



DESTINATION_ MYANMAR

C U B A O F T H E E A S T

MYANMAR, FORMERLY KNOWN AS BURMA AND HOME TO 135 DISTINCT ETHNIC TRIBES, IS OPEN TO VISITORS AND COMMITTED TO RESPONSIBLE TOURISM. WITH MORE LUXURY OFFERINGS, BUT STILL RETAINING ITS AUTHENTICITY, THE TIME TO VISIT IS NOW, SAYS Matt Shea.





YANGON STREET



MARKET NAY PYI TAW



THE GOAT MARKET



UPPATASANTI PAGODA



TRAVELLING BY TRAIN WITH THE LOCALS



A LITTLE LOCAL AT INLE LAKE



THE GREEN HILL VALLEY ELEPHANT CAMP

MATT SHEA

LET'S GET ONE THING OUT OF THE WAY IMMEDIATELY. IT'S OKAY TO CALL IT MYANMAR. "Most people here don't care," our guide Ye Thiwa, says. "They just want stability. They want prosperity."

The military junta in control of what was then known as Burma made the decision in 1989 to change the country's name. Why? Because, Ye tells us, the Burmese people are actually just one tribe out of 135 distinct ethnic groups - but also the largest, accounting for 68 per cent of the population. The generals wanted a name that better represented the overall population. And a popular vote wouldn't have changed a thing.

That's the official logic, at least.

And yes, you should visit. Aung San Suu Kyi, Nobel Peace Prize laureate (1991) and a living oracle for Myanmar, not long released after two decades of house arrest, now welcomes visitors to the country, as long as it's through private companies interested in developing responsible tourism.

Right now, Myanmar is something of a Cuba of the East. The two countries have vastly different political backgrounds, but both have suddenly sprung open to the world after decades of isolation. It means you should visit Myanmar now, before the tourism economy - official numbers of which have visitors trebling since 2012 to 3.1 million - and any associated exhaustion begins to take hold. You can still see the curiosity of a foreign encounter in the faces of the people. Quite literally, in one sense: the *thanaka*, a yellow cosmetic paste applied to the cheeks of women and children to help moisturise and protect from sunburn, is a distinctive cultural trait. But more so in the way they deal with you: with warmth rather than the weariness of a people worn down by a succession of big-foot Westerners.

We mainline a dose of untouched Myanmar on our first day in Yangon, the country's largest city and former capital, taking a dusty train trip south from the airport into the centre of town. The carriages are

packed with locals, many making their way to the iconic Bogyoke Market to sell fabrics or gemstones or perhaps yoghurt flavoured with *jaggery* (concentrated toddy palm sap). Our guide Ye grins as, against our insistence, passengers clear themselves from the packed benches. This kindness quickly becomes a theme of our trip, Myanmar's 89 per cent Theravada Buddhist population continually looking to garner merit in a never-ending effort to reach Nirvana.

Later that afternoon comes an opportunity to witness the merit-making in full force at one of Yangon's most impressive sights, the Shwedagon Pagoda. Visible from almost anywhere in the city, the 99 metre-high temple overpowers at close range, a cacophony of colour, sound and people. Flocks of starlings swoop among the surrounding annexes before tightly circling the main pagoda, whose gold-leafed stupa

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absorbs and reflects the sunset, a dazzling beacon pointing towards the heavens. The whole thing feels part religious experience, part street carnival.

That night we relax on the spacious pool deck at the Novotel Yangon Max, one of a number of properties at the leading edge of a new wave of luxury that is beginning to sprout throughout Myanmar. The hotel, with its generous rooms and enormous facilities, is so new that you can smell the carpet.

We sip champagne and chat about the trip ahead, which will take us all the way to Inle Lake, high in the country's mountainous Shan State.

But not before a short flight and overnight stop at MGallery The Lake Garden in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar's capital. The Lake Garden could easily be lifted from a Bond film, a series of single-storey buildings scattered over a gigantic, high-security property that, much like Nay Pyi Taw itself, is in the middle of nowhere. Lofty ceilings and cool slate floors lead to elegantly detailed rooms, each packing a private balcony with shuttered views over the grounds. If it all seems a little stately, that's because it is: the Presidential Suite is actually designed for real presidents.

In civic terms, Nay Pyi Taw is almost brand-new, a planned city that many would choose to bypass. But then you would miss out on one of the country's undiscovered delights, the Uppatasanti Pagoda. A modern replica of Yangon's Shwedagon, Uppatasanti is actually a much quieter and more contemplative destination - a place for prayer rather than a place to simply witness prayer.

The next morning, we wind north-east into the mountains for a highlight of our trip: the Green Hill Valley Elephant Camp. Co-founder Htun Htun Wynn quietly talks us through the devastating stories of the seven elephants in the camp's care. One is so traumatised from an elephant trap that only now - three years after arriving at the camp - is she beginning to take food with her trunk.

Such sadness is juxtaposed with the pure joy of being invited to bathe these phenomenal creatures.



The 46-year-old Yu Moe Yin closes her eyes in bliss as her belly hits the cool stream that runs through the camp, while her adopted five-year-old Poe Chit playfully sprays water as we scour his thick skin with acacia bark. Magic.

Our ultimate destination turns out to be just a few hours up the road. Inle Lake, an expansive waterway, nearly 900 metres above sea level, acts as a place of commerce, trade and community for more than 70,000 people living on its shores (or on the lake itself in impressive, vertiginous stilt houses). We spend our days scooting across the glassy surface in diesel-powered longboats, marvelling at the fishermen who row with their legs, or exploring the markets, restaurants and religious sites dotted around the lake.

In the evenings, we sink into the facilities at the brand-new Hotel Novotel Inle Lake Myat Min, a beguiling property — its expansive, over-the-lake villas providing front-row seats for spectral sunsets further heightened by the surrounding mountains and arid, high-altitude atmosphere.

On our final night in Myanmar it's back to Yangon, debriefing with dinner at Le Planteur Restaurant, a majestic, colonial-style estate looking out upon one of Inya Lake's peaceful inlets. Over a meal of Japanese scallops and pan-fried foie gras we relax into the night.

With us is the Australian Trade Commission's Ross Bray. Honest company, he explains the quirk in Myanmar's much-trumpeted trebling of tourist statistics: most of them are either border visitors or relatives of expatriates working in the country. The actual numbers from outside the region have briefly plateaued, hence why so much of the country remains untouched.

But that won't last long, Bray reckons. In short, you need to go to Myanmar. And you need to go now.

MYANMAR

● GETTING THERE

Qantas flies to Singapore twice-daily from Sydney and daily from Melbourne and Brisbane. Jetstar Asia flies from Singapore to Yangon daily. Return fares from Sydney to Yangon via Singapore start from A\$1,028 return for economy and A\$3,245 for business (with the refurbished Qantas A330s now coming on-stream), with a connecting economy Jetstar return fare to Yangon from A\$110. qantas.com; jetstar.com

● WHERE TO STAY

Rates (including breakfast) start from US\$192 (about A\$245) per night at the Novotel Yangon Max; US\$127 (about A\$162) per night at MGallery The Lake Garden Nay Pyi Taw and US\$115 (about A\$147) per night at Novotel Inle Lake Myat Min. accorhotels.com.

● GETTING AROUND

Specialist Asia travel group Exo Travel offers a range of tours throughout Myanmar. exotravel.com



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