

Getting Started

Read the discussion on p17 regarding whether you should boycott Myanmar or not.

WHEN TO GO

The best time to visit Myanmar is between November and February. During these months it rains least (if at all in places) and it is not so hot.

March to May brings intense heat (TS Eliot described April as ‘the cruellest month’). At this time, Yangon’s daily temperatures often reach 40°C, while areas around Bagan and Mandalay go a few digits higher. The cool hill towns of Shan State offer relief from the heat, though.

The southwest monsoon starts between mid-May and mid-June, bringing frequent rains that dunk the country through till October, peaking from July to September. The dry zone (roughly the area between Mandalay and Pyay) gets less rain than the rest of the country, though roads anywhere (and particularly in the delta region south and east of Yangon) can become impassable. Rakhaing State bears the full force of the rains – often exceeding 500cm of rain annually.

Check the ‘current weather’ link on the Myanmar section of www.asia.travelinfo.com/myanmar/currentweather.asp for 22 temperatures across the country.

COSTS & MONEY

Even though the government keeps a ‘foreigner price’ system very much in effect, causing transport, accommodation and entrance fees for foreigners to swallow the local price several times over, Myanmar is still very cheap to visit.

For those looking for relative comfort, ‘midrange’ hotels start around US\$20 in most places, while upmarket hotels may charge over US\$100 in Yangon, Mandalay, Bagan, Inle Lake and Ngapali Beach. Shoestringers can often find a clean room for US\$4 or US\$5 – a bit more in Yangon or off-the-beaten-track places. Unless you eat meals at top-end hotels, or classier restaurants in some touristy areas, meals are much the same fare – rice or noodles, with meat or vegetables – and cost about US\$1.

If you don’t have to have a guide, consider arranging your own trips. A shared taxi (no guide) may cost as little as US\$5 for a return trip to a site. By comparison, in Bagan for example, one hotel offers a day tour to Mt Popa for US\$100 per person.

See Climate Charts (p335) for more information.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

The must-haves include US dollars for your whole trip, a passport that will expire more than six months after leaving the country, and a visa. Useful items include sunscreen lotion, insect repellent, a good torch (only cheapies are available here), tampons (unlikely to be found outside Yangon), disposable nappies (diapers), and a good waterproof poncho if you’re coming in the rainy season.

Flip-flops or sandals are necessary for all the shoe-shedding you’ll be doing at Buddhist sites; inexpensive ones are available. The AA batteries in Myanmar may be cheap, but they only keep a CD player running for an hour. You’ll need a jumper (sweater) in the chillier hill towns and a blanket if you are going to do overnight trips (including by boat) in the area.

See p49 for ideas on bringing gifts for the locals.

TOP TENS**Festivals & Events**

- Independence Day, 4 January (p340)
- Kachin State Day (Myitkyina), 10 January (p218)
- Shwedagon Festival (Yangon), February/March (p340)
- Buddha's Birthday, full moon, April/May (p340)
- Water Festival (Thingyan) & Burmese New Year, mid-April (p341)
- Dawei Thingyan, April (p164) Few foreigners make it here to see local men don 4m bamboo effigies and dance the streets to a drum beat.
- Nat Festival (Mt Popa), Nayon full moon, May/June (p278)
- Start of Buddhist Rains Retreat, full moon June/July (p341)
- Nat Festival, near Amarapura, after Wagaung full moon, August (p250)
- Tazaungmon, full moon October/November (p341) Taunggyi's balloon festival (p195) is a particular highlight.

Must Reads

- *Burmese Days* by George Orwell
- *The Trouser People: A Story of Burma in the Shadow of the Empire* by Andrew Marshall
- *Living Silence* by Christina Fink
- *The Glass Palace* by Amitav Ghosh
- *From the Land of Green Ghosts: A Burmese Odyssey* by Pascal Khoo Thwe
- *Letters from Burma or The Voice of Hope* by Aung San Suu Kyi
- *Culture Shock! Burma* by Saw Myat Yin
- *The Piano Tuner* by Daniel Mason
- *The Lady – Aung San Suu Kyi: Noble Laureate & Burma's Prisoner* by Barbara Victor
- *The History of Burma* by GE Harvey

Souvenirs

- *Longyi* (sarong-style lower garment) Found wherever a breeze might blow.
- Pathein's paper parasols (p134)
- Myanmar's best lacquerware at Myinkaba (p275)
- Traditional-style lacquerware in Kyaukka (p260)
- Delta-born glazed pots from Twante (p129), near Yangon
- Moustache Brothers T-shirt from Mandalay (p241)
- Cheap DVDs in Yangon (p122)
- Marionettes from Yangon's Bogyoke Aung San Market (p121) or in Mandalay (p241)
- Jade from Mandalay's local market (p242)
- Water buffalo in Kengtung (p198)

If you're travelling around by public transport and are OK with rice-based meals, you can get by on as little as US\$15 or US\$20 a day; those considering taking a couple of taxis and frequenting midrange local restaurants may spend US\$35 to US\$50. Staying at plush hotels and eating at classy restaurants will cost US\$100 and more.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Few countries warrant more pretrip reading than Myanmar.

In Andrew Marshall's excellent *The Trouser People: A Story of Burma in the Shadow of the Empire* (2002), the British author retraces the steps of a gutsy Scot named Sir George Scott who traversed unmapped corners of British Burma in the late 1800s. Marshall compares the current day with Scott's finds – much documented in Scott's mammoth 1882 book *The Burman* – and finds that traditions have remained unchanged in the hills where 'people are small and ghosts are big'.

From the Land of Green Ghosts: A Burmese Odyssey (2002), by Pascal Khoo Thwe, is a self-told tale of a reluctant rebel of the government who escaped – unlike many of his friends – out of Myanmar. Thwe grew up in a hill tribe in Shan State. His book hops between following telltale traditions and his role in a changing Myanmar. There are many cultural traditions presented – including a recipe for smoked pigeons with marijuana sauce.

The definitive reading on Myanmar continues to be George Orwell's sweat-stained *Burmese Days* (1934), which takes place amid the last gasp of the fading British colonial period in northern Burma. Well-timed earthquakes and riots, and overly poetic birthmarks, can be forgiven as the lead characters' appreciation for the Burmese way of life seeps into the story of a gang of British brutes – some of whom are so stereotyped it's hard to distinguish them from one another.

Amitav Ghosh's excellent *The Glass Palace* (2001) faithfully recounts historical details (from King Thibaw's fall in 1885 to the modern era) as experienced by a curious web of fictionalised families (Burmese, Indian, Chinese and American).

Daniel Mason's *The Piano Tuner* (2002) follows a London tuner on a strange trip to tune a piano deep in the Shan Hills. It's similar to *Heart of Darkness* except that Kurtz has a piano (not necessarily a mind) out of whack. The story is good though, and descriptions of 19th-century sea voyages and Myanmar customs are spot on.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Here are some of useful sites to refer to when planning your trip:

Ayezay (www.ayezay.com) Bursts with links and info on Myanmar, including travel, human rights and geography.

Irrawaddy (www.irrawaddy.org) Website of a Bangkok-based publication, it focuses on political issues, but covers many cultural news topics. It has a huge archive.

Lonely Planet's Thorn Tree (www.lonelyplanet.com) Self-promotion aside, LP's discussion board is the best resource to mix and mingle with fellow travellers.

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.

HOW MUCH?

Ride on a Yangon city bus K5

Burmese all-you-can-eat buffet lunch K1000-1500

Overnight bus from Yangon to Mandalay K6000

Hired car with driver per day US\$100

Visa extension in Yangon US\$38

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

THE BIG-FOUR FRENZY **Seven to Nine Days/Yangon to Inle Lake**

Starting in **Yangon** (p000), stretch your plane legs up the steps to the **Shwedagon Paya** (p000) at night, when its golden *zedi* (stupa) glows under the floodlights. Next day, wander around **downtown** (p000) ending at **Bogyoke Aung San Market** (p000), which has the country's best selection of handicrafts and souvenirs. Hire a driver, fly, or take a train or an overnight bus to **Mandalay** (p000), where you can climb **Mandalay Hill** (p000), see the famed **Mahamuni Paya** (p000) and witness the **Moustache Brothers** (p000) one day, and on the next make a rushed day trip to *zedi*-studded **Sagaing Hill** (p000), then the leaning tower of **Inwa** (p000), and monk- and fisher-filled **U Bein's Bridge** (p000) in Amarapura at sunset. The boat trip down the Ayeyarwady River to **Bagan** (p000) takes a day but is a relaxing way to take in life along one of Asia's mightiest rivers. In Bagan, take a horse-cart or cycle around 42 sq km of 800-year-old temples. Next day, cool off in the Shan Hills to the east at **Inle Lake** (p000) – reached by bus, taxi or plane – where dug-out canoes can take you to floating markets under the flight path of egrets; after a day, consider a day trip to **Pindaya Caves** (p000) to see their 8000 Buddha images. Fly or take a bus back to Yangon.

If time is short, you can still take in Yangon, Mandalay and a few nearby ancient cities, Bagan's 3000 temples, and do a boat trip on Inle Lake.



THE BIG-FOUR EXPANSION **Four Weeks/Yangon to Mrauk U**

Take a few days in **Yangon** (p000), and see **Shwedagon Paya** (p000), **Aung San's old home** (p000), and wander around **downtown** (p000). Take a bus or taxi to **Bago** (p000) to see a Buddha extravaganza by day, then continue on to **Kyaiktiyo** (p000) for the night; wake up by doing a truck/trek up to the balance-act that is the Golden Rock. From Kyaiktiyo, get to **Kalaw** (p000), for some treks in the Shan Hills, spend a day at **Pindaya Caves** (p000) to see their 8000 Buddha images and explore **Inle Lake** (p000) for a few days. In October/November, you can see the balloon festival in **Taunggyi** (p000), where you can catch a ride to **Mandalay** (p000), where you can visit four ancient cities: **Mingun** (p000), **Amarapura** (p000), **Inwa** (p000) and **Sagaing** (p000). From Mandalay, take a boat to **Bagan** (p000), allowing three days to temple-hop and honour the *nat* (spirit) at **Mt Popa** (p000). Bus or taxi to **Pyay** (p000) to see the ruins of the ancient Pyu city by ox cart.

Two options for the rest of your stay: add on three days from Kyaiktiyo, by bussing to **Mawlamyine** (p000) near the WWII 'Death Railway', then take Myanmar's loveliest boat ride to **Hpa-an** (p000) for a mountain climb and lunch, with monkeys. Then, when in Mandalay, add on a three-day trip to refreshingly cooler **Pyin U Lwin** (p000), a flower-scented hill station with waterfalls, and do a DIY trek in **Hsipaw** (p000). Or scrap those two side trips, and take a six-day trip from Pyay firstly to **Mrauk U** (p000), the Rakhaing's hillocky version of Bagan and then snorkel and eat seafood at **Ngapali Beach** (p000). From here, take a flight or a bus ride to Yangon.

Build more memories by doing the 'Big Four'; then pick one seven-day or two three-day side trips (treks, boat rides, beaches, lesser-seen towns) to fill your visa's 28 days.



ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

AYEYARWADY HO! Three or Four Weeks/Myitkyina to Chaungtha

Fly to **Myitkyina** (p000), where you can wait for the next ferry by taking in Kachin culture; in January animal sacrifices are made to satisfy the *nat*. Get a deck ticket for the half-day trip to **Bhamo** (p000), a leafy town with a home-made helicopter inspired by James Bond. Hire a longboat for a six-hour ride to **Katha** (p000), where George Orwell based his *Burmese Days*. Although most prefer to stay aboard for the 24 hours south to Mandalay, for a fun four-day side trip, disembark at Kyaukmyaung, and pack into a pick-up for quiet **Shwebo** (p000), and then pleasant **Monywa** (p000), near a **Buddha-shaped mountain** (p000) and the carnivalesque **Thanboddhay Paya** (p000), brimming with over 500,000 Buddhas.

Take a bus to **Mandalay** (p000), and spend three or four days visiting the **ancient cities** (p000) and cycling around pagodas and chapati stands; then get back on the Ayeerwady to **Bagan** (p000), where you can cycle around 3000 temples. A couple of days south from Bagan by boat is ho-hum Magwe, near a gurgling mound of butane-gas sludge guarded by snakes at **Minbu** (p000); another night south is **Pyay** (p000), to see the ruins of the ancient city of the Pyu and the nearby spectacled Buddha, the **Shwemyetman Paya** (p000).

Many travellers brave the bus ride from Pyay to **Ngapali Beach** (p000) for some relaxing beach life. Otherwise, get a bus back to **Yangon** (p000), and another one southeast to **Chaungtha Beach** (p000), a more accessible kick-back spot on the Bay of Bengal.

This may be Myanmar's ultimate journey – from Myanmar's top to bottom, mostly following the Ayeerwady, hitting the off-the-beaten track and not missing Mandalay or Bagan, with opportunities to travel aboard ferries with locals who rarely see a foreign face.



TAILORED TRIPS

THE ACTIVE LIFE

Many activities take place under the hot Myanmar sun. More travellers are planning their own loops on treks in Shan State. Of the best, and certainly most popular, are the treks from **Kalaw to Inle Lake** (p000), while treks around **Hsipaw** (p000) take in Shan villages. Getting to some religious sites are hikes in themselves, famously up **Mandalay Hill** (p000), riverside **Sagaing Hill** (p000), and past monkeys up **Mt Popa** (p000), the spiritual centre of the 37 *nat*.

It's rewarding to explore the back lanes of Myanmar towns on a bike. Long-distance cyclists can take the popular trip from **Mandalay to Bagan** (p000) via Myingyan – or take to the hills along the road from **Pyin U Lwin** (p000), to **Lashio** (p000) via Hsipaw.

You can take kickboxing classes at the YMCA in **Yangon** (p000), or go for a run (p000).

Both **Ngapali Beach** (p000) and **Chaungtha Beach** (p000) offer snorkelling trips. The best diving, by far, is off the islands near **Kawthoung** (p000), currently reached with diving operators from Phuket (see p000). Weeklong kayaking trips can also be arranged in Kawthoung.

In the far north, at the foothills of the Himalaya, you can go white-water rafting serious rapids on the **Maykha River** (p000).



MYANMARVELS & THE OUTRIGHT ODD

Some aspects of Myanmar are a little 'unusual' – and certainly make for some memorable experiences. In **Myingyan** (p000) prized Buddha relics are housed in a remarkably unchanged British-colonial bank safe, while the remains of a famous monk have been in open view since 1951.

Snake temples are another thing. Three pythons in **Paleik** (p000) are lovingly fed at 11am daily, and pose with frightened kids for photos. Another python in **Bago** (p000) is supposedly the reincarnation of the former head of a monastery. At **Minbu** (p000) you can dip your toe in a 'volcano' made of bubbling butane gas; and, hey, there's a couple of snakes at the pagoda.

You can pick up a water buffalo for mum at the market in **Kengtung** (p000); a cheapie costs US\$200. Near the Chinese border, **Mong La** (p000) is a casino town with transvestites and Chinese yuan for local currency. Near India, **Kalaymyo** (p000) is a half-Chin, half-Bamar town you can fly to, but don't wander out of town.

The unique spectacled Buddha of **Shwemyetman Paya** (p000) sits in a temple near Pyay. Any **nat festival** (p000) may evolve into people falling into trances and being possessed by spirits, sometimes led by men dressed as *nat* wives.

Feast on wriggling larva at **markets** (p000).



Snapshot

FAST FACTS

Population: 52 million

Population growth rate:
0.47%

Area: 676,577 sq km

GDP: US\$73.7 billion
(60th in world)

GDP per capita: US\$1733
(172nd in world)

Number of refugees
or displaced persons:
600,000 to one million

Internet users:
28,000 (2003)

Estimated number
of people with AIDS:
330,000

Government's self-
proclaimed slogan:
'Everybody's friend but
nobody's ally'

Number of Bangkok
noodle carts named after
Aung San Suu Kyi: 100

When you've been isolated from the international community for as long as Myanmar has, even a major government shake-up, as happened in October 2004, makes little more than a blip on the international media radar – if that. This particular shake-up came when Myanmar's number three in command, Prime Minister Khin Nyunt, was arrested and 'permitted to retire for health reasons'. Hard-line leader General Than Shwe accused Nyunt of 'corruption', but most commentators believe Nyunt's removal had more to do with his overly pro-China business interests and concerns over his military intelligence background. In the days that followed, hundreds of intelligence officers, which Than Shwe also looked upon with suspicion, were arrested – and roadside checkpoints stood empty across the country. A couple of overly optimistic people believed Nyunt – with his declared 'road map to democracy' via a multi-party system – was something of a budding Gorbachev; others recall his brutal response to the 1988 nonviolent demonstrations. Most locals – many of whom learned of Nyunt's removal through CNN or BBC – are wary of Than Shwe's promise to continue with the roadmap. Comedian Lu Maw of the Mandalay-based Moustache Brothers called the change 'same wine, new bottle'.

After Nyunt's ousting came reports of thousands of prisoners being released, including many political prisoners. Still, one notable absentee on that list was Nobel Peace Prize-winner Aung San Suu Kyi, who remains under house arrest (her third arrest since 1989). Locking her up has provoked international condemnation of the regime. In July 2003, US President George W Bush enacted a full embargo of Myanmar, including a ban on all financial transactions with the country. This sent credit-card companies and foreign-run banks in Myanmar packing.

Meanwhile, the EU introduced stronger sanctions including threatening not to approve Myanmar dignitaries' visas; officials at the 2004 Athens Olympics refused entry to representatives of the Ministry of Sport from Myanmar; and in February 2005, Tony Blair approved a tourism boycott of the country. Even slow-to-criticise Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) officials publicly condemned Myanmar for keeping Suu Kyi under arrest, though it's unlikely much will come of talks on the matter at the 2006 Asean summit, controversially scheduled to take place in Myanmar. Despite sanctions with the West, Myanmar's trade with Singapore, China, Thailand and India remains unaffected, while Japan has flip-flopped back to environmental aid packages (and associated investment) with the ruling junta. In the meantime, General Than Shwe plays off China's and India's battling interests in the country (particularly regarding the country's offshore oil reserves – believed to be Asia's biggest) to the regime's advantage.

Reliable reports of the devastating December 2004 tsunami are few and far between. However, it appears that the country largely escaped the wrath of the disaster, though southeastern Myanmar saw 20 deaths when a bridge was washed out in Kawthoung.

The Authors



ROBERT REID

Coordinating Author

Moulded by Oklahoma (USA) public schools, Robert moved to a crappy base-ment apartment in New York with his still-warm journalism degree. After that he lived in San Francisco, London and Ho Chi Minh City, where he worked at *Vietnam News* and travelled a lot around Southeast Asia. After Asia, Robert worked at Lonely Planet – as a commissioning editor then a publishing manager. He now writes full-time from a Brooklyn apartment with a view of the galaxy-famous Verrazano Bridge. Robert wrote the introductory chapters, Mandalay, Around Mandalay, Bagan & Central Myanmar, Temples of Bagan, Western Myanmar, Pyin U Lwin section, Directory, and Transport.

The Coordinating Author's Favourite Trip

I was a little worried about the bus trip between Ngapali Beach (p314) and Pyay (p283) – a bouncing, fish-filled, sure-fire vomit ride. My bus mate – a local in jeans and ballcap (little guy, maybe 37) – lets go a raspy laugh at anything uttered. 'I paid US\$15 to stay there.' *Ho ho ho!* 'Another passport check?' *Ho ho ho!* A woman gets off in Taunggok snarling, 'I don't want my daughter to throw up all night'. *Ho ho ho.* At a 3am tea stop, Rasp buys me tea and cake and teases a heavy-set woman; 'She looks like she's 50.' (Much laughter. Her too.) I'm asked how old she looks. 'I would've sworn 27.' (More laughter.) Turns out she's his wife. I wake him in Pyay at 5.30am and hand him an 'I ♥ NYC' T-shirt. *Ho ho ho.* Somehow we made the journey without even unfolding the vomit bag.



MICHAEL GROSBERG

Yangon, Around Yangon, Southeast Myanmar & Northeast Myanmar

Michael was raised in the Washington DC area, studied philosophy in Michigan and Israel and then worked in business in the Northern Marianas. A long overland trip through Asia followed, finally ending in exhaustion, carrying his clothes in a laundry bag in Amman, Jordan, with his sanity still intact. After stints at journalism and NGO work in South Africa, Michael pursued graduate work in comparative literature in New York City and has since taught at various universities. Despite the long economy-class flights and his inherited distaste for air travel, he has continued to make repeated trips to Southeast Asia.

LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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