; ☎ lunch & dinner) Chinese restaurants are another fixture in Yangon and this is one of the best. Tables spill onto the footpath on a breezy night and the duck is delicious. It's between 12th and Phooone Gyeet Sts.

International

Pizza Corner (Map p532; ☎ 254730; Shwe Bontha St; pizzas K2000-2800) New arrivals might be thinking 'Pizza? Why would I want pizza?'. Wait until you've spent a month upcountry and all will be revealed. The décor is bad burger joint to the hilt, but the pizzas are tasty.

Monsoon (Map p530; ☎ 295224; 85 Thein Byu Rd; mains K2500-7500) More like East meets West, this place has an eclectic menu of regional favourites from Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and beyond, plus plenty of home comfort food. Set in a grand old colonial-era building, the menu is very reasonably priced given the elegant surrounds.

Café Dibar (Map p528; ☎ 006143; 14 Than Lwin Rd; mains from K3000) A little way out, but in striking distance of Shwedagon Paya, Café Dibar is a homely Italian bistro with authentic pizzas and pastas.

Cafés & Teashops

Café Aroma (Map p532; Sule Paya Rd; ☎ 8am-11pm) Caffeine cravers should head here for a morning fix. It also has an extensive menu of Asian and international food and is popular with well-heeled young Burmese.

Zawgyi House (Map p532; ☎ 380398; 372 Bogyoke Aung San Rd) Take a pew on the porch for some top people watching in front of this grand old wooden house. Teas, coffees, shakes and snacks, plus an expensive handicraft showroom inside.

Sei Taing Kya Teashop (off Map p528; ☎ 7am-5pm) This is the Burmese teashop answer to Starbucks, with several branches around the city. The liveliest branch is near the Israeli embassy and serves tea by the gallon and plenty of snacks.

Yatha Teashop (Map p532; 352 Mahabandoola Rd) A traditional Indian-style teashop between Seikkan Thar and 39th Sts.

DRINKING

After one night in Bangkok, you would be forgiven for thinking Yangon is a sleepy backwater. However, dig a little deeper and there is some action. For those on a strict budget, the cheapest options are downtown beer gardens serving Dagon or Myanmar draught beer. Expat-oriented places – mostly north of the centre – are comparatively pricey. Check out the *Myanmar Times* for more extensive listings.

Thiripyitsaya Sky Lounge (Map p532; ☎ 255255; 20th fl, Sakura Tower, 339 Bogyoke Aung San Rd) The place to come for big views of Yangon; come for a sun-downer and see the sky change colour. Pricey drinks, but short of chartering a chopper you won't get a better view of the Shwedagon.

Lake View (Map p528; ☎ 382917; 290 U Weizara Rd) For a ground-level view of attractive Kandawgyi Lake, this place has draught Myanmar beer for less than US\$1. Check out the impressive replica of the royal barge Karaweik across the water, but don't venture in as it is government-owned.

50th Street Bar & Grill (Map p530; ☎ 298096; 9-13 50th St) Long one of the only bars in town, this place feels a little lost and lonely in the backstreets, but it's worth a drink or two during the extensive happy hours. There are cheap drinks from 5pm to 8pm daily and Sunday is an all-day happy hour, the perfect way to overcome a hangover.

Monsoon (Map p530; ☎ 295224; 85 Thein Byu Rd) It's more of a restaurant, but the extensive drinks menu here includes happy hour cocktails from 5.30pm to 7.30pm.

Star Millennium Café (Map p532; ☎ 380346; 70 Bo Aung Kyaw St) 'The place where the stars hang out' or at least the place where they hang pictures

GAY & LESBIAN YANGON

After Bangkok, expect a subdued scene here in conservative Yangon. **Silver Oak Café** (Map p532; ☎ 299993; 83/91 Bo Aung Kyaw St) is one of the few centres of gay nightlife in the city with live music almost every night. **Patty O'Malleys** (Map p528; ☎ 666900; 1 Kaba Aye Pagoda Rd, Inya Lake) is an underground Irish bar at the Sedona Hotel with a gay-friendly vibe.

of the stars. From Beckham to Bruce Lee, they are all here. Affordable drinks and an international menu make this a good spot to stop by.

Mr Guitar Café (Map p528; ☎ 550105; 22 Sa Yar San St; ☎ 6pm-midnight) Burmese music legends often swing by this café-bar, founded by popular singer Nay Myo Say. There is live music nightly from 7pm to midnight. Drinks are expensive compared with downtown bars.

Strand Bar (Map p532; Strand Rd; ☎ 11am-11pm) The most expensive digs in town has introduced 'Stranded' happy hours from 5pm to 11pm on Friday. A lot of expats come out of the woodwork for this one and draught beer is just US\$1.

CLUBBING

Yangon nightclubs can be an interesting cultural experience for the uninitiated. Most seem to include lots of amateur model shows and little dancing.

Pioneer (Map p530; Yuzuna Garden Hotel, 44 Ah Lan Paya Pagoda St; admission around K4000) This is one of the most popular clubs in town. More a conventional nightclub, it's packed with young, wealthy Burmese. Prices sometimes include a free drink.

DJ Bar (off Map p528; Dusit Inya Lake Hotel, 37 Kaba Aye Paya Rd) The *in* place at the time of writing, this late-night bar with a dance floor rumbles on until 4am on weekends. Way out on Inya Lake.

SHOPPING

Theingyi Zei (Map p532) is the local market for everyday homewares and textiles. It extends four blocks east to west from Kon Zay Dan St to 24th St, and north to south from Anawrahta Rd to Mahabandoola Rd. Theingyi Zei is also renowned for its traditional Burmese herbs and medicines.

Bogyoke Aung San Market (Scott Market; Map p532; Bogyoke Aung San Rd; ☎ 8am-6pm Tue-Sun) This grand old labyrinthine market has the largest selection of Burmese handicrafts in Yangon, as well as jewellery, *longyi* (wraparound garment worn by women and men), shoes, bags and pretty much anything else.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

See p524 for information on international air services. For details on domestic flights, which leave from the same airport, see p525.

Boat

There are four main passenger jetties in the Yangon River waterfront, which wraps itself around southern Yangon. Long-distance ferries head up the delta towards Patheingyi or travel north along the Ayeyarwady River to Pyay, Bagan and Mandalay.

When purchasing a ticket for a particular ferry from the government-run **IWT** (Map p530; ☎ 284055) at the back of Lanthit St jetty, be sure to check from which jetty the boat departs.

Bus

Yangon has two main bus stations. The Highway Bus Centre (Aung Mingalar Bus Terminal; off Map p528) serves the most destinations, while the **Hlaing Thar Yar Bus Terminal** (off Map p528; Hwy No 5, Yangon-Patheingyi Rd) serves the Delta.

The Highway Bus Centre is a confusing array of competing bus companies in a dusty lot, just southwest of Yangon Airport.

The Hlaing Thar Yar Bus Terminal is a good 45 minutes west of the centre on the other side of the Hlaing River.

Guesthouses can assist with purchasing tickets, which will certainly save time, if not money. Bigger companies with bus-ticket offices (Map p530) opposite the Central Train Station include **Kyaw Express** (☎ 242473), **Sun Moon Express** (☎ 642903) and **Transnational Express** (☎ 249671).

Several buses to Patheingyi (K3000, three to four hours), Chaungtha Beach (K5000 to K6000, six to seven hours) and Ngwesaung Beach (K5000 to K6000, five hours) leave from the Hlaing Thar Yar Terminal from early morning until about 1pm. The comfiest ones leave early.

BUSES FROM YANGON

The following are some sample fares and trip durations for buses leaving the Highway Bus Centre.

Destination	Fare	Duration
Bagan	K15,000	14hr
Bago	K1000	2hr
Hpa-an	K4500	8hr
Kyaikto	K3000	4½hr
Mandalay	K15,000	12hr
Mawlamyine	K9000	6hr
Taunggyi (for Kalaw & Inle Lake)	K15,000	20hr
Thandwe (for Ngapali)	K12,000	20hr

Train

The 716km-long trip from Yangon to Mandalay is the only train trip most visitors consider, but the government profits handsomely from the overpriced tickets, so we don't recommend it. The express trains are much more comfortable than the average Burmese train. Reserve sleepers (ie anything that contains sleeping berths, including some day trains) several days in advance. There is currently no conventional night sleeper to Mandalay, just a 12.45pm departure that arrives at the absurd hour of 3am. Book advance tickets at the **Yangon train station** (Map p530; ☎ 274027; 🕒 6am-4pm).

GETTING AROUND
Bus

More than 40 numbered city bus routes – on dodgy old pick-ups and newer Japanese or Korean buses with air-con – connect the townships of Yangon. Some can be quite crowded, but midday hops across the centre (for example) beat a taxi. Tickets cost from K20 to K200 depending on the type of bus. Useful routes:

- Bogyoke Aung San Market to Mingala Zei (near Kandawgyi Lake) – pick-up 1
- Sule Paya to Pyay Rd (University of Yangon; near Inya Lake) to airport – blue bus 51, 52 and air-con bus 51

TRAINS FROM YANGON

Destination	Ordinary class	Upper class	Sleeper	Duration
Bagan	US\$11	US\$31	US\$34	19hr
Kyaikto	US\$3	US\$8	n/a	7hr
Mandalay	US\$15	US\$30-35	US\$40-50	14hr
Thazi	US\$9	US\$25	US\$33	12hr

- Sule Paya to Highway Bus Centre – bus 43, 45, 51
- Sule Paya to Hlaing Thar Yar Bus Station – bus 54, 59, 96
- Sule Paya to Shwedagon Paya – bus 37, 43, 46

Taxi

Licensed taxis carry red licence plates, though there is often little else to distinguish a taxi from any other vehicle in Yangon. The most expensive are the *car-taxis*, beaten-up old Japanese cars. Breakdowns are not exactly unknown. Fares are highly negotiable; trips around the central area cost about K1000 to K1500. Sule Paya to Shwedagon Paya runs at about K2000. Late at night, expect to pay more. A taxi for the day is US\$20 to US\$30.

Trishaw

There are far fewer trishaws, bicycles or motorcycles in Yangon than anywhere else in Myanmar. Trishaws are useful for getting around downtown, but Yangon is too spread out to use them for sightseeing. Trishaws aren't permitted on the main streets from midnight to 10am. Rides cost about K300 to K1000, depending on the distance covered.

WEST COAST BEACHES & THE DELTA

Thailand may be the beach capital of Southeast Asia, but it's no secret and you'll have to share the sand with everybody else. Myanmar's curvaceous coastline has some tasty slices of sand itself and there are few tourists during the week. Remote Ngapali Beach is the finest, but is rapidly pricing itself out of the backpacker market. Chaungtha Beach and Ngwesaung Beach are easier to reach from Yangon, both via the sleepy delta town of Pathein.

During the monsoon season (mid-May to mid-September) heavy rains blanket the coast and chase away most travellers.

PATHEIN (BASSEIN)

☎ 042 / pop 300,000

A good staging post on the way to Chaungtha or Ngwesaung Beaches, Pathein is, believe it or not, Myanmar's fourth-largest city. Located in the heart of the Ayeyarwady delta, Pathein is a good place to check the pulse of real local life. It's home to a flourishing parasol industry and is a good place to pick one up during the blasting heat. The wide, scenic Pathein River curves through town, delivering constant action.

Sights

Pathein is famous throughout the country for its 'umbrella' industry – actually parasols for the sun, not rain. These are made in parasol workshops scattered across the northern part of the city, particularly around the Twenty-Eight Paya, off Mahabandoola Rd. Saffron-coloured ones are waterproof. Prices start from just a few thousand kyat. The **Shwe Sar Umbrella Workshop** (☎ 25127; 653 Tawya Kyaung Rd; 🕒 8am-5pm) is a good place to see them being made.

Shwemokhtaw Paya, in the centre of Pathein near the riverfront, is a huge, golden, bell-shaped stupa. The *hti* (decorated top of a pagoda) consists of a top tier made from 6.3kg of solid gold, a middle tier of pure silver and a bottom tier of bronze – the Olympic pagoda perhaps? The seated Buddha in the southern shrine apparently floated here on a raft from Sri Lanka.

Settaway Paya is the most charming of the several lesser-known *paya* in Pathein. The *paya* compound wraps around a couple of green hillocks dotted with a number of well-constructed *tazaung* (shrine buildings).

Sleeping & Eating

Electricity ebbs and flows in Pathein, but mostly ebbs.

Taan Taan Ta Guest House (☎ 22290; 7 Merchant St; s US\$5-7, d US\$6-10; 🕒) One of the taller hotels in town, top-floor rooms here are brighter, but all rooms are clean and include a bathroom.

Paradise Guest House (☎ 25055; 14 Zegyaung Rd; r US\$10; 🕒) It may not be paradise, but it delivers the best bang for your buck. Fronting a

canal, a short walk from the central market, the rooms are clean and include satellite TV.

Golden Land Restaurant (Merchant St; mains K2000; 🍴 lunch & dinner) North of the clock tower, this place has a leafy garden for alfresco dining and a relaxed atmosphere away from the street action. The menu includes Burmese and Chinese cuisine.

Night market (Strand Rd) After dark, this riverside market draws the young-uns for a spot of flirting. It offers a veritable smorgasbord of treats, including coconut crepes with syrup, fritters, fresh fruit and peanuts steamed in bamboo.

Getting There & Away

Pathein is about 120km west of Yangon.

BOAT

Chinese triple-deckers sail between Yangon and Pathein (ordinary class/cabin US\$7/42, 17 hours), leaving at 5pm in either direction. In Yangon, boats depart from the Lanthit St jetty.

BUS

Many buses go to Pathein from Yangon's Hlaing Thar Yar Bus Terminal, most leaving before noon. Tickets range from K2500 to K5000 for the three- to four-hour trip.

Overloaded minibuses leave for Chaungtha Beach (K3000, 2½ hours) around 7am, 11am and 1pm from Pathein's **bus station** (Vadayagone St). It is more comfortable to get a direct bus from Yangon.

Shwe Min Than buses go to Ngwesaung (K3000, 1½ hours) every other hour from 7am to 3pm.

CHAUNGTHA BEACH

☎ 042

This beach is incredibly popular on weekends and holidays, with locals having fun in the sun and sea – fully clothed. Come during the week for some solitude. The best stretch of sand is a 15-minute walk north of town. Chaungtha is a bumpy 40km west of Pathein.

Boats head out to **Whitesand Island** (one way K4000, one hour) at 8am, returning at 5pm. It's a good place for swimming and snorkelling, although there are only three trees for shade. The **market** (🕒 6-9am) is a lively vestige of a time before tourism; it comes to life when the catch comes in.

Sleeping & Eating

Of Myanmar's beach towns, Chaungtha has the cheapest places to stay, though most places are moving up to midrange. Some places close during the wet season.

Shwe Hin Tha Hotel (☎ 24098, in Yangon 01-650588; r US\$12-25; 🍽️) The only affordable hotel facing the beach, the cheaper rooms here are small bungalows with private porches facing the courtyard.

There are several budget places located away from the beach. **Win Villa** (s/d US\$3/6) is a wooden home with a balcony and very simple rooms.

Food is available at all guesthouses and hotels, plus there are some point-and-eat restaurants along the village's main street.

Getting There & Away

Guesthouses can arrange boats to Ngwesaung Beach (from K30,000, 1½ hours). Seriously overcrowded minibuses leave for Pathein (K3000, 2½ hours) at 7am, 11am and 1pm from the bus station in the village. Better air-con buses go to Yangon (K5000 to K6000, six to seven hours) at 7am.

NGWESAUNG BEACH

☎ 042

Long touted as the new Ngapali, this is both good news and bad news. The good news is that the beach is a gorgeous 15km stretch of white sand. The bad news is that almost all the resorts and hotels are swanky places geared towards high-spending visitors. The water is deeper and clearer than at Chaungtha, plus there is space to spread out.

Sleeping

Golden Sea Resort (☎ in Yangon 01-241747; s/d US\$7/15) This place is one of the only affordable options in Ngwesaung – but it's anyone's guess how long it will hold out. Rooms are in small wooden bungalows with attached bathroom.

Yuzana Resort (☎ 40323; r US\$25-45; 🍽️) This was the first of the mega-resorts built in Ngwesaung. It has a whopping 133 rooms, all equipped with satellite TV, minibar and bathroom. The terrace restaurant here is popular with locals.

Getting There & Away

Shwe Min Than buses go to Pathein (K3000, 1½ hours) every other hour from 7am to

3pm. There are several direct buses to Yangon (K5000 to K6000, five hours).

There are no roads to Chaungtha. Boats can be chartered (from K30,000, 1½ hours) or you can travel by bus via Pathein.

NGAPALI BEACH

☎ 043

The premier beach destination in Myanmar, it's one hell of a ride for those planning on travelling overland. Given its name, some say, by a homesick Italian, Ngapali boasts 3km of palm-fringed sands on the beautiful Bay of Bengal. The turquoise waters deliver a bounty from the sea and this town serves up some of the country's best food. It has moved steadily upmarket in recent years, so there are slim pickings for budget travellers. It is only really worth the trip for those planning to continue on to Sittwe and the temples of Mrauk U (Myohaung).

Sights & Activities

Half-day **snorkel trips** (incl boat, mask & snorkel for up to 5 people US\$12-15) are widely promoted. The coral's not spectacular compared with parts of Thailand, but there are plenty of brightly coloured fish to follow.

Jade Taw is a fishing village south of the beach, easily reached on foot, where fish lie drying in the sun on bamboo mats (providing a timely reminder to use sunscreen in this hot place!). Further south by road is **Lontha**, home to a hilltop stupa with superb views. Turn left at the market crossroads and follow the water.

Sleeping & Eating

Grand Resort (s/d US\$6/10) Grand and resort aren't the first two words that come to mind when you see this simple place, but it has Ngapali's only surviving budget rooms. Just north of the main strip, the bare-bones rooms have a mattress on the floor and attached bathrooms over the water.

Royal Beach Hotel (☎ 42411, in Yangon 01-243880; royalingapali@myanmar.com.mm; r US\$20-50) This atmospheric little hotel, hidden away amid a small forest of palms, has five categories of room available. Rooms have wooden floors, mosquito nets and private bathrooms. Power is sporadic unless you opt for the top-rate rooms with 24-hour generator power.

Linn Thar Oo Lodge (☎ 42333, in Yangon 01-229928; www.linntharoo-ngapali.com; s US\$25-40, d US\$30-45)

Prices keep on rising at Linn Thar Oo Lodge, but it's one of the cheaper deals in Ngapali. There are 42 bungalows and some of them offer sea views. The more expensive rooms are wood-pannelled and include satellite TV and hot water.

The only places serving food or drink for a sunset over the sea are the hotels. Head to the parallel road behind the beach and you'll find some superb open-air, family-run restaurants. Squid with garlic and ginger sauce is a local speciality here. Crab, squid or barracuda is about K3000, tiger prawns K5000. Moonlight, 200m north of Royal Beach, is one of the old favourites here.

Getting There & Around

Visitors reach Ngapali via the **Thandwe Airport** (☎ 42611), 5km north of the beach, or the Thandwe bus station, 9.5km northeast. Flights to Yangon start at US\$56, and to Sittwe at US\$46.

Long-distance bus services to and from Yangon take about 20 hours, leaving Ngapali around 2pm, and cost K11,000. **Ye Aung Lan** (☎ 43500) sends buses along the smoother route (via Gwa). **Aung Thit Sar** (☎ 43499) goes via Pyay on a stomach-churning trip over the mountains, the bus stuffed with bags of dried fish. Buses will pick you up from your guesthouse. Alternatively, a pick-up from Ngapali leads to Thandwe (K500, 45 minutes), from where it is a trishaw ride to the bus station.

Overland travel to Sittwe is currently not allowed, but it is possible to take a boat from Taunggok, reached by pick-up or the Pyay bus from Thandwe. See p571 for more information.

Guesthouses around Ngapali rent bicycles for about K2000 per day.

CENTRAL MYANMAR

The central plains of Myanmar may lack the iconic sights of places such as Bagan and Inle Lake, but the towns in this area are a rewarding way to escape the tourist trail. The region is primarily an agricultural heartland, but there are some historic towns to break up the long cross-country journeys, and you'll meet incredibly friendly locals along the way.

BAGO (PEGU)

☎ 052 / pop 220,000

Welcome to Buddha World! Bago has carved a niche for itself – and many thousands of niches for its sacred Buddhas – as home to some monumental religious sites. The town lies 80km north of Yangon (en route to Inle Lake or Mandalay), but sees just a handful of travellers, most of whom are on day trips or on their way to the Golden Rock. Founded in AD 573 by the Mon, Bago's days as a major river-port town declined as the river changed course, and the final nail in the coffin came when marauding Burmese king Alaungpaya destroyed it in 1757.

Sights

A US\$10 ticket covers entrance to Shwethalyaung, Shwemawdaw Paya, Mahazedi Paya, Kyaik Pun Paya and the Kanbawzathadi Palace. Some of this money may go to site maintenance, but the bulk goes to the government. Ticket checkers finish work at about 4.30pm for those wanting to avoid the fee. All other sights listed have free admission.

SHWETHALYAUNG & AROUND

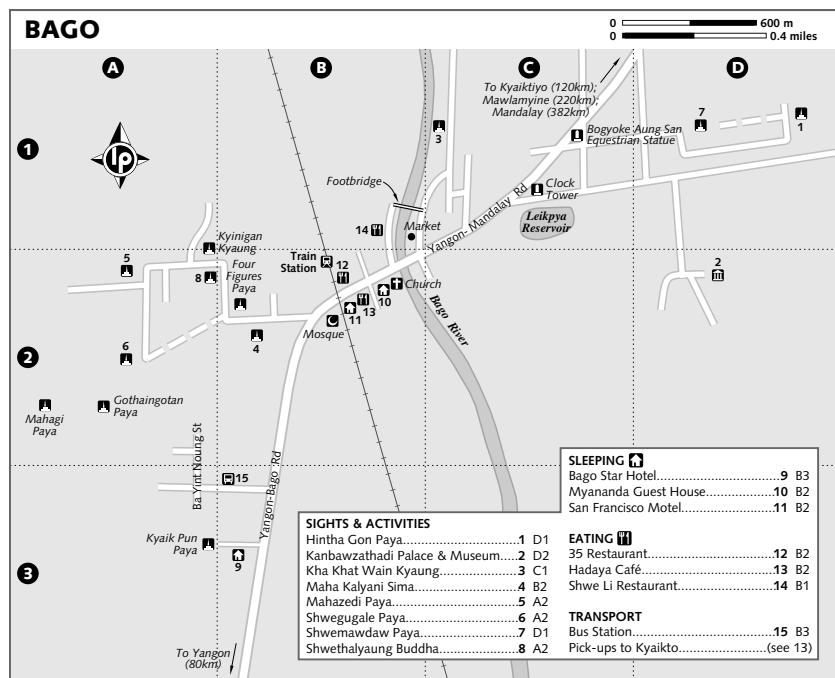
The Shwethalyaung is a 55m reclining Buddha image that's 9m longer than the famous one at Wat Pho in Bangkok and has a sweet, lifelike face. The jewelled soles of the feet are particularly beautiful. A mural tells the temple's melodramatic story, which began in AD 994.

Just before the Shwethalyaung is the reconstructed **Maha Kalyani Sima** (Hall of Ordination) and a curious quartet of standing Buddha figures.

Carry on beyond the Shwethalyaung and you reach the **Mahazedi Paya**, where men (only) can climb to the top for fine views. Just beyond is **Shwegugale Paya**, including a tunnel lined with 64 seated Buddha images.

SHWEMAWDAW PAYA & AROUND

Rebuilt after an earthquake in 1930, the Shwemawdaw Paya is 14m higher than Shwedagon Paya in Yangon. Look out for the large chunk of the *zedi's* spire, toppled by an earthquake in 1917, resting at the northeastern corner of the *paya*. The stupa, reached by a covered walkway lined with stalls, draws plenty of



pilgrims during the **full-moon festival** at Tagu (March/April).

Beyond the Shwemawdaw Paya is **Hintha Gon Paya**, a hilltop shrine guarded by mythical swans. This is the place for Bago views without the US\$10 charge.

KHA KHAT WAIN KYAUNG

One of the top three biggest *kyaung* (Buddhist monasteries) in Myanmar, this is a bustling hive of 1200 monks, and a welcoming place. Tourists come to watch the 10.30am lunch, but it's more relaxed at other times of the day.

KANBAWZATHADI PALACE & MUSEUM

This Mon-style palace, just south of Shwemawdaw Paya, was the home of a 16th-century Taungoo king. The excavated walls are the only authentic 16th-century artefacts. Everything else is a reproduction, similar to the palace in Mandalay.

Sleeping

Bago has plenty of good-value rooms, but few travellers spend the night here.

San Francisco Motel (☎ 22265; 14 Yangon-Mandalay Rd; s/d from US\$5/8; 🚽) In the same area as the Myananda, the SF has small but spotless rooms, some offering a balcony.

Myananda Guest House (☎ 22275; 10 Yangon-Mandalay Rd; s US\$5-10, d US\$8-12; 🚽) This is a friendly place located on the busy main road; the cheaper rooms here only have a fan and access to a shared bathroom. Longtime local guide Mr Han hangs out here.

Bago Star Hotel (☎ 23766; 11-13 Kyaikpon Pagoda Rd; s/d US\$24/30; 🚽 🚿) The star of the Bago hotel scene, rooms here are set in well-appointed bungalows with satellite TV, hot water and 24-hour air-con. On the same road as Kyaik Pun Paya, the pool is popular after tramping around the temples.

Eating & Drinking

For cheap eats, there are a number of food stalls, including some good Indian biryani sellers, in the centre of town near the market. Beer stations are clustered near the bridge on Main Rd.

Shwe Li Restaurant (194 Strand St; dishes from K1500) For the best all-rounder in town, head to this

clean and tidy place with Shan and Indian curries.

35 Restaurant (Yangon-Mandalay Rd; dishes K1500) It's a touch tatty, but this restaurant turns out good-value Bamar, Chinese and even European dishes. Famous for its 'goat fighting balls', that's a load of bollocks, as the British might say.

Hadaya Café (Yangon-Mandalay Rd; ☎ 24hr) One of the better teashops in town, Hadaya has a good selection of pastries.

Getting There & Away

BUS & PICK-UP

Buses from Yangon (K2000, two hours) depart approximately hourly from 6am from Yangon's Highway Bus Centre. Pick-ups to Bago (K1500, front seat K2500, up to four hours) depart frequently from Yangon's **Tha-khin Mya Pan-gyan Gate terminal** (Map p530; Strand Rd).

Hadaya Café can help with boarding a Yangon bus heading north. To Mandalay, buses arrive around 7pm; you'll have to pay the full fare (from K9000) for the 12-hour ride.

Air-con buses to Nyaungshwe (Yaungshwe), for Inle Lake, leave around 1.30pm (from K9000, 15 hours), arriving at 4.30am.

To reach Bagan, take a Mandalay-bound bus to Meiktila and catch a ride the next morning to Nyaung U.

Pick-ups east to Kyaikto (for Golden Rock) leave from Hadaya Café (K2500, three hours). Buses go from near the Emperor Hotel (K3000).

TAXI

Some travellers make a day trip out of Bago with a hired car from Yangon, starting from about US\$40. One-way rides should cost US\$20.

TRAIN

There are several trains daily to Mandalay (ordinary/upper class US\$11/29, 14 hours), stopping in Taungoo (US\$4/8, four hours), though it can be tricky getting a seat. There are also trains for Yangon (US\$2/5, two hours).

Getting Around

Trishaw is the main form of local transport in Bago. A trip in the central area should cost no more than K500. A wise idea is getting one for the day, which should cost about K4000 to K6000.

TAUNGOO

☎ 054 / pop 90,000

It's hard to imagine this was once the nerve centre of a powerful kingdom. Today's Taungoo is a sleepy place that most people see from a bus or train window. However, it gets the 'real-deal experience' thumbs up from those who do stop and is home to one of Myanmar's more memorable guesthouses. Taungoo is just under halfway from Yangon to Mandalay.

Shwesandaw Paya (1597) is the main pilgrimage site. Several other Buddhist sites are on and around the 'royal lake'. The old moat is on the town's west side.

Up in the Karen mountains, **Seinyay Forest Camp** is a popular elephant camp that some tour groups pop by. The guesthouse following arranges trips for about US\$50 per person, which is actually less than half the Yangon rate.

Owned by a wonderfully hospitable pair of doctors, **Myanmar Beauty Guest House II, III & IV** (☎ 23270; fourdoctors@mptmail.net.mm; Pauk Hla Gyi St; r US\$8-25; 🚽) are three teak houses with poster beds, hot showers and wide-open views of the rice paddies. Rates include a large breakfast and lively conversation. It's just north of the bridge, to the south of town.

Heading north or south on air-con buses you'll pay the full fare. Most stop at Golden Myanmar Restaurant, in the centre. Rattletrap local buses go to Yangon (K4000) and Mandalay (K5000) around 6pm.

PYAY (PROME)

☎ 053 / pop 95,000

All roads lead to Pyay, at least some important ones from Yangon, Bagan and Ngapali Beach do, not forgetting the mighty Ayeyarwady River. But the trouble is most visitors just keep on going. It's laid-back enough, with river views and nearby ruins older than Bagan's.

The central statue of Aung San on horseback is 2km west of the bus station, just south of the main market, and a block east of the Ayeyarwady.

Sights

Perched atop a central hill, the attractive **Shwesandaw Paya** is actually 1m taller than Shwedagon Paya in Yangon, and apparently dates from 589 BC. The double golden *hti* atop the *zedi* represent peace between the Mon and Burmese; the second was put up when Burmese leader Alaungpaya captured

the city in 1755. Facing the *paya* from the east is **Sehtatgyi Paya** (Big Ten Storey), a giant seated Buddha.

Sleeping & Eating

Aung Gabar Guesthouse (☎ 21400; 1462 Bogyoke Rd; s/d US\$3/6) Under friendly management, this is the bargain basement in town. Rooms are small, bathrooms are shared, but at least it's clean.

Myat Lodging House (☎ 21361; 222 Bazaar St; s US\$8-10, d US\$10-12, tr US\$16-18; 🏠) Just a block away from the centre of the action, this family-run guesthouse has simple carpeted rooms. Fork out an extra US\$2 for a private bathroom, hot water and satellite TV. Pyay maps are available.

Pyay Star Restaurant (cnr Bogyoke & Pyay-Yangon Rds; dishes from K1500) Overlooking the Aung San statue, Pyay Star Restaurant is a lively little beer hall with an upstairs balcony to escape the dusty streets.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

Ferry routes on the Ayeyarwady centre on Pyay. A couple of weekly ferries go to Yangon (ordinary/upper class US\$10/20, two or three days) and Mandalay (US\$12/25, six or seven days). The **IWT office** (☎ 24503; The Strand; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) can help with tickets and times.

BUS

The highway bus station, 2km east of the centre, sends frequent buses to Yangon (K5000, six hours). No direct buses go to Bagan, so it is necessary to change in Magwe for Nyaung U. To reach Thandwe (near Ngapali Beach), catch a bus to Taunggok (K7000 to K9000, nine hours) around at 6pm, from where you can catch a bus or pick-up to Thandwe (four or five hours).

TRAIN

Trains connect Pyay with Yangon (ordinary/upper class US\$6/15, 12 hours).

AROUND PYAY

About 8km east of Pyay, **Thayekhittaya** (Sri Ksetra; admission US\$4; 🕒 8am-5pm) is a sprawling oval-shaped walled city of the enigmatic Pyu, who ruled here as far back as 1500 years ago. The only real way around the site is by ox cart (K5000), which makes a 12km loop in three hours. Few sites are still standing, but the trip

is slow-paced and there are unlikely to be any other tourists. The 46m cylindrical Bawbawgyi Paya is the finest of the temples. From the centre of Pyay, pick-ups go to the bus station, from where eastbound buses go within 2km of the site. A return taxi to the site is about K10,000, including waiting time. It is possible to cycle to the site, but not around it.

West of the road to Yangon, about 14km south of Pyay, **Shwemyetman Paya** (Paya of the Golden Spectacles) is home to a large, white-faced, seated Buddha – sporting a pair of giant gold-plated glasses! Hop on a local Yangon-bound bus or south-bound pick-up, and get off in Shwedaung town.

SOUTHEASTERN MYANMAR

Teetering on the brink, the Golden Rock of Kyaiktiyo draws a few visitors off the main trail, but there is more to the southeast than this sacred and surreal stone. Mawlamyine offers glimpses of old Burma and is the launching pad for the beautiful boat ride upriver to Hpa-an. Some travellers enter Myanmar from Ranong, Thailand, to Kawthoung and the nearby Myeik Archipelago, a flight or boat ride from the rest of Myanmar.

KYAIKTIYO (GOLDEN ROCK)

☎ 035

The gravity-defying golden rock Kyaiktiyo is one of the most enigmatic and intriguing sights among many in Myanmar. Perched on the very edge of a cliff on Mt Kyaikto, this giant, gold-leafed boulder marks the spot of a Buddha hair donated by a hermit in the 11th century. Apparently, the king salvaged it from the bottom of the sea and brought it to this spot by a boat that subsequently turned to stone, visible a few hundred metres away. The place has a mystical and magical aura; it's a place of miracles, not least of which is how the boulder has managed to hang on all these years. Golden Rock draws pilgrims in their thousands during the cooler months between October and March.

Some travellers make a gruelling day trip from Yangon. This is madness, as it warrants more time and is especially beautiful illuminated at night. Plan on spending a night here or in Bago.

Orientation

The town of Kyaikto is 9km away from the foot of Mt Kyaikto. The village of **Kinpun**, sometimes referred to as 'base camp', is a collection of restaurants and guesthouses right at the foot of Mt Kyaikto, and the most common starting point for an ascent.

Sights

There are two ways to see the rock: hiking 11km from Kinpun (four to six hours one way), or trucking and then walking. Most do the latter. Packed trucks from Kinpun (K1000, front seat K2000) ply upwards from 6am to 7pm, stopping for a fascinating 45-minute walk to the stupa. The steep, paved path throngs with pilgrims and monks.

If you want to feel like an extra in *Burmese Days*, locals may offer to carry you up in a sedan-chair for K7000 to K10,000. Only men are permitted to walk along a short chasm-spanning bridge to the boulder itself.

There is a US\$6 entrance fee collected at the **MTT office** (🕒 6am-6pm).

Sleeping & Eating

Only a few guesthouses in Kinpun accept foreigners; all rates include breakfast.

Pann Myo Thu Inn (s US\$4-8, d US\$7-15; 🏠) The small rooms here could be mistaken for prison cells, but stepping up in price brings wooden floors, furnishings and air-con.

Sea Sar Guest House (s US\$4-10, d US\$8-20; 🏠) The best of a basic bunch in Kinpun, Sea Sar Guest House is popular with the local touts. It's set in shady grounds; splash the cash on the more expensive bungalow-style rooms with private bathroom.

Spend the sunset or sunrise contemplating the Golden Rock by staying up top. **Golden Rock Hotel** (☎ in Yangon 01-502479; grtt@goldenrock.com.mm; s/d US\$40/60, bungalows US\$50/80; 🏠) has the smarter rooms set amid lush vegetation, but it's a 40-minute walk to the balancing boulder. Rooms at **Mountain Top Inn & Restaurant** (☎ in Yangon 01-502479; grtt@goldenrock.com.mm; s/d US\$50/60) are surprisingly basic for the buck, but then you're paying for the views from its perfect position on the mountaintop.

Pilgrims aplenty mean that plenty of Chinese and Bamar restaurants line the main street of Kinpun. All are pretty similar, so just look out for places with a crowd. The hotels 'at the top' both have credible restaurants with incredible views.

Getting There & Away

Buses en route from Yangon to points further south stop in Kyaikto. There are buses between Yangon and Kyaikto (K3000, 4½ hours) leaving from Yangon's Highway Bus Centre. The bus stop in Kyaikto is across from Sea Sar Guest House, where you can get a bus to Bago (K2500, three hours) or pick-up (K2000, three hours).

Pick-ups head south to Hpa-an and Mawlamyine (K2500, front seat K4000, four hours) from 6am to 1pm.

There are three trains a day from Yangon (ordinary/1st/upper class US\$3/6/8, six hours), two leaving at convenient times in the morning.

MAWLAMYINE (MOULMEIN)

☎ 057 / pop 300,000

Moulmein to George Orwell during his time as a policeman here, Myanmar's third-largest city feels more like an overgrown provincial town. Much of the colonial architecture has gone in recent years, replaced by bland Chinese blocks overlooking the Thanlwin (Salween) River. The 3km bridge, the longest in the country, offers long-overdue connections with the north. The real reason to come to Mawlamyine is the beautiful boat ride up to Hpa-an.

The **Mon Cultural Museum** (cnr Baho & Dawei Jetty Rds; admission US\$2) has a modest selection of Mon pieces. For a cityscape, climb the tallest stupa, **Kyaikthanlan Paya**, or other nearby pagodas. The mosques in town are the best-kept buildings, particularly the green-and-turquoise **Kaladan Mosque**. The central **zeigyo** (market; South Bogyoke Rd), on the west side of the road, features a few 'off the back of a boat' black-market items.

Pa-Auk-Taw-Ya Kyaung (☎ 032-22132; www.paauk.org; c/o Major Kan Saing, 653 Lower Main Rd) is one of the largest meditation centres in Myanmar, about 14km south of town.

A picturesque isle off the city's northwestern end is **Shampoo Island** (Guangse Kyun), reached by boat for K2000.

The best budget place to stay in Mawlamyine is **Breeze Rest House** (Lay Hnyin Tha; ☎ 21450; 6 Strand Rd; s US\$4-10, d US\$8-15; 🏠). Set in an old villa, rooms upstairs include a balcony. The friendly owner is a wealth of information on the area.

Attran Hotel (☎ 25764; North Bogyoke Rd; s/d US\$25/35; 🏠) is the most comfortable hotel in

town; its riverside setting is an advantage and rooms include satellite TV.

Double-decker ferries from the Hpa-an jetty in Mawlamyine leave on a gorgeous trip amid limestone mountains and sugarcane fields for Hpa-an (US\$2, five hours) between noon and 2pm Monday and Friday.

Several overnight buses connect Mawlamyine with Yangon (K9000, seven or eight hours). Pick-ups to Hpa-an (K2000, two hours) leave from the *zeigyo* hourly from 8am to 3pm.

The train station is north of the river in Mottama (Martaban). Three daily express trains connect Mottama with Yangon (ordinary/1st/upper class US\$7/13/18, nine hours), stopping in Bago.

HPA-AN

☎ 058

Hpa-an is not so much about the destination as the journey: by riverboat from Mawlamyine. That said, Hpa-an is verdant and villagelike, hemmed in by higgledy-piggledy hills that rise abruptly from the fields. The best activity is to climb the steps up **Mt Zwegabin** (722m), 11km south of town. The views are pretty impressive. Arrive at 11am for the monkey feeding and the monastery offers a free lunch (rice, orange, tea). Watch your rice!

There isn't a huge amount of choice when it comes to staying in Hpa-an. Rooms at **Soe Brothers Guest House** (☎ 21372; 46 Thitsa Rd; s US\$4-7, d US\$8-10) have windows, but no mosquito nets and shared bathrooms only. However, the owners are helpful and offer information on boats and buses if you ring ahead. Around the corner, **Parami Hotel** (r with shared bathroom per person US\$5, r with private bathroom US\$22) has mozzie nets,

even in the cheapies, but the US\$22 rooms are ambitiously priced just for the joy of a private bathroom.

The boat to Mawlamyine leaves on Tuesday and Saturday around 7am. The bus to Yangon's Highway Bus Centre (K5000, 10 to 11 hours) leaves at 6pm. Pick-ups to Kyaikto (K3000) leave from the central green mosque.

KAWTHOUNG

Crossing the Pagyan River from Ranong, Thailand to Myanmar's southernmost tip is like stepping back in time. The waterfront is lined with teashops and moneychangers, plus touts offering boat trips to Thailand. At **Cape Bayinnaung** (Victoria Point), look for the statue of King Bayinnaung, who invaded Siam in the 16th century, pointing a sword towards Thailand.

The offshore **Myeik (Mergui) Archipelago** is one of Myanmar's most beautiful places and the thousands of islands here are almost completely unexplored. The archipelago is home to 'sea gypsies', as the nomadic Salon people are known. Phuket-based tour groups offer high-priced diving and kayaking trips, or try **Moby Dick Tours** (☎ in Yangon 01-202110; www.moby-dick-adventures.com) for overnight trips to islands.

Accommodation pickings are slim in this part of Myanmar. **Kawthoung Motel** (☎ 51046; Bogyoke Rd; r 800B; 📶), 500m up from the jetty, has simple rooms with cold-water private bathrooms. Cheaper, and even more basic, is **Tanintharyi Guest House** (☎ 51748; Garden St; r 400B).

Foreigners can't go from here into Myanmar's 'mainland' by road. **Air Bagan** (code W9; ☎ 01-513322; www.airbagan.com) flies to Yangon (US\$135), stopping in Dawei (Tavoy) and Myeik.

GETTING TO THAILAND

It is possible to enter Thailand at Kawthoung; most travellers don't need a visa to enter the country (see p812).

Boats shuttle between Kawthoung and Ranong (Thailand), 10km away, regularly from about 6am to 4.30pm (40 minutes); you can charter a whole boat for 300B. The **immigration office** (☎ 8am-5.30pm) in Kawthoung is at the jetty, while the Thai **immigration office** (☎ 0 7782 2016; Th Ruangrat; ☎ 8.30am-6pm) is 700m north of Saphan Pla (Pla Bridge) pier, where the boats dock. The pier is 4.5km from the centre of Ranong, but you should be able to catch a *sāwngthāew* (small pick-up truck with two benches in the back) into town (7B). Bear in mind that Myanmar is half an hour behind Thailand.

When leaving here, some foreigners have been charged a US\$25 'fee' by MTT. Problems may arise for anyone travelling on an expired visa.

See p787 for information on doing the trip in the opposite direction.

Boats from Ranong cost 300B, but prices start much higher – you'll need to haggle. There are daily fast boats to Myeik (US\$25, 6½ hours). MFSL ferries to Yangon run to a random timetable and officials may not be willing to sell tickets to foreigners.

INLE LAKE & SHAN STATE

Shan State is vast, untamed and – with rebel groups, warlords and drug dealers living in its mysterious mountains – largely unexplored. Inle Lake is the main attraction, a beautiful body of water hemmed in by mountains and populated by floating communities. Trekking is a popular activity and Kalaw is an affordable base for adventure. This is one of the few parts of Myanmar where homestays are possible and the Shan are some of the friendliest folk in the country. However, ask around locally for the latest situation before making plans to venture into rural areas.

INLE LAKE

☎ 081 / pop 150,000

A wonderful watery world of floating gardens, stilted villages and crumbling stupas, Inle Lake is an absolute must. Mountains tumble down towards the lakeshore, blurring the distinction between heaven and earth. For many travellers, Inle is heaven on earth, a place to while away the days canoeing, cycling and walking through the lush countryside. The Intha people are famous for their leg rowing, although these days many just turn it on for the tourists. There is even a monastery where meditating monks have taught the cats to jump – that's enlightenment for you. Inle deserves to be savoured, not rushed, and many travellers end up staying for longer than they expected.

In September and October, the **Phaung Daw U festival** runs for nearly three weeks and is followed by the **Thadingyut festival**, one of Myanmar's best-known events (see p577).

Always cooler, Inle gets downright chilly at night in January and February.

Orientation & Information

There are many villages in and around Inle Lake, but Nyaungshwe (Yaungshwe) is the biggest and best thanks to a good range of budget accommodation. The transport hub

at Shwenyaung is 13km away. Taunggyi is the main town in the area, east of Nyaungshwe, but there is no compelling reason to visit.

To enter the Inle Lake zone, tourists are required to pay a US\$3 entry fee at the MTT booth on the main road into Nyaungshwe from Shwenyaung.

There are several internet places in Nyaungshwe. **Freak Internet** (Yone Gyi Rd; per hr K3000) can connect to Hotmail and Yahoo.

Sights & Activities

THE LAKE

The best way to experience the lake is to play the tourist and take a full-day **motorboat tour**. Any guesthouse – or anyone with a boat near the waterfront – can arrange one for K15,000 to K20,000 a day, depending on the places to be visited. Half-day trips cost about K10,000. Popular stops include the **floating gardens of Kela**, the 'jumping cat' monastery of **Nga Phe Kyaung**, the wooded stupas of **Indein**, and whichever village market is on that day. They'll also take you to artisans' shops, where weaving, blacksmithing and jewellery-making go on. The workshops are interesting, but there's no obligation to buy anything. Cloth is one of the better buys around Inle Lake.

Another option that avoids the buzzing motors of the longtail boats is a self-guided **canoe trip** through the villages on the lesser-known north end of the lake. Check out the *nat* shrine opposite Nanthe village, south of Nyaungshwe. Rates start at K1000 per hour. Ask at guesthouses or try the local boatmen.

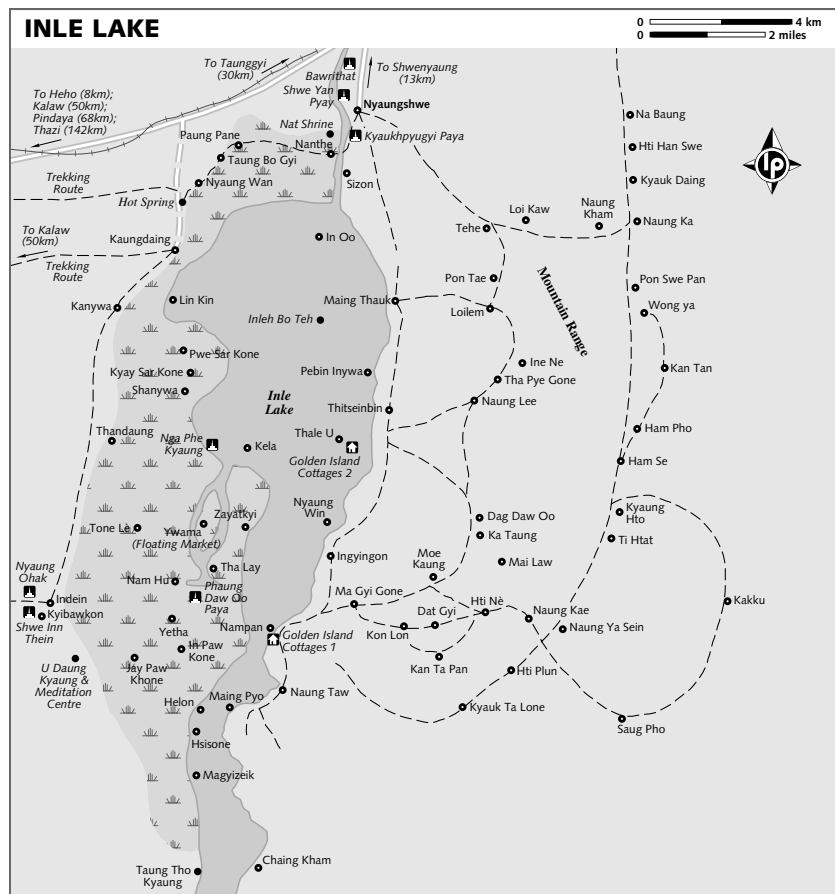
IN NYAUNGSHWE

The **Museum of Shan Chiefs** (Third St; admission US\$2; ☎ 9.30am-3.30pm Tue-Sun), housed in a stately teak-and-brick mansion, was once the palace of the last Shan *sao pha* (chieftain). There are many Shan furnishings and costumes on display, plus a teak-floored audience hall in the north wing.

There are plenty of Buddhist sites around town (see Map p548); the oldest is **Yadana Man Aung Paya**, with a step-spired stupa.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Turn up the heat at the **hot spring** (public/private bathing US\$1/3; ☎ 7am-5pm), close to the Intha village of Kaungdaing. Rent a *longyi* for bathing for K200. A boat comes here from Nyaungshwe (K1000 each way), or it is possible to cycle on a bumpy, hour-long ride.



Guided **day treks** can usually be arranged through guesthouses for approximately US\$7 to US\$8 per day. There is a good, but fairly rugged, all-day trip that leads to the monastery of **Koun Soun Taungbo** and to a nearby cave, heading past two Pa-O villages along the way.

Sleeping

Nyaungshwe is teeming with good budget rooms. All include breakfast and rent bicycles unless otherwise noted.

Queen Inn (☎ 2954; s/d from US\$5/7) The Queen has a selection of little bungalows set on the banks of the river opposite town. The friendly family can't do enough for guests and offers tasty home cooking.

Remember Inn (☎ 29257; remember@myanmar.com.mm; Haw St; s US\$5-10, d US\$8-15; ☑) Friendly and informative, Remember is just as popular with taxi drivers as with travellers (commission and all that). The cheaper bamboo rooms are fine, or invest more for a bathtub.

Aquarius Inn (☎ 29352; 2 Phaung Daw Pyan Rd; s/d US\$7/12) Large, cosy, all-wooden rooms make this a traveller favourite. There is a large garden with table tennis, plus a small library.

Four Sisters Inn (☎ 29190; 105 Nan Pan Qtr; s/d US\$7/12) Run by, you guessed it, four sisters, this is a friendly, family guesthouse in the south of town. Rooms include hot water and are set around a small garden.

Teakwood Hotel (☎ 29250; teakwoodht@myanmar.com.mm; r old wing US\$12-15, new wing US\$15-30) One

of the classier places in town, Teakwood has some cheap rooms in the original house and some smarter rooms in a new 'boutique' wing with some decorative flourish. The family is very welcoming, including matriarch Mrs Tin.

Viewpoint Hotel (☎ 29062; Jetty Rd; s/d US\$15/20) The canalside location of this hotel is wonderfully atmospheric, but the morning boats wake guests at the crack of dawn. The bungalows are large with breezy balconies, but are starting to show signs of age.

Golden Island Cottages 1 & 2 (☎ in Taunggyi 081-23136, in Yangon 01-549019; www.gicmyanmar.com; s US\$40-80, d US\$45-100; ☑) This is the place to sleep over the water in Inle. Boasting two locations in Nampan and Thale U, the main lodge is connected to smart, stilted cottages via elevated walkways. Nampan offers better lake views, but Thale U is more peaceful. Both places are run as a Pa-O collective, benefiting the local community.

Other budget options:
Joy Hotel (☎ 29083; Jetty Rd; s US\$4-8, d US\$6-12) Quiet escape from the main drag overlooking a small canal to the west of the market.

Nawng Kham (Little Inn; ☎ 29195; Phaung Daw Pyan Rd; s/d US\$5/10) Just seven rooms, it's little, but has good views of the nearby zedi.

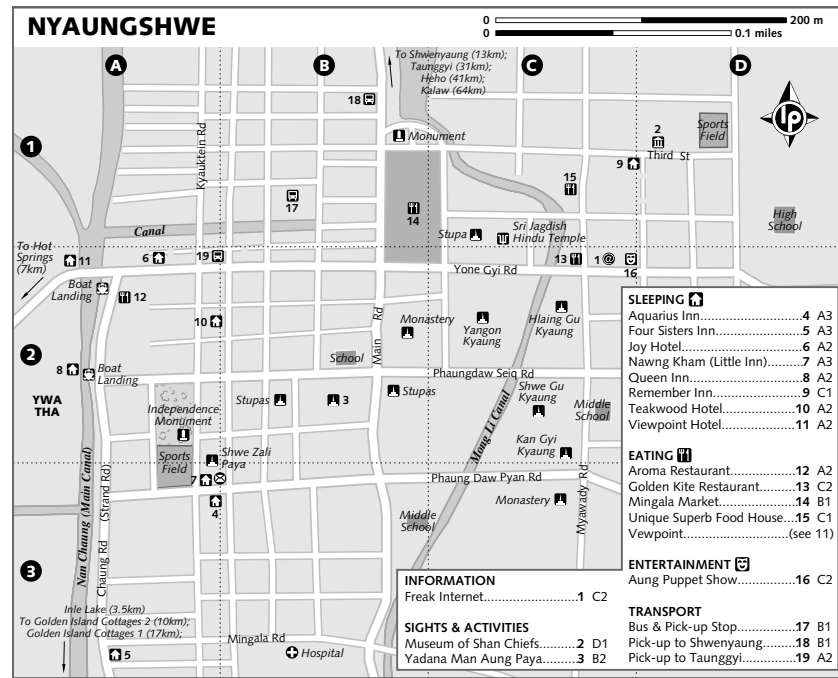
Eating & Drinking

Aroma Restaurant (Chaung Rd; dishes from K1500; ☑) Lunch & dinner) This tiny restaurant is the hole-in-the-wall relation of Aroma in Bagan and turns out the best Indian curries in town.

Golden Kite Restaurant (Yone Gyi Rd; dishes K2000-4000; ☑) breakfast, lunch & dinner) The name sounds Chinese, but the menu is Italian, including homegrown herbs, homemade pasta, imported cheese, pizzas and gnocchi.

Unique Superb Food House (3 Myawady Rd; mains K2000-4000) So modesty is not its strong point, but it's a modest-looking set-up with an extensive menu of international favourites.

Viewpoint (☎ 29250; Talk Nan Bridge; mains K2500-5000) Set in a colonial-style baroque building that beckons you in, this is the smartest restaurant in town. It promises 'Shan nouvelle cuisine' and blends European presentation with local flavours. The decoration is opulent, the drinks list extensive, but tax and service charge are an extra hit.



If you are no longer egg-cited by the hotel breakfast, head to Nyaungshwe's **Mingala market** (Main Rd) for a Shan *hkauq-sweh* (noodle soup) in the morning. Later in the day, there is a range of exotic-looking snacks available, plus luscious fresh fruits.

Entertainment

Aung Traditional Puppet Show (Yone Gyi Rd; admission K2000; ☎ 7pm & 8.30pm) This house is home to a local puppet troupe that performs nightly. It's a good deal compared with US\$8 in Mandalay.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Air Bagan (code W9; ☎ 01-513322; www.airbagan.com), **Air Mandalay** (code 6T; ☎ 01-525488; www.airmandalay.com) and **Yangon Airways** (code HK; ☎ 01-383106; www.yangonair.com) fly to Heho, 41km northwest. Guesthouses can help you arrange tickets. Flights to Yangon start at US\$75, Mandalay at US\$35. A taxi from Heho is hard to get for under US\$18. Going to the airport it should be possible to arrange something cheaper.

BUS & PICK-UP

You can catch buses leaving Taunggyi at the Shwenyaung junction: the bus to Bagan (K11,000, 12 hours) passes by at 5am; buses to Mandalay (K10,000, eight to 10 hours) go from 6pm to 8pm; and night buses to Yangon (K15,000, 16 to 20 hours) stop around noon.

Pick-ups ply these routes but take much more time. Be prepared for cold if you are travelling in January.

TAXI

Share taxis to Bagan or Mandalay (about US\$75, eight hours) are, short of flying, the quickest option.

Getting Around

Bicycles are available for about K1000 per day. Pick-ups from Shwenyaung, 13km away, to Nyaungshwe (K300) run from 6am to 6pm. Buses also come and go.

PINDAYA

☎ 081 / pop 20,000

The **Pindaya Caves** (admission US\$3) are a popular stop on the Shan State circuit. Here 8000 Buddha images form a labyrinth throughout the chambers of the caves. The condensation on

the 'perspiring Buddhas' is rubbed on the face for good luck.

Golden Cave Hotel (☎ 40227; s US\$15-25, d US\$20-30; 🏠) is the best place to stay in town, with wooden rooms, some with balcony views of the cave entrance.

From Kalaw, take a local bus to Aungban (K300) and catch another to Pindaya (K1000) – leave early and allow a full day. It's more convenient to hire a taxi from Kalaw for US\$20 to US\$25.

KALAW

☎ 081 / pop 12,000

Kalaw is earning a cool reputation among budget travellers, and it's not just due to its chilly winter weather. Located at 1320m on the rolling, pine-clad hills of the Shan Plateau, this is Myanmar's budget trekking heartland. Located to the west of beautiful Inle Lake, some travellers enjoy hiking between the two (about 45km), on mountains dotted with Pal-aung, Pa-O, Intha and Shan villages.

Activities

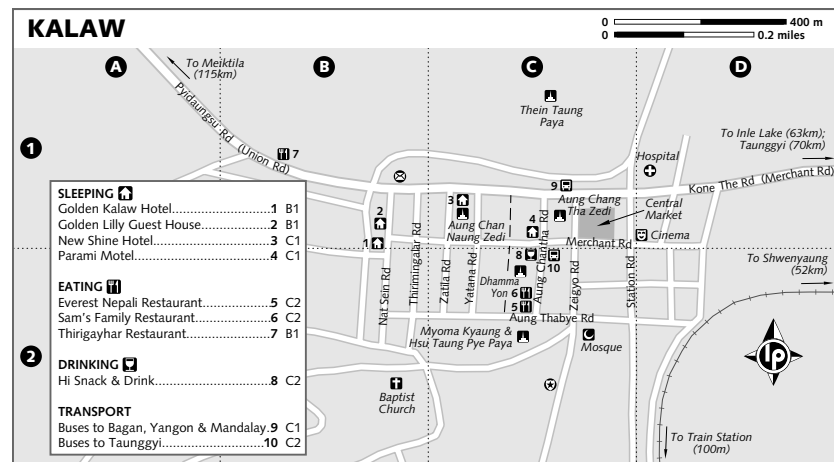
Exploring the pretty countryside on foot is the main reason to stop in Kalaw; friendly minority villages and striking scenery are the main rewards. An array of local guides can tailor individual itineraries. During high season (November to February), it can get pretty busy on the more popular routes, while in the wet season, paths get miserably muddy and few tourists head this way. Licensed guides in Kalaw charge US\$6 to US\$8 per day for **overnight treks**, a dollar less for day hikes. It's possible to stay in longhouses in mountain villages; **Viewpoint** is the mountaintop home of a Nepali family and a reliable stopping point on overnight treks.

It is possible to trek between Kalaw and Inle Lake. Guesthouses can arrange the transport of any belongings not needed on the trek. Two- or three-day treks are available and include a night in a village or a monastery. Have good shoes and warm clothing for the cool evenings.

When visiting villages, it's better to contribute cash to the monastery's *sayadaw* (head teacher) than hand out gifts of any kind.

Sleeping

All rates include a basic breakfast. Electricity in Kalaw is even more temperamental than elsewhere.



Golden Lilly Guest House (☎ 50108; goldenlilly@myanmar.com.mm; 5/88 Nat Sein Rd; s/d US\$3/6) A popular family-run place, the Golden Lilly has large, threadbare rooms with a front porch and an attached bathroom at the rear. Robin is a reliable trekking guide based here. Email is available but, like the rest of Kalaw, there's no internet.

Golden Kalaw Hotel (☎ 50311; 66 Nat Sein Rd; s/d US\$3/6, with bathroom US\$6/8) Right next door to Lilly, this old house is a rambling place with large rooms and a communal area for hanging out downstairs.

Parami Motel (☎ 50027; Merchant Rd; s US\$5-7, d US\$10-12) A large hotel near the market, the Parami Motel has cheapies with shared bathrooms, as well as some more expensive rooms (with private bathrooms) that have just been upgraded.

New Shine Hotel (☎ 50028; newshine@myanmar.com.mm; 21 Union Rd; s US\$15-20, d US\$25-30) Part of the local chain Golden Express, this is a possibility for those seeking a step up in comfort. Superior rooms are bigger with a bath, but all have satellite TV.

Eating & Drinking

Everest Nepali Restaurant (Aung Chantha Rd; dishes from K1500; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Recently relocated over the road, this is an old favourite for chapatis and curry, washed down with freshly squeezed juices.

Sam's Family Restaurant (Aung Chantha Rd; dishes from K1500) Love is in the air... The white tablecloths and candlelight here are unexpected

finds in the Kalaw backstreets. This is a reliable stop for Chinese and Bamar meals.

Thirigayhar Restaurant (Union Rd; mains from K2500; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This place sometimes draws the tour groups for Shan, Indian or Western cuisine, thanks to a homely set-up that is the most appealing in town.

Hi Snack & Drink (Aung Chantha Rd) For a dose of local nightlife, try this wooden bar that churns out beer and hosts occasional impromptu guitar concerts.

Getting There & Away

Many buses pass through Kalaw (heading towards Bagan, Yangon, Mandalay and Taunggyi), so it may be easier to stop here first, then leave the region from Inle Lake or Taunggyi to the east. Guesthouses can help with bus tickets, as can the general store next to the main bus stop in town.

Yangon-bound buses from Taunggyi pass by in the evening (K11,000, about 15 hours). It's also possible to board a bus to Bagan (K9000) or Mandalay (K8000). A bus to Shwenyaung (the Inle Lake junction) costs K4000 and takes three hours. A taxi to Meiktila is about US\$35.

There are also slow train services to Thazi (ordinary/upper class US\$3/5), Heho (US\$2/3) and Shwenyaung (US\$2/3).

Kalaw is about the same distance from Heho Airport as Nyaungshwe, so it is possible to get in or out by air. (See opposite for more on flights and taxis.) However, it is harder to find people to share with for

GETTING TO THAILAND

It is possible to cross the border from Tachilek into Mae Sai in Thailand. It's not a problem leaving from here as long as your visa hasn't expired. The road from Taunggyi to Kengtung is off limits to foreigners, but visitors can fly into Kengtung and travel onto Tachilek. Sporadic fighting in the area is a possibility.

Deary Tachilek is about three to four hours from Kengtung on a paved road. In Kengtung, check out **Harry's Trekking House** (☎ 084-21418; 132 Mai Yang Rd; r US\$3-15) for a cheap room and good trekking info. Generally, it's much cheaper going to Tachilek (by bus K5000, by Toyota 'van' K8000) than the other direction (generally US\$7 and US\$15 respectively). The border is open roughly from 6am to 6pm weekdays, and 6am to 9pm weekends.

Buses connect Mae Sai with Bangkok; other services include Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai.

See p746 for details on doing the trip in the opposite direction.

Kalaw, as most flight passengers are heading to Inle Lake. Consider negotiating at Heho village and boarding a pick-up to Kalaw (K5000) from there.

MANDALAY

☎ 02 / pop 950,000

Compared with the ancient treasures surrounding the city, Mandalay is a veritable whippersnapper at just 150 years old. Founded as capital of the Burmese empire in 1861, Mandalay saw the swansong of the last kings of Burma. The British stormed in and took over in 1885 in a one-sided conflict.

Poetic though the name may be, Mandalay is a thoroughly modern city, the second largest in the country. The dusty streets sprawl east of the Ayeyarwady and south of Mandalay Hill, a stupa-studded hill looming over the flat cityscape. It's impossible not to be impressed by the golden Buddha of Mahamuni Paya, but the real attractions lie beyond town in the nearby ancient cities.

The town continues to boom thanks to Chinese investment and, so the story goes,

GETTING INTO TOWN

Most visitors arrive at the ramshackle Highway Bus Station, 7km south of the centre. A share taxi to town is about K4000. The train station is downtown, south of the Mandalay Palace; trishaws cannot linger at the entry/exit ramps, but are nearby. The airport is a staggering 45km from the centre. A taxi to town is about US\$15, more like US\$10 if going to the airport.

from the red, green and white trades – rubies, jade and heroin. Beneath this bustling bravado, there is a more meditative side to life here, as it's home to three in five of Myanmar's Buddhist monks.

ORIENTATION

Lower numbered streets run east–west, starting from north to south. The north–south-running streets are numbered 60 and above, higher streets to the west. The main arteries include 35th and 80th Sts. The city centre, called 'downtown' by English-speaking locals, runs roughly from 21st to 35th Sts, and 80th to 88th Sts. Street addresses usually include cross streets; in Mandalay, '66th St, 26/27' means '66th St between 26th and 27th Sts'.

Look out for the free foldout Mandalay map, produced by Delta Media.

INFORMATION

Internet Access

Many guesthouses have a lone computer offering internet access for K1000 or so per hour. Other reliable places for that online fix:

Fuji Cyber Coffee House (Map p555; 78th St, 37/38; ☎ 8am–11pm) On the top floor of 78 Shopping Centre, an air-con retreat with fast terminals.

Micro-Electronics Email Service (Map p555; 83rd St, 23/24; ☎ 9am–8.30pm) Near the backpacker heartland.

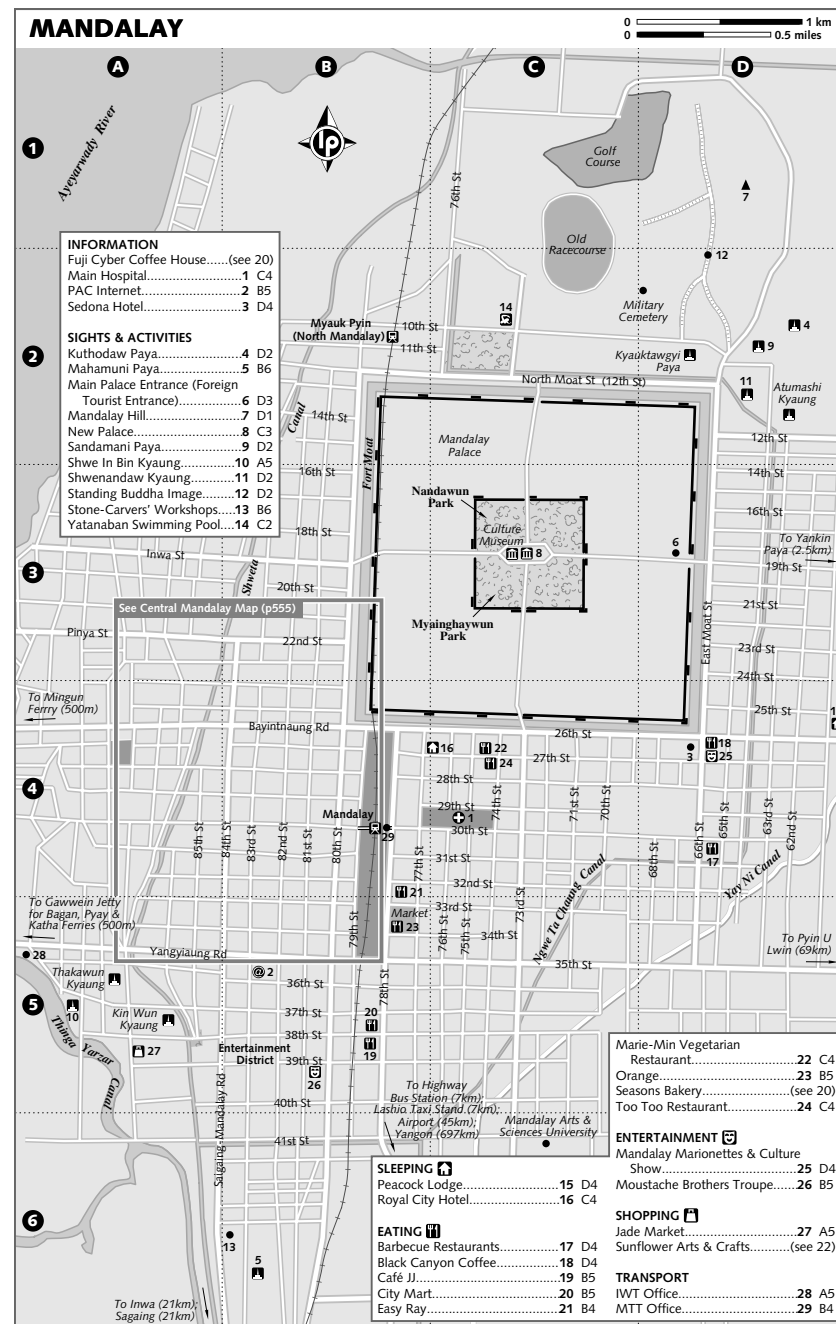
PAC Internet (Map p553; 83rd St, 35/36; ☎ 8am–8pm) Switched-on place with access to all websites and cheap internet calls.

Medical Services

Main Hospital (Map p553; 30th St, 74/77)

Money

Exchange rates in Mandalay are slightly lower than in Yangon, but better than elsewhere.



Kyaw Kyaw Aung Email (Map p555; 27th St, 80/81; ☎ 9am-6pm) Cashes travellers cheques and offers credit card cash advances at, steady yourself, a 27% commission.

Sedona Hotel (Map p553; cnr 26th & 66th Sts) This joint venture is one of the few places that accept credit cards.

Post

DHL Express office (Map p555; ☎ 39274; 22nd St, 80/81)

Main post office (Map p555; 22nd St, 80/81; ☎ 9.30am-3pm)

Telephone

Local calls can be made cheaply from street stands all over Mandalay.

Central Telephone & Telegraph (CTT; Map p555; cnr 80th & 26th Sts; ☎ 7am-8.30pm) Absurdly expensive international calls.

Tourist Information

Guesthouses and hotels are some of the most reliable sources of local information. Staff are helpful at the most popular places, plus there are other travellers to trade tips with.

SIGHTS

The government collects a flat US\$10 fee for a ticket that covers the main sights in Mandalay. They used to charge US\$3 to US\$5 *per sight*. Tickets are checked at the palace, Kuthodaw Paya, Shwenandaw Kyaung and Shwe Ta Bin Kyaung. The same ticket is also valid for Amarapura (p559) and Inwa (Ava; p560). Sometimes collection desks don't operate before 8am or after 4.30pm, and alternative entrances bypass ticket checkers. Hint hint.

Mahamuni Paya

If you only see one sight in Mandalay, go for Mahamuni (Map p553), a couple of kilometres south of downtown. Its central Buddha image – the nation's most famous – was brought from Rakhaing State in 1784, and is so highly venerated the thick gold leaf obscures its features. It may have been cast as early as the 1st century AD. Male worshipers (only) apply new layers of gold leaf daily. Every morning at 4am, a team of monks lovingly washes the image's face and the soupy run-off is bottled as holy water. Women are not permitted to approach the central altar. In the north-west corner of the surrounding pavilion are six intricate bronze **Khmer figures**, war booty that's been dragged, carted and floated from Angkor Wat via Thailand. It's worth having

small notes ready for would-be guides and palm-readers.

There are lots of new Buddha images being hewn from stone at workshops just to the west of the *paya*.

Shwe In Bin Kyaung

This elegant **monastery** (Teak Monastery; Map p553; cnr 89th & 38th Sts) between downtown and Mahamuni Paya dates from 1895, when wealthy Chinese jade merchants funded its construction. It's lovely, off the tourist trail, entry is free, and toothless monks might invite you to watch their prayers.

The surrounding area is something of a 'monk's district', with hundreds of monks walking to and fro along the leafy lanes.

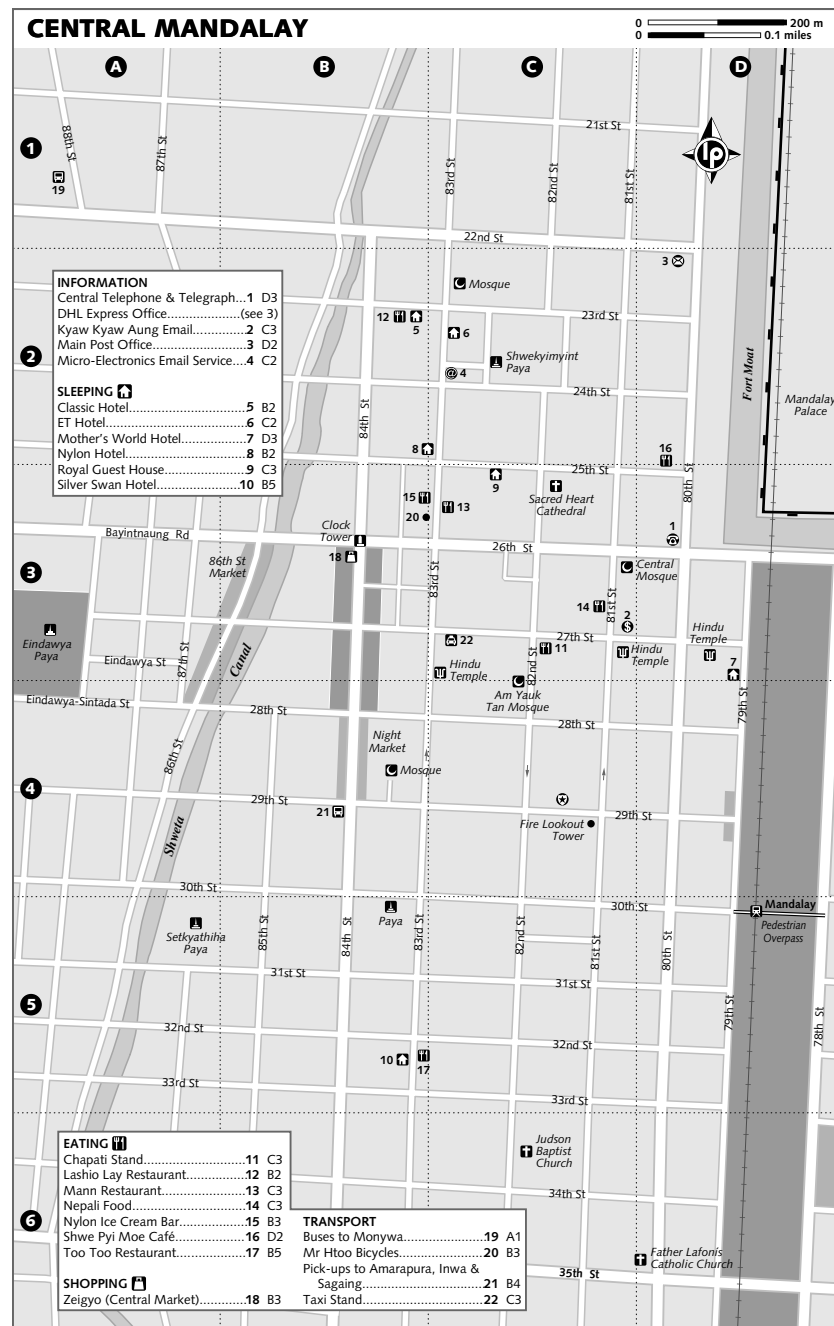
Mandalay Hill

It's a long, hot barefoot climb to the top of Mandalay Hill (Map p553), but what a view. Two hundred and thirty metres above the plain, you can rest your eyes on the Shan hills and the Ayeyarwady. The path is lined with souvenir sellers, cold-drink hawkers and astrologers. Near the top, a **standing Buddha image** points down at Mandalay, to where, legend has it, Buddha once stood and prophesied a great city would be built in the Buddhist year 2400 (the Roman equivalent of 1857), the year Mindon Min decided to move the capital here.

Tuck your shoes out of view or leave them with one of the attendants (K100). An elevator/escalator combo leads up from a halfway point reached by switchback road built by forced labour in the mid-'90s. The road now continues all the way to the top, so taxis can get here. A few gates lead up; the best is the lion-guarded one, directly south of the peak.

Heaps of pagodas draw visitors and worshippers to the south and southeast of Mandalay Hill. **Kuthodaw Paya**, aka the 'world's biggest book', draws tour buses for its 729 slabs that retell the Tripitaka canon. It's included in the US\$10 ticket (see left). Nearby, the more haggard **Sandamani Paya** has more such slabs and is free to get in.

A couple of hundred metres south, the intricately carved wooden **Shwenandaw Kyaung**, the only surviving part of the original Mandalay Palace, is worth seeing. It was moved outside the palace walls following King Mindon's death. It's also included in the US\$10 ticket.



Mandalay Palace

On the advice of their celestial advisors, the kings of old moved their palaces every generation or two. Mindon Min, one of the last kings of Myanmar, ordered the old palace in Amarapura dismantled in 1861 and relocated to this sprawling, moated complex. Thibaw Min occupied it until the Brits drove him out.

During WWII, fierce fighting between occupying Japanese forces and advancing British and Indian troops resulted in fires that burned the original to the ground.

The **new palace** (Map p553; ☎ 7.30am-5pm) was built using concrete, aluminium and forced labour. It's not exactly authentic, although there's a useful watchtower to climb. The only entry for foreigners is along the east wall; entry is included in the US\$10 ticket (p554). Most of the interior – restricted to visitors – is a leafy army barracks. Most visitors, and locals remembering the work it took to rebuild it, avoid visiting the palace at all.

You can walk along a shady **promenade** on the south wall, near downtown, to admire the original walls close up for free.

ACTIVITIES

Yatanaban Swimming Pool (Map p553; admission K200; ☎ 5am-6pm), north of the palace, is an Olympic-sized outdoor pool that's the best cheap dip in town.

SLEEPING

Most of Mandalay's budget options are concentrated in the downtown area. Many fill up by afternoon in the high season from October to March. Breakfast is included at all places.

our pick **Royal Guest House** (Map p555; ☎ 65697; 41 25th St, 82/83; s/US\$6-8, d/US\$10-15; ☎) One of the longest-running budget guesthouses in town, the staff here extend a warm welcome to all. Rooms are smaller than some, but in good shape and very clean. It's a good spot for travel information and to meet other travellers. Book ahead during the high season.

ET Hotel (Map p555; ☎ 65006; 129 83rd St, 23/24; s/d from US\$7/10; ☎) Moving towards the Shan district, this reliable spot has functional rooms with private bathroom and hot water. Downstairs there's a book swap and plenty of friendly banter.

Classic Hotel (Map p555; ☎ 32841; 59 23rd St, 83/84; s/d US\$8/15; ☎) The mighty generator outside tells you this place knows how to deal with power cuts. Reasonably smart rooms include

air-con, one or two satellite channels and private bathrooms with hot showers.

Royal City Hotel (Map p553; ☎ 31805; 130 27th St, 76/77; s/d from US\$13/20; ☎) Part of the Royal Guest House family, this is a smarter hotel for those who want some creature comforts without breaking the bank. The large rooms include air-con, TV, private bathroom and worthy views from the upper floors.

Peacock Lodge (Map p553; ☎ 33411; 5 Myayapadethar St; s/d US\$15/20; ☎) Hidden away off 61st St in the back roads of Mandalay, this place feels a world away from the bustle of downtown. There may be better-value rooms available elsewhere, but only here do the genial owners treat you like part of the family. The seven rooms have wooden floors and period furnishings. Bicycles are available.

Silver Swan Hotel (Map p555; ☎ 36333; silverswanhotel@mptmail.net.mm; 568 83rd St, 32/33; s/US\$15-20, d/US\$20-30; ☎) It looks like a slick business hotel from the outside, but lively staff here ensure there is a relaxed vibe to the place. The rooms are clean and smart, including satellite TV, minibar and a bathtub, making for one of the better midrange deals in town.

Other options in the downtown area:

Nylon Hotel (Map p555; ☎ 66550; nylon@mandalay.net.mm; cnr 25th & 83rd Sts; s/US\$5-7, d/US\$10-15; ☎) Incongruously housed above a generator shop (no excuse for power cuts!), this place has small clean rooms, all with inside bathroom.

Mother's World Hotel (Map p556; ☎ 33627; 58 79th St, 27/28; s/d US\$15/22; ☎) The location is a bit run-down, but there is nothing run-down about the smart, businesslike rooms here. No lift, so ask for a lower floor.

EATING & DRINKING

There is a lively little dining scene in Mandalay, with plenty of inexpensive Asian restaurants. However, there is definitely not a lively little night scene, particularly when you consider this is a city of almost one million inhabitants. Save your dancing shoes for Yangon.

Shwe Pyi Moe Café (Map p555; 25th St, 80/81; tea K100; ☎ breakfast & lunch) This traditional teashop is always packed to the rafters with locals mulling over life. It serves good tea and cooks up *ei-kyar-kwe* (long, deep-fried pastries) and even banana pancakes.

Chapati Stand (Map p555; cnr 27th & 82nd Sts; meals around K500; ☎ dinner) For a bargain meal with a bit of bustle, it is hard to beat this open-air stall. Veggie or meat curries come with fresh,

steaming chapatis. There's a mixed crowd: *longyi*, skullcaps, turbans and Kathmandu backpacks.

Easy Ray (Map p553; ☎ 60396; 78th St, 32/33; drinks from K500; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Spread over three floors, this is where young, cool couples come to hang out. Yes, sorry, this is as cool as it gets in Mandalay and that's only thanks to the air-con.

Marie-Min Vegetarian Restaurant (Map p553; 27th St, 74/75; dishes K600-1400; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner, closed May) Long a budget favourite, this Indian restaurant offers a wholesome range of vegetarian dishes. Chapatis are a major feature, with a range of dips and curries on the side. The delicious lassis are made with purified water. It's down a lane just off the main drag.

Too Too Restaurant (Map p553; 27th St, 74/75; meals K800; ☎ lunch & dinner) Burma's greatest culinary hits are all available here, bubbling away in saucepans each day. Catfish, prawn, chicken, veggie, the curries come in many flavours. Locals swear it's best at lunch. There's a second larger branch (Map p555; 83rd St, 32/33) opposite the Silver Swan Hotel.

our pick **Lashio Lay Restaurant** (Map p555; 65 23rd St, 83/84; dishes around K1000; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This no-frills Shan restaurant has some of the best food in town. If you don't believe us, just look at the queue of locals coming for lunch-time takeaway. Choose from about 25 or more dishes daily, all with soup, salad and rice.

Nepali Food (Map p555; 81st St, 26/27; dishes K1000; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Can't wait until Kathmandu for that curry fix, Nepal style? This place serves no meat, no alcohol and no eggs, just bargain thalis with three curries, chapati, rice and dhal.

Mann Restaurant (Map p555; 83rd St, 25/26; dishes K1000-2000; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This creaky Chinese place is showing its age, but the middle kingdom meals remain a good deal. There are usually a few travellers swilling beers; the local girls promoting Dagon Beer also serve a fair share of boozy locals.

Black Canyon Coffee (Map p553; ☎ 68123; 66th St, 26/27; coffees from K2000, meals K2000-7000; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This Thai exile is a fine spot for creative coffee kicks by day and authentic Thai dining by night. It's opposite the Sedona in a stylish town house.

Café JJ (Map p553; ☎ 66511; cnr 78th & 38th Sts; mains K2500-5000; ☎ lunch & dinner) A most unexpected oasis, this designer restaurant includes lav-

ish Burmese décor, subtle lighting and soft seating. The menu is mainly international, and there's a well-stocked bar and live music on the weekend.

Nylon Ice Cream Bar (Map p555; 173 83rd St, 25/26; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This timeless ice-cream parlour is a popular meeting place for locals on a sunny afternoon to cool off over some ice cream. Most travellers prefer to cool off with a chilled Myanmar Beer.

Barbecue Restaurants (Map p553; 30th St, 65/66; ☎ lunch & dinner) For a barbecue fix hit 30th St, where there is a strip of open-air barbecue restaurants cooking up skewers of pork, chicken, fish, veggies, spiced bean curd and lady fingers. Beer flows and the locals are friendly. A full meal with a drink costs about K5000.

Anyone planning a long boat or train journey or some trekking around Hsipaw should head to one of the better-stocked supermarkets in town for some treats. **City Mart** (Map p553; 78 Shopping Centre, 78th St, 37/38) is one of the best with lots of imported temptations. **Seasons Bakery** (Map p553; 78 Shopping Centre, 78th St, 37/38), in the same complex, offers fresh breads, cakes and savouries. Or try **Orange** (Map p553; Skywalk Shopping Centre, 78th St, 33/34), another reliable supermarket. Purchase fresh fruit from locals along the way.

ENTERTAINMENT

Mandalay Marionettes & Culture Show (Map p553; ☎ 34446; 66th St, 26/27; admission US\$8; ☎ 8.30pm) This traditional puppet show, with live musical accompaniment, includes episodes of *zat pwe* (re-creation of Buddhist tales) and *yama pwe* (tales from the Indian epic Ramayana). The show has more than doubled in price in recent years; cheaper shows (some free) are available in Bagan and Inle Lake.

SHOPPING

Crafts are a popular purchase in Mandalay. It is possible to pick up marionettes (new and old) for a few dollars, as well as *kalaga* (a traditional tapestry) and other antiques.

Sunflower Arts & Crafts (Map p553; 27th St, 74/75) Part of Marie-Min Vegetarian Restaurant includes two showrooms of old wood and bronze pieces and some anatomically correct (read dangling genitalia) puppets. Mandalay Marionettes (above) also sells puppets.

Zeigyo (Central Market; Map p555; 84th St, 26/28) Spread over two large modern buildings, this

market is packed with plenty of Myanmar-made items (including handicrafts) that spill onto the surrounding footpaths.

Jade market (Map p553; admission US\$1; ☎ 7am-5pm) Amid the 'monk district', this market features dozens of stalls and tables where locals get serious about green rocks. Beware of fakes.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

See p560 for details on pick-ups and other transport to Amarapura, Inwa, Sagaing and Mingun.

Air

Mandalay sees daily services to and from Yangon (from US\$75), Nyaung U (for Bagan; from US\$35) and Heho (for Inle Lake; from US\$35), as well as flights to Kengtung, Bhamo and Myitkyina. **Air Bagan** (code AB; ☎ 61791; www.airbagon.com), **Air Mandalay** (code 6T; ☎ 31548; www.airmandalay.com) and **Yangon Airways** (code HK; ☎ 31799; www.yangonair.com) all serve Mandalay. Domestic fares are usually slightly cheaper at travel agents.

Boat

The **IWT office** (Map p553; ☎ 36035; 35th St; ☎ 10am-2pm) has information on boats on the Ayeyarwady, including trips to Bagan (lower deck/upper deck US\$10/20, 15 hours, 5.30am Wednesday and Sunday) on the slow boat, and to Bhamo (lower deck/upper deck/cabin US\$9/24/54, two to three days, 6am Monday, Thursday and Sunday). Gawwein Jetty is a little further to the west and is the place to buy tickets. IWT boats are government-owned and operated. Express boats to Bagan had been suspended at the time of writing. However, private operator **Malikha** (☎ 72279, 09511 8357; www.malikhatravels.com) has high-speed boats to Bagan. The schedule isn't yet fixed, but it is likely to depart three times a week and will cost US\$23, double the price of upstream due to demand.

Bus

Mandalay's dusty Highway Bus Station (off Map p553) sees a mind-numbing array of daily options for transport. You can arrange

MANDALAY BUSES & FARES

Destination	Fare	Duration	Departures	Type of Bus
Bagan	K6500	8hr	9am, 2pm & 9pm	local
Meiktila	K3000	3hr	frequent	local
Taunggyi (to Inle Lake)	K11,000	10-12hr	6pm	air-con
Yangon	K15,000	12-15hr	5.30pm	air-con

tickets to Yangon at small stands downtown or check with your guesthouse on the latest, greatest company.

Buses for Monywa (K5000, four hours) leave from a small downtown station (Map p555) off 88th St. Some Monywa-bound drivers refuse to take foreigners.

Taxi

The easiest way to Pyin U Lwin (Maymyo) is via share taxi (per person about K4000, 1½ hours). Check at your guesthouse or at the **taxi stand** (Map p555; cnr 27th & 83rd Sts). The Highway Bus Station has a **Lashio taxi stand** (off Map p553; ☎ 80765) for vehicles to Hsipaw (K8000, five hours) or Lashio (K10,000, seven hours).

Train

Mandalay's enormous train station includes a government-run **MTT office** (Map p555; ☎ 22541; ☎ 9.30am-6pm), just inside the main (east) entrance. Come here for English-language information on train times, but aim to buy your tickets upstairs to avoid the MTT commission. Better still don't use the train, as it is a government operation.

At the time of research, just four trains a day were heading to Yangon (via Thazi, Taungoo and Bago). Three are inconveniently bunched together on the half-hour between 5am and 6am, while one night train departs at 10.30pm. Ordinary tickets cost US\$12 to US\$16, 1st class US\$33 to US\$38 and sleepers US\$36 to US\$44.

Trains also leave for Nyaung U (Bagan; 1st class US\$10, 10 hours) at 9pm. Three daily trains go to Myitkyina (ordinary/upper class from US\$11/30, 24 hours). One morning train goes northeast to Pyin U Lwin (US\$3/5, three hours) and Hsipaw (US\$4/7, 10 hours).

GETTING AROUND

Try not to shop with a driver, as you'll end up paying over the odds thanks to commission deals drivers work out with shop owners.

Bicycle & Motorcycle

There are several central places to rent bicycles, including **Mr Htoo Bicycles** (Map p555; 83rd St, 25/26; per day K2000; ☎ 8am-7pm). Marie-Min Vegetarian Restaurant (p557) can usually help to arrange a motorbike.

Bus

Mandalay's city buses are very crowded, particularly during the 7am to 9am and 4pm to 5pm rush hours.

Taxi

White taxis and 'blue taxis' (which are ancient Mazda pick-ups) whisk folks around Mandalay most hours. Prices are negotiable. A ride from downtown to the Bagan jetty is about K2000 or so. A full-day trip by blue taxi to nearby attractions is about K20,000.

Trishaw

Trishaws are the usual around-town transport. Count on K300 to K500 for a short ride, and K1000 for a longer one, such as Mandalay Hill to downtown. Always bargain. At night, expect rates to rise.

AROUND MANDALAY

For most visitors, the real draw of Mandalay is day-tripping to the four old cities nearby. Lesser-seen Monywa is on an interesting less-travelled route from Mandalay to Bagan via Pakokku.

AMARAPURA

The 'City of Immortality', a short-lived capital 11km south of Mandalay, is famed for **U Bein's Bridge**, the world's longest teak bridge at 1.2km. At 200 years old, the bridge sees lots of life along its 1060 teak posts, with monks and fishers commuting to and fro. It leads to **Kyauktawgyi Paya** and small **Taungthaman** village, with tea and toddy shops. A popular sunset activity is renting a **boat** (about K2000) to drift by

THE MOUSTACHE BROTHERS ARE UNDER SURVEILLANCE

Comprising Myanmar's best-known dissident comedians, the **Moustache Brothers Troupe** (Map p553; 39th St, 80/81; donation US\$5; ☎ 8.30pm) performs nightly in the brothers' simple home in Mandalay's backstreets. Officially banned from outdoor performances, the three brothers and their family have celebrated traditional Burmese folk opera for three decades. It has to be one of the smallest 'theatres' in the world and the action is an in-yr-face blend of slapstick, political satire, Myanmar history, traditional dance and music. Lu Maw's English is pretty good, but he is a wealth of idioms and slang, which can make it hard for non-native English speakers to follow. He jokes about traditional *a-nyeint pwes* (folk operas) being all-night affairs: 'Now just one hour, we rip you off, you are sitting ducks'.

The three brothers, Par Par Lay, Lu Zaw and Lu Maw have won international acclaim for their bravery in facing up to the military regime in Myanmar. Invited to perform at Aung San Suu Kyi's house in 1996, Par Par Lay and Lu Zaw were arrested by police for telling political jokes and sentenced to seven year's hard labour. Lu Maw was in Mandalay 'holding the fort' at the time. Soon the imprisoned brothers became a cause célèbre and celebrities such as Rob Reiner were petitioning for their release. Par Par Lay even got a mention in the Hugh Grant film *About a Boy*.

The brothers were released in 2002 and celebrated with some signature performances. They were then told they could no longer perform, so began to 'demonstrate' performances without costume. So the show went on, every night, deriding the government for everything from corruption to stupidity. Somehow the government seemed to leave them alone, although Lu Maw would tell the audience that the KGB is watching, as the Moustache Brothers are under surveillance. 'If they come, father gives a whistle. The performers run away and they arrest the tourists,' he laughed. Guests would look nervous, but he'd give them a reassuring wink. However, in September 2007 Par Par Lay was arrested again.

Lu Maw's wife once featured on the cover of an Italian edition of the Lonely Planet guide to Myanmar. The whole family is friendly and welcomes visitors for a chat before the show, which continues despite Par Par Lay's disappearance. We urge our readers to support their performance, as they are one of the few dissenting voices in a nation silenced by oppression.

as the skies turn orange, or watching life go by from a waterside beer station.

Just west is the **Ganayon Kyaung**, where hundreds, if not thousands of monks breakfast at 11am. Resist the temptation to thrust a camera in their faces, as some travellers do.

The highway is about 1km west of the bridge; ask the pick-up driver for directions. It's possible to cycle from Mandalay in about 45 minutes.

Amarapura is included in the Mandalay US\$10 ticket (see p554) and checks were in place during our last visit.

INWA (AVA)

Cut off by rivers and canals, Inwa (called Ava by the British) served as the Burmese capital for nearly four centuries. **Horse carts** (2 people K5000) lead a three-hour loop around Inwa's handful of sights. Beside the road, villagers till soil or bathe in ponds in an area picturesquely dotted with abandoned temples. Admission is included in the US\$10 Mandalay ticket (see p554).

The finest sight is the atmospheric and unrenovated **Bagaya Kyaung**, a teak monastery supported by 267 posts. The 27m **Nanmyin** watchtower leans precariously. Look for the breast-shaped Kaungghmudaw Paya in the distance, across the river about 10km west of Sagaing. **Maha Aungmye Bonzan** (aka Ok Kyaung) is a brick-and-stucco monastery dating from 1822.

Take a pick-up to the Inwa junction. From here it's 1km south to the water, where there are boats to Inwa.

SAGAING

Across the Ava Bridge from the Inwa junction, the stupa-studded hilltops of Sagaing loom over the Ayeyarwady. With 500 stupas and monasteries galore, Sagaing is where Burmese Buddhists come to relax and meditate – friendly monks have been known to invite visitors to stay. Travellers wanting to practise *satipatthana vipassana* like this spot too. Try the meditation centre **Kyaswa Kyaung** (☎ 072-21541; ulkyaswa@myanmar.com.mm). Sagaing is also known for **silver shops** and **guitars**.

Sagaing Hill (admission US\$3) is the big attraction. Trees hang over stone steps leading past monasteries to the top. **Tilawkgaguru** (donation K500), near the southwest base, is a mural-filled cave temple dating from 1672. There are great views above, and pathways lead all the way to the

SEEING THE ANCIENT CITIES 101

Frequent **pick-ups** (Map p555; cnr 29th & 84th Sts) leave when full from Mandalay, stopping at Amarapura (30 minutes) and the Inwa junction (40 minutes) before reaching Sagaing (45 minutes). It's K200 during the day, K400 after dark. Some shoestringers pool kyat for a 'blue taxi', which costs from K20,000 to K25,000 for a full day. Seeing the three in one day is a real rush, but can be done. Mingun is only accessible by boat (see below).

water for the adventurer. The hill is 1km north of the market. Some locals know free ways up, but the admission fee also includes Mingun.

Pick-ups leave from near the market. Sagaing is spread out. A trishaw driver can take the strain for about K4000 for half a day.

MINGUN

Up and across the Ayeyarwady from Mandalay, **Mingun** (admission US\$3) is an adventurous visit. The boat drifts peacefully for 11km, and a half dozen sights face the water, all peppered with ample opportunities for noodles, art and postcards. The **Mingun Paya** is actually the remains of a planned 150m stupa, surely a candidate for the world's largest pile of bricks. It is still possible to climb up. Just north is the **Mingun Bell**, the world's largest uncracked bell. It's worth pressing on 200m north to the white, wavy-terraced **Hsinbume Paya**. Admission to Mingun includes Sagaing.

Negotiate with private boats for a return ride for about K10,000, including some stops along the way. There is also a government-run boat (K1500, 1½ hours) that departs daily at 9am and returns at 1pm.

MONYWA

☎ 071 / pop 140,000

This scrappy trade town, 136km west of Mandalay, is missed by most visitors, but has some superb sights nearby. About 20km south, **Thanboddhay Paya** (admission US\$3; ☎ 6am-5pm) bursts with carnival shades of pink, orange, yellow and blue. Inside are over half a million Buddhas filling nooks and crannies. About 4km east of the *paya* is a Buddha frenzy in the foothills, including a 90m **reclining Buddha** and the world's second-tallest standing Buddha. The easiest way to visit is by taxi.

Across the Chindwin River and 25km west, the 492 **Hpo Win Daung Caves** (admission US\$2) occupy a mountain shaped like a reclining Buddha. There are many carved Buddhas, with streams of light beaming through holes in the walls, plus whole temples carved into the rock, giving the feeling of a mini Petra. It's best to go with a guide. To get here, catch a boat from the Monywa jetty (each way K1500), then a jeep from a jeep stand (five people one way K8000, charter return about K20,000).

The rooms at the rear of **Shwe Taung Tarn Hotel & Restaurant** (☎ 21478; 70 Station Rd; r/bungalows US\$5/8; ♿) are a pretty good deal, with wooden floors, air-con and TV. There is also a good range of Burmese food available in the restaurant.

Hourly buses leave for Mandalay (K5000, four hours) from the station, 1.5km south of the centre. For information on going the other way, see p558. Four daily buses go to Pakokku (K4000, 4½ hours) en route to Bagan. There are no passenger ferries.

PYIN U LWIN (MAYMYO)

☎ 085 / pop 80,000

This is little Britain, colonial stylée, with cooler weather than in Mandalay and wide boulevards lined with stately homes from a bygone era. Set in the foothills of northern Shan State, this former British hill town was known as Maymyo during the British era. It is easy to while away some time biking along shady avenues or sipping tea with the friendly locals. Local transport includes cute pony-led miniature wagons, straight out of the Wells Fargo days of the American West.

Domestic tourists gravitate here during the hottest months (from March to May).

Orientation & Information

For a small town, Pyin U Lwin is very spread out. The highway between Mandalay and Hsipaw doubles as the main road.

Get online opposite the bus stand at **Shwe Htay Internet** (Main Rd; ☎ 8am-9pm).

Sights

Modelled on the famous Kew Gardens of London, the **National Kandawgyi Gardens** (☎ 22130; admission K2000, camera/video K200/K1000; ☎ 8am-5pm) is a 176-hectare little Eden, with an inviting pool facing a small lake. It's a few kilometres to the west of the town centre.

In town, the **Purcell Tower**, a gift from Queen Victoria, still chimes to the tune of Big Ben. The **market** is filled with local strawberry jam and wine, plus pullover-makers leaning over old sewing machines.

The most enjoyable day trip is to the attractive **Anisakan Falls** (admission free), a 45-minute hilly trek from the village of Anisakan, itself 8km south of Pyin U Lwin. It may be easiest to go with a guide (including taxi about K20,000). Pick-ups run to Anisakan (around K500) from the main road in Pyin U Lwin.

Sleeping & Eating

The most appealing hotels are located to the south and southwest of town. All rates include breakfast. For reliable Chinese food, try the restaurants lining the side streets to the north and south of the main road.

Golden Dream Hotel (☎ 21302; 42/43 Main Rd; s US\$3-5, d US\$6-10) If you want to be in the thick of the (limited) action, this old stand-by is run by a friendly Indian family. Cheap rooms have a balcony but no bathroom.

Grace Hotel 1 (☎ 21230; 114A Nann Myaing Rd; s & d per person US\$7) The Grace is set in spacious gardens just a stroll away from the centre of town. The rooms are basic but include a bathroom.

Dahlia Motel (☎ 22255; 09-204 4153; s US\$8-15, d US\$15-25) There's a traveller vibe here thanks to the outgoing owner, a self-confessed 'rock and roll Muslim' (translation: drinks beer, eats pork sometimes). All rooms have private bathrooms and satellite TV.

Golden Triangle Café & Bakery (☎ 24288; Mandalay-Lashio Rd; sandwiches & pizzas K2000-4000; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Housed in a grand old building, this is a good bet for a snack, pastry or freshly brewed local coffee.

Getting There & Away

Pyin U Lwin has limited bus services. By far the easiest way to or from Mandalay or Hsipaw is by share taxi. A small share-taxi stand on the main road, 200m east of the clock tower, arranges taxis to Mandalay (K4000, two hours) and Hsipaw (K5500, three hours). Most go from 7am to 2pm or 3pm.

Pick-up trucks, lingering near Purcell Tower, head to Mandalay (K2000) and, less frequently, Hsipaw (K3500).

The train station is north of the main road, 1km east of the taxi stand. See p562 for more information about this famous stretch of railway.

Hsipaw

☎ 082 / pop 15,000

Hsipaw has its own time zone where the clocks tick more slowly. Travellers come to this laid-back highland town for a couple of days and before they know it a week has passed. Hsipaw is a popular base for trekking and hosts a bustling riverside market each morning.

Bawgyo Paya Pwe is held here in February/March (see p576). Technically in Shan State, the usual gateways are Pyin U Lwin and Mandalay.

Sights & Activities

The **Shan Palace** (suggested donation US\$2; ☎ 4pm-sunset), built in 1924, is home to the nephew of the last prince of Hsipaw and his wife. The gracious couple shows guests the mansion's memorabilia and tells its story, which is intertwined with that of Shan State. For more, read *Twilight over Burma: My Life as a Shan Princess*, by Austrian-American Inge Sargent. The palace is in the north part of town.

For a great sunset, walk to either **Five Buddha Hill** or **Nine Buddha Hill**. Cross the bridge on the Lashio road, walk 200m and look for a path leading to both hills.

Boat trips along the Dokhtawady can be arranged through the Mr Charles or Nam Khae Mao Guest Houses from about US\$5 per person.

Talk to **Mr Book**, who runs a bookshop on the main road and gives out hand-drawn maps of outlying-area treks. He also organises river tubing in the summer.

Sleeping & Eating

Nam Khae Mao Guest House (☎ 80088; nkmao@myanmar.com.mm; 134 Bogyoke Rd; s/d with shared bathroom US\$3/6, with private bathroom US\$6/10) Next to the clock tower, this friendly place is pretty rundown, but a fallback if Mr C is full.

Mr Charles Guest House (☎ 80105; 105 Auba St; s US\$3-6, d US\$6-15) This is one of the best-known budget places in Myanmar, and the veranda here has seen many a late-night beer session over the years. Smarter rooms are in a new annexe, which is also a bit quieter.

The market stalls offer Hsipaw's best cheap eats. **Mr Food** (Law Chun; Namtu Rd), on the main road, pulls the travellers thanks to its English-language menu and satellite TV. Across from Mr Food, **Burmese Cuisine** (Namtu Rd; curry K500) has a row of pots filled with tasty curries, including pumpkin for vegetarians.

Getting There & Away

Bus services often involve unscheduled stops, known as breakdowns. Buses leave Hsipaw at 6am for Mandalay (K5000), stopping in Pyin U Lwin. Buses also head to Lashio (K2000, two hours), 72km northeast.

Most people go by share taxi to or from Mandalay (per person K8000, four hours). Taxis to Lashio cost K3500.

The train to Pyin U Lwin crosses the Gokteik Gorge and is revered as one of Myanmar's most beautiful rides, though the carriages can rock like a horse. It's supposed to leave Hsipaw at 9.30am daily but is often late.

BAGAN (PAGAN) REGION

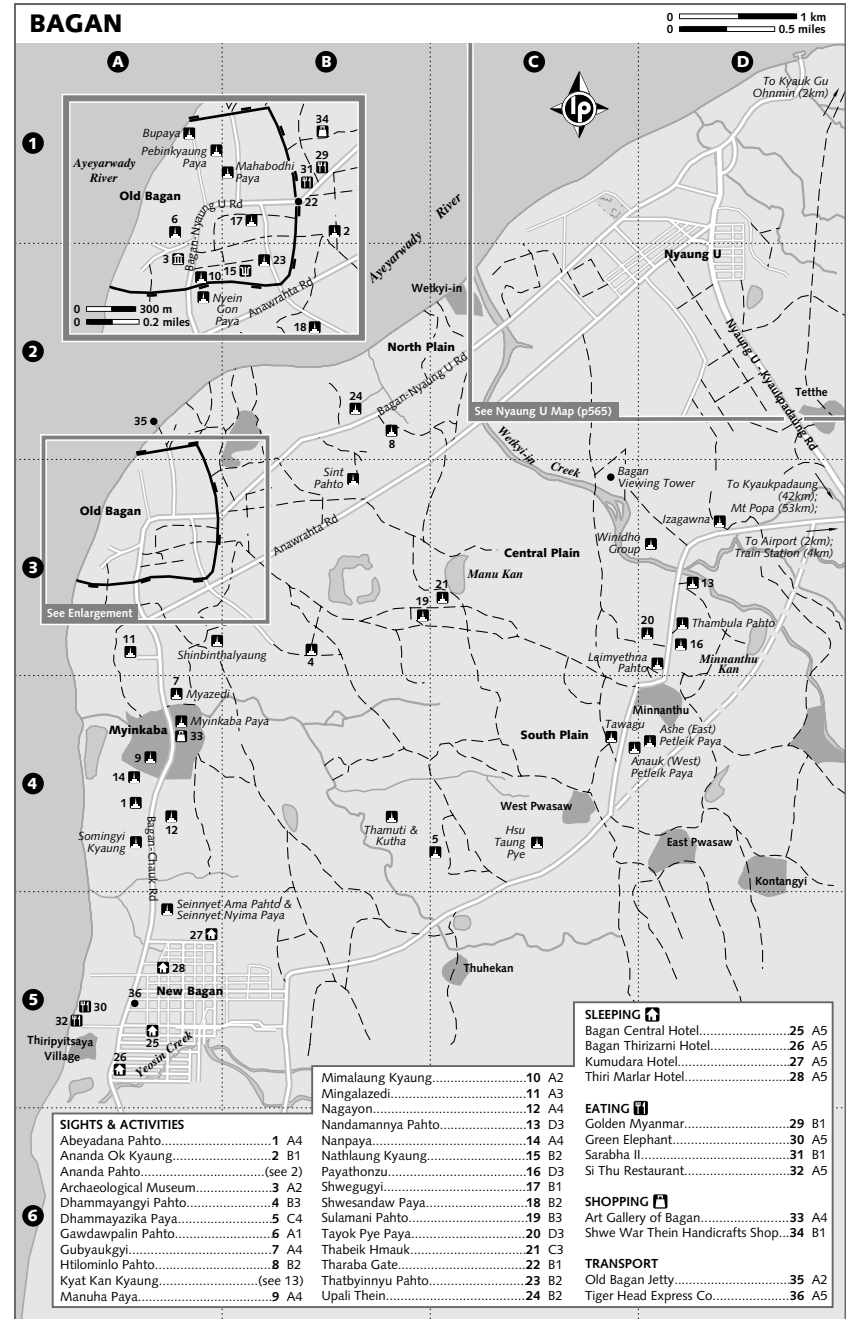
BAGAN

☎ 02 & 061

Gather all of Europe's medieval cathedrals onto Manhattan island and throw in a whole lot more for good measure, and you'll start to get a sense of the ambition of the temple-filled plain of Bagan. Rivalling the temples of Angkor for the crown of Southeast Asia's most memorable sight, the 4400 temples here date from around the same period more than 800 years ago. Angkor's individual temples may be more spectacular, but Bagan's brilliance is in the wonderful collective views of stupa upon stupa dotting the plain. High season can get very busy, while low season allows some silence and solitude, although the vendors will usually track you down eventually.

History

Bagan was born when King Anawrahta took the throne by force in 1044. He unified the country, introduced Theravada Buddhism and began building Bagan's first temple, the grand Shwezigon. The hubristic Anawrahta coveted the sacred Buddhist scriptures (the Tripitaka) held by the very Mons who enlightened him. When they refused to hand them over, he took them by force. Anawrahta was eventually killed by a wild buffalo, but his dynasty ruled for 200 years. This was Bagan's golden age, a period of manic temple building. Things began to go bad under



BAGAN TELEPHONE CODES

Are you sitting comfortably? Bagan telephone codes are a little confusing. There are two area codes: ☎ 061 and ☎ 02. Some old signs or business cards still have the borrowed Pakokku code (☎ 062), which was assigned in the rush for new telephone numbers as places opened after 2000. All old numbers that start with ☎ 062 have been switched to ☎ 02. All local numbers are five digits. To add to the fun, any old numbers that previously began with 70 changed to 67, meaning the old number ☎ 062-70999 is now ☎ 02-67999.

the decadent King Narathihapati, who built the gorgeous Mingalazedi pagoda but bankrupted the city, leaving it vulnerable to attack by Kublai Khan in 1287.

The city was crushed again in 1975, when an earthquake measuring 6.5 on the Richter scale damaged many of Bagan's principal structures.

Bagan's most recent upheaval happened in 1990, when the government forcibly relocated the residents of Old Bagan, planting them in undeveloped land 4km to the south (now known as New Bagan).

Orientation

The massive Bagan Archaeological Zone stretches 42 sq km and is home to the 'towns' of Nyaung U, Old Bagan, Myinkaba, New Bagan and a few others. Most independent travellers base themselves at Nyaung U. In the northeast corner of the zone, this town is home to the bus station, and is about 5km north of the airport and train station. Old Bagan is about 4km west, atmospherically located amid the bulk of the temples, and more expensive hotels here cater to tour groups. New Bagan is about 4km south and has some more budget and midrange options. Well-paved roads connect these centres, crisscrossed by dirt trails venturing to the temples.

In Nyaung U, 'Main Rd' is used (locally and in text) to refer to the main strip, which runs along the Bagan-Nyaung U Rd east of the bus station, and along the Anawrahta Rd from the market to the Sapada Paya. Just east of the bus station is the unnamed 'restaurant row' with a whole range of places to eat.

The Map of Bagan, found at most guesthouses, is very useful. It should be free, but sometimes costs K500 to K1000.

Information

All foreign visitors to the Bagan Archaeological Zone must pay a US\$10 entrance fee, technically lasting as long as you'd like to stay. Half of this fee is supposed to go to the Bagan Archaeology Department, but whether this actually happens or not is open to debate.

Nyaung U is home to most traveller life-support systems, including a post office and internet access.

Ever Sky Information Service (Map p565; ☎ 061-60146; Nyaung U; ☎ 7am-9.30pm) Conveniently located in restaurant row, Ever Sky can arrange cars, trips and guides, plus it has a small bookstore.

Internet Stand (Map p565; Main Rd, Nyaung U; per hr K2000; ☎ 8am-8pm) A solitary computer with access to blocked internet mail sites.

RMCG Computer Centre (Map p565; Main Rd, Nyaung U; internet per hr K2500; ☎ 7am-9pm) Computer shop that can burn digital camera shots onto CD.

Sleeping

Old Bagan's joint-venture hotels are geared to bigger wallets and as such are not covered here. Sneak a look at someone's copy of Lonely Planet's *Myanmar* guide if you feel like indulging. All prices include breakfast.

NYAUNG U

Inn Wa Ga (Map p565; ☎ 061-60902; Main Rd; s/d from US\$4/8; 🏠) A stone's throw from the market, we don't advise you test this theory. The Wa Ga was having a spring clean during our visit and has decent air-con rooms with big windows upstairs.

Eden Motel (Map p565; ☎ 061-60812; Main Rd; s US\$5-10, d US\$7-15; 🏠) The Eden is a reliable favourite with travellers thanks to large rooms with private bathroom and efficient air-con. There is a newer annexe across the road, but the original building has atmosphere.

May Kha Lar Guest House (Map p565; ☎ 061-60304; Main Rd; s US\$5-18, d US\$8-20; 🏠) A deceptively large guesthouse, there is a mind-boggling selection of rooms here, all well tended by a hospitable family. More expensive rooms are larger and include extras such as TV.

our pick New Park Hotel (Map p565; ☎ 061-60322; 4 Thiripyitsaya; s US\$6-8, d US\$10-14; 🏠) Set in a leafy compound, these bungalow-style rooms are good value, including wooden floors,

attached bathrooms and porches. The owners are friendly and informed, plus it's just a stroll to 'restaurant row'.

Golden Express Hotel (Map p565; ☎ 02-67101; geh@myanmar.com.mm; Main Rd; s US\$15-25, d US\$18-30; 🏠) The cheaper rooms here are a cheap ticket to the swimming pool (US\$3 for non-guests), which is a real draw after a hot day exploring the temples. Rooms are well-equipped with bathrooms and satellite TV. It is a couple of kilometres west of town.

Thante Hotel (Map p565; ☎ 02-67317; nyaungu.thante@mptmail.net.mm; Main Rd; s/d US\$30/35; 🏠) The Thante is a fair deal for those wanting some extra creature comforts and access to a pool. The extensive gardens are home to roomy bungalows with satellite TV, minibar and deck chairs on a small porch. Nonguests can use the pool for US\$3.

Other cheap deals:

Pann Cherry Guest House (Map p565; ☎ 061-60075; Main Rd; s US\$3-4, d US\$6-8) The rooms are small and simple, but the price is right. Close to the bus station.

Shwe Na Di (Map p565; ☎ 061-60409; Main Rd; s/d US\$4/6; 🏠) Basic rooms with a capital B; shared bathroom only.

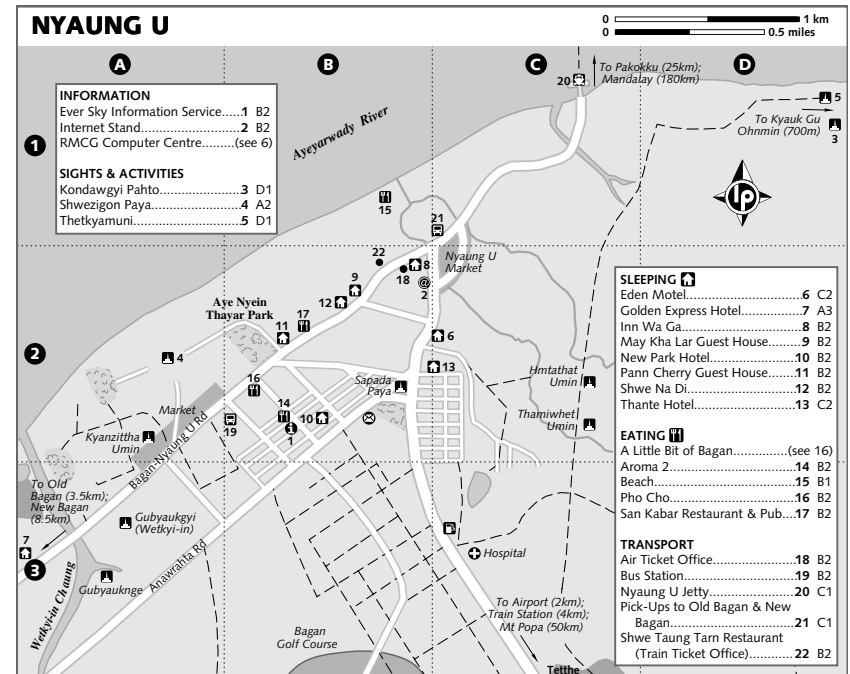
BAGAN SKYSCRAPER

Is that really what it looks like? A concrete skyscraper looming over ancient Bagan? Surely not? Unfortunately it is. Conceived by the generals and flouting all Unesco guidelines for historic sites, the **Bagan Viewing Tower** is open for business. We are sure the views are impressive from up top, but it's a real blight on the landscape and costs a hefty US\$10 to experience, so give it a miss.

NEW BAGAN

Bagan Thirizarni Hotel (Map p563; ☎ 061-60309; Main Rd; s/d from US\$10/15; 🏠) The most southerly hotel in town, this bungalow complex is great value, as all the rooms include satellite TV, fridge, telephone and bathroom.

Bagan Central Hotel (Map p563; ☎ 02-67141; Main Rd; s/d US\$15/20; 🏠) This friendly place is pretty central as far as New Bagan goes. Rooms include satellite TV, hot water and wooden floors, set around a leafy courtyard with tables for open-air breakfast.



THE TEMPLES OF BAGAN

Ancient Bagan may be one of the most spectacular sights in Southeast Asia, but with so many temples to choose from it is easy to find a solitary stupa or decaying mural to take in alone. This section groups some of the more popular (and impressive) temples in Bagan (all on Map p563, unless otherwise noted). See p569 for info on getting around.

Top Temples

With more than 4000 temples to choose from, it pays to work out in advance which are the biggest and best.

- Ananda Pahto – one of the finest, best-preserved and most revered of all the Bagan temples.
- Dhammayangyi Pahto – an absolute colossus, this red brick temple is visible from all over Bagan.
- Gawdawpalin Pahto – considered the crowning achievement of the late period.
- Shwezigon Paya (Map p565) – the original golden stupa, prototype for the Shwedagon in Yangon.
- Thatbyinnyu Pahto – the tallest temple at Bagan, topped with a golden spire.

Old Bagan

This 2km anticlockwise circuit takes in sites within the old city walls. It's manageable on foot or by bicycle.

North of the unobtrusive **Archaeological Museum** (Nyaung U-Old Bagan Rd), the 60m-high **Gawdawpalin Pahto**, one of the finest late-period temples, was rocked by the 1975 earthquake but has been restored.

About 200m south, a dirt road leads past **Mimalaung Kyaung** (note the *chintse*, a half-lion, half-guardian deity) and **Nathlaung Kyaung** (the only remaining Hindu temple at Bagan) to **Thatbyinnyu Pahto** (Omniscience Shrine). Bagan's highest temple, built in 1144, it has a square base, surrounded by diminishing terraces and rimmed with spires.

Another 200m north of the Thatbyinnyu is **Shwegugyi**, a temple dating from 1131 with lotus *sikhara* (Indian-style temple finial) atop and stucco carvings inside. Back on the main Nyaung U-Old Bagan Rd is the 9th-century **Tharaba Gate**, the former eastern entry to the walled city.

The Northern Plain

The bulk of 'Bagan' fills the broad space between Nyaung U and Old Bagan. These sites are (roughly) west to east between the two paved roads linking the two.

About half a kilometre east of Thatbyinnyu, the 52m-high **Ananda Pahto**, with its golden *sikhara* top and gilded spires, is probably Bagan's top draw. Finished in 1105, the temple has giant Buddha images facing each of the four entranceways. On the full moon of the month of Pyatho (between mid-December and mid-January), a three-day *paya* festival attracts thousands of pilgrims.

Just northwest is **Ananda Ok Kyaung**, with colourful murals detailing 18th-century life, some showing Portuguese traders.

Midway between Old Bagan and Nyaung U, **Upali Thein** features large, brightly painted murals from the early 18th century. Across the road, the location for the terraced 46m-high **Htilominlo Pahto** was picked by 1218 by King Nantaungmya, using a 'leaning umbrella'.

The Central Plain

A rural area to the south of Anawrahta Rd between Nyaung U and New Bagan, look out for goat herders when cycling around.

South of Thatbyinnyu, the 11th-century five-terraced **Shwesandaw Paya** (1057) is a graceful white pyramid-style pagoda with 360-degree views of Bagan's temples. It is packed for sunset, but it's otherwise empty during the day. Note the original *hti* lying to the south – it was toppled by the quake. Half a kilometre south, the ever-visible, walled **Dhammayangyi Pahto** has two encircling passageways, the inner one of which has been intentionally filled. It's said that King Narathu was such a bastard that the workers ruined it after his assassination in 1170. Bat calls echo down from the dark ceilings.

One kilometre to the east, the broad two-storeyed **Sulamani Pahto** (1181) is one of the Bagan region's prettiest temples, with lush grounds and carved stucco. Just 150m east, **Thabeik Hmauk** looks like a mini Sulamani, but without the hawkers – and it is possible to climb to the top.

Around Myinkaba

The area around Myinkaba village, located between Old Bagan and New Bagan, is brimming with sites. One of the most popular is **Mingalazedi** (1274), with three receding terraces lined with 561 glazed tiles and tasty views of the nearby river and surrounding temples.

Just north of town, **Gubyaukgyi** (1113) sees a lot of visitors thanks to its richly coloured interior paintings. You should bring a torch (flashlight). In the village, the modern-looking **Manuha Paya** (1059) was built by the captive Mon king. Note the four giant Buddha images that are seemingly too large for the enclosure, symbolic of Manuha's discontent with his prison life. Stairs at the rear lead above the reclining Buddha. Just south, **Nanpaya**, from the same era, is a cave-style shrine; it was possibly once Hindu as suggested by the three-faced Brahma on the pillars.

About 400m south of town, the Sinhalese-style stupa of the 11th century, **Abeyadana Pahto**, was likely built by King Kyanzitha's Bengali wife and features original frescoes. Across the road, **Nagayon** has some tight stairs leading up to the roof. Its lotus-shaped *sikhara* was possibly a prototype for Ananda.

South Plain

This rural stretch is accessed via the road from New Bagan to the airport, or by dirt roads from the Central Plain. About 3.5km east of New Bagan, **Dhammayazika Paya** (1196) is unusual for its five-sided design. It's very well tended with lush grounds and lavish attention from worshippers. A dirt road leads 2km to Dhammayangyi.

An excellent cluster of sites is about 3km east. North of the road, **Tayok Pye Paya** has good westward views of Bagan. To the south, 13th-century **Payathonzu**, a small complex of three interconnected shrines, draws visitors to its murals.

About 200m north, **Nandamannya Pahto**, from the same period, features the 'temptation of Mura' murals – in the form of topless women reaping no response from a meditating Buddha. It's often locked; ask at Payathonzu for the 'key master'. Just behind, the **Kyat Kan Kyaung** has been a cave-style monastery for nearly one thousand years.

Around Nyaung U

In town, the gilded bell of **Shwezigon Paya** (1102; Map p565) is considered by many to be the prototype for many Burmese pagodas. The 37 pre-Buddhist *nat* were endorsed by the Bamar monarchy here. A yellow compound located on the east side (called '37 Nats' in English) features figures of each.

From the Nyaung U jetty, it is possible to arrange a fun boat trip (about K5000 or so) to see temples just off the Ayeyarwady: **Thetkyamuni** and **Kondawgyi Pahto** are about 1km east. **Kyauk Gu Ohmin** cave temple, dating back a thousand years, was supposedly the start of a tunnel intended to go 18km – only 50m is accessible nowadays.

Thiri Marlar Hotel (Map p563; ☎ 02-67370; thirimarlar@mptmail.net.mm; s/d US\$20/25; 🍴) Worth the extra dollars, this quiet retreat has 21 smart rooms facing a leafy courtyard. Book ahead in the high season, as it fills up fast. There is a bar and breakfast area up top.

Kumudara Hotel (Map p563; ☎ 02-67080; www.kumudara-bagan.com; s/d US\$36/45; 🍴 📺 📶) Head here for the best views in Bagan. Rooms at the Kumudara have balconies offering an unobscured panorama of the soaring temples, and include satellite TV, minibar, IDD phone and a big bathroom. As well as the pool with a view, guests enjoy free internet access.

Eating

NYAUNG U

This is the dining capital of Bagan and there are plenty of restaurants along the main street and the famous 'restaurant row'. Italianesque food is popular at most places, but there's also an Asian assortment of Burmese, Chinese, Thai and Indian available.

Pho Cho (Map p565; restaurant row; mains from K1500; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Also confusingly known as Puppet, this place has some pretty tasty Thai food, although Bangkok regulars won't find it 100% authentic.

our pick Aroma 2 (Map p565; restaurant row; dishes K2000-4000; 🍴 lunch & dinner) This is the best Indian restaurant in town offering a spicy selection of classics that will keep even curry-craving Brits happy. There is a large garden area that overflows with candlelit tables in the dry season.

San Kabar Restaurant & Pub (Map p565; Main Rd; pastas K2000-4000, pizzas K3000-4000; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) The birthplace of Bagan pizza, the San Kabar remains a popular stop for its Italian-inspired creations. Like Aroma, the candlelit courtyard is a major draw in the dry season.

A Little Bit of Bagan (Map p565; restaurant row; dishes K2000-5000; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Another fixture in restaurant row, this place is slightly pricier, but more atmospheric than most. The menu includes Burmese, Indian and Italian, plus there is internet access available.

Beach (Map p565; ☎ 02-67370; dishes K3000-7000; 🍴 7am-11pm) An impressive new restaurant overlooking the Ayeyarwady, the Beach is set in a striking pavilion surrounded by lush gardens. The menu includes flavours from Europe and the East, plus there is a happy hour from 4pm to 6pm, the perfect excuse for a sundowner.

OLD BAGAN

By day, Old Bagan's eateries are the closest spots to the heart of the temples.

Sarabha II (Map p563; dishes K1200-6000; 🍴 lunch & dinner) The quieter of the two Sarabha restaurants, this has a leafy garden and plenty of tables. The prices reflect the target audience of tour groups, but the menu includes something from every corner of the globe.

Golden Myanmar (Map p563; buffet K2000; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Come here hungry, as the 'personal buffet', delivered to your table, is enough to feed a family. Four curries come with 10 or more bowls of local condiments. Invite your horse cart driver along to help.

NEW BAGAN

The cheapest eats are the hole-in-the-wall Burmese places along the main drag. There are several large riverside restaurants in New Bagan, with fine views, nightly puppet shows and busloads of tourists in peak season.

Green Elephant (Map p563; mains K3000-6000; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Part of a countrywide empire, this has a delightful garden for intimate dining.

Si Thu Restaurant (Map p563; mains K3000-6000; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Puppet show at 7.30pm every night.

Shopping

Shwe War Thein Handicrafts Shop (Map p563; ☎ 061-67032; dsavariau@mptmail.net.mm; 🍴 7am-9pm) This shop, just east of Tharabar Gate in Old Bagan, is a treasure trove of Myanmar trinkets.

The town of Myinkaba is the lacquerware epicentre of Myanmar. Several family-run workshops sell traditional pieces, which are better quality than offerings from hawkers around temples. One reliable place is **Art Gallery of Bagan** (Map p563; ☎ 061-60307).

Getting There & Away

Most travel services operate out of Nyaung U. Ask at Ever Sky (p564) or your guesthouse about hiring a share taxi. A charter to Inle is about US\$90 or so, Mandalay US\$60.

AIR

Regular services connect Bagan with Yangon (from US\$75), Mandalay (from US\$35) and Heho (from US\$55). There is an **air ticket office** (Map p565; ☎ 02-67406; 🍴 9am-5pm) on the main road in Nyaung U that sells domestic tickets. **Air Bagan** (code AB; ☎ 061-60588; www.airbagan.com), **Yangon Airways** (code HK; ☎ 061-60476; www.yangonair

.com) and **Air Mandalay** (code 6T; ☎ 061-60240; www.airmandalay.com) fly into Bagan.

BOAT

The Shwe Keinnery Express ferry leaves from Bagan for Mandalay at 5.30am (US\$16, 12 hours, five times weekly), but it wasn't operating at the time of writing. More visitors opt to drift downriver from Mandalay. The slow boat to Mandalay (ordinary/upper class US\$10/20) departs on Monday and Thursday at 5.30am. There are also services to Pyay (US\$10, two nights). Bear in mind that all these options are government owned and operated. **Malikha Express** (www.malikhatravels.com) was launching services to Mandalay (upstream US\$12, seven hours). The schedule isn't yet fixed, but it's likely to run three days a week. Most boats leave from the Nyaung U jetty (Map p565), a kilometre northeast of the market; some operate from Old Bagan (Map p563), depending on the tide and time of year.

From the Nyaung U jetty local ferries go to Pakokku (K1500, 2½ hours), where there are buses to Monywa.

BUS

Local buses to Mandalay (K6500, eight hours), via Meiktila, leave at 7am and 9am from the bus station in Nyaung U (Map p565). Here you can catch a 3pm air-con bus to Yangon (K7500 to K12,000, 12 to 15 hours) or a 5am bus to Taunggyi (K11,000, about 12 hours). Book tickets well in advance in peak season.

PICK-UP

Tiger Head Express Co (Map p563) sends daily pick-ups from New Bagan to Taunggyi (inside/outside K10,000/8000, 10 hours) via Kalaw at 3am. Pick-ups to Mt Popa leave from the Nyaung U bus station.

TRAIN

There is one morning train to Mandalay (ordinary/1st class US\$4/9, nine hours) at 7am. Services to Yangon were not operating at the time of writing, but it is possible to take a train to Pyinmana (US\$5/10, 10 hours) and connect from there. The train station is 4km southeast of Nyaung U. More convenient for buying tickets is the train station office in Nyaung U, part of the **Shwe Taung Tarn Restaurant** (Map p565; Main Rd).

Getting Around

Bicycles are a leisurely way to see Bagan. The going rate is K1000 per day in Nyaung U, double that in New Bagan. Carry water though, as some temples don't have vendors.

A horse cart isn't a bad way to get to grips with Bagan on day one. It's K10,000 for the whole day, but there is only really sufficient space for two people. Try and arrange one with a foam cushion, as it can get pretty uncomfortable after a few hours.

A pick-up runs between Nyaung U and New Bagan, stopping in Old Bagan and Myinkaba. A ride costs K300. A taxi for the day costs about US\$20 to US\$25.

A taxi from the airport costs K5000/6000/7000 to Nyaung U/Old Bagan/New Bagan.

AROUND BAGAN

Mt Popa

The Mt Olympus of Myanmar, Mt Popa is the stupa-studded centre of *nat* worship in the country. This 1520m-high monastery-topped hill is visible from Bagan on a clear day – look to the right end of the mountains to the west – and offers breathtaking views of the plain. The 30-minute climb up goes past monkeys and many pilgrims, including the slow-stepping nonordained hermit monks called *yeti*. The **Mahagiri shrine**, at the foot of the mountain, features a display of the 37 *nat*. Festivals include the full moon of **Nayon** (May/June) and **Nadaw** (November/December). It's possible to swim at the summit at the upmarket **Popa Mountain Resort** (☎ 02-69168; s/d from US\$70/80; 🍴) for US\$5.

The Popa trip up is only worth it if you have at least two full days for Bagan itself. It's possible to visit by pick-up from Nyaung U (about K1000), often with a change in Kyaukpadaung. Far easier is getting a slot in a share taxi for US\$7 per person. Ask the driver to point out remnants of the petrified forest along the way.

Meiktila & Thazi

If you find yourself in Meiktila while travelling the Bagan-to-Inle corridor, the **Money Hotel** (☎ 064-21588; Pan Chan St; s US\$5-10, d US\$8-15; 🍴) is a converted mansion on the shores of Lake Meiktila.

Thazi, the rail junction, is home to the basic **Moon-Light Rest House** (r from US\$3; 🍴).

MUST READ

Finding George Orwell in Burma (2006) sees US journalist Emma Larkin following in the footsteps of the famous novelist. A great read, but sadly what she discovers is more *Animal Farm* than *Burmese Days*.

Pakokku

An alternative route between Bagan and Monywa goes by this slow-paced authentic town on the west bank of the Ayeyarwady. Stay at **Mya Yatanar Inn** (☎ 062-21457; 75 Lanmataw St; r per person K4000), a downtown mansion on the water run by a priceless old couple who have been taking travellers in for more than 20 years. Bicycles and motorbikes are available for rent.

UPPER AYEYARWADY

Drifting down the Ayeyarwady, through jungle-clad gorges and past friendly villagers for whom the river and its traffic are a life-line to the outside world, is one of the most memorable experiences in Myanmar. The best of the action is way north of Mandalay in Kachin State. Most travellers fly north or take the train to Myitkyina or Bhamo before going with the flow and enjoying life in the slow lane.

Much of the area away from the river is closed to foreigners.

MYITKYINA

☎ 074 / pop 140,000

This is the end of the line as far as overland travel in the north goes. The Kachin capital of Myitkyina is a popular embarkation point for a river trip south. It is also a low-key trekking centre for visits to nearby Kachin villages. Rice grown here is considered Myanmar's best.

Snowland Tours (☎ 23498; snowland@mptmail.com.mm; ☹ closed Sun) has a local office in town and can help with trekking tours to Kachin villages.

Several Buddhist sites are in the area, though many locals are Christian. The modest **Kachin State Culture Museum** (Youngyi Rd; admission US\$2; ☹ 10am-3pm Tue-Sun) is 3km from the centre.

The **YMCA** (☎ 23010; mka-ymca@myanmar.com.mm; 12 Myothit Rd; s US\$6-10, d US\$10-14; ☹ ☎) is the most traveller-friendly place in town. The Y has basic rooms, but staff are pretty switched on when it comes to the local area. Internet access is, like the pace of life, slow.

Air Bagan (code W9; ☎ 01-513322; www.airbagan.com) and government-run **Myanma Airways** (MA, code UB; ☎ 01-374874) connect Myitkyina and Mandalay (US\$70).

Foreigners are not supposed to travel on the fast boats to Bhamo (US\$10, seven hours), but it's worth checking the latest. Pick-ups on the 188km road between Bhamo and Myitkyina leave from near the Y at 8.30am. Have passport copies ready for checkpoints.

A blanket is mandatory for nights on the train to and from Mandalay (1st-class/sleeper from US\$31/36, 25 to 50 hours).

A shop behind the Y can rent motorcycles for K7000 per day.

BHAMO

☎ 074 / pop 20,000

More of a charmer than Myitkyina, the riverside town of Bhamo has a bustling daily market, drawing Lisu, Kachin and Shan folk from surrounding villages. The ruinous old Shan city walls of **Sampanago** are located 3km north of town. Interesting **Kachin villages** lie within reach.

Check out the **homemade helicopter**, made by Sein Win, who was inspired by James Bond movies. Ask about it at the **Friendship Hotel** (☎ 50095; yonekyi@baganmail.net.mm; per person with shared bathroom US\$7, s/d with private bathroom US\$20/25; ☹), one of the better provincial pads, with satellite TV and minibar in the top rooms.

Deck/cabin on the ferry to Mandalay costs US\$9/54. The trip takes 1½ days. Fast boats to Katha (ordinary/1st class K5000/15,000, six to seven hours) are exceptional value.

KATHA

Fans of George Orwell's *Burmese Days* will enjoy foraging around this sleepy town. Eric Blair (his real name) was stationed here in 1926-27 and based his novel on this setting. The old **British Club**, around which much of the novel revolves, is now an agricultural co-op. The tennis court mentioned in the novel is still used.

Ask for a front-facing room upstairs to catch some river views at the basic **Ayeyarwady Guest House** (Strand Rd; r K3000-5000).

The ferry south to Mandalay (deck/cabin US\$7/42, around 24 hours) goes three times weekly. It's also possible to take a bus to Mandalay (K8000, 12 hours). The nearest train station is 25km west at Naba (US\$1, one hour).

WESTERN MYANMAR

Western Myanmar, home to the proud Rakhing people, is a land unto itself. Isolated and inaccessible from the rest of the country, this enigmatic region is in many ways closer to Bangladesh than Burma. Sittwe is only accessible by air or water and 'baby Bagan', the atmospheric temple city of Mrauk U, is reached by a boat ride inland.

The Rakhing people, dubbed 'Burmese' by the government, love their own language and culture. The Mahumuni Buddha remains a sensitive subject and locals love to tell the story of how it was stolen by the Burmese and moved to Mandalay in 1784.

The Muslim population, known as the Rohingya, is frequently in conflict with the Buddhist majority, as the Rohingya have been heavily persecuted by the government. The government doesn't recognise them as citizens, and many have escaped across the border to Bangladesh as refugees.

See p540 for information on Ngapali Beach, which is in southern Rakhing State.

SITTWE (AYKAB)

☎ 043 / pop 200,000

Used as a hub for visiting the temples of Mrauk U, Sittwe has a striking waterfront location. The population is about 30% Muslim, with the central Jama Mosque the most historic and impressive religious site in town.

Information

Internet stand (Main Rd; per hr K3000; ☹ 8am-9pm) One of the few internet places in town; it's slow.

Sights

A busy port town for generations, Sittwe's main attractions are found where the wide Kaladan River kisses the Bay of Bengal. The morning **fish market** kicks off at 6am, with

thousands of fish splashed on the stone pier. About 2km south, via the Strand, is the **Point**, a peninsula boasting big sunset views.

Back in the centre, the **Rakhing State Cultural Museum** (Main Rd; admission US\$2; ☹ 10am-4pm Tue-Sat) features a Mrauk U model, many artefacts of the era, and watercolours of traditional wrestling moves.

A couple of hundred metres north of the centre, the **Maka Kuthala Kyaungdawgyi** (Large Monastery of Great Merit; Main Rd; admission free) features an interesting collection of relics in an old British colonial-era mansion.

Sleeping & Eating

Electricity is erratic at best. Try some Rakhing specialities, which involve seafood and spice, for the best dining.

Sittwe Prince Hotel (☎ 24075; www.mraukuprincehotel.com; 27 Main Rd; s US\$10-25, d US\$15-30; ☹ ☎) The most traveller-friendly hotel, cheaper rooms here are small and have shared bathrooms. Air-con is available in the more expensive rooms.

Noble Hotel (☎ 23558; 45 Main Rd; noble@myanmar.com.mm; s/d with breakfast US\$25/35; ☹ ☎) These smart rooms are reasonable value, including 24-hour air-con and satellite TV.

Mondi stand (bowls K300; ☹ breakfast & lunch) *Mondi* is the tasty local variant of Burmese *mohinga*, with chillies instead of peanuts. Locals swear this place has the best in town. It's opposite City Hall on the airport road.

Nyein Chan (Set Yone Su St; dishes K1500-3000; ☹ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Near City Hall lies a good strip of family-style Burmese/Chinese restaurants, including this place with a steaming, prawn-filled Rakhing curry soup.

City Point Music Restaurant (The Strand; dishes K2000-4000; ☹ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The best of the riverfront restaurants, there is a one-man band here by night.

Getting There & Away

Foreigners cannot travel by road to Sittwe.

AIR

Air Mandalay (code 6T; ☎ 21638; www.airmandalay.com) and **Yangon Airways** (code HK; ☎ 24102; www.yangonair.com) fly to Yangon (from US\$82) via Thandwe (from US\$46) most days, although there are just two flights a week in the low season. The airport is 2.5km southwest of the centre; head outside the gate to get a cheap ride into town.

BOAT

Malikha Express (☎ 23441; www.malikhatravels.com; Main Rd; (☎) 9am-5pm) has connections from Sittwe to Mrauk U and Taunggok, from where you can reach Ngapali or Yangon. Fast boats head between Taunggok and Sittwe (US\$40, eight hours) on Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday, connecting with fast boats to/from Mrauk U. From Taunggok, buses or pick-ups go to Pyay or Thandwe (Ngapali). Buy tickets in advance.

See opposite for information on boat services to and from Mrauk U.

MRAUK U (MYOHAUNG)

☎ 043 / pop 25,000

Like Bagan to the east, the Rakhaing kings of Mrauk U (mrauk-oo) went on a merry old building spree in this ancient capital, home to more than 150 temples. Accessible via a pretty 65km boat ride northeast from Sittwe, Mrauk U is smaller than Bagan but more alive. Shepherds lead their flocks past curvy hillocks dotted with temples, and smouldering fires add a mysterious haze to the timeless setting. A huge **pagoda festival** is held in mid-May.

Mrauk U served as the Rakhaing capital from 1430 to 1784, when the Brits relocated it to Sittwe. It was a fine time, with the kings hiring Japanese samurais as bodyguards and the naval fleet of 10,000 boats terrorising neighbouring countries from the Bay of Bengal.

It's worth reading up. Tun Shwe Khine's *A Guide to Mrauk U* or U Shwe Zan's *The Golden Mrauk U: An Ancient Capital of Rakhine* are only available in Yangon.

Sights

The more than 150 temples blend into the small town over a 7-sq-km area. Foreigners pay US\$10 to visit, plus a K1000 'donation' for tacky fluorescent lights in some temples. Payment can be made at the Shittaung temple.

PALACE SITE & AROUND

Apart from crumbling walls, little is left of the central palace, located just east of the market. Apparently astrologers advised King Minbun to move his home here in 1429 to shun 'evil birds' at his Launggret palace. Inside the

CHIN STATE EXCURSIONS

Excursions to inland Chin State from Mrauk U have been on and off in the last few years. Currently, day trips are once again possible, but not overnight trips, although the situation will no doubt change again during the lifetime of this book. The cost is about US\$85 including boat, vehicle, lunch and visit and this can be shared by three people. This is a bargain compared with the US\$550-and-up tours run by MTT out of Bagan. The trips take in a traditional Chin village where older women still have weblike tattoos on their faces.

western walls, the Department of Archaeology's **museum** (admission free; (☎) 11am-3pm Mon-Fri) has prerestoration photos, a site model and a replica of the Shittaung pillar.

On a hill just north, the 18th-century **Hari-daung** pagoda has nice westward views.

NORTH GROUP

The main sites of Mrauk U are clustered beyond the **Shittaung** (Shrine of the 80,000 Images), the most intricate of the surviving temples. Built in 1535, the pagoda has a maze-like floor plan. An outer chamber, accessible via the far left door at the entry hall to the east side, passes 1000 sculptures; the inner chamber coils to a dead end, passing a 'Buddha footprint' on the way. On the outer walls, there are some rather pornographic renderings of local figures.

Just north is the 16th-century **Andaw Paya**, and beyond is the **Ratanabon Paya**, a stupa dating from 1612 that survived a WWII bomb.

Across the road west from Shittaung, the bunkerlike **Dukkkanthein Paya** (1571), set amid a green field, is the most impressive of the batch: look for Mrauk U's 64 traditional hairstyles on sculptures on the coiling path leading to a sun-drenched Buddha in the inner chamber.

Further north of Ratanabon, hilltop **Mahabodhi Shwegu** (1448) features 280 *jakata* (stories of the Buddha's past lives) on its narrow entry walls. About 200m north, the compact and ornate **Pitaka Taik** (1591) is the last remaining library at Mrauk U.

EAST GROUP

East of the palace walls, the temples are spaced further apart and some temples

stand on hilltops with good vantage points. One of Mrauk U's highlights is located 2km east. The massive **Kothaung Temple** (Shrine of the 90,000 Images) was named by King Minbun's son to beat daddy's 80,000 images at Shittaung. The outer passageway is lined with thousands of evocative bas-reliefs of Buddha images.

SOUTH GROUP

Tucked away in the lively village back lanes, this area has a number of pagodas. Mrauk U's best view is at the **Shwetaung Paya** (Golden Hill Pagoda; 1553), which is southeast of the palace. Trails disappear into vegetation at times, so it is best to return before dark. A guide might be useful. Views of the Chin Hills and the river to the west justify the scrapes.

To the south, **Laksaykan Gate** leads to the eponymous lake, a water source.

Sleeping & Eating

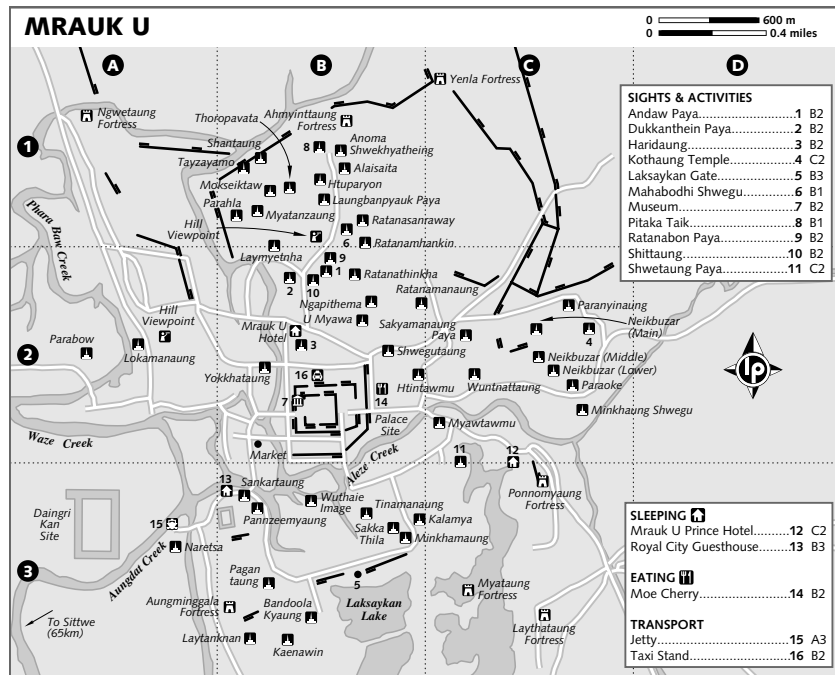
Royal City Guesthouse (☎ 23808-19; d US\$8-12, bungalows US\$15) The closest accommodation to the jetty, this amiable riverside guesthouse has small rooms with mozzie nets. Shared bathrooms are open air – that's basic rather than Balinese-style.

Mrauk U Prince Hotel (☎ 24200; www.mraukprincehotel.com; s US\$10-25, d US\$15-30) Rooms here are finished in bamboo and include a private bathroom with hot water on request. Helpful staff give away free maps of the temples.

Moe Cherry (dishes K1500-3000; (☎) lunch & dinner) The most popular place in town with travellers, the Moe Cherry has a range of local Rakhaing-style curries and some good veggie options. The restaurant is also a good place to ask about car rental or boat information.

Getting There & Around

The only way to Mrauk U is by boat. The two-tier government-run IWT runs to Mrauk U from Sittwe (US\$4, six to seven hours), leaving three mornings a week from a jetty 1km north of Sittwe's centre. Other days you can catch a small 'private boat' (US\$10 to US\$15, four to five hours) at 7am or 2.30pm. Private boat charter is possible for small groups and starts from about US\$80 to US\$100, including waiting in Mrauk U. **Malikha** (☎ 23159; www.malikhatravels.com) runs enclosed 'fast boats' (US\$20, three hours), leaving at 2.30pm. In the other



direction, boats usually leave Mrauk U at 8am from the jetty, 1km south of the market, but double-check with your guesthouse or hotel.

In late 2004, seven people, including five Italian tourists, were killed when an unexpected storm overturned a fast boat after dark.

A horse cart around the temples is about K10,000 per day. Bicycle rental is about K2000 per day. The taxi stand (for jeeps) is on the north side of the palace.

MYANMAR DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Hotels and guesthouses are a touch more expensive in Myanmar than in neighbouring countries. In places with choice, it is possible to find a plain room for a fistful of dollars (US\$4 to US\$6 per person). Don't expect much more than concrete floors, squashed mosquitoes on the walls and a shared bathroom down the hall, but a basic breakfast might be included. For a few dollars more, extras will include air-con, hot water and even TV. Unless stated otherwise, prices in this chapter include private bathroom.

Nearly all hotels and guesthouses quote prices in US dollars. Most accept kyat at a slightly disadvantageous rate. Prices listed in this chapter are for peak season, roughly October to March. Small discounts may be available in the low season; don't be afraid to haggle gently if planning a longer stay.

GOVERNMENT HOTELS

The big question many travellers ask themselves in Myanmar is how to avoid government-run hotels? Government officials have their fingers in the pockets of top-end and joint-venture hotels, but rarely bother with small-time guesthouses. Full-on government hotels are often named after the destination (eg Mrauk U Hotel in Mrauk U) and fly the national flag outside. Generally 10% of what you spend at any guesthouse goes to the government. The less your room costs, the less the government gets its hands on.

All accommodation supposedly must be licensed to accept foreign guests. Passport and visa details are required at check-in, but hotels don't need to hold onto your passport. Sometimes unlicensed guesthouses will say they're 'full' rather than explain the full story. In out-of-the-way towns, some local guesthouses will accept weary travellers. Prices are about US\$2 (in kyat) and conditions are basic.

ACTIVITIES

Barefoot pilgrimages up pagoda-topped hills (such as Mandalay Hill) or biking around town are the most common activities, but there are some other options for the adventurous traveller.

Cycling

With your own bike and spare parts, Myanmar's highways are there to be conquered. Popular stretches include Mandalay to Bagan, via Myingyan, or the hilly terrain from Mandalay to Hsipaw. Roads are actually smoother than in some other Southeast Asian countries. The brutal hot season may deflate even the most committed pedal pusher.

Diving & Snorkelling

Unfortunately, there's not much underwater action available in Myanmar for the budget traveller. You can snorkel past colourful fish and some coral off Ngapali Beach or Chaungtha Beach. The more spectacular Myeik Archipelago, near Kawthoung, is generally only accessible via expensive live-aboard cruises operating out of Thailand (see p787).

Trekking

Treks between Kalaw and Inle Lake (see p550) take in an overnight stay in a longhouse. Other inspiring hikes are available around Hsipaw. Winter nights can get chilly so bring some warm clothes. Avoid the wet season, as heavy rain makes for slippery trails.

BOOKS

Even more than with most countries, it's worth to read up before arriving in Myanmar. Pick up Lonely Planet's *Myanmar* for more comprehensive coverage, or the helpful *Burmese Phrasebook*.

Other top books:

- *From the Land of Green Ghosts: A Burmese Odyssey* (2002) by Pascal Khoo Thwe. The literary memoir of a Karenni tribesman escaping the post-1988 chaos to study literature at Cambridge.
- *Trouser People* (2002) by Andrew Marshall. The author follows the footsteps of a colonial-era Scot who introduced football to hill tribes in the late 19th century.
- *Burmese Days* (1934) by George Orwell. Well. The definitive novel of the last lonely days of Britain's colonial experience, this is a must on any trip to old Burma.
- *The Glass Palace* (2001) by Amitav Ghosh. This modern classic interweaves a motley crew of locals (Indians, Chinese, Burmese) amid lushly recounted historical events.
- *Freedom from Fear & Other Writings* (1995) by Aung San Suu Kyi. A collection of essays from the country's leading lady.

BUSINESS HOURS

Usual business hours in Myanmar:

Government offices ☎ 8am to 4.30pm, Monday to Friday

Post offices ☎ 9.30am to 3.30pm, Monday to Friday

Restaurants ☎ 7am to 9pm

Shops ☎ 9.30am to 6pm or later

CLIMATE

November through to February is the best time to visit. Temperatures can get quite cold in the hills, and close to freezing in places such as Kalaw. From mid-February, it gets increasingly hot – April being the 'cruellest month', to quote TS Eliot, until rains bless the land from mid-May through to mid-October. See the climate charts (p916) for average temperatures and rainfall.

CUSTOMS

Immigration officers at Yangon airport are friendlier than some of their stone-faced contemporaries around the region. Even customs officers appear relatively cheerful. Officially, visitors must declare foreign currency in excess of US\$2000, as well as electronic goods such as laptops, iPods, radios and cameras. However, we found checks to be pretty lax on our last visit.

Technically, antiques cannot be taken out of the country, although this is not often enforced.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Usually the only time a local will be running with your money or belongings is if they're chasing you down the road with something you've dropped. For now theft remains quite rare, but don't tempt fate in this poor country by flashing valuables or leaving them unguarded.

The only real scams are dodgy money-changers slipping in torn notes, and drivers or guides getting a commission for purchases at any shops you visit.

A few bomb incidents have occurred in Yangon in recent years, but these seem to have halted of late. Areas around the Myanmar–Thai border, home to the country's notorious drug trade, can be dangerous (and off limits) to explore.

Talking politics with locals can potentially endanger them, so be discreet. A taxi driver taking foreigners to see the area around Aung San Suu Kyi's house might get into trouble. Generally let a local dictate the conversation. In private places, and some teashops, some will be quite frank. Don't force political issues.

Power outages are pretty common, even in Yangon, but many businesses have their own generators. Check with guesthouses whether the power will be on all night, especially in the hot season.

DRIVING LICENCE

Licences aren't usually required when renting a motorbike. Would-be drivers need an International Driving Permit from the Road Transport Administration Department in Yangon, but this is not that easy to arrange.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

For visa information, see p581.

Embassies & Consulates in Myanmar

Myanmar is usually a good place to get visas for other countries, as the embassies don't see a lot of business. Sometimes you can pay with kyat. Countries with diplomatic representation in Yangon:

Australia (Map p532; ☎ 01-251810; 88 Strand Rd)

Bangladesh (off Map p528; ☎ 01-549557; 56 Kabe Aye Pagoda Rd)

Cambodia (off Map p528; ☎ 01-546156; 34 Kabe Aye Pagoda Rd)

Canada Represented by the Australian embassy.

China (Map p530; ☎ 01-221280; 1 Pyidaungsu Yeiktha Rd)

France (Map p530; ☎ 01-212520; 102 Pyidaungsu Yeiktha Rd)

Germany (Map p528; ☎ 01-548951; 32 Natmauk St)

India (Map p532; ☎ 01-243972; 545-547 Merchant St)

Indonesia (Map p530; ☎ 01-254465; 100 Pyidaungsu Yeiktha Rd)

Japan (Map p528; ☎ 01-549644; 100 Natmauk St)

Laos (Map p530; ☎ 01-222482; A1 Diplomatic Quarters, Taw Win Rd)

Malaysia (Map p530; ☎ 01-220249; 82 Pyidaungsu Yeiktha Rd)

New Zealand Represented by the UK embassy.

Singapore (Map p528; ☎ 01-559001; 238 Dhamma Zedi Rd, Bahan Township)

Thailand (Map p530; ☎ 01-226721; 45 Pyay Rd)

UK (Map p532; ☎ 01-281700; 80 Strand Rd)

USA (Map p532; ☎ 01-282055; 581 Merchant St) This embassy will move to Inya Lake during the lifetime of this book.

Vietnam (Map p528; ☎ 01-548905; 36 Wingaba Rd, Bahan Township)

Myanmar Embassies & Consulates Abroad

For Myanmar diplomatic offices in Southeast Asia, see the relevant country chapter.

Australia (☎ 02-6273 3811; 22 Arkana St, Yarralumla, ACT 2600)

Bangladesh (☎ 02-60 1915; 89B Rd No 4, Banani, Dhaka)

Canada (☎ 613-232 6434; Apt 902-903, The Sandringham, 85 Range Rd, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 8J6)

China (☎ 010-6532 1584; 6 Dong Zhi Men Wai St, Chaoyang District, Beijing 100600)

France (☎ 01 42 25 56 95; 60 rue de Courcelles, 75008 Paris)

Germany (☎ 30-206 1570; Zimmerstrasse 56, 10117 Berlin)

India (☎ 11-688 9007; 3/50F Nyaya Marg, Chanakya-puri, New Delhi 110021)

Israel (☎ 03-517 0760; 26 Hayarkon St, Tel Aviv 68011)

Italy (☎ 06-854 9374; 1st fl, Int 2, Viale Gioacchino Rossini, 18, 00198 Rome)

Japan (☎ 03-3441 9291; 8-26, 4-chome, Kita-Shinagawa, Shinagawa-ku, Tokyo 140-0001)

South Korea (☎ 02-792 3341; 723-1/724-1 Hannam-Dong Yongsam-ku, Seoul 140-210)

UK (☎ 020-7499 8841; 19A Charles St, London W1X 5DX)

USA (☎ 202-332 9044; 2300 S St NW, Washington, DC 20008)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Traditionally Myanmar follows a 12-month lunar calendar, so most festival dates cannot be fixed on the Gregorian calendar. Most festivals in Myanmar are on the full moon of the Burmese month in which they occur, but the build-up can go for days. Besides Buddhist holy days, some Hindu, Muslim and Christian holidays and festivals are also observed.

January

Independence Day 4 January. A major public holiday marked by a seven-day fair at Kandawgyi Lake in Yangon, and countrywide celebrations.

February/March

Union Day 12 February. Marks Bogyoke Aung San's short-lived achievement of unifying Myanmar's disparate ethnic groups.

Bawgyo Paya Pwe Held the day after the Tabauing full moon, this is one of the oldest and largest Shan festivals.

Shwedagon Festival This is the largest *paya* festival in Myanmar and takes place on the full moon.

Armed Forces Day 27 March. This event is celebrated with parades and fireworks. Since 1989, the government has pardoned prisoners on this day.

March/April

Full-Moon Festival The Tagu full moon is the biggest event of the year at Shwemawdaw Paya in Bago.

April/May

Buddha's Birthday The full moon also marks the day of the Buddha's enlightenment and the day he entered nirvana. One of the best places to observe this ceremony is at Yangon's Shwedagon Paya.

Thingyan (Water Festival) The Burmese New Year is celebrated with a raucous nationwide water fight. Traditional Burmese restraint goes out the window. It is impossible to go outside without getting drenched so just join the fun. Businesses close and some transport grinds to a halt. It's a favourite with youngsters but many adults check into meditation centres until the insanity is over.

Workers' Day 1 May.

June/July

Buddhist Lent Start of the Buddhist Rains Retreat (aka 'Buddhist Lent'). Laypeople present monasteries with new robes, because during the three-month Lent period monks are restricted to their monasteries.

July/August

Martyr's Day 19 July. Commemorates the assassination of Bogyoke Aung San and his comrades on 19 July 1947.

Wreaths are laid at his mausoleum, north of Shwedagon Paya in Yangon.

Wagaung Festival Lots are drawn to see who will have to provide monks with their alms.

September/October

Boat Races This is the height of the wet season, so boat races are held in rivers, lakes and even ponds all over Myanmar. The best place to be is Inle Lake.

Festival of Lights (Thadingyut) Celebrates Buddha's return from a period of preaching. For the three days of the festival, all Myanmar is lit by oil lamps, fire balloons, candles and even mundane electric lamps.

October/November

Tazaungdaing Another 'festival of lights', particularly celebrated in the Shan State. In Taunggyi there are fire-balloon competitions. In some areas there are also speed-weaving competitions during the night. The biggest weaving competitions occur at Shwedagon Paya in Yangon.

Kathein A one-month period at the end of Buddhist Lent during which new monastic robes and requisites are offered to the monastic community.

December

Christmas Day 25 December. Christmas Day is a public holiday in deference to the many Christian Kayin (Karen).

Kayin New Year December/January. Considered a national holiday, when Karen communities throughout Myanmar celebrate by wearing their traditional dress and by hosting folk dancing and singing performances. The largest celebrations are held in the Karen suburb of Insein, just north of Yangon, and in Hpa-an.

Ananda Festival December/January. Held at the Ananda Pahto in Bagan at the full moon.

FOOD & DRINK

Food

Mainstream Burmese cuisine represents a blend of Bamar, Mon, Indian and Chinese influences. If you're arriving from Thailand, Vietnam or Malaysia, it may not instantly inspire, but there are some cracking dishes out there.

A typical meal has *htamin* (rice) as its core, eaten with a choice of *hin* (curry dishes), most commonly fish, chicken, prawns or mutton. Beef and pork are less popular, as they are considered offensive to most Hindus and Buddhists. Soup is always served, along with a table full of condiments (including pickled veggies as dipping sauces). Most meals include free refills, so come hungry.

Outside of Rakhaing State (near Bangladesh), most Burmese food is pretty mild on the chilli front. Most cooks opt for a simple masala of turmeric, ginger, garlic, salt and onions, plus plenty of peanut oil and shrimp paste. *Balachauing* (chillies, tamarind and dried shrimp pounded together) or the pungent *ngapi kyaw* (spicy shrimp paste with garlic) is always nearby to add some kick. Almost everything in Burmese cooking is flavoured with *ngapi* (a salty paste concocted from dried and fermented shrimp or fish).

Noodle dishes are often eaten for breakfast or as light snacks between meals. By far the most popular is *mohinga* (moun-hinga), rice noodles served with fish soup and as many other ingredients as there are cooks.

Shan khauk-swe (Shan-style noodle soup; thin wheat noodles in a light broth with meat or tofu) is a favourite all over Myanmar, but is most common in Mandalay and the Shan State. Another Shan dish worth seeking out is *htamin chin*, literally sour rice, a turmeric-coloured rice salad.

See p535 for examples of snacks found in street markets around Myanmar.

The seafood served along the coasts, particularly grilled squid in Ngapali Beach, is delicious.

Drink

Only drink purified water. Be wary of ice in remote areas, but it is usually factory produced in towns and cities. Bottled water costs just K150 or K200 from stalls and shops.

Burmese tea, brewed Indian-style with lots of condensed milk and sugar, is the national drink. Most restaurants will provide as much free Chinese tea as you can handle. Teashops, a national institution, are good places to sample the tea experience and munch on inexpensive snacks such as *nam-bya* and *palata* (flat breads) or Chinese pastries. Ordering isn't as easy as in restaurants. Ask for *lahpeq ye* (tea with a dollop of condensed milk); *cho bouk* is less sweet, and *kyauk padaung* is very sweet.

Locally produced soft drinks (such as Fantasy, Max and Star) are just K150 per bottle, compared with the (rare) bottle of Coke for nearer K1000. Sugarcane juice is a very popular streetside drink.

Let's not forget the beer, which is almost as popular as tea. Myanmar Beer (about US\$1.50 for a big bottle) is the best local

brew. It's available in draught, as is the newer Dagon Beer. Mandalay Beer is considered the weakest link. Yangon is one of the only places to find out-and-out bars. Elsewhere open-air barbecue restaurants and 'beer stations' embrace a steady crew of red-faced local drinkers. It's fine to buy a bottle to take to your guesthouse, or sit at a restaurant and get plastered.

International wines are available in some hotels and restaurants, as are a selection of stronger tipples. Local wine, Aythaya, is now produced near Inle Lake and is very palatable. Local firewaters are not, but sampling them is a great way to earn your stripes with the local boozers.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

Lesbians and gays are generally accepted in Burmese culture. In fact local women walking with foreign men raise more eyebrows. Yangon has the most active gay 'scene'. It's OK to share rooms, but public displays of affection – for anyone – are frowned upon.

HOLIDAYS

Apart from the big festivals such as New Year, other major public holidays include:

Independence Day 4 January

Peasants Day 2 March

Armed Forces Day 27 March

Workers' Day 1 May

National Day late November/early December

Christmas Day 25 December

INTERNET ACCESS

Myanmar only joined the cyberworld in 2001, but access to the internet is on the rise. It's about K500 to K1000 per hour in Yangon, though at places such as Bagan, Ngapali Beach and Inle Lake it costs more like K2000. The government tries to restrict web-based email sites such as Hotmail and Yahoo, but most places have software to beat the censors. Sites such as www.bbc.co.uk or www.nytimes.com were accessible during the time of research.

Bear in mind that all local email ending in '.mm' is subject to government censorship in both directions. This can result in emails being delayed by hours, sometimes days. Worse, when a backlog develops, it's not unknown for them to hit the delete button! If trying to book a room via email, resend if you don't hear anything after a few days.

There are two ISPs – a government-run dial-up and a military-run broadband service.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Irrawaddy (www.irrawaddy.org) The website of a Bangkok-based publication, it focuses on political issues, but covers many cultural news topics.

Mizzima (www.mizzima.com) A nonprofit news service organised in 1998 by Burmese journalists in exile.

Myanmar Home Page (www.myanmar.com) Provides a funny government dictum, and two local English-language papers, including the useful *Myanmar Times* (for entertainment listings, flight schedules).

Myanmar Travel Information (www.myanmartravelinformation.com) Includes train and airline schedules (though these date quickly).

Online Burma/Myanmar Library (www.burmalibrary.org) Comprehensive database of books on Myanmar.

LEGAL MATTERS

Myanmar does not have an independent judiciary. If you engage in political activism (eg handing out pro-democracy leaflets as some Westerners have), illegally cross the border into the country, or get caught with drugs, you have no legal recourse. We've heard of a French traveller bribing his way out of a heroin-possession arrest. Political activists are less likely to be able to cut a deal.

MAPS

The best map found outside Myanmar is Periplus Editions' 1:2,000,000 *Myanmar Travel Map*; find it at **MapLink** (www.maplink.com). In Myanmar, Design Print Services (DPS) produces handy foldout maps, including the *Tourist Map of Myanmar* and local maps for Yangon, Mandalay and Bagan.

MEDIA

Magazines

Reasonably up-to-date copies of *The Economist*, *Newsweek* and *Time* are available at upmarket hotel shops or at **Inwa Bookstore** (Map p532; 232 Sule Paya Rd, Yangon).

Newspapers

For the official line, the *New Light of Myanmar* is hilarious, overflowing with Orwellian propaganda and clunky English. Look out for the anti-Western poems. Far more useful is the *Myanmar Times*, with a schedule of international flights and entertainment listings. Both are scarce beyond Yangon.

Radio

All legal radio and TV broadcasts are state controlled. Radio Myanmar broadcasts news in Burmese, English and eight other national languages three times a day. Only music with Burmese-language lyrics goes out on the airwaves.

Many Burmese listen to Burmese-language broadcasts from the Voice of America and the BBC for news from the outside world.

TV

TV Myanmar (MRTV) operates from 5pm to midnight, although it's at the mercy of the local power supply. Check out the 9.15pm national news, when a newscaster coldly reads the censored news before a mural of a power plant. English Premiership games are often broadcast.

Many hotels have satellite TV, if only in the lobby. CNN and the BBC are available on these sets and there seems to be no censorship by the government.

MONEY

Kyat, dollars, even the dreaded FECs (see p580): money comes in many shapes and sizes here. Kyat covers the little things (bottles of water, renting a bike, some rice), while dollars (or vanishing FEC notes) are usually requested for ferries, air tickets, hotels and museums. While inflation has skyrocketed in recent years, costs in US dollars don't fluctuate much. Be sure to carry all the US dollars you need and more. Crisp, new US\$100 bills attract the best exchange rates. Small bills are useful for guesthouses, most of which price rooms in dollars rather than kyat. The euro is also increasingly being accepted.

ATMs

Myanmar has no ATMs (cash points).

Bargaining, Bribes & Tipping

Essentially almost any price is open to negotiation. Exceptions are transport (other than taxis) and entrance fees. Handicrafts can often be purchased for half the first offer. Guesthouses and hotels may drop prices during quiet periods, or if you're planning a longer stay.

Minor bribes – called 'presents' or 'tea money' in Burmese English – are part of everyday life in Myanmar. Extra compensation is expected for the efficient completion of

many standard bureaucratic services, such as a visa extension.

Tipping, as it is known in the West, is not the rule in any but the fanciest hotels and restaurants. Rounding up a restaurant bill is certainly appreciated.

Cash

Myanmar's everyday currency, the kyat (pronounced chat, and abbreviated K) is divided into the following banknotes: K1, K5, K10, K15, K20, K45 (seriously), K50, K90 (no joke), K100, K200, K500, K666 (all right, we're being devilish, sorry) and K1000.

Credit Cards

Need a credit card bailout? Fly to Bangkok! Very, very few upmarket hotels accept credit cards here and no one else does. Before the banking crisis in 2003, most credit cards were accepted.

Exchanging Money

Offers to 'change money' nearly outnumber *longyi* in this country. Essentially the only sensible way to get kyat is via the 'black market', through guesthouses, shops, travel agencies or less reliable blokes on the street. Some won't accept US dollar bills starting with the serial numbers 'CB'. The airport exchange counter at research time offered K450 for the dollar, while in Yangon rates were about K1250. The official exchange rate is a hilarious K6 to the US dollar!

Only US dollars and euros can be exchanged in Myanmar. Baht can be exchanged only at the border with Thailand. The exchange rates here are based on those used in the streets of Myanmar; other sources differ considerably from this.

Many travellers do the bulk of their changing in Yangon, where rates are a little better than elsewhere. Count the cash before handing over dollars, and don't change in the street. Honest exchangers won't mind you counting. Generally kyat are banded in stacks of 100 K1000 bills. If you want to be well and

DOLLARS VS KYAT

Prices in this book follow local usage: dollars when locals ask for them, kyat otherwise. Note some strict museum staff and boat operators will insist on dollars.

truly stitched up, then by all means change at a government bank or airport.

Foreign Exchange Certificates (FECs)

In 2003, the government stopped requiring visitors to change US\$200 worth of Foreign Exchange Certificates (FEC) upon arrival. The FEC, pegged at 1:1 to the US dollar, is still accepted at hotels and for tourism-related services such as ferries or air tickets, but it's increasingly rare.

Travellers Cheques

In Yangon, you can cash travellers cheques at some upscale hotels for a 3% to 10% commission.

PHOTOGRAPHY & VIDEO

Most internet cafés can burn digital photos onto a CD for about K1000, but you should have your own adapter. Colour print film is widely available in most towns. Some sights, including some pagodas, charge small camera fees. Avoid taking photos of military facilities, uninformed individuals, road blocks, bridges, NLD offices and Aung San Suu Kyi's house.

POST

Myanmar is the place to get retro with postcards at just K50 to anywhere in the world. That's US\$0.05! The government has to be losing money on this, so send as many as you can. For bigger (or more valuable) packages, **DHL** (Yangon Map p532; ☎ 01-664423; Traders Hotel, 223 Sule Paya Rd; Mandalay Map p555; ☎ 02-39274; 22nd St, 80/81) sends packages to anywhere but the USA (restricted due to sanctions). A 0.5kg package to Europe or Canada is about US\$65, to Australia, US\$50.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

See 'Should You Go?' (p521) for more on the pros and cons of visiting Myanmar.

Much of Myanmar remains mired in poverty. Support local businesses by buying locally made products. Eat in local restaurants when possible and dine in villages rather than taking picnics from town. Use local guides for remote regions, including indigenous minority peoples where available.

When bargaining for goods or transport, remember the aim is not to get the lowest possible price, but one that's acceptable to both you and the seller. Coming on too strong or

arguing over a few cents does nothing to foster positive feelings towards foreign visitors.

Begging is quite a common sight in Myanmar these days. Remember that the military government doesn't give a damn about the people and there is little in the way of a social security net to catch the fallen. Avoid giving money to children, as it is most likely going straight to a 'begging pimp' or family member. Food is one option, but better still is to make a donation to one of the many local organisations trying to assist in the battle against poverty.

STUDYING

Most foreign students in Myanmar are getting busy with *satipatthana vipassana*, or insight-awareness meditation. Yangon is meditation HQ, with several centres. Sagaing is another good place to find opportunities. Often food and lodging are provided at no charge, but meditators must follow eight precepts, including no food after noon, as well as no music, dancing, jewellery or perfume. It's for the experienced only. Daily schedules are rigorous – sometimes nonstop practice from 3am to 11pm.

For practice sessions of less than one month, a tourist visa suffices. For longer terms, it's necessary to apply for a 'special-entry visa', which you cannot apply for while in Myanmar on a tourist visa. Applicants must receive a letter of invitation from a centre. The process takes eight to 10 weeks.

For individual meditation centres, see entries under Yangon (p533) and Sagaing (p560).

SAVE THE INTERNATIONAL CALLS FOR THAILAND!

Try to avoid making international calls in Myanmar, as they're ludicrously expensive by regional standards and the money from them goes directly into the government's pocket. If you need to stay in touch with family and friends, switch to email or consider signing up for an instant messaging service such as Google Talk, which isn't blocked by the government censors. Look out for (the few) internet cafés that have cheaper internet telephone services using MediaRing Talk or other software that isn't blocked.

There is useful information on meditation centres at www.rainbow2.com/burma and <http://web.ukonline.co.uk/buddhism/meditation.htm>.

TELEPHONE

Local calls can be made cheaply or for free from guesthouses. Domestic long distance is cheap from a Central Telephone & Telegraph (CTT) office or from phone stalls on the street. International calls – made at a CTT office or from guesthouses – are a whopping US\$4 or US\$5 per minute to Australia or Europe, an extra dollar to North America. Some smaller towns still use manual switchboards, which can be a hoot to see in action.

Mobile Phones

Myanmar has mobile phones, but at a whopping US\$2500 for a number they are few and far between. Roaming is not possible anywhere in Myanmar, save for a couple of border towns where you can tap into Thailand. If you're carrying a mobile, it is supposed to be declared on arrival.

Phone Codes

To call Myanmar from abroad, dial your country's international access code, then ☎ 95 (Myanmar's country code), the area code (less the 0) and the five- or six-digit number. To dial long distance within Myanmar, dial the area code (including 0) and the number. Bear in mind that it can be very difficult to contact some regions of the country – patience and perseverance are required.

TOILETS

In many backwater places, toilets are often squat jobs, generally in a cobweb-filled outhouse reached by a dirt path behind a restaurant. In guesthouses and hotels, you'll find Western-style sit-down flush toilets. Toilet paper is widely available, but should not be flushed.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Myanmar Travel & Tours (MTT; www.myanmars.net/mtt) is part of the Ministry of Hotels & Tourism (MHT), the official government tourism organ in Myanmar. Its main office is in Yangon (p531) and there are also offices in Mandalay, Bagan and Inle Lake. We certainly don't recommend using its services, but the staff can be useful in terms of gauging prices and getting info on travel restrictions.

TRAVELLERS WITH DISABILITIES

Myanmar is a tricky country for mobility-impaired travellers. Wheelchair ramps are virtually unheard of and transport is crowded and difficult even for the fully ambulatory.

VISAS

Passport holders from Asean countries, China, Bangladesh and Russia do not need to apply for visas to visit Myanmar. All other nationalities do. A tourist visa's validity expires 90 days after issue and only allows a 28-day, single-entry visit. It costs US\$20. You'll need three passport-sized photos for the process.

There are also 28-day business visas (US\$30) and 28-day special visas (US\$30) for former Myanmar citizens (which can be extended for three to six months once in Yangon for US\$36). A multiple-entry business visa is US\$150. There are also meditation visas (US\$30) for those travelling for this purpose.

Travel agencies along Bangkok's Khao San Rd specialise in getting quick tourist visas for Myanmar. Rates depend on turnaround times, which always aren't met: visa in one day 1800B, two days 1600B and three days 1100B. The process at the Bangkok embassy can take a couple of days. It may be easier to plan ahead and arrange the visa in a 'quieter' capital, such as Phnom Penh or Vientiane.

Visitors from Thailand can get very short-term 'visas' that allow minimal travel in border regions of Myanmar.

Applications

Myanmar's embassies and consulates abroad are scrupulous in checking out the backgrounds of visa applicants. Consider declaring another profession if you're a journalist, photographer, editor, publisher, motion-picture director or producer, cameraperson or writer. Otherwise you're likely to be rejected.

Extensions

At the time of research, it was possible to extend a tourist visa by an additional 14 days (only) beyond its original 28-day validity in Yangon only. The process costs US\$36 and usually takes about two to five days. A travel agent can help navigate the bureaucracy for a total of US\$50. You'll need two copies of your passport and visa, two passport-sized photographs and a recommendation letter from MTT. The process cannot be started in advance or from elsewhere in Myanmar.

Overstaying Your Visa

Another option, if you want just a few more days, is overstaying your visa. Check with a Yangon agent before your visa's up, but at research time there was generally little hassle to overstay *if* you were leaving from the Yangon or Mandalay airports. Be prepared to spend at least 20 minutes with some paperwork, and to pay US\$3 per day overstayed, plus a US\$3 'registration fee'. Try to have correct change handy. Apparently, it's possible to overstay by up to six weeks without major incident; many travellers have reported overstaying a week or more.

When departing overland to Thailand on an expired visa, it's best to enlist help from a travel agency before popping up at the border. In one case, an extra US\$35 fee was lopped onto the US\$3-per-day penalty to cross to Ranong, Thailand.

VOLUNTEERING

You'll have plenty of chances to help locals with English over tea. Some foreigners have been able to volunteer as English teachers at monasteries. In November 2004, seven foreigners doing so at Mandalay's Phaungdaw Kyaung were deported, though this was likely

a repercussion of the monastery's connection with ousted prime minister Khin Nyunt.

WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Women travelling alone are more likely to be helped than harassed. In some areas, you'll be regarded with friendly curiosity – and asked, with sad-eyed sympathy, 'Are you only one?' – because Burmese women tend to prefer to travel en masse. At the more remote religious sites, a single foreign woman is likely to be 'adopted' by a young Burmese woman, who will take you by the hand to show you the highlights. At some sites, such as Mandalay's Mahamuni Paya (p554), 'ladies' are not permitted to the central altar; signs will indicate this if it is the case.

You can get tampons at upmarket shops in Yangon and Mandalay.

WORKING

Work permits in Myanmar are not totally impossible to get these days. The first step is to arrange sponsorship from a local company and have a persuasive reason to be here – an English teacher at one of the international schools, for example. Seek out expats in Yangon for more information.