

# History

A preview of the past: life in Myanmar has rarely been smooth. Squabbling kingdoms plagued the area for centuries, till the British took it in three waves in the 19th century. For its own economic benefit, Britain managed the mountainous border regions (home to many ethnic groups) and the fertile plains and delta of central and lower Myanmar (where most Bamar live) separately, festering a rift between cultures that lingers in full force today. After a rocky independence from Britain from 1948, General Ne Win wrestled control in 1962 from the fracturing elected government and led the country to full isolation from the outside world. Ruined by a rapidly deteriorating economy and a major currency devaluation in the 1970s and '80s, many thousands of locals flooded the streets – peacefully – on 8 August 1988 in prodemocracy marches that saw Aung San Suu Kyi emerge as a leader recognised worldwide. The violent reaction to this protest by the military was broadcast on international television screens and forced the administration to call a national election. The election was held in 1990, but the military has yet to hand over the government to Aung San Suu Kyi's National League of Democracy (NLD), which won a staggering percentage of votes.

## WHERE HUMANS BEGAN?

Virtually nothing is known of Myanmar's prehistoric inhabitants, though archaeological evidence suggests the area has been inhabited since at least 2500 BC. Ancient Greeks knew of Burma. Going a bit further back in history: the Myanmar government is proud of recent finds that link the earliest primates – of which, theory goes, humans evolved – to Asia, or more precisely central Myanmar. A 45 million-year-old fossil (an anklebone of a primate) was supposedly found in central Myanmar in the late 1990s.

## EARLY KINGDOMS

Myanmar's landscape – a broad expanse of fertile flatland cupped by protective mountain ranges along its present international borders and carved by long, very navigable rivers – explains a lot of how this land evolved once migrating ethnic groups decided to stick around. Four major precolonial ethnic groups peppered the flatlands with kingdoms for centuries, while smaller ethnic groups lived – mostly untouched – in the remote hills beyond. The first major kingdom of sorts started with the Pyu (who arrived from the Tibeto-Burman plateau or from India). The Pyu created city-states – Beikthano, Hanlin (p262), Sri Ksetra (Thayekhittaya; p286) – in central Myanmar between the 1st century BC and the 9th century AD. In the 10th century, Yunnanese invaders from China enslaved or scared off most Pyu (though some art of the Pyu remains, showing a blend of Hinduism and Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism).

The Mon (Tailing), who may have originated from eastern India or mainland Southeast Asia, arrived in the 6th century, settling fertile lowlands on

*History of Burma* (1925), by GE Harvey, gives a chronological rundown of Myanmar's kingdoms (from the Pyu era until 1824). Harvey almost audibly sighs at the kings' blunders, and faithfully recounts many fanciful legends.

The Rakhaing claim the Buddha visited their kingdom in the 6th century BC.

## TIMELINE 543 BC

Buddha's death

## 1st century BC

Possible founding of Beikthano, a Pyu town east of current-day Magwe

**CAPITAL HOPSCOTCH**

It's difficult to give a precise summary of overlapping historical periods, dynasties and locations of capitals in Myanmar due to a lack of accurate records. Here are general periods of key capitals of the Pyu, Rakhaing, Mon and Bamar people, although the kingdoms often jumped about as often as new kings breathed and died.

<b>Pyu</b>		Inwa	1364-1555
Beikthano	1st century BC-		1636-1752
	5th century AD		1765-83
Hanlin	3rd-9th century		1823-37
Thayekhittaya	3rd-10th century	Taungoo	1486-1573
		Shwebo	1758-65
		(Mokesebo)	
<b>Rakhaing</b>		Konbaung	1783-1823
Dhanyawady	?-6th century AD		1837-57
Wethali	4th-9th century		1857-85
Mrauk U	13th-18th century	Mandalay	
		(Yadanapon)	
<b>Mon</b>		<b>British</b>	
Thaton (Dvaravati)	?-10th century	Sittwe &	1826-52
Hanthawady (Bago)	6th-16th century	Mawlamyine	
	1740-57	Mandalay	1852-86
		Yangon	1886-1947
<b>Bamar</b>			
Bagan	10th-14th century		
Sagaing	1315-64		

the Ayeyarwady River delta across Thailand to Cambodia. They developed the area as Suvannabhumi (Golden Land), the capital either being near present-day Thaton in Myanmar, or in Thailand's Nakhon Pathom.

The Bamar people, or Burmans, arrived from somewhere in the eastern Himalaya in the 8th or 9th century, supplanting the vanquished Pyu in central Myanmar, and establishing the cultural heartland of Myanmar as it's still known. Bagan (Pagan) is believed to have been founded by the Bamar in 849. Centuries of conflict with the Mon erupted after their arrival, and the end product – even with Bamar coming out on top – was really a merger of the two cultures.

Sometimes linked with present-day Bangladesh, the Rakhaing (Arakanese) claim their kingdom was well underway by the 6th century BC. Certainly it was in full force by the 15th century, when – as a Buddhist kingdom based in Mrauk U – Rakhaing pirates controlled much of the Bay of Bengal.

**THE 'FIRST BURMA'**

Nearly 200 years after Bagan was founded, Anawrahta took the throne in 1044 and ignited the so-called 'golden period' by consolidating the scattered kingdoms for the first time. Initially animists, the Bamar had picked up a hybrid form of Buddhism – part Tantric, part Mahayana – during their migration to Myanmar. When the Mon king Manuha of Thaton refused Anawrahta's request for their Tripitaka (the holy canon of Theravada Buddhism), Anawrahta marched south and conquered

Thaton in 1057, bringing back both the scriptures and the king! The resultant injection of Mon culture in Bagan inspired a creative energy. It quickly became a city of glorious temples and the capital of the First Burmese Empire. For more on the history of Bagan see p293.

In 1077, the kingdom took a steady slip downward when a lowly buffalo killed mighty Anawrahta. None of his successors (Kyanzitha, Alaungsithu and Htilominlo) had his vision, and the kingdom's power slowly declined. In 1273 King Narathihapate gets the credit for carelessly offending the growing power of Kublai Khan and his Tartars (assassinating diplomats will do that), who invaded in 1287 but didn't stay long. Shan tribes from the hills to the east – closely related with the Siamese – took the opportunity and grabbed a piece of the low country, while the Mon in the south broke free of Bamar control and established their own kingdom.

**SECOND BURMESE EMPIRE**

The 200 years following the collapse of Bagan were chaotic, with pieces of the puzzle ruled by varying factions. During this time, Marco Polo probably dropped by in the late 13th century, and the first actual record of European contact came in 1435, when Venetian trader Nicolo di Conti travelled along the coast.

In the 13th century the Mon re-established Hanthawady as a fairly stable kingdom at Bago (Pegu) near Yangon. In 1472, Dhammazedi, the greatest of Bago's kings, came to the throne; he prompted a Buddhist revival, set up diplomatic contact with Europe and set the first stones for the great Shwedagon Paya in Yangon.

Meanwhile the Shan had taken over northern Myanmar and founded the Kingdom of Inwa (mistakenly called 'Ava' by the British) near present-day Mandalay in 1364, and the Rakhaing people flourished in western Myanmar, building fields of temples to rival Bagan.

Amid the testosterone, the tiny settlement of Bamar refugees in central Taungoo (surviving between the Mon and Shan by playing the larger forces off against each other) managed eventually to egg on the so-called 'Second Burmese Empire'. In the 16th century, a series of Taungoo kings extended their power north, nearly to the Shan's capital at Inwa, then south, taking the Mon kingdom and shifting their own capital to Bago. In 1550 Bayinnaung came to the throne and reunified all of Myanmar and defeated the neighbouring Siamese so convincingly that it was to be many years before the long-running friction between the two nations re-emerged.

As happened with Anawrahta, the union slipped into decline following the ruler's death in 1581. The capital was shifted north to Inwa in 1636. Its isolation from the sea – effectively cutting off communication around the kingdom – ultimately contributed to their defeat by the British.

**BURMA'S LAST KINGS**

King Alaungpaya kicked off the third and final Burmese dynasty by contesting against the Mon when the Mon took over Inwa in 1752. Some say Alaungpaya's sense of invincibility deluded the Burmese into thinking they could resist the British later on. After Alaungpaya's short bloody reign (see p38), his son, Hsinbyushin charged into Thailand and levelled the capital of Ayuthaya, forcing the Siamese to relocate their capital to

What is currently considered traditional 'Burmese culture' is really a fusion of Mon and Bamar cultures that came about at the height of the Bagan era.

*The Traveller's History of Burma* (2000), by Gerry Abbot, highlights interactions with Myanmar from foreign eyes from the 14th century to the end of the last millennium.

**AD 754**

Chinese Yunnan conquers the hill tribes in the north

**6th–9th century**

The Mon, then the Bamar people settle in Myanmar

**849**

Bagan founded

**1057**

Ancient Mon city of Thaton conquered by Anawrahta's Bamar forces from Bagan; First Burmese Empire emerges

**BURMA'S GREATEST KING**

Mention 'Alaungpaya' to a Burmese person and you'll often get a smile. The king with no royal ties put his hometown of Shwebo (then known as Mokesebo; p260) on the map, and kick-started Burma's final dynasty by kicking more arse than all the rest of Burmese kings combined. During his reign, he mocked English dignitaries ('like women with soft skin and no tattoos') and shrugged off offers of assistance ('I can crush 100 men such as the king of Bago'). Alaungpaya talked big, but backed it all up – plus some.

As the Mon (Tailing) army of Bago conquered a passive Burmese capital of Inwa (Ava) in 1752, a furious Alaungpaya rallied to keep the Burmese kingdom alive. He readied his hometown (then home to 300) by digging a moat and building walls. When the Mon asked for Alaungpaya's allegiance, he attacked.

Word spread of this defiant bumpkin, and Alaungpaya found ready recruits – Burmese and Shan – who would accept the measly offerings for serving in his army: no pay (other than selling any Mon kidnapped) and a BYOBS policy ('bring your own bamboo spear' to fight with).

Over the next few years, however, the army collected weapons from slain French soldiers (who aided the Mon) and gradually picked apart the Mon kingdom: taking Inwa in 1753, Pyay in 1755, Dagon later in 1755 (which he renamed Yangon, meaning 'End of Strife'), and the Mon capital of Bago in 1757. At one point, so the story goes, Alaungpaya sent 1000 cut-off Mon heads on a raft to Bago as a gesture of ill will. After five years of battling the Shwebo king, the Mon fled to Siam where they were assimilated.

Alaungpaya followed them. But he started so late in the year that rains sent him and his army on retreat. On 11 May 1760, not yet back home, Alaungpaya died at the age of 46. His body was cremated in Shwebo.

His reign lasted only eight years, but his home is ever revered as 'Victory Land' to most Burmese.

what eventually became Bangkok. His successor, Bodawpaya (another son of Alaungpaya), looked for glory too, and brought the Rakhaing (Arakanese) under Burmese control, which eventually led to tension with the British (who had economic interests in Rakhaing territory) that the dynasty would not outlive.

With eyes on Indochina, Britain wrestled all of the increasingly isolationist Burma from the kings in three swipes, named the First, Second and Third Anglo-Burmese Wars – picking up Tenasserim and Rakhaing in 1824, Yangon and southern Burma in 1853, and Mandalay and northern Burma in 1885. The first war started when Burmese troops, ordered by King Bagyidaw, crossed into British-controlled Assam (in India) from Rakhaing to pursue refugees. General Maha Bandula managed some minor victories using guerrilla tactics, but eventually was killed by cannon fire in 1824; Burmese troops then surrendered. The Treaty of Yandabo, helped by the translator of missionary Adoniram Judson (whose name is on many Baptist churches in Myanmar still), gave Rakhaing and Tenasserim to the British.

Two Burmese kings later, Bagan Min started his reign – as many did – with mass executions to rid the capital of his potential rivals. An 1852 incident involving the possible kidnapping of two British sea captains – some argue it never happened – gave the British a welcome excuse for igniting another conflict, and an opportunity for more land. The British

quickly seized all of southern Burma, conquering Yangon, Patheingyi (Bassein) and they marched north to Pyaw (Prome), facing little opposition.

The unpopular Bagan Min was ousted in favour of Mindon Min, who moved the capital to Mandalay in 1857. Mindon Min built Mandalay, but unhappily didn't adequately provide for his successor. After he died in 1878, the new (rather reluctant) king, Thibaw Min, was propelled to power by his ruthless wife and scheming mother-in-law. The following massive 'massacre of kinsmen' (79 of his rivals) made many British papers – previous kings hadn't had to face the consequences of world media attention – which did little to support any move to question British power.

**ENTER BRITAIN**

King Thibaw was totally ineffective and ruthless. Gangs of thugs replaced relative order in northern Burma. In 1885 it took Britain two weeks to take Mandalay, the final piece in the Burmese acquisition puzzle. Some locals today shake their heads stating that Ayeyarwady forts weren't used adequately to repel the British ships; others call the conflict 'the war over wood', as Britain's victory allowed it to secure rights to the growing teak industry.

Focused on controlling the rice, gem, petroleum and (particularly) teak exports, England found Burma easier to control by applying direct rule only where the Bamar were the majority (ie in the central plains). 'Hill states' of the Chin, Kachin, Shan, Kayin and Kayah were allowed to remain largely autonomous. This division would contribute to a rocky start when Myanmar became independent in 1948, due to ill-feeling between the groups.

Division among the indigenous population was brought about in other ways too. As part of 'British India' after 1885, a flood of Indians (whom the Burmese traditionally looked down on) came into the country and became the 'second colonisers,' by building businesses and taking rare low-level government jobs. The less commercially experienced Burmese were unable to compete. By 1930, most of Yangon's population was Indian. Chinese were also encouraged to immigrate and set up businesses to stimulate the economy. Cheap British imports poured in, fuelled by rice profits.

At this time many old names got new British ones: Rangoon for Yangon, Prome for Pyaw, Burma for Myanmar.

Contrary to the romantic tone of modern English-language accounts of 'Burma under the Raj', much of Myanmar was considered a hardship posting by British colonial officials, who found the Burmese difficult to govern (and, to be fair, many of the British officials were insensitive and incompetent). The country had the highest crime rate in the British Empire. Along with railroads and schools, the British built prisons, including the infamous Insein prison, the Empire's largest and still in use by the current government.

**RISE OF NATIONALISM**

Of course, many Burmese were not happy with the British presence, and nationalism burgeoned in the early days of the 20th century – often led by Buddhist monks. In 1919, at Mandalay's Eindawya Paya (p236), monks evicted Europeans who refused to take off their shoes; one monk, U Kettaya, was given a life sentence. U Ottama, a Burmese monk who had

A couple of interesting titles (usually available in Yangon) include *A History of Burma* by Maung Htin Aung, and *Deposed King Thibaw of Burma in India, 1885–1926*, by WS Desai.

For an immensely readable fictionalised, but accurate, retelling of Burma's days from the fall of King Thibaw to the modern era, read Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* (p29).

**1270s**

Marco Polo pops by

**1273**

Burmese slay Tartar ambassadors; a peeved-off Kublai Khan invades 14 years later

**1364**

Shan leaders found Inwa (Ava)

**1435**

Portuguese Nicolo di Conti visits; the first recorded European contact

Some of the first British encounters with Burmese kings were in the early 18th century, when Bodawpaya dressed up in so much gold (to impress) that he needed assistants to help move him to his throne.

studied in India and returned to Myanmar in 1921, promoted religious liberation as way to bring the independence movement to the attention of the average Burmese Buddhist. After numerous arrests, U Ottama died in prison in 1939. Another monk, U Wizaya, died in prison after a 163-day hunger strike that began as a protest against a rule that forbade monks from wearing robes while imprisoned.

University students in Yangon went on strike on National Day in 1920, protesting elitist entrance requirements at British-built universities; the students referred to each other as *thakin* (master), as they claimed to be the rightful masters of Burma. (Present leader General Than Shwe among them.) One *thakin* – a young man called Aung San – was expelled from university in 1936 for refusing to reveal who wrote a politically charged article.

The British were eventually forced to make a number of concessions towards self-government. In 1937 Myanmar was separated administratively from India, but internally the country was torn by a struggle between opposing Burmese parties and sporadic outbursts of anti-Indian and anti-Chinese violence.

### Aung San & WWII

More famous in the West as Aung San Suu Kyi's father, Bogyoke Aung San is still revered as national hero No 1 by most Myanmar people – from prodemocracy activists to the military regime. His likeness is seen throughout Myanmar. Aung San Suu Kyi, who was only two when he died, called him 'a simple man with a simple aim: to fight for independence'.

Born in 1915, Aung San was an active student at Rangoon University. He edited the newspaper and led the All Burma Students' Union. At 26 years old, he and the group called the 'Thirty Comrades' looked abroad for support of their independence movement. After initially planning to seek it in China, they negotiated for military training in Japan, and returned as the first troops of the Burmese National Army (BNA) with the invading Japanese troops in 1941. By mid-1942, the Japanese had driven retreating British-Indian forces, along with the Chinese Kuomintang (KMT), out of most of Myanmar. But the harsh and arrogant conduct of the Japanese soon alienated the Myanmar people. Aung San complained at Japan's 15th Army headquarters in Maymyo (now Pyin U Lwin): 'I went to Japan to save my people who were struggling like bullocks under the British. But now we are treated like dogs.'

#### MAJOR WWII SITES IN MYANMAR

- **Lashio** (p215) Where the infamous Burma Road began
- **Taukkyan War Cemetery** (p140) Final resting place of over 33,000 allied soldiers
- **'Death Railway' terminus** (p159) Western end of Japanese-designed Burma–Siam Railway (of *Bridge over the River Kwai* fame), built by Allied POWs and Asian coolies and which claimed over 100,000 lives
- **British Colonial Diplomat House, Meiktila** (p288) Former Japanese interrogation centre, now a hotel

*Irrawaddy Flotilla*, by Alister McRae, highlights the British-bred fleet of steamers that continue to ply Myanmar's many waterways, while *The Longest War 1941–45*, by Louis Allen, gives an excellent account of the WWII campaign in Burma.

Aung San and the BNA switched allegiance to the Allied side. The British, helped by the imaginative 'Chindit' anti-Japanese operation, ultimately prevailed. The Allies suffered about 27,000 casualties, while nearly 200,000 Japanese perished during the campaign.

### Footsteps to Independence

In January 1947, Aung San visited London as the colony's deputy chairman of the Governor's Executive Council, and signed a pact (the Aung San–Attlee agreement) allowing self-rule within a year. Plans included an April election of a constituent assembly, made up of nationals of Burma only; also Burma would receive an interest-free loan of £8 million from Britain.

A month later, Aung San met with Shan, Chin and Kachin leaders in Panglong, in Shan State. They signed the famous Panglong Agreement in February 1947, guaranteeing ethnic minorities the freedom to choose their political destiny if dissatisfied with the situation after 10 years. The agreement also broadly covered absent representatives of the Kayin, Kayah, Mon and Rakhaing.

In the elections for the assembly, Aung San's Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) won an overwhelming 172 seats out of 225. The Burmese Communist Party took seven, while the Bamar opposition (led by U Saw) took three. The remaining 69 seats were split between ethnic minorities (including four seats for the Anglo-Burman community).

Britain hoped to maintain influence and wanted a gradual transition. Aung San wanted immediate independence with a democratic, civilian government.

He wouldn't live to see it. On 19 July 1947, the 32-year-old Aung San and six aides were gunned down in a plot ascribed to U Saw. (Some speculate that the military was involved, due to Aung San's plans to demilitarise the government.) Apparently U Saw thought he'd walk into the prime minister's role with Aung San gone; instead he took the noose, when the British had him hanged in 1948.

### U NU & EARLY WOES

While Myanmar mourned the death of a hero, Prime Minister Attlee and Aung San's protégé, U Nu, signed an agreement for the transfer of power in October 1947. On 4 January 1948, at an auspicious middle-of-the-night hour, Burma became independent and left the British Commonwealth. As Aung San had promised, the national presidency was given to a representative from an ethnic minority group, and Sao Shwe Thaik, a Shan leader, became the first president of the Union of Burma.

Almost immediately, the new government had to contend with the complete disintegration of the country – involving rebels, communists, gangs and US-supported anticommunist Chinese KMT forces.

The hill-tribe people, who had supported the British and fought against the Japanese throughout the war, were distrustful of the Bamar majority and went into armed opposition. The communists withdrew from the government and attacked it. Muslims from the Rakhaing area also opposed the new government. The Mon, long thought to be totally integrated with the Burmese, revolted. Assorted factions, private armies, WWII resistance groups and plain mutineers further confused the picture.

'Democracy is the only ideology which is consistent with freedom... It is therefore the only ideology we should aim for'

AUNG SAN

1472

The great Mon King Dhammazedi takes the throne and sets up diplomatic contact with Europe

1550

Bayinnaung ascends to the throne and reunifies all of Myanmar; the Second Burmese Empire

1627

Dutch and English East India Company opens branches

1753–5

Burmese king Alaungpaya conquers Inwa, then Dagon, which he renames as Yangon

*Burma: Prospects for Political and Economic Reconstruction* (1997), by David I Steinberg, written for the World Peace Foundation, gives a quick summing-up of the present woes and concludes that 'The Burmese will determine their own fate'.

In early 1949 almost the entire country was in the hands of a number of rebel groups, and there was even fighting in Yangon's suburbs. At one stage the government was on the point of surrendering to the communist forces, but gradually fought back, and through 1950 and 1951 regained control of much of the country.

Also, with the collapse of Chiang Kai-Shek's KMT forces before Mao Zedong's, the tattered remnants of the KMT withdrew into northern Burma and mounted raids from there into Yunnan, China. Being no match for the Chinese communists, the KMT decided to carve their own little fiefdom out of Burmese territory.

## NE WIN & THE ROAD TO SOCIALISM

By the mid-1950s, the government had strengthened its hold on the country, but the economy slipped from bad to worse. A number of grandiose development projects succeeded only in making foreign 'advisors' rather wealthy, and in 1953 the Burmese bravely announced that aid or assistance from the USA was no longer welcome, as long as US-supplied Chinese KMT forces were at large within the country. U Nu managed to remain in power until 1958, when he voluntarily handed the reins over to a military government under General Ne Win.

Considering the pride most of the country had for the Burmese army – which helped bring independence and was founded by Aung San – this was seen as a welcome change. Freed from the 'democratic' responsibilities inherent in a civilian government, Ne Win was able to make some excellent progress during the 15 months his military government operated. A degree of law and order was restored, rebel activity was reduced and Yangon was given a massive and much-needed cleanup.

In early 1960, elections were held and U Nu regained power with a much-improved majority, but once again political turmoil developed. His party threatened to break up into opposing groups and in early 1962 Ne Win assumed power again and abolished the parliament. He established his own 17-member Revolutionary Council, announcing that the country would 'march towards socialism in our own Burmese way'. This time U Nu did not hand over power voluntarily, and along with his main ministers was thrown into prison, where he remained until forced into exile in 1966.

'The Burmese Road to Socialism' was a steadily downhill path. A rice-growing wonder fell into economic free fall. Nationalisation policies were extended right down to the retail shop level in 1966 when it was announced that a long list of items would only be available from 'Peoples Shops'. The net result was frightening; many everyday commodities immediately became available only on the black market, and vast numbers of people were thrown out of work by the closure of retail outlets.

A disingenuous 'sock the rich' measure demonetised the largest banknotes (K50 and K100). Anybody so unfortunate as to have these notes found them to be worthless. Many of the retail traders who became unemployed following the nationalisation of retail trade were Indians and Chinese – vestiges of the colonial era in Bamar eyes – and they were hustled out of the country with Draconian thoroughness. No compensation was paid for their expropriated businesses, and each adult

was allowed to depart with only K75 plus K250 in gold. As many as a 250,000 people of Indian and Chinese descent left Burma during the 1960s. Anti-Chinese riots in Yangon in 1967 – spurred by fears that the Chinese were about to 'import' China's Cultural Revolution – resulted in hundreds of Chinese deaths.

In late 1974 there were serious student disturbances over the burial of former United Nations (UN) secretary-general and long-time Ne Win political foe, U Thant, yet overall the government appeared firmly in control and determined to continue its strange progress towards a Burmese Utopia. In late 1981 Ne Win retired as president of the republic (retaining his position as chair of the Burmese Socialist Programme Party, the country's only legal political party at the time), but his successor, San Yu, and the government remained guided very much by Ne Win's political will.

## '8-8-88'

With the standard of living in Burma on a continual downward spiral, something happened that no-one foresaw. In 1987 and 1988, the long-suffering Burmese people decided they had had enough of their incompetent and arrogant government and packed the streets in huge demonstrations, insisting that Ne Win go.

Ne Win voluntarily retired from the chairmanship of the party in July 1988, but it was too late to halt the agitation of the people. The massive prodemocracy demonstrations, spurred by the further demonetisation of large notes and a prophecy that Burma would become a 'free country' on the auspicious date of 8 August 1988 (8-8-88), were brutally crushed by the government, with at least 3000 deaths recorded over a six-week period.

Ne Win's National Unity Party (NUP; formerly the Burmese Socialist Programme Party) was far from ready to give up control, and the public protests continued as two Ne Win stooges succeeded him. The third Ne Win successor came to power after a military coup in September 1988, which, it is generally believed, was organised by Ne Win.

A newly formed State Law & Order Restoration Council (Slorc) established martial law under the leadership of General Saw Maung, commander in chief of the armed forces, and promised to hold democratic National Assembly elections in May 1989.

The opposition quickly formed a coalition party called the National League for Democracy (NLD) and campaigned for all it was worth. The long-suppressed Burmese population rallied around charismatic NLD spokesperson Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of hero Aung San. Suu Kyi, conversant in Burmese, Japanese, French and English and married to an Oxford University professor, brought a hitherto-unseen sophistication to Burmese politics.

Nervous, Slorc tried to appease the masses with new roads and adding a coat of paint to many buildings in Yangon, and then it attempted to interfere in the electoral process by shifting villages from one part of the country to another and by postponing the election. Perhaps the biggest surprise came with the announcement that the government was abandoning socialism in favour of a capitalist economy in all but a few industries.

In July 1989 Aung San Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest.

In 1989, Slorc changed the country's official name from the Union of Burma to the Union of Myanmar, claiming that 'Burma' was a vestige of European colonialism. Other name changes included Rangoon (back to Yangon).

After being forced into exile, one-time leader U Nu vainly attempted to oppose the Ne Win government from abroad. In 1980 he returned to Yangon, where he translated Buddhist scripture most of the time. He died in 1995.

1826

England annexes Rakhing and Tenasserim, following First Anglo-Burmese War

1852

Second Anglo-Burmese War gives Britain Bago

1885

Third Anglo-Burmese War ends era of Burmese kings

1947–8

General Aung San assassinated; independence achieved

## 1990 ELECTION & THE NLD

Feeling it had effectively dealt with the opposition, the government allowed an election in May 1990 (the first in 30 years). In spite of all its preventive measures, the NUP lost the election to the NLD, which took 392 of the 485 contested seats. Slorc barred the elected members of parliament from assuming power, however, decreeing that a state-approved constitution had to be passed by national referendum first. In October 1990 the military raided NLD offices and arrested key leaders. Since that time over 100 elected parliamentarians have been disqualified, imprisoned, exiled or killed. Some observers wonder if the election was a ruse to get opposition out in the open, where they could be more easily crushed.

Before her arrest in 1989, Suu Kyi had been appointed secretary general of the NLD. The main NLD candidates in line for any potential premiership that might have occurred if the 1990 election results had been recognised by the current regime were U Aung Shwe, U Tin Oo and U Kyi Maung, all ex-officers. It was widely acknowledged, even back in 1990, that Slorc would never allow a person of Aung San Suu Kyi's background (an ex-resident of the country, and married to a Briton) to run for office; it was equally acknowledged that the candidates who stood the best chance of acceptance by the military dictatorship were those with a military background. It turned out that even this was not enough to make the ruling junta relinquish control.

After the events of 1988–89, the world press at first gave amazingly little coverage to politics in the country that had been renamed Myanmar. In January 1991, Suu Kyi was awarded the Sakharov Prize for freedom of thought by the European Parliament, and in October of the same year she was honoured with the Nobel Peace Prize. Another international honour came her way in June 1992 when Unesco awarded Suu Kyi the Simón Bolívar Prize. In May 1995, Suu Kyi was honoured with a fourth international award when India presented the leader, in absentia, with the Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding. As the world media began to follow events in Myanmar, prodemocracy elements, both within the country and abroad, proved themselves to be much more media savvy than the military junta. The democratisation of 'Burma', as most prodemocracy groups still call the country, soon became a cause célèbre for sundry activists and Hollywood celebrities.

Much to the joy of the Burmese people and her supporters abroad, the government released Suu Kyi from house arrest in July 1995 after nearly six years. Suu Kyi's detention was the most potent symbol of government repression and the biggest magnet for international attention, but many other high-level dissidents, including the NLD's Tin U and Kyi Maung, were also released at this time – not from house arrest, but from prison. For several months Suu Kyi was allowed to address crowds of supporters from her residence. In May and September 1996, Suu Kyi held a congress of NLD members in a bold political gambit to demonstrate that the NLD was still an active political force. The junta responded by detaining hundreds who attended the congress and the street leading to Suu Kyi's residence was blockaded, prohibiting her from making speeches at her residence.

Had the NLD been installed in government, Suu Kyi wouldn't have been the leader. She may have been given a high position, though the constitution forbids those married to foreigners from holding high public office.

Aung San Suu Kyi has been under house arrest three times (from July 1989 to July 1995; from September 2000 to May 2002; and from May 2003 to the present).

## THE WRITINGS OF AUNG SAN SUU KYI

It takes very little reading to understand why so many people in Myanmar have a deep respect for 'the Lady', Aung San Suu Kyi. Her interviews with journalist Alan Clements, described in *Voices of Hope* (1997), often intermingle politics and Buddhism. *Freedom from Fear* (1991) is a collection of her writings on topics ranging from her father to winning the Nobel Peace Prize. *Letters from Burma* (1997) features a collection of letters Suu Kyi wrote on Burmese culture for a Japanese publication.

In 1998 18 foreign activists were arrested in Yangon in 1998 for distributing antigovernment leaflets. In the same year Suu Kyi attempted to leave Yangon to meet with supporters outside the city but was blocked by the military and forcibly returned to Yangon. In 1999 Suu Kyi's British husband, Oxford professor Michael Aris, died of cancer shortly after Yangon denied him a visa to see Suu Kyi one last time in Myanmar. Although they hadn't seen each other since January 1996, Suu Kyi felt she had no choice but to stay in Myanmar, fearing that if she left the country to visit her husband's deathbed in England, she would be refused re-entry and forced into exile.

Suu Kyi made a second attempt to leave Yangon to meet with supporters in September 2000, but was stopped at a military roadblock. After spending six days in her car by the roadside, Suu Kyi was once again placed under house arrest.

In October 2000, secret talks began between Suu Kyi and the junta – the most significant step towards reconciliation since the elections. Brokered by Rizali Ismail, a former Malaysian diplomat and special envoy to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, the talks resulted in the release of hundreds of political prisoners. A very noticeable result of the talks was the cessation of crude attacks against Suu Kyi in the Myanmar media. The NLD in return stopped its direct criticism of the Myanmar government.

In May 2002 Suu Kyi was released from house arrest and immediately announced that her demands for political reform had not changed as a result of the talks with the junta. Her unconditional release promised the opposition leader freedom of movement for the first time in over 12 years. In the weeks following her release she visited NLD offices in townships in the Rangoon area, and in late June made a triumphant visit to Mandalay. It was Suu Kyi's first trip to Myanmar's second-largest city since 1989 (her September 2000 attempt to visit Mandalay was thwarted by the military).

In May 2003, while touring Sagaing District outside Budalin (north of Monywa), Suu Kyi and a party of 250 NLD members were attacked. It's believed as many as 100 people were killed. Many others were held in detention. Suu Kyi spent several months in jail – and underwent a hunger strike. She was eventually transferred to her house. She is still there.

Aung San Suu Kyi returned to Burma from Britain in 1998 to tend to her dying mother. At the time disquiet with the government was at a peak

## THE WORLD & MYANMAR

To improve its image, Slorc hired a Washington, DC public-relations firm for help, which suggested changing its name to the State Peace & Development Council (SPDC), which it did in November 1997.

1962

Ne Win establishes power after military coup

1975

Massive earthquake rocks Bagan

1988

On 8/8 (8 August), huge prodemocracy nonviolent marches; army kills over 3000

1990

NLD earns 82% of votes in election but the military refuses to hand over power

Initially after 1988, the West established embargoes on arms sales and most foreign aid to Myanmar. But some companies – such as the UK's Premier Oil, France's Total and USA's Unocal – helped develop offshore gas fields. Stronger international sanctions were taken in 1997 by the USA, the regime's harshest critic, when it banned new investment by American companies in Myanmar. Strong lobbying by activists and threats of consumer boycotts forced some major companies (including PepsiCo, Heineken, Carlsberg and Levi Strauss) to either pull out or decide against investing in the country.

In November 1999, the UN International Labour Organization took the unprecedented step of recommending sanctions against Myanmar for its use of civilians for forced labour and treacherous tasks of portage for the military (including serving as 'human landmine detectors'). Its 174 member nations were advised to review their links with Myanmar and ensure they did not support forced labour there. In June 2001, UN agencies in Myanmar warned in a joint letter to their headquarters that Myanmar was facing a humanitarian crisis and that it was a 'moral and ethical necessity' for the international community to extend more aid. The letter stated that one-quarter of Burmese babies were born underweight and, as of the end of 1999, an estimated 530,000 people were HIV-positive. The letter also stated that Myanmar only receives annual foreign aid equivalent to about US\$1 per capita, compared with US\$35 for Cambodia and US\$68 for Laos.

In a controversial move in 2001, Japan broke ranks in the embargo on nonhumanitarian aid to Myanmar when it offered US\$28 million in technical assistance to repair the Baluchaung hydroelectric power plant in Kayah State as an incentive for the regime to press ahead with reconciliation talks with Suu Kyi.

The sanctions got stronger following Aung San Suu Kyi's third arrest in 2003. US President George W Bush authorised full economic sanctions, which resulted in foreign banks in Myanmar packing up and leaving. The wording of EU's sanctions, however, allowed France's Total gas company to continue operating there. Much criticism has focussed on whether forced labour was used from 1995 to 1998 to build Total's Yadana pipeline, which reportedly generates anywhere from US\$150 million to US\$400 million annually.

Critics of the use of sanctions argue that these measures hurt the local workforce. After US sanctions, many garment factories, virtually all of which are privately owned, closed down, reportedly leading to the loss of 40,000 to 60,000 jobs. For more on the sanctions debate, see p17.

Despite the Myanmar's government's human-rights record, a number of foreign investors – most of them Asian (particularly Chinese, but also Singaporean, Japanese, Indian and Thai) – continue to invest huge amounts of foreign currency into private development projects, especially in the Yangon to Mandalay corridor. See p22 for more on foreign investment.

The land border between Myanmar and China stands wide open for legal and illegal trade, and acts as the main supply line for millions of dollars worth of Chinese weaponry destined for Myanmar's military, along with another estimated US\$1 billion in consumer goods annually. A

1994 visit to Yangon by Chinese Premier Li Peng – the man who ordered the Tiananmen Square massacre one year after Myanmar's bloody 1988 putsdown – reaffirmed China's firm approval of Myanmar's government.

Meanwhile the repression of free speech and other human rights continues under the SPDC leadership. A report commissioned by the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) in Geneva describes systematic human-rights violations, including arbitrary arrests of anyone opposed to the junta, the torture of detainees, severe media restrictions, forced relocation of 500,000 urban dwellers, and forced conscription of civilians to serve as anything from porters to human minesweepers for the military. (See p56 for examples of media restrictions, and p65 for how censorship even affects rock music albums.) The government also frequently requests 'volunteer beautification' labour (in effect, forced labour) from city, town and village residents, requiring them to paint their houses, dig drainage ditches, build walls and weed the roadside. (Apparently forced labour has decreased since the early 1990s, according to Amnesty International, but is still very much in use. See [www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org) or [www.irrawaddy.org](http://www.irrawaddy.org), among other sites, for updates on this issue.)

Myanmar gained some international muscle with its controversial membership of Asean, which it joined in 1997. Despite some murmurs of discontent regarding the arrest of Aung San Suu Kyi, no Asean officials have directly confronted the generals on the issue. Some commentators wonder whether the 2006 Asean summit, scheduled for Yangon, will go forward if Suu Kyi isn't free by the time.

In 2004 Prime Minister Khin Nyunt, a disciple of Ne Win, who sought to re-create himself after Ne Win's death in 2002 with the seven-step 'Roadway to Democracy' programme, was ousted by hard-line Than Shwe, who claims he will continue the roadway. See p34 for more on recent events in Myanmar.

Considering the US renewal of 'Most Favoured Nation' trade status for China, and China remains a foreign-trade hub for Asia, Myanmar's government believes it need not fear trade sanctions with the West.

Although Ne Win had retired from all official positions in 1988, he was widely believed to call the shots for many years thereafter – possibly up till his death in December 2002.

## 1996

The Government's 'Visit Myanmar Year' prompts ongoing tourism boycott

## 1997

Myanmar joins Asean

## 2003

Aung San Suu Kyi placed under house arrest (for third time); USA and EU impose tougher sanctions

## 2004

Myanmar opens world's largest tiger reserve, ousts prime minister

# The Culture

## NATIONAL PSYCHE

Although isolated, subjugated and poor, the Myanmar people can be as proud of their country and culture as any nationality you'll meet. Locals gush over past kings, *pwe* (festivals), *mohinga* (noodles with chicken or fish) breakfasts, great temples and, for many, Theravada Buddhism itself. Of course Buddhism here comes with a heavy dosage of *bamahsan chinn* (Burmese-ness) – a Buddhism-influenced complex word describing the gentle personality of many, which includes undying respect for elders, modesty in dress, and a preference for subtlety rather than loudness or directness. Another trait is *ah har de*, a sense of not wanting to 'make waves' or pass on unpleasant news. Perhaps telling is Pico Iyer's great piece on hanging out with Myanmar students in *Video Nights in Kathmandu* (1988); though released on the eve of the explosive prodemocracy marches of that year, students talk of moonwalking, and do not even show a glimpse of the bubbling discontent.

Even small-scale open dialogue is not an everyday aspect of life. One exiled Myanmar man explained: 'The most important thing I got out of being in England was watching political TV shows, where people were arguing, explaining different viewpoints. That never happens at home.' It tends to surprise locals if an American tourist vocalises disapproval of George W Bush's policies, for example. Locals here tend to cheer for Arsenal, Manchester United and Chelsea.

## LIFESTYLE

Exiled writer Pascal Khoo Thwe writes that, growing up in Myanmar's hills, traditional family life meant that 'Earth is round at school and flat at home', meaning some aspects of modern life are left, along with your shoes, outside the door at home.

Families in Myanmar are big, and the birth – of a boy or girl – is a big occasion. While boys are coddled more, girls are equally welcomed, as they're expected to look after parents later in life. You might find three or four generations of a family living in a two- or three-room house. Some thatched huts in the countryside have generators pumping life into the TV a couple hours a night. Running water outside the cities and bigger

*Living Silence: Burma under Military Rule* (2001), by Christina Fink, sums up Myanmar's military years and how the military affects various aspects of life – all peppered with fascinating quotes from a wide cross-section of Myanmar people.

### TOP FIVE FIRST QUESTIONS ASKED

- **Burma or Myanmar?** Britain renamed 'Myanma' as Burma (after the majority Bamar, or Burmese, people); the junta restored the original name of Myanmar in 1989; 'Burmese' in this book refers to the food, the Bamar and the language.
- **Men in skirts?** Most Myanmar men wear *longyi* (saronglike wraparound 'skirts'); it's easy to understand why when the heat hits you.
- **Mud on face?** Women, kids and some men sprinkle, stripe or blotch their faces with *thanakha* (powdered bark) as make-up.
- **Is that blood?** No. The red droplets in corners and sidewalks are relinquished bits of betel, made from the chopped nut and a paste of slaked lime; you'll see betel sold from street-side stands, wrapped into small leaves.
- **How to say 'thanks'?** 'Cè-zù-bèh'.

towns is rare. Many families put coconut symbols of the house guardian *nat* (spirit) inside (see p000).

The bulk of village life revolves around the farm. Here Yangon's politics or dreams of wealth can pale in importance to the season, the crop, the level of the river (where they bathe, clean and get their drinking water) and Buddha. One local outside Shwebo told us, 'All I want is K2000 a day for rice to feed my family.'

### DO'S & DON'TS

#### Etiquette

Many locals are too kind to mention to a traveller when they're being insensitive. So, let it be your role to (politely) tell fellow travellers when they're acting inappropriately. Here are the basics:

- When visiting a Buddhist sight, don't wear shoes, shorts, short skirts, or have exposed shoulders.
- Don't thrust a camera into a monk's (or anyone's) face for a photo.
- Don't pose with, sit on, or strike Buddha images.
- Take your shoes off (not necessarily socks) when entering private homes.
- Don't touch somebody on the head (including patting a child's head).
- Don't point your feet at anybody or anything – apologise if you accidentally brush someone with your foot.
- When shaking hands or handing over something, do so with your right hand, while touching your right elbow with your left hand.
- Don't step over somebody who is sitting or lying on the floor (such as on a boat deck).

#### What to Give

Many travellers are prone to give gifts to locals in this impoverished country. Gifts can be big thrills – and are often asked for by children around the country – but foreigners should exercise care when deciding what and where and to whom they give things to. One way to discourage kids from begging, and to show respect, is giving toys or kid-related gifts either directly to their parents or to schools or monasteries. Here are a few gift suggestions:

- Donate school supplies – such as cheap pens and pencils bought locally – all of which are highly sought.
- Bring self-made or bought English-language tapes to give out to villagers who can't afford English classes.
- Bring some popular English-language magazines and books; locals love to read, and material is hard to find in cash-poor Myanmar; exercise care in handing over any that could carry political overtones (such as the *New Yorker* or the *Economist* or Myanmar-related books); hand discreetly over to new friends in their homes.
- Other popular gifts include Western T-shirts, lipstick, toys, baseball-style caps, stickers and chocolates (though heat ruins them in a hurry).
- Bring photographs of your city, home, family – or postcards you can leave.
- Instantly appearing images on digital cameras' viewfinder screens draw much applause from locals.
- If asked, make simple suggestions of what tourists might be interested in, to prompt grassroots entrepreneurship (eg 'night market walking tours' etc).
- Donate to villages seeking aid for health clinics (about 0.4% of the national budget goes to health care); at research time, we bumped into a Swiss tourist who contacted the Bagan Department of Archaeology seeking to fund placing a glass shield over unprotected 800-year-old murals.



In the cities, large apartment blocks are connected to more-or-less around-the-clock electricity. Residents are better educated, sometimes working as lawyers, doctors, clerks and officials – that is, they work in *buildings*. They're a bit more internationally aware, and likely to speak more English. Where electricity exists, it invariably clicks off frequently – when it does listen up for the 'ahhhs' and laughter that good-naturedly follows.

For Buddhists, especially, the acquisition of spiritual merit – by giving to monks, adding gold-leaf layers to Buddha images – helps worshippers achieve enlightenment. This is why locals in towns that lack a health clinic may bang alms bowls on the side of the road for donations to help build a new pagoda, for example.

Death is a big deal, though mourned for less time than in much of the West. To miss a funeral is an unimaginable faux pas. If a heated argument goes too far, the ultimate capper is to yell, 'Oh yeah? Don't come to my funeral when I die'. Cemeteries are not well tended, and rarely visited, as many consider it bad luck to go near the dead (often the widowed aren't invited to wedding parties, and we've seen fishers do their thing while ignoring a floating body no-one dares to touch).

## POPULATION

About 11% of Myanmar's 52 million people live in the capital, Yangon. It's estimated, though, that seven in 10 people are involved in agriculture. Unlike many developing-world countries, there isn't a massive flocking to the big cities: jobs are scarce in the capital with inflation soaring at 50% and international banks (and their potential credit) fleeing in 2003 due to economic sanctions imposed by the international community.

Historically, the diverse ethnic make-up of the country has been separated by its topography. The broad central plain, with the Ayeyarwady River and Myanmar's most fertile soil, has been run by whichever group was strongest (usually the Bamar, or Burmese, in the past few hundred years). Most ethnic groups continue to live in some sort of isolation in the mountains lining much of Myanmar's international borders, notably the Shan, Kayah and Kayin (Karen) in the east; the Kachin to the north; and the Chin and Rakhaing to the west.

There are roughly 71 people per sq km (compared to 939 per sq km in neighbouring Bangladesh), and outside Yangon or Mandalay, there's Laos-like elbow room.

## ETHNICITY

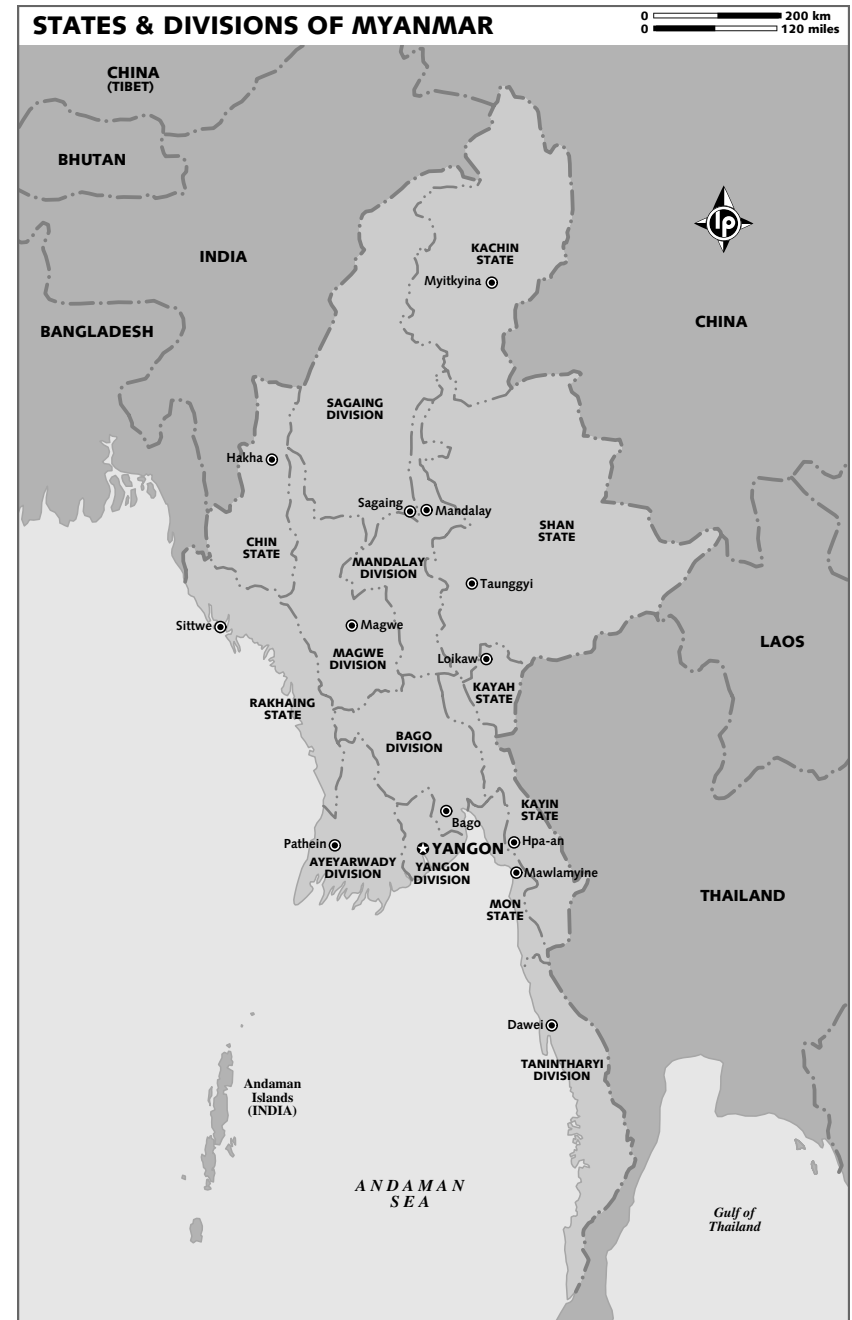
One of the more exciting aspects of travel in Myanmar is getting the opportunity to experience a corner of Asia that in many ways has changed little since British colonial times. Due to its isolation – self-imposed and otherwise – Myanmar has yet to be completely overwhelmed by outside clothing influences. Nowhere else in Southeast Asia will you see so many sarongs, turbans and other exotic apparel. Of course, differences in dress are just a hint of the distinctions between Myanmar's diverse ethnic populations.

Officially Myanmar's 50-plus million residents (not including Chinese, Indian, Nepalese and other groups) are divided into eight nationalities – the Bamar, Shan, Mon, Kayin, Kayah, Chin, Kachin and Rakhaing – but the Myanmar government further subdivides these eight groups into 67 subgroups. We've made a list of the 10 groups visitors to Myanmar are most likely to encounter or read about.

As in many other ethnically (and religiously) diverse countries, feelings

In Myanmar's *tain* (divisions) the Bamar (Burman) people are in the majority (Yangon, Ayeyarwady, Bago, Magwe, Mandalay, Sagaing, Tanintharyi) but in the *pyi* (states) the non-Bamar are in the majority (Shan, Kachin, Chin, Rakhaing, Kayah, Kayin, Mon).

Ethnologists have suggested that there are actually some 135 distinct ethnic groups living in Myanmar.





of pride and prejudice cause friction between Myanmar's ethnic groups. Ask a Bamar (or a Shan or a Kayin) their opinion about their countrymen of different ethnic or religious backgrounds to get an idea of what kinds of challenges governments in Myanmar have faced in their efforts to keep the peace and preserve the borders.

In recent years, there's been a massive influx of Chinese people into northern Burma, evident in Mandalay and certainly in border towns such as Mong La, where the yuan is the local currency.

### Bamar

The Bamar – also known as Burman or Burmese – make up the majority (68%) of the population and, not surprisingly, rule the country. Thought to have originally migrated from the Himalaya, the Bamar ruled much of what is now Myanmar from Bagan by the 11th century. When the British conquered Myanmar in the 19th century, it was the Bamar who had to relinquish the most. Many ancient court customs and arts were lost as the Bamar monarchy was abolished.

Devout Theravada Buddhists, the Bamar – from the top military generals to trishaw drivers – believe that being Buddhist is a key aspect of being Bamar, and the Myanmar media reports daily on the merit-making of top officials at the country's principal Buddhist places of worship. Government nation-building efforts have included establishing the Bamar language (Burmese) as the language of instruction in schools throughout Myanmar. So most non-Bamar speak Burmese as a second language.

### Chin

The Chin inhabits the mountainous region (mostly corresponding with Chin State) that borders on India and Bangladesh to the west. In the past, the Chin, as with most highland dwellers, led labour-intensive lives and their relatively simple traditional dress reflected this. Men wore loin-cloths in the warmer months and draped blankets over themselves when the weather turned cool. The women wore poncholike garments woven with intricate geometric patterns. These garments and Chin blankets are highly sought-after by textile collectors today.

The most extraordinary Chin fashion of old was the custom of tattooing the women's faces. Chin facial tattoos cover the whole face – starting at just above the bridge of the nose and radiating out in a pattern of dark lines that resemble a spider's web. Even the eyelids were tattooed. The tattooing was traditionally done to girls once they reached the age of 12 or 13. Legend has it that this practice was initiated to keep young Chin maidens from being coveted by Rakhaing princes whose kingdom bor-

### SUBJUGATION

With the complete takeover of Myanmar by the British in 1886, new borders were drawn. As with so many of the boundaries superimposed on maps during the European colonisation of the world, these borders had little to do with ethnic groupings, and there were many old rivals and enemies within the borders of British Burma. The colonisers managed to keep animosity between ethnic groups under control by utilising the carrot of semi-autonomy or the stick of arrest and imprisonment. Over a century later, despite a different bunch of rulers, little has changed.

Acts of insurgency between Bamar-majority government troops and minority ethnic groups that smouldered for four decades after independence have been largely quelled. Groups that signed ceasefire agreements with the government (the Kachin, Kayah etc) have been granted limited economic autonomy. Those groups that continue to fight the government (some Shan and Kayin) are dealt with severely. In rebel-controlled areas, government troops have been accused of using rape as a weapon and adopting a scorched-earth policy that regularly sends groups of refugees fleeing across the borders into Thailand and Bangladesh. Some observers of politics in Myanmar predict that, given a choice, many of Myanmar's ethnic groups would opt for independence and break away from Bamar-controlled Myanmar.

dered the southern Chin Hills. The practice died out after WWII, but in many Chin villages (particularly in the more traditional southern areas) you can see a few tattooed grannies going about their daily chores.

Many Chin, particularly in the north, are Christian, following the efforts of American missionaries during the British colonial period. Chin State is restricted to travellers, but can be visited with government permission (p000). Kalaymyo (p000) is a half-Chin town that can be reached, by air, without permit.

### Kachin

The Kachin (who call themselves Jingpaw) were heavily targeted by Christian missionaries during British colonial times. The Baptists seemed to have been the most successful, with the Catholics following close behind. As much of the Kachin State lies above the tropic of Cancer, the climate is more extreme – stifling hot in the summer months and downright cold in the winter – and the Kachin seem to have abandoned their traditional dress for Western clothes that can be easily changed to suit the seasons.

About the only vestige of Kachin dress that foreign visitors are likely to encounter are men's *longyi* (saronglike lower garment) of indigo, green and deep-purple plaid. During festive occasions Kachin dress is quite impressive. Women sport finely woven wool skirts decorated with zigzag or diamond patterns and dark blouses festooned with hammered silver medallions and tassels. These exotic blouses are admired by the Bamar and until fairly recently it was not uncommon for photo studios in Bamar-majority towns as far south as Pyay to keep a few Kachin blouses on hand so that Bamar women could wear them while posing for photographs.

### Kayah

Also known as the Karenni or Red Karen, the Kayah are settled in the mountainous isolation of Kayah State – an area completely closed off to travellers.

As with many of Myanmar's ethnic groups that traditionally practised animism, the Kayah were targeted for conversion to Christianity by Baptist and Catholic missionaries during the colonial period. The name

Travellers can visit the Kachin in Myitkyina (p000), home to the Kachin State Cultural Museum, Bhamo (p000) and – with a permit – Putao (p000).

'Red Karen' refers to the favoured colour of the Kayah traditional dress, and the fact that their apparel resembles that of some Kayin (Karen) tribes – a resemblance that caused the Kayah to be classified by colonisers and missionaries as 'Karen'. Today the Kayah make up a very small percentage of the population of Myanmar – perhaps less than 1% – and the vast majority lead agrarian lives within Kayah State, much as their ancestors have done for centuries. A significant number of Kayah also live in Thailand's Mae Hong Son Province.

### Kayin

The Kayin (also known as Karen) are a large and diverse group, divided into numerous subgroups. They were originally animists, but some Kayin villages were heavily targeted by Christian missionaries in the 19th and early 20th centuries, while other villages converted to Buddhism.

The Kayin are an independent-minded people but the sheer diversity of the many Kayin subgroups has made it impossible for them to achieve any real cohesion for achieving greater political power. To this day Buddhist Kayin often side with the Buddhist Bamar against their Christian Kayin kin. The recruitment of child soldiers for rebel groups is not uncommon in this neck of the woods. This came to the world's attention most recently when a Christian Kayin group calling itself 'God's Army' made headlines with its brief armed struggle against the Myanmar government. The group was led by young twin brothers who reputedly had magical powers and took up arms when they were only nine years old.

The typical dress of both the Kayin men and women is a *longyi* with horizontal stripes (a pattern that is reserved exclusively for women in other ethnic groups). The Kayin are thought to make up about 7% of the total population of Myanmar.

### Mon

The Mon (also called the Tailing by Western historians) were one of the earliest inhabitants of Myanmar and their rule stretched into what is now Thailand. As happened with the Cham in Vietnam and the Phuan in Laos, the Mon were gradually conquered by neighbouring kingdoms and their influence waned until they were practically unknown outside present-day Myanmar. As in Thailand, which also has a Mon minority, the Mon have almost completely assimilated with the Bamar and in most ways seem indistinguishable from them. In the precolonial era past, Mon Buddhist sites – including Yangon's Shwedagon Paya – were appropriated by the Bamar (though the Golden Rock is still in Mon State), and Mon tastes in art and architecture were borrowed as well. Today the Mon make up just over 2% of the population of Myanmar, but Mon art and culture have influenced that of the Bamar quite thoroughly, as a trip to the Mon Cultural Museum (p000) in Mawlamyine will attest.

### Naga

The Naga are mainly settled in a mountainous region of eastern India known as Nagaland, but significant numbers live in the western Sagaing Division between the Indian border and the Chindwin River.

When the British arrived in the mid-19th century, the Naga were a fragmented but fearsome collection of tribes. Headhunting was a tradition among them and for many decades they resisted British rule, though a lack of cooperation between the tribes hindered their efforts to remain independent. A turnaround came about during WWI when the British recruited nearly 17,000 Naga to fight in Europe. The unexpected result

of this experiment was a feeling of unity among the many Naga tribes, which led to an organised Naga independence movement.

The Naga sport one of the world's most exotic traditional costumes. Naga men at festival time wear striking ceremonial headdresses made up of feathers, tufts of hair and cowry shells, and carry wicked spears, giving them a look that somehow seems vaguely African, Polynesian and Amazonian – like some fantasy ensemble cooked up by Hollywood.

### Rakhaing

The Rakhaing (formerly called Arakanese), who make up about 4% of the population of Myanmar, are principally adherents of Buddhism. Their ancient capital was centred at Mrauk U in what is now the northern Rakhaing State, which borders Bangladesh. Their language is akin to Bamar but, due to their geographical location, they have absorbed a fair amount of culture from the Indian subcontinent. In the eyes of most Bamar, the Rakhaing are a Creole race – a mixture of Bamar and Indian – a perception that Buddhist Rakhaing strongly resent.

Rakhaing State also has a minority population of Muslim Rakhaing, who refer to themselves as Rohingya.

The Rakhaing are skilled weavers and are known in Myanmar for their eye-catching and intricately patterned *longyi*.

### Shan

The Shan call themselves Tai ('Shan' is actually a Bamar word derived from the word 'Siam'). The name they call themselves is significant, as the Shan are related ethnically, culturally and linguistically to Tai peoples in neighbouring Thailand, Laos and China's Yunnan Province. In fact, if you've spent some time in northern Thailand or Laos and learned some of the respective languages, you'll find you can have a basic conversation with the Shan. The Shan are also Theravada Buddhists and at one time they fought the Bamar for control of Myanmar. Today they make up about 9% of the population.

Traditionally, the Shan wore baggy trousers and floppy, wide-brimmed sun hats, and the men were known for their faith in talismanic tattoos. Nowadays Shan town-dwellers commonly dress in the Bamar *longyi* and are mostly indistinguishable from the Bamar, except on festival occasions when they proudly sport their ethnic costumes.

In former times the Shan were ruled by local lords or chieftains called *sao pha* (sky lords), a word that was corrupted by the Bamar to *saw-bwa*.

The Shan are said to be very fond of gambling and festivals, and Shan women are admired throughout Myanmar for their beauty and light complexions.

### Wa

During British-colonial times the Wa (who come from the still-remote northeastern hills of Shan State) were hated and feared. The British distinguished two groups of Wa according to how receptive they were to the coloniser's attempts to control them. The 'Wild Wa' were headhunters, and decorated their villages with the severed heads of vanquished enemies to propitiate the spirits that guarded over their opium fields. (Apparently they only stopped the practice in the 1970s!) The so-called 'Tame Wa' allowed the colonisers to pass through their territory unimpeded, yet the area inhabited by the Wa – east of the upper Thanlwin (Salween) River in northern Shan State – was never completely pacified

Presently the only place in Kayin State that travellers can visit is Hpa-an (p000).

It is only possible to visit the Naga during their New Year celebrations in January, held near Khamti, by taking a costly government-sponsored tour (p000).

Besides the ruins at Mrauk U (p000), the most visible vestige of the Rakhaing's illustrious past is the Mahamuni Buddha image (p000), now in Mandalay. Sittwe is home to a Rakhaing State Culture Museum (p000).

Many parts of Shan State (Myanmar's largest) are restricted to travellers, but it's possible to get to many areas, including around Inle Lake (p000), Kengtung (p000) and Hsipaw (p000).

With a guide, you can visit Wa villages outside Kengtung (p000).

by the British. Nowadays rumours abound of the 20,000-strong United Wa State Army, led by Bao Youxiang (aka 'Chairman Bao'); an army supposedly highly militarised producers of opium and methamphetamine. They often make headlines in neighbouring Thailand due to frequent border skirmishes with Thai military and police forces.

## MEDIA

Though media sources have proliferated in recent years – 15 new domestic journals and papers in the first few years of this century – very little objective 'hard news' gets splashed on their pages. Much of Myanmar, for example, learned about the ousting of their prime minister Khin Nyunt in 2004 via international TV channels or the BBC website. You can get the flavour of media's (enforced) censorship from the pages of the government's voice piece in English, the *New Light of Myanmar*, whose repertoire includes anti-West poems. There's also an agenda in place where even the slightest of strayers get arrested. Apparently novelists can't use the name 'Suu' in books because of its association with Aung San Suu Kyi. When Nelson Mandela won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993, the story was censored because the prize could be associated with Aung San Suu Kyi.

In 1999 documentary filmmakers Aung Pwint and Thaug Tun were arrested for videotaping grim details of everyday life, including footage of forced labour. They remain in prison. In 2003 troubles arose from a football article on a team fined for not appearing in a tournament! Loose links between the fine and the government, plus questions surrounding the government's handling of US\$4 million from an international grant to foster football programs, was enough to land the four writers in jail, one of whom briefly faced a death sentence.

The 9.15pm national news broadcast nightly is read by a no-smiles woman (often sporting a 1968 beehive do) in front of a mural of a power plant. She mostly gives national news on the government's achievements. Some locals get their news from fascinating grainy newsreels that precede all cinema showings, which show General Than Shwe overseeing new construction projects.

## RELIGION

About 87% of the people of Myanmar are Buddhist. Locals are proud of their religion and keen to discuss it. Knowing a little about it is a prerequisite for outsiders wishing to better understand the Burmese mind. During

### HOW MANY DID YOU SAY?

The Myanmar people may seem, to outsiders, to have an imaginative understanding of maths. We had a resident of Mrauk U tell us, in all earnestness, the local area had six million temples; a Sittwe resident insisted the largest minority group in the city of 150,000 were the '800,000 Muslims', and a trishaw driver in Mandalay suggested that to start a guesthouse you'd need – after spending several minutes tabbing it up by pen and paper – about US\$400 million. Minimum. Locals count 4000 islands in the Mergui Archipelago, while detailed British surveyors found only 804. Historical accounts include hundreds of thousands of soldiers marching to battle; numbers often contradictory to later British accounts. The age of the 'antique' you're holding is often wildly, um, optimistic too.

Nothing to fuss over, though. Locals are more accustomed to counting with the *lakh* (equal to 100,000) than a million, so it's possible a zero or two gets added there. Also, Myanmar's largest bill is just K1000 (worth about US\$1.05 at research time), and many people are happy to earn K3000 a day. For nearly everyone, US\$40,000 is about as likely to fall into their laps as US\$400 million.

the U Nu period, Buddhism functioned as a state religion of sorts – as embodied in such catch phrases as 'the Socialist Way to Nibbana'. Nowadays there is complete freedom of religion, though within the government Buddhists tend to attain higher rank more easily than non-Buddhists.

## Buddhism in Myanmar

### EARLY HISTORY

The Mon were the first people in Myanmar to practise Theravada Buddhism. King Asoka, the great Indian emperor, is known to have sent missions here (known then as the 'Golden Land') during the 3rd century BC. A second wave is thought to have arrived via Sinhalese missionaries from present-day Sri Lanka, sometime between the 6th and 10th centuries.

By the 9th century the Pyu of northern Myanmar were combining Theravada with elements of Mahayana and Tantric Buddhism brought from their homelands in the Tibetan Plateau. During the early Bagan era (11th century), Bamar king Anawrahta decided that the Buddhism practised in his realm should be 'purified' from all non-Theravada elements, a task he set for Mon monks captured by his armies in Thaton, in southern Myanmar. However, Buddhism here has never completely shed Tantric, Hindu and animist elements, but remains predominately Theravada (only 1% of the Buddhists, most of whom are of Chinese descent, practise Mahayana Buddhism today).

### THERAVADA & MAHAYANA

Theravada Buddhism (also followed in Cambodia, Laos, Sri Lanka and Thailand) differs from Hinduism, Judaism, Islam or Christianity in that it is not centred around a god or gods, but rather a psycho-philosophical system. Today it covers a wide range of interpretations of the basic beliefs, which all start from the enlightenment of Siddhartha Gautama, a prince-turned-ascetic, and referred to as the Buddha, in northern India around 2500 years ago.

Neither the Buddha (which means 'The Enlightened') nor his immediate pupils ever wrote the *dhamma* (Buddhist teachings) down, so after Gautama's death a schism developed and today there are two major schools of Buddhism. The Theravada (Doctrine of the Elders) school holds that to achieve *nibbana* (nirvana), the eventual aim of every Buddhist, you must 'work out your own salvation with diligence'. In other words, it is up to each individual to work out their own fate.

The Mahayana (Large Vehicle) school holds that individuals should forego the experience of *nibbana* until all humankind is ready for salvation. The goal is to become a Bodhisattva (Buddha-to-be), rather than a fully enlightened Buddha.

The Mahayana school does not reject the other school, but claims it has extended it. The Theravadins, on the other hand, see Mahayana as a misinterpretation of the Buddha's original teachings. Of the two, the Theravada is more austere and ascetic, and, some might say, harder to practise.

### TENETS

Buddha taught that the world is primarily characterised by *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness), *anicca* (impermanence) and *anatta* (insubstantiality), and that even our happiest moments in life are only temporary, empty and unsatisfactory.

The ultrapragmatic Buddhist perception of cause and effect – *kamma* in Pali, *karma* in Sanskrit, *kan* in Burmese – holds that birth inevitably

Many visitors come to Myanmar to meditate; see p000 for a list of monasteries.

leads to sickness, old age and death, hence every life is insecure and subject to *dukkha*. Through rebirth, the cycle of *thanthaya* (*samsara* in Pali) repeats itself endlessly as long as ignorance and craving remain.

Only by reaching a state of complete wisdom and non-desire can one attain true happiness. To achieve wisdom and eliminate craving one must turn inward and master one's own mind through meditation, most commonly known to the Burmese as *bhavana* or *kammahtan*.

The Buddha taught four noble truths:

- 1 Life is *dukkha*.
- 2 *Dukkha* comes from *tanha* (selfish desire).
- 3 When one forsakes selfish desire, suffering will be extinguished.
- 4 The 'eightfold path' is the way to eliminate selfish desire.

The eightfold path is divided into three stages: *sila* (morality), *samadhi* (concentration), and *pañña* (wisdom and insight). It consists of:

- 1 Right thought
- 2 Right understanding
- 3 Right speech
- 4 Right action
- 5 Right livelihood
- 6 Right exertion
- 7 Right attentiveness
- 8 Right concentration

Devout Buddhists in Myanmar adhere to five lay precepts, or moral rules (*thila* in Burmese, *sila* in Pali), which require abstinence from killing, stealing, unchastity (usually interpreted among laypeople as adultery), lying and intoxicating substances.

In spite of Buddhism's obviously profound truths, the most common Myanmar approach is to try for a better future life by feeding monks, giving donations to temples and performing regular worship at the local *paya* (Buddhist monument). For the average person, everything revolves around the *kutho* (merit), from the Pali *kusala* (wholesome), one is able to accumulate through such deeds.

### MONKS & NUNS

There are as many as 500,000 monks in Myanmar. Socially, every Myanmar male is expected to take up temporary monastic residence twice in his life: once as a *samanera* (novice monk) between the ages of 10 and 20 and again as a *hpongyi* (fully ordained monk) sometime after the age of 20. Almost all men or boys aged under 20 participate in the *shinpyu* (novitiation ceremony) – quite a common event since a family earns great merit when one of its sons 'takes robe and bowl'.

All things possessed by a monk must be offered by the lay community. Upon ordination a new monk is typically offered a set of three robes (lower, inner and outer). Bright red robes are usually reserved for novices under 15, darker colours for older, fully ordained monks. Other possessions a monk is permitted include a razor, a cup, a filter (for keeping insects out of drinking water), an umbrella and an alms bowl.

In Myanmar, women who live the monastic life as *dasasila* ('10-precept' nuns) are often called *thilashin* (possessor of morality) in Burmese. Myanmar nuns shave their heads, wear pink robes, and take vows in an ordination procedure similar to that undergone by monks. Generally speaking, nunhood isn't considered as 'prestigious' as monkhood. This is mainly because nuns generally don't perform ceremonies on behalf of

At many stupas, worshippers pour one glassful of water for every year of their age (plus one) over the Buddha image to ensure long life.

### NUMBER NINE, NUMBER NINE

Myanmar astrology, based on the Indian system of naming the zodiacal planets for Hindu deities, continues to be an important factor deciding proper dates for weddings, funerals, ordinations and other events. Burma became independent at 4.20am on 4 January 1948, per U Nu's counsel with an astrologer. Numerology plays a similar role in Myanmar.

Nearly everyone in Myanmar reveres the number nine, which is thought to have an inherent mystic significance. The Burmese word *ko* (nine) also means 'to seek protection from the gods'. General Ne Win, too, was fascinated with numerology, especially that relating to the cabalistic ritual *Paya-kozu* (Nine Gods). He replaced common currency with 45-kyat and 90-kyat notes, because their digits' sum equalled nine. It is considered no accident that the prodemocracy marches were staged on 8 August 1988 (8-8-88); for many, eight is considered an 'unlucky' number.

laypeople, and keep only 10 precepts – the same number observed by male novices.

### MONASTERIES

Monastic communities are called *kyaungtaik*, *hpongyi-kyaung*, or simply *kyaung* for short. There are over 50,000 in Myanmar. The most important structure on the monastery grounds is the *thein* (a consecrated hall where monastic ordinations are held). *Kyaung* may also be associated with one or more *zedi* or *pahto* (temple). An open-sided resthouse or *zayat* may be available for gatherings of laypeople during festivals or pilgrimages.

### RECOMMENDED READING

Some of the following books are available in Yangon:

- *Essential Themes of Buddhist Lectures Given by Ashin Thittila*, Department of Religious Affairs (DRA), Yangon
- *The Initiation of Novicehood and the Ordination of Monkhood in the Burmese Buddhist Culture* by Sao Htun Hmat Win, DRA, Yangon
- *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Thailand, Laos, Burma*, edited by Bardwell L Smith
- *Things as They Are*, by Maha Boowa Nyanasampanno

A few online sources:

**Access to Insight** ([www.accesstoinight.org/index.html](http://www.accesstoinight.org/index.html))

**Barre Center for Buddhist Studies** ([www.dharma.org/bcbs.htm](http://www.dharma.org/bcbs.htm))

**Buddha Net** ([www.buddhanet.org](http://www.buddhanet.org))

**DharmaNet International** ([www.dharmanet.org](http://www.dharmanet.org))

### THE 37 NAT

One of the great things about Myanmar is the ongoing worship of the *nat* (spirit) – a link to the pre-Buddhism era when animism (associated with hills, trees, lakes) held undisputed dominion over the land. Though some Buddhist leaders downgrade the *nat*, the *nat* are very much alive in the lives of the people of Myanmar.

### History

The powerful *nat* of Myanmar has evolved into a spirit that may hold dominion over a place (natural or human-made), person, or field of experience. Orthographically, the written Burmese word *nat* is likely derived from the Pali-Sanskrit *natha* (lord or guardian).

'I worship Buddha, but I make friends with the *nat*'

– PAKOKKU LOCAL

Separate, larger shrines were built for a higher class of *nat*, descended from actual historic personages (including previous Thai and Bamar kings) who had died violent, unjust deaths. These suprahuman *nat*, when correctly propitiated, could aid worshippers in accomplishing important tasks, vanquishing enemies and so on.

In Bagan, King Anawrahta stopped animal sacrifices (part of *nat* worship at Mt Popa) and destroyed *nat* temples. Undeterred, many of his subjects simply rebuilt *nat* shrines in their homes. Realising he may lose the case for making Theravada Buddhism the national faith, Anawrahta wisely conceded the *nat*'s coexistence with Buddha. He himself led the way by placing images of the 36 *nat* from Mt Popa at the base of the sacred *zedi* of Shwezigon.

To these universally recognised 36, Anawrahta sagely added a 37th, Thagyamin, a Hindu deity based on Indra, who he crowned 'king of the *nat*'. Since, in traditional Buddhist mythology, Indra paid homage to Buddha on behalf of the Hindu pantheon, this theistic insertion effectively made all *nat* subordinate to Buddhism.

Anawrahta's scheme worked, and today the commonly believed cosmology places Buddha and his teachings at the top, with the Hindu and Bamar *nat* in second and third place.

### Worship & Beliefs

In many homes, you may see the most popular *nat* in the form of an unhusked coconut dressed in a red *gaung baung* (turban), which represents the dual-*nat* Eindwin-Min Mahagiri (Lord of the Great Mountain who is in the House). Another widespread form of *nat* worship is exhibited through thered-and-white cloths tied to a rear-view mirror or hood ornament; these colours are the traditional *nat* colours of protection.

Some of the more animistic guardian *nat* remain outside home and *paya*. A tree-spirit shrine, for example, may be erected beneath a particularly venerated old tree, thought to wield power over the immediate vicinity. These are especially common beneath larger banyan trees (*Ficus religiosa*), as this tree is revered as a symbol of Buddha's enlightenment. A village may well have a *nat* shrine in a wooded corner for the propitiation of the village guardian spirit. Such tree and village shrines are simple, dollhouse-like structures of wood or bamboo; their proper placement is divined by a local *saya* (teacher or shaman), trained in spirit lore. Such knowledge of the complex *nat* world is fading fast among the younger generations.

Those with a general fear of *nat* will avoid eating pork, which is thought to be offensive to the spirit world. The main fear is not simply that spirits will wreak havoc on your daily affairs, but rather that one may enter your mind and body, and then force you to perform unconscionable acts in public – acts that would cause others to shun you. Spirit possession – whether psychologically induced or metaphysical – is a phenomenon that is real in the eyes of the people of Myanmar.

### Nat Festivals

On certain occasions, the *nat* cult goes behind simple propitiation of the spirits (via offerings) and steps into the realm of spirit invocation. Most commonly, this is accomplished through *nat pwe* (spirit festivals), special musical performances designed to attract *nat* to the performance venue. Nearly all indigenous Burmese music is designed for this purpose.

The *nat* like loud and colourful music, so musicians at a *nat pwe* bang away at full volume on their gongs, drums and xylophones, producing what sounds like some ancient form of rock and roll.

Every *nat pwe* is accompanied by a risk that the invited spirit may choose to enter, not the body of the medium, but one of the spectators. One of the most commonly summoned spirits at *nat pwe* is Ko Gyi Kyaw (Big Brother Kyaw), a drunkard *nat* who responds to offerings of liquor imbibed by the *nat-gadaw*. When he enters someone's body, he's given to lascivious dancing, so a chance possession by Ko Gyi Kyaw is especially embarrassing.

Once possessed by a *nat*, the only way one can be sure the spirit won't return again and again is to employ the services of an older Buddhist monk skilled at exorcism – a process that can take days, if not weeks. Without undergoing such a procedure, anyone who has been spirit-possessed may carry the *nat* stigma the rest of their lives. Girls who have been so entered are considered unmarriageable unless satisfactorily exorcised.

Though *nat pwe* are commonly held with festivals throughout Bamar Myanmar, the grandest of all occur during the annual *nat* festival in Taungbyone, about 20km north of Mandalay. Held each August (more specifically for six days up to and including the full moon of Wagaung, the fifth lunar month) since Anawrahta's reign, the Taungbyone festival honours the so-called Muslim Brothers, Byat-wi and Byat-ta, two of the most famous *nat* from the Bagan era. Another *nat* festival, rather smaller than the one at Taungbyone, follows immediately afterwards at Yadana-gu, a *paya* south of Amarapura. This one revolves around the ritual bathing of *nat* images on the banks of the Ayeyarwady River; many festival-goers arrive here by sampan from Amarapura.

### Other Religions

Among the non-Buddhist people of Myanmar, 1% are animist, 4% Christian, 4% Muslim and 1.5% Hindu. Most Muslims and Hindus, as well as many Christians, are of Indian descent and live in the larger towns and cities.

Most other Christians in Myanmar are found among the tribal minorities, though the majority of the tribal people remain animist. Baptist, Catholic and Anglican missionaries have been active in Myanmar for over 150 years. Ethnic groups that traditionally practised animism were more receptive to conversion, especially the Kayin, Kachin and Chin.

Myanmar had 2500 Jews before the wake of nationalism encouraged most to leave; today Myanmar has only about 50 Jews; the best Jewish site to visit is Yangon's 19th-century Moseah Yeshua Synagogue (p000).

With such religious diversity, it's not surprising that there is sometimes friction between religious groups. In October 2001, riots between Buddhists and Muslims caused the government to impose temporary curfews in Taungoo and Pyay. Many Muslims endure restrictions on their ability to travel, and often can stay only at family homes, not hotels.

### WOMEN IN MYANMAR

In most respects Myanmar women enjoy legal rights equal to those of Myanmar men; for example, they own property and aren't barred from any profession. Unlike in the West, females do not traditionally change any portion of their names upon marriage; in the event of divorce, they are legally entitled to half of all property accumulated during the marriage. Inheritance rights are also equally shared. Aung San Suu Kyi wrote

To lure a *nat* to a loud *pwe* takes the work of a spirit medium, or *nat-gadaw* (*nat* wife), who is either a woman or a male transvestite who sings and dances to invite specific *nat* to possess them.

Many locals split their devotion between Buddha and the *nat*: Buddha is for their future lives, and the *nat* for problems in this life.

### MYANMAR BEAUTY SECRETS

- Women rarely touch alcohol or cigarettes; the cheroots puffed by country women are mild.
- High humidity helps, as sweating keeps the pores active and flushed.
- Most locals wash with cold water (often straight from the river) two or three times daily with unscented soap.
- *Thanakha* paste is a combination of moisturiser, sunscreen and perfume that's smeared on the face (some women apply it to their whole bodies at night); it's made from the ground bark of the *thanakha* tree.
- Plumpness is a sign of health; to say '*wa-laiq-ta!*' ('how fat you're looking!') is quite a compliment!

that a baby girl is equally celebrated as a baby boy, as they're believed to be 'more dutiful and loving than sons'. Girls are educated alongside boys and, by university age, women outnumber men in university and college enrolment. Most white-collar professions grant women a paid maternity leave of six weeks before birth and one or two months afterwards.

Religion is one arena in which women perpetually take a back seat, though. Any man is seen as possessing the potential, regardless of desire, of becoming a Buddha; women cannot. A small number of Buddhist shrines, for example Mandalay's Mahamuni Paya, have small areas around the main holy image that are off-limits to women. Many people in Myanmar – women as well as men – believe the birth of a female indicates less religious merit than the birth of a male, and that it is easier for males to attain *nibbana*. A small but devoted minority of men and women refute this view, pointing out that the actual *suttas*, or sayings of the Buddha, do not support this assumption.

Just as boys between the ages of five and 15 usually undergo a pre-puberty initiation as temporary novice monks, girls around the same age participate in an initiatory ear-piercing ceremony (often called 'ear-boring' in Burmese English). Some also become temporary nuns at this age.

Saw Myat Yin, the insightful author of *Culture Shock! Burma*, expresses a viewpoint common among the majority of Myanmar women, who see their role as equal but 'supportive and complementary...rather than in competition' and that 'if they accept a role a step behind their menfolk they do so freely and willingly'.

### ARTS Dance & Theatre

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

As with music, most of Myanmar's classical dance styles arrived from Thailand. Today the dances most obviously taken from Thailand are known as *yodaya zat* (Ayuthaya theatre), as taught to the Burmese by Thai theatrical artists taken captive in the 18th century.

The most Myanmar of dances feature solo performances by female dancers who wear strikingly colourful dresses with long white trains, which they kick into the air with their heels – quite a feat, given the restrictive length of the train.

A *zat pwe* involves a re-creation of an ancient legend or Buddhist

Jataka (life story of the Buddha) while the *yamazat* picks a tale from the Indian epic Ramayana.

Classical dance-drama is occasionally performed at the National Theatre in Yangon (p000), where around a dozen amateur theatre groups regularly practise and perform *yamazat*. In Mandalay, *yamazat* performers even have their own shrine. Since Myanmar classical dancing emphasises pose rather than movement, and solo rather than ensemble performances, it can soon become a little boring for TV-hyped Western tastes. By contrast the less common, but livelier, *yein pwe* features singing and dancing performed by a chorus or ensemble.

Most popular of all is the *a-nyeint pwe*, a traditional-variety *pwe* somewhat akin to early American vaudeville (see p000 for a description).

### Marionette Theatre

*Youq-the pwe* (Myanmar marionette theatre) presents colourful puppets up to a metre high in a spectacle that many aesthetes consider the most expressive of all the Myanmar arts. Developed during the Konbaung period, it was so influential that it became the forerunner to *zat pwe* as later performed by actors rather than marionettes. As with dance-drama, the genre's 'golden age' began with the Mandalay kingdoms of the late 18th century and ran through to the advent of cinema in the 1930s.

The people of Myanmar have great respect for an expert puppeteer. Some marionettes may be manipulated by a dozen or more strings; certain *nat* may sport up to 60 strings, including one for each eyebrow. The marionette master's standard repertoire requires a troupe of 28 puppets including Thagyamin (king of the gods); a Myanmar king, queen, prince and princess; a regent; two court pages; an old man and an old woman; a villain; a hermit; four ministers; two clowns; one good and one evil *nat*; a Brahmin astrologer; two ogres; a *zawgyi* (alchemist); a horse; a monkey; a *makara* (mythical sea serpent); and an elephant.

These days it's rare to see marionette theatre outside tourist venues in Yangon, Mandalay or Bagan.

### Music

Much of classical Myanmar music, played loud like the *nat* like it, features strongly in any *pwe*, and its repetitive, even harsh, harmonies can be hard on Western ears at first. This harshness likely comes from the fact that Myanmar scales are not 'tempered' as Western scales have been since Bach. Traditional Myanmar music is primarily two dimensional in the sense that rhythm and melody provide much of the musical structure, while repetition is a key element in developing this structure. Subtle shifts in rhythm and tonality provide the modulation usually supplied by the harmonic dimension in Western music.

### CLASSICAL MUSIC

The original inspiration for much of Myanmar's current musical tradition came from Thailand (then Siam) during the reign of King Hsinbyushin, particularly after the second conquest of Thailand in 1767 when musicians and dancers were brought to Myanmar to effect 'cultural augmentation'. Interestingly, the Thais had acquired these styles themselves from Cambodian musicians after conquering Angkor centuries earlier. Myanmar classical music as played today was codified by Po Sein, a colonial-era musician, composer and drummer who also designed the *hsaing waing* (the circle of tuned drums, also known as *paq waing*) and formalised classical dancing styles. Such music is meant to be played as

Myanmar dance scholars have catalogued around 2000 dance movements, including 13 head movements, 28 eye movements, nine neck movements, 24 ways of moving only one hand and 23 using both hands, 38 leg movements, eight body postures and 10 walking movements.

The literacy rate for men is 88%; for women it is 78%.

### TRADITIONAL BURMESE MUSIC CDS

These music CDs can generally be found outside Myanmar:

- **Mahagita**, *Harp & Vocal Music from Burma* (2003; Smithsonian Folkways)
- **Green Tea Leaf Salad**, *Flavors of Burmese Music* (2001; Pan Records)
- **White Elephants & Golden Ducks**, *Musical Treasures from Burma* (1997; Shanachie)
- **Pat Waing**, *The Magic Drum Circle of Burma* (1998; Shanachie)
- **U Ko Ko**, *Performs on the Burmese Piano* (1995; Ummus)

an accompaniment to classical dance-dramas that enact scenes from the Jataka or from the Ramayana.

Musical instruments are predominantly percussive, but even the *hsaing waing* may carry the melody. These drums are tuned by placing a wad of *paq-sa* (drum food) – made from a kneaded paste of rice and wood-ash – onto the centre of the drum head, then adding or subtracting a pinch at a time till the desired drum tone is attained.

In addition to the *hsaing waing*, the traditional *hsaing* (Myanmar ensemble) of seven to 10 musicians will usually play: the *kye-waing* (a circle of tuned brass gongs); the *saung gauq* (a boat-shaped harp with 13 strings); the *pattala* (a sort of xylophone); the *hneh* (an oboe-type instrument related to the Indian *shānāi*); the *pa-lwe* (a bamboo flute); the *mi-gyaung* (crocodile lute); the *paq-ma* (a bass drum); and the *yagwin* (small cymbals) and *wa-leq-hkouq* (bamboo clappers), which are purely rhythmic and are often played by Myanmar vocalists.

### FOLK

Older than Myanmar classical music is an enchanting vocal folk-music tradition still heard in rural areas where locals may sing without instrumental accompaniment while working. Such folk songs set the work cadence and provide a distraction from the physical strain and monotony of pounding rice, clearing fields, weaving and so on. You'll hear this type of music most readily in the Ayeyarwady Delta between Twante and Patheingyi.

### ROCK & RAP

Modern music has taken off in Myanmar in recent years, with a host of rap and rock bands influenced with the introduction of MTV Asia. Western music's influence first came in the 1970s, actually, when singers such as Min Min Latt and Takatho Tun Naung sang shocking things such as Beatles cover versions or 'Tie a Yellow Ribbon around the Old Oak Tree'. This led to long-haired, distorted-guitar rock bands such as Empire and Iron Cross in the 1980s. Iron Cross still makes a huge impact, as does the band Lazy Club, which you may see on videotapes in teashops or aboard all-night buses.

Bands such as these (all of whom sing in Burmese, even if they have English names) have a stable of half a dozen singers who share the stage with the same backing band. Iron Cross, for example, features one of Myanmar's 'wilder' singers, Lay Phyu, whose recent *Butterfly* album has him done up like the insect. Then Iron Cross also tones it down as a backing band for the poppier stuff of other singers. One local aficionado explained: 'There's no competition between a band's many singers. They

At the National Museum in Yangon (p101) you can view an exhibit of Burmese traditional music

### ROCK & RAP CDS

These are five highlights, generally only found (for K1200 or K1500) in Myanmar. (Sincere regrets go to the one-time Rakhaing band Evil Elf, who sadly never recorded.)

- **Lay Phyu & Iron Cross**, *Butterfly* (2003) Myanmar's most popular rock singer
- **Ah Nge & Iron Cross**, *Khu Hnit Tway Ah Ka* (2003) Iron Cross' number two (a little more talented than Mr Lay, actually)
- **Myanmar Future Generations** Free-download album (www.mm-fg.net) of 11 politically charged rap tracks (and counting)
- **The Ants**, *Colourful Chocolate* (1998) Alternative-rock trio from Shan State
- **Big Bag**, *Don't Talk About Punk* (2004) Includes cover of Green Day's *Longview*, in Burmese
- **Myo Kyawt Myaing**, *The Troubles of Being Human* (2004) Rap pioneer, features *My Name is Myo Kyawt Myaing*

help each other. Our rock singers don't throw TVs out the windows. On stage they jump around and all, but offstage they're very good natured.'

Sone Thin Par and actress Htu Eindra Bo are female singers who win fans for their melodies – and looks.

Rap is the latest trend, with Min Min Latt's son, Anega, now busting beats with other big-name rappers Barbu, Myo Kyawt Myaing and (hear the girls sigh...) Sai Sai. Songs often deal with gossip, or troubles between parents and kids. One rap band, 9mm, was briefly detained in 2004 for performing political songs written by an anonymous prodemocracy group of exiled and local rappers called Myanmar Future Generations (MFG).

A famed exiled singer, Mun Awng (a Kachin singer) has recorded political songs, including his *Battle for Peace* album, which is available through the underground only.

Look out for posters advertising shows. Yangon's Strand Hotel and Mya Yeik Nyo Hotel are popular venues. You might bump into one of Myanmar's more popular musicians at Yangon's Mr Guitar Cafe (p000).

### Architecture

It is in architecture that one sees the strongest evidence of Myanmar artistic skill and accomplishment. Myanmar is a country of *zedis*, often called 'pagodas' in English. Wherever you are – boating down the river, driving through the hills, even flying above the plains – there always seems to be a hilltop *zedi* in view. It is in Bagan (p000) that you see the most dramatic results of this national enthusiasm for religious monuments.

### PAYA, ZEDI OR PAHTO?

The *paya* (pa-yah), the most common Myanmar equivalent to the often-misleading English term pagoda, literally means 'holy one' and can refer to people, deities and places associated with religion. Often it's a generic term covering a stupa, temple or shrine. There are basically two kinds of *paya*: the solid, bell-shaped *zedi* and the hollow square or rectangular *pahto*. A *zedi* or stupa is usually thought to contain 'relics' – either objects taken from the Buddha himself (especially pieces of bone, teeth or hair) or certain holy materials. Both *zedi* and *pahto* are often associated with *kyaung* (Buddhist monasteries).

The term *pahto* is sometimes translated as temple, though shrine

All lyrics must pass the government's censor board. In 1998 blues singer Nyi Pu had to rename his debut *Everything's Going to Be Good to Everything's Good*; a few years later, Iron Cross' Myo Gyi changed his *Very Wild Wind* album to a tamer *Breeze*.



would perhaps be more accurate as priests or monks are not necessarily in attendance. The so-called Mon-style *pahto* is a large cube with small windows and ground-level passageways; this type is also known as a *gu* or *ku* (from the Pali-Sanskrit *guha*; cave). The overall Bamar concept is similar to that of the Mayan and Aztec pyramids of Mesoamerica: worshippers climb a symbolic mountain lined with religious reliefs and frescoes.

If all this seems too confusing, just remember that the generic Myanmar term for all these structures is *paya*. The famous Mon *zedi* in Yangon is called Shwedagon Paya (p000), and Bagan's greatest *pahto* is often called Ananda Paya (p000).

### ZEDI STYLES

Early *zedi* were usually hemispherical (the Kaunghmudaw at Sagaing near Mandalay) or bulbous (the Bupaya in Bagan), while the more modern style is much more graceful – a curvaceous lower bell merging into a soaring spire, such as the Shwedagon Paya in Yangon. Style is not always a good indicator of a *zedi*'s original age as Myanmar is earthquake-prone and many (including the Shwedagon) have been rebuilt over and again. Around the base of a *zedi* people are meditating, strolling around and chatting. This makes *zedi* tranquil places to visit.

### OTHER BUILDINGS

Traditionally, only the *zedi*, *gu* and *pahto* have been made of permanent materials; until quite recently all secular buildings – and most monasteries – were constructed of wood, so there are few old ones to be seen. Even the great palaces were made of wood, and with the destruction of Mandalay Palace during WWII there is no remaining wooden Myanmar palace. A few surviving examples are in Mandalay (p000), Inwa (p000), Salay (p000) and near Pakokku (p000).

Although so little remains of the old wooden architectural skills, there are still many excellent wooden buildings to be seen. The people of Myanmar continue to use teak with great skill, and a fine country home can be a very pleasing structure indeed.

Buildings erected during the British colonial period feature a variety

### BUDDHA'S HAND SIGNS

Of the hundreds and hundreds of Buddha images you'll see in Myanmar, the Buddha will be in one of four postures: standing, sitting, walking and reclining. The first three are associated with the daily activities of the Buddha, while the later represents Buddha's dying moments when he attained *parinibbana* (ultimate nirvana). Look out for the following hand signs, which have difference meanings:

- **Abhaya** Both hands are extended forward, palms out, to symbolise Buddha's offer of protection or freedom from fear.
- **Bhumispara** The right hand touches the ground, which symbolises the point in the Buddha's life when he sat in meditation beneath the banyan tree and vowed not to budge from the spot until he gained enlightenment.
- **Dana** One or both hands extended forward with palms up, which symbolises the offering of *dhamma* (Buddhist teachings) to the world.
- **Dhyana** Both hands rest palm-up on the Buddha's lap, signifying meditation.
- **Vitarka or Dharmachakka** Thumb and forefinger of one hand forms a circle with other fingers curving outward (somewhat like an 'OK' gesture), symbolising the first public discourse on Buddhist doctrine.

High above you in a *zedi* you can hear the wind bells tinkling from the *hti*, the decorative metal 'umbrella' that tops the structure.

of styles and materials, from the rustic wood-and-plaster Tudor villas of Pyin U Lwin to the thick-walled, brick-and-plaster, colonnaded mansions and shop houses of Yangon, Mawlamyine and Myeik. An interesting example of a fusion of Burmese and European styles is the City Hall building in Yangon. Until recently scant attention was paid to preserving colonial architecture – for political as well as economic reasons. Nowadays some are being restored, but many have been demolished and replaced by new structures in recent years.

### Sculpture & Painting

Early Myanmar art was always a part of the religious architecture – paints were for the walls of temples, sculpture to be placed inside them. Remarkably little research has been carried out on Myanmar religious sculpture other than that from the Bagan and Mandalay eras. Many pieces, formerly in *paya* or *kyaung* have been sold or stolen. Mandalay's Mahamuni Buddha image, a Rakhaing sculpture, is the country's most famous image of any age. Unfortunately, you'll easily find more Myanmar religious sculpture for sale or on display in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, San Francisco and London than in Myanmar.

In the immediate aftermath of the 1988 demonstrations, the government forbade 'selfish' or 'mad art' that didn't have clear progovernment themes. One artist, Sitt Nyein Aye, spent two months in custody for sketching the ruins of the former student union, which New Win had blown up in 1962. Things seem to have relaxed a little, evident in national galleries – though most works are rather predictable tourist-oriented works. The government's social posters – anti-AIDS, antidrugs, or just progovernment! – are interesting pieces of propaganda posted on many main streets.

### Literature

Religious texts inscribed onto Myanmar's famous *kammawa* (lacquered scriptures) and *parabaik* (folding manuscripts) were the first pieces of literature as such, and began appearing in the 12th century. Until the 1800s, the only other works of 'literature' available were royal genealogies, classical poetry and law texts. A Burmese version of the Indian epic Ramayana was first written in 1775 by poet U Aung Pyo. The first printed books in the country were produced by missionaries; the American Baptist Mission was responsible for virtually all publishing until the late 19th century, when the first press owned by a Burmese began printing a Burmese-language newspaper.

Today the people of Myanmar are great readers, as you'll realise from the piles of books in the street at every night market.

### SPORT Martial Arts

Myanmar has a tradition of kickboxing that's said to date back to the Bagan era, although the oldest written references are found in chronicles of warfare between Burma and Thailand during the 15th and 16th centuries. *Myanma let-hwei* (Myanmar kickboxing) is very similar in style to *muay thai* (Thai kickboxing), although not nearly as well developed as a national sport.

The most common and traditional kickboxing venues are temporary rings set up at *paya pwe* rather than sports arenas. However, in recent years occasional championships are held at Aung San Stadium in Yangon. Yangon's YMCA is a good place to ask about upcoming events.

When royal palaces ceased to be built, woodcarving skills rapidly declined. There has been a small renaissance in recent years, mostly seen in hotels.

As with Thai boxing, almost anything goes in the ring. All fighters are bare-fisted. All surfaces of the body are considered fair targets and any part of the body except the head may be used to strike an opponent. Common blows include high kicks to the neck, elbow thrusts to the face and head, knee hooks to the ribs and low crescent kicks to the calf. Punching is considered the weakest of all blows and kicking merely a way to 'soften up' one's opponent; knee and elbow strikes are decisive in most matches.

Competition isn't nearly as formalised in Myanmar as in Thailand; in fact you probably won't find two people anywhere in the country who agree on the rules! In the simplest rural matches, fought in a dirt circle, there's no time limit and a fighter loses once he has wiped blood from his face or body three times (or gets knocked out cold!). In more organised amateur matches, boxers fight in square rings (5.8m by 5.5m), for three to five rounds of three minutes each, usually with two minutes' rest between. Professional matches in larger towns and cities begin with five rounds but may increase round by round to 12 rounds when the scoring is tight – even longer if no clear winner emerges earlier in the match.

Before the match begins, each boxer performs a dancelike ritual in the ring to pay homage to Buddha and to Khun Cho and Khun Tha, the *nat* whose domain includes Myanmar kickboxing. The winner repeats the ritual at the end of the match.

### **Chinlon**

Often called 'cane ball' in Burmese English, *chinlon* refers to games in which a woven rattan ball about 12cm in diameter is kicked around. It also refers to the ball itself, which resembles the *takraw* of Thailand and Malaysia. Informally any number of players can form a circle and keep the *chinlon* airborne by kicking it soccer-style from player to player; a lack of scoring makes it a favourite pastime with locals of all ages.

In formal play six players stand in a circle of 22ft (6.6m) circumference. Each player must keep the ball aloft using a succession of 30 techniques and six surfaces on the foot and leg, allotting five minutes for each part. Each successful kick scores a point, while points are subtracted for using the wrong body part or dropping the ball.

A popular variation – and the one used in intramural or international competitions – is played with a volleyball net, using all the same rules as in volleyball except that only the feet and head are permitted to touch the ball.

# Environment

## THE LAND

A bit bigger than France and slightly smaller than Texas, Myanmar covers 678,500 sq km, though it sometimes jockeys with neighbouring Thailand for a hectare or two more along its eastern extremes. Its land borders with (clockwise from west) Bangladesh, India, Tibet, China, Laos and Thailand, covers 5876km, and 1930km of coastline faces the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea.

Geographically, Myanmar's south is similar to Malaysia, the north to northern India or China, and the centre is an overlap of the two – each producing unique 'zones' manifested in the scenery and creatures that hop by it. The area southwest of Yangon is a vast delta region. There is a central broad flat heartland, where much of the country's history was played out and lots of rice is currently grown. This is surrounded by protective mountain and hill ranges. Most notable are: the rugged Kachin Hills, which serve as the first steps into the Himalaya to the north; Khakabo Razi, on the Tibetan border, is Southeast Asia's highest mountain at 5889m; and Mt Victoria, west of Bagan in Chin State, which rises 3053m.

Three major rivers – fed by monsoon downpours and melted Himalayan snows from Nepal and India – cut north to south through the country. The 2000km-long Ayeyarwady River, one of Asia's most navigable big rivers, feeds much of the country's rice fields. It connects lower Myanmar (based around Yangon) with upper Myanmar (around Mandalay). North of Mandalay, the Chindwin River connects the hills to the north; while the Thanlwin River leads from China to the Gulf of Mottama through Myanmar's east. Also, the Mekong River passes by on the short border with Laos.

Politically, the land is divided into seven *tain* (divisions) and seven *pyi* (states) as shown on the map on p51.

## WILDLIFE

Myanmar's rich wildlife benefits from its diverse habitats – brackish waters and mangrove along the coast, bizarre mixes of tropical forests and cooler mountain habitats up north. The central plains (the dry zone) are home to more rice fields than wildlife.

## Animals

When Marco Polo wrote about Myanmar in the 13th century, he described '...vast jungles teeming with elephants, unicorns and other wild beasts.' Though Myanmar's natural biodiversity has no doubt altered considerably since that time, it's difficult to say by just how much. It's estimated that Myanmar is presently home to 251 mammals, 687 birds, 203 reptiles and 70 amphibians – 32 of which are endangered, including the tiger, two species of rhinoceros and the red panda (see p70).

The most comprehensive wildlife survey available was undertaken by the Bombay Natural History Society between 1912 and 1921 and published as the *Mammal Survey of India, Burma and Ceylon*. In Myanmar *The Wild Animals of Burma*, published in 1967, is the most 'recent' work available and even this volume simply contains extracts from various surveys carried out by the British between 1912 and 1941, with a few observations dating to 1961.

From the local perspective, the 3000km-long Himalaya mountain chain begins in Myanmar. This is true enough, as one end of the chain, formed when the Indian and Eurasian tectonic plates collided 140 million years ago, extends to Myanmar's northern Kachin State.

As with Myanmar's flora, the variation in Myanmar's wildlife is closely associated with the country's geographic and climatic differences. Hence the indigenous fauna of the country's northern half is mostly of Indo-Chinese origin while that of the south is generally Sundaic (ie typical of Malaysia, Sumatra, Borneo and Java). In the Himalayan region north of the Tropic of Cancer (just north of Lashio), the fauna is similar to that found in northeastern India. The area extending from around Myitkyina in the north to the Bago Mountains in the central region is one where there is overlap between geographical and vegetative zones – which means that much of Myanmar is a potential habitat for plants and animals from all three zones.

Distinctive mammals – found in dwindling numbers within the more heavily forested areas of Myanmar – include leopards, fishing cats, civets, Indian mongooses, crab-eating mongooses, Himalayan bears, Asiatic black bears, Malayan sun bears, gaur (Indian bison), banteng (wild cattle), serow (an Asiatic mountain goat), wild boars, sambar, barking deer, mouse deer, tapirs, pangolin, gibbons and macaques. Sea mammals include dolphins and dugongs.

Some 10,000 Asiatic elephants – roughly a third of all those on the planet – are distributed throughout Myanmar. Among these are 6000 working elephants, most of which are used in logging and agriculture. It's encouraging that this number exceeds by a thousand that tallied by English scholar FT Morehead in his 1944 treatise *The Forests of Burma*.

Reptiles and amphibians include four sea turtle species along with numerous snake varieties, of which an astounding 52 are venomous. These include the common cobra, king cobra (hamadryad), banded krait, Malayan pit viper, green viper and Russell's viper.

Myanmar is rich in birdlife, with an estimated 687 resident and migrating species. Coastal and inland waterways of the delta and southern peninsula are especially important habitats for Southeast Asian waterfowl. One of the best birding spots is at Mt Victoria, which requires taking an expensive government guide (p329).

#### ENDANGERED SPECIES

Currently, 32 species are endangered in Myanmar, including the flying squirrel, tiger, three-striped box turtle and blue whale. The main threats to the country's wildlife are deforestation and poaching (see p72 for more details).

As recently as the mid-1990s, an estimated 2000 tigers (about 40% of Southeast Asia's total, some suggest) were thought to inhabit the primary forests, but some sources claim that numbers have dropped dramatically due to poaching and the illicit trade in tiger parts.

Both the one-horned (Javan) rhinoceros and the Asiatic two-horned (Sumatran) rhinoceros are believed to survive in very small numbers near the Thai border in Kayin State. The rare red panda (or cat bear) was last

Possession of a sacred 'white (albino) elephant' supposedly ensured Burmese kings a prosperous reign. In 1885 Burma's last royal white elephant died during the reign of King Thibaw. Shortly thereafter British colonial forces took over the country.

#### CARING FOR YOUR ELEPHANT

One of my favourite Burmese books is *Burmese Timber Elephant* by U Toke Gale. It could be subtitled 'selection, care and use of your pet elephant', for it tells you everything you need to know and many things you don't about timber elephants – even what to do when your elephant is in musth. There's a chart of 90 nerve centres to use to control an elephant or get it to do things. But don't press 13, 25, 60, 61 or 63 or 'the animal will be infuriated'!

Tony Wheeler

#### INTRODUCING...THE LEAF DEER

In the 1990s, the 'leaf deer' – a 0.6m-tall deer – amazed scientists in northern Myanmar just by existing. Locals called it 'leaf deer' because it's so small they could wrap it in a leaf. Genetically ancient, and considered the most primitive deer species, it offers insight into evolution. The New York-based Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) was the first to bring the leaf deer to the attention of the world. The WCS also broke ground by becoming, in 1993, the first international NGO to work with the junta to set up wildlife reserves in Myanmar in three decades.

sighted in northern Myanmar in the early 1960s but is still thought to live in Kachin State forests above 2000m.

#### Plants

As in the rest of tropical Asia, most indigenous vegetation in Myanmar is associated with two basic types of tropical forest: monsoon forest (with a distinctive dry season of three months or more) and rainforest (where rain falls more than nine months per year). It's said there are over 1000 plant species endemic to the country.

Monsoon forests are marked by deciduous tree varieties, which shed their leaves during the dry season; rainforests are typically evergreen. The area stretching from Yangon to Myitkyina contains mainly monsoon forests, while peninsular Myanmar to the south of Mawlamyine is predominantly a rainforest zone. There is much overlapping of the two – some forest zones support a mix of monsoon forest and rainforest vegetation.

In the mountainous Himalayan region above the Tropic of Cancer, Myanmar's flora is characterised by subtropical broadleaf evergreen forest up to 2000m; temperate semi-deciduous broadleaf rainforest from 2000m to 3000m; and, above 3000m, evergreen coniferous, subalpine snow forest and alpine scrub.

Along the Rakhaing and Tanintharyi coasts, tidal forests occur in river estuaries, lagoons, tidal creeks and along low islands. Such woodlands are characterised by mangrove and other coastal trees that grow in mud and are resistant to seawater. Beach and dune forests, which grow along these same coasts above the high-tide line, consist of palms, hibiscus, casuarinas and other tree varieties that can withstand high winds and occasional storm-sent waves.

The country's most famous flora includes an incredible array of fruit trees, over 25,000 flowering species, a variety of tropical hardwoods, and bamboo. Cane and rattan are also plentiful.

Myanmar may possibly contain more species of bamboo than any country outside China. One pure stand of bamboo forest in Rakhaing State extends over 7770 sq km.

#### RESPONSIBLE ECOLOGICAL TRAVEL TIPS

Here are some simple tips for helping Myanmar's environment.

- Avoid using nonbiodegradable goods.
- If you do use nonbiodegradable items deposit them in rubbish bins in the nearest town. Make an effort to carry out rubbish left by others.
- Never bury your rubbish: digging disturbs soil and ground cover, and encourages erosion. Buried rubbish will likely be dug up by animals, which may be injured or poisoned by it.
- Avoid restaurants serving 'exotic' wildlife species, if you should find them (eg barking deer, bear).
- Ask boat drivers not to lower anchors onto coral formations, if on a trip in the vicinity of coral reefs.

Myanmar holds 75% of the world's reserves of *Tectona grandis*, better known as teak (*kyun* in Burmese). This dense, long-wearing, highly prized hardwood is one of Myanmar's most important exports, for which the biggest consumers are China, Singapore and India.

## NATIONAL PARKS

By an optimistic account, about 7.2% of Myanmar's land area (48,981 sq km) is made up of national parks and national forests, wildlife sanctuaries and parks and other protected areas. Other accounts estimate the percentage of protected areas as more like 2.1% (and this tally takes in zoos and the like). Regardless, the government has pledged to expand the area, much to the credit of the efforts of the New York-based Wildlife Conservation Society. In 2004 the government expanded the Hukuang Valley Tiger Reserve (p225) in Kachin State to 8400 sq km (and it may grow to 12,000 sq km), making it the largest tiger reserve in the world. When set up in 2001, a mere 150 tigers roamed the area; hunting (for the Chinese market) has been a major cause of the decline.

Most of the 'ecotourist' sights touted by the government (ranging from the zoo in the capital to the world's largest tiger reserve in Kachin State) are in remote areas and require special permission to visit. The most visited national park is Mt Popa (p277), which receives 150,000 visitors annually.

By one account, Myanmar sports more forest in general than any South or Southeast Asian country apart from India, and has 75% of the same area of forest as India, despite its much smaller size. That said, only 1.2% of Myanmar's forests are protected – by one estimate; others have it at about 3% – so Myanmar's forests remain the most unprotected in the region. The government apparently plans to expand, in increments, to protect 5%, then 10%, of the country at some point. We'll see.

## ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Essentially no environmental legislation was passed from the time of independence until after 1988, and unsurprisingly most of the government's acts – such as recent efforts to 'green the Dry Zone,' protect wildlife etc – have been ineffective.

At the moment, deforestation by the timber industry poses the greatest threat to wildlife habitats. In areas where habitat loss isn't a problem, hunting threatens to wipe out the rarer animal species. Wildlife laws are seldom enforced, which hardly helps matters. Poaching remains a huge problem in Myanmar, where tiger, elephant, python, turtle and eagle is frequently sold in Mandalay (en route to China usually). Of the protected areas, 13 of 16 wildlife sanctuaries are smaller than 350 sq km – not big enough to make much of a difference.

Marine life is threatened by a lack of long-range conservation goals. Myanmar's move to industrialise means that the release of pollutants into rivers and the sea is steadily increasing, and overfishing, especially in the delta regions, is also a growing problem. The country must also deal with illegal encroachment on national fisheries by Bangladeshi, Thai and Malaysian fishing boats.

Though most locals recycle nonbiodegradable material as a matter of course (disposability is still only a luxury for the rich here), and despite government's plans to expand 'protected' areas, there is no 'environmental movement' in the country as such.

About 70% of the population are farmers, and much of Myanmar's forests have fallen to the axe – for fuel sources, or legal/illicit timber

exports. One of the most troubled areas is the so-called 'Dry Zone', made up of heavily populated Mandalay, lower Sagaing and Magwe divisions. Little of the original vegetation remains in this pocket (which is about 10% of Myanmar's land, but home to one-third of the population) due to growth in the area's population and deforestation. The problem isn't new. Much of Britain's 19th-century industrialisation, as well as the train tracks made here in Myanmar, were built from cut Burmese timber. Following the 1988 putting down of the prodemocracy protests, the government relaxed timber and fishing laws for short-term gains, causing more long-term problems.

Myanmar is the world's second-leading producer of heroin, with many poppy farms in the Golden Triangle area of Shan State. The UN's Office of Drugs & Crime reported, however, that poppy cultivation fell by 29% in 2004.

Alan Rabinowitz's *Beyond the Last Village: A Journey of Discovery in Asia's Forbidden Wilderness* (2001) describes the rolled-up-sleeve efforts by himself and the Wildlife Conservation Society to set up reserves and parks in Myanmar's northern areas.

Most of Myanmar's protected areas are off-limits for travellers. See a list of wildlife sanctuaries at [www.myanmars.net/travel/ecotourism.htm](http://www.myanmars.net/travel/ecotourism.htm).

A conservative estimate is that 500,000 cu metres of timber heads to China annually. Myanmar's forest cover is currently about 50%, but apparently the percentage drops by 1.4% annually – one of the 10 worst deforestation rates in the world.

# Food & Drink

## STAPLES & SPECIALTIES Burmese Cuisine

Mainstream Burmese cuisine represents an intriguing blend of Bamar, Mon, Indian and Chinese influences. *T'āmin*, also written as *htamin* (rice) is the core of any Burmese meal, to be eaten with a choice of *hin* (curry dishes), most commonly fish, chicken, prawns or mutton. Very little beef or pork is eaten by the Burmese – beef because it's considered offensive to most Hindus and Burmese Buddhists, and pork because the *nat* (spirits) disapprove (see p60). Many Burmese Buddhists in fact abstain from eating the flesh of any four-legged animal, and, during the Buddhist rain retreat around the Waso full moon may take up a 'fire-free' diet that includes only uncooked vegetables and fruit. Nearly all butchers in Myanmar are either Muslim or Chinese.

Unlike many Chinese dishes, Burmese food takes a long time to prepare, and is often best eaten either at lunch in restaurants when it's fresh, or in homes. Bamar curries are the mildest in Asia in terms of chilli power – in fact most cooks don't use chillies at all in their recipes, just a simple *masala* of turmeric, ginger, garlic, salt and onions, plus plenty of peanut oil and shrimp paste. Heat can be added in the form of *balachaung*, a table condiment made from chillies, tamarind and dried shrimp pounded together, or from the very pungent, very hot *ngapi jaw* (shrimp paste fried in peanut oil with chilli, garlic and onions). Curries are generally cooked until the oil separates from all other ingredients and floats on top. Some restaurants will add oil to maintain the correct top layer, as the oil preserves the underlying food from contamination by insects and airborne bacteria while the curries sit in open, unheated pots for hours at a time.

Lots of dishes are flavoured with *ngapi*, which is a salty paste concocted from dried and fermented shrimp or fish, and can be very much an acquired taste. A thin sauce of pressed fish or shrimp called *ngan-pya-ye* may also be used to salt Bamar dishes.

One of the culinary highlights of Burmese food (or Bamar food) is undoubtedly *dhouq* or *thouq* (also *lethouq*) – light, spicy salads made with raw vegetables or fruit tossed with lime juice, onions, peanuts, chillies and other spices. Among the most exquisite are *maji-yweq dhouq*, made with tender young tamarind leaves, and *shauk-thi dhouq*, mixed with pomelo, a large citrus fruit similar in appearance to grapefruit, but sweeter. *T'āmin let-dhouq* are savoury salads made with cooked rice.

A popular finish to Bamar meals is *la-hpeq dhouq* (a saladlike concoction of pressed, moistened green tea leaves mixed with a combination of sesame seeds, fried peas, dried shrimp, fried garlic, peanuts, toasted coconut and ginger, and other crunchy flavourings). The 'slimy-looking' mass of leaves puts some foreigners off, but it's actually quite tasty once you get beyond the dish's exotic appearance.

A common side dish is Indian-influenced *peh-hin-ye* (lentil soup, or dahl); the classier restaurants may serve dahl fortified with chunks of boiled turnips, potatoes and okra. A *hin-jo* (mild soup) of green squash may also be available. Once you've ordered one or more curries at an authentic *t'āmin zain* (rice shop), rice, dahl, soup, side dishes and Chinese tea come automatically for no charge.

Noodle dishes are most often eaten for breakfast or as light meals between the main meals of the day. By far the most popular is *mohinga*

(rice noodles with chicken or fish), which is eaten with a spoon and *tu* (chopsticks). Another popular noodle dish, especially at festivals, is *oun-no hkauq-sweh*, rice noodles with pieces of chicken in a spicy sauce made with coconut milk.

## REGIONAL CUISINE

In Mandalay and around Inle (Kalaw, Pindaya, Nyaungshwe and Taunggyi) it is also fairly easy to find Shan cuisine, which is very similar to northern Thai cuisine. Popular dishes are *k'auk sen* (Shan-style wide rice noodles with curry) and various fish and meat salads. Large *maung jeut* (rice crackers) are common throughout Shan State.

*Shàn k'auk swèh* (Shan-style noodle soup) – thin wheat noodles in a light broth with chunks of chilli-marinated chicken – is a favourite all over Myanmar but is most common in Mandalay and Shan State. A variation popular in Mandalay is made with rice noodles and called *myi shay*. Another Shan dish worth seeking out is *t'āmin chin* ('sour rice', a turmeric-coloured rice salad).

Mon cuisine, most readily available in towns stretching from Bago to Mawlamyine, is very similar to Bamar food with a greater emphasis on curry selections. While a Bamar restaurant might offer a choice of four or five curries, a Mon restaurant will have as many as a dozen, all lined up in curry pots to examine. Mon curries are also more likely to contain chillies than in other cuisines.

Rakhaing food most resembles dishes found in Bangladesh and India's Bengal state, featuring lots of bean and pulse dishes, very spicy curries and flatbreads. Because of Rakhaing State's long coastline, seafood is common in the larger towns. Seafood is also available and popular in Tanintharyi Division, which has a similarly lengthy sea coast.

## Chinese & Indian Cuisines

In towns large and small throughout Myanmar you'll find plenty of Chinese restaurants, many of which offer regional specialities that are a world (well, half of China anyway) away from the Chinese food found in Western countries. For example, there are Muslim-Chinese restaurants that serve Yunnanese specialities.

Indian restaurants are also common, although much more so in Yangon than elsewhere. Most are run by Muslim Indians, a few by Hindus. Excellent chicken *dan bauk* (biryani) as well as all-you-can-eat vegetarian *thali* served on a banana-leaf is easy to find in the capital. The Myanmar people call Indian restaurants that serve all-you-can-eat *thalis* 'Chitty' or 'Chetty' restaurants. Many Indian places outside of Yangon can be very basic.

## Fruit

Myanmar has a wide variety of tropical fruits (watermelon, grapefruit, lychee, pomelo, banana, tangerine etc) and in season you can get delicious strawberries in Pyin U Lwin, Mandalay and even Yangon. Don't miss the huge avocados if you're in the Inle Lake area. Bago is known for its tasty pineapples, and Hsipaw has the most delicious papayas we've ever sampled. Mangoes are available from March through July, jackfruit from June to October.

## DRINKS

### Nonalcoholic Drinks

Only drink water in Myanmar when you know it has been purified – which in most restaurants it should be. You should be suspicious of ice

When you're served a bowl of *hin* (curry), you're not expected to consume all the oil; just spoon out the ingredients from underneath the layer.

One of the seminal works on Myanmar cuisine is *Cook and Entertain the Burmese Way*, by Mi Mi Khaing.

Food is so enjoyed in Myanmar that standard greetings to friends and foreigners include: *sar pyi bi lar?* ('have you eaten your lunch yet?') and *bar hin ne sar le?* ('what curry did you have for lunch?')

Half of Ba Than's fun little book *Myanmar's Attractions & Delights* (2003) features snippets of background on various dishes and food-related customs. The book is available in some Yangon bookshops.

although we've had lots of ice drinks in Myanmar without suffering any ill-effects. Many brands of drinking water are sold in bottles and are quite safe. A 1L bottle, usually kept cool by ice or refrigerator, costs about K150 or K200.

Burmese tea, brewed in the Indian style with lots of milk and sugar, is cheap. If this is not to your liking, ask for Chinese tea, which is weak and comes without milk. Many restaurants, the Chinese ones in particular, will provide as much weak Chinese tea as you can handle – for free if you order some food. It's a good, safe thirst quencher and some people prefer it to regular Burmese tea. You can always buy some little snack if you'd like some tea but not a meal. Teashops (p79) are a good place to drink safely boiled tea and munch on inexpensive snacks such as *nam-bya*, *palata* (kinds of flat breads) or Chinese pastries.

Soft drinks are more costly but reasonable by Asian standards. Since the privatisation of industry there has been a boom in new made-in-Myanmar soft-drink brands, including Fantasy, Max, Star, Fruito and Crusher. They taste pretty much the same as a Coke and are not frequently found outside Yangon or touristy areas. Local soft drinks costs about K150 per bottle, while a Coke can be K700 or more because it can only be brought into the country via the black market.

Coffee drinkers will find themselves growing disturbingly attached to the 'three-in-one' packets of instant coffee (the 'three' being coffee, milk and sugar), which you can have in teashops for about K200. Shops sell them for K100 each in stores.

### Alcoholic Drinks

In the past the Burmese were not big drinkers. This was partially due to the general lack of disposable income but also because alcohol-drinking is looked down upon by the many Burmese Buddhists who interpret the fifth lay precept against intoxication very strictly. However, with the advent of 'beer stations' – places that serve cheap draught beer – the number of urban Burmese who can afford a few glasses of beer after work is on the rise. In fact, beer stations seem to be giving the traditional Burmese teashops some stiff competition.

Any place selling beer or alcohol must pay (sometimes relatively expensive) 'alcohol licence fees' to the government. See p79 for information on drinking venues.

### BEER

Apart from international brands such as Tiger, ABC Stout, Singha, San Miguel, Beck and other beers brewed in Thailand, Singapore and Indonesia (typically costing K800 to K1200 for a 375mL can or bottle), there are a couple of Myanmar brews. These include long-established Myanmar Beer, which is very similar to Indian or Sri Lankan beer – and equal to Tiger, to the palate of at least a couple of researchers. A more watery beer is Mandalay Beer. If you order it, some waiting staff may double-check to see if you meant 'Myanmar' beer. Some bottles contain a layer of sediment on the bottom resulting from inadequate filtration. Founded in 1886, Mandalay Brewery, in Yangon, also produces the New Mandalay Export label, which is the best-tasting local beer. Some fine, newer, brands brewed in Myanmar include Dagon and Skol. All these cost about the same as Mandalay Beer but taste a lot better. Also worth a try is the new Mandalay Strong Ale, which packs a punch with a 7.5% alcohol content.

Among the locals, Myanmar draught is the favourite; a glass of it will only set you back K250.

For more tips on drinking water, see p375.

### TODDY

Throughout central Myanmar and the delta, *t'an ye* (or *htan ye*; palm juice) or toddy is the farmer's choice of alcoholic beverage. *T'an ye* is tapped from the top of a toddy palm, the same tree – and the same sap – that produces jaggery, or palm sugar. The juice is sweet and nonalcoholic in the morning, but by midafternoon ferments naturally to a weak, beer-like strength. By the next day it will have turned. The milky, viscous liquid has a nutty aroma and a slightly sour flavour that fades quickly.

Villages in some areas have their own thatched-roof toddy bars where the locals meet and drink pots of fermented toddy. The toddy is sold in the same roughly engraved terracotta pots the juice is collected in and drunk from coconut half-shells set on small bamboo pedestals. Favourite toddy accompaniments include prawn crackers and fried peas. Some toddy bars also sell *t'an-ayeq* (toddy liquor, also called jaggery liquor), a much stronger, distilled form of toddy sap.

### OTHER LIQUORS & WINES

Very popular in Shan State is an orange brandy called *shwe leinmaw*, with prices decreasing depending on how close to the source you buy it. Much of it is distilled in the mountains between Kalaw and Taunggyi. It's a pleasant-tasting liqueur – sort of a poor man's Grand Marnier – and packs quite a punch.

In Pyin U Lwin, there are several sweet strawberry-based wines you can pick up.

There is also a variety of stronger liquors, including *ayeq hpyu* (white liquor), which varies in strength from brandylike to almost pure ethyl; and *taw ayeq* (jungle liquor), a cruder form of *ayeq hpyu*.

### CELEBRATIONS

Burmese meals are made not with servings, but giant shareable portions, and feasts often spill into grand family-and-friends affairs. For some birthdays, when a child 'takes the robe' and joins a monastery, and certainly funerals (or anniversaries of deaths), monks are invited to eat with Buddhist families, who offer blessings to the family. Those who can afford it arrange large parties to eat at Chinese restaurants or hotel restaurants for weddings or birthdays.

### WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

Myanmar has essentially three dining/drinking scenarios: what's in Yangon; what's in other oft-visited places (Mandalay, Bagan, Inle Lake, Ngapali Beach); and then everywhere else. Food can be quite cheap (from K1000 for a full stomach) if you stick to the roadside restaurants with their curry-filled pots or pick-and-point rice dishes. On the other hand, the restaurants of big hotels or Yangon's expat-oriented scene are predictably expensive; some only accept US dollars. Other oft-visited towns have restaurants that cater to travellers, though they are not as upmarket as some restaurants in Yangon.

Because almost all accommodation options include a free breakfast of eggs – or, on occasion, *mohinga* – many travellers don't venture out in the morning.

### Quick Eats

By far the bulk of eateries throughout Myanmar are basic with concrete floors, wide-open front for ventilation and often a menu in English. Burmese eateries are busiest (and many say freshest) at lunch. No menus

Many festivals in Myanmar involve celebrations. For more information, see p340.

**STREET SNACKS: WE DARE YOU**

Myanmar *thāye-za* (literally ‘mouth-watering snack’) come in an eye-popping array of cheap bite-sized snacks that line ‘night markets’ all around the country. Most of the stuff isn’t threatening – multicoloured sticky-rice sweets, poppy-seed cakes, dried salt fish split open and de-boned, and banana or potato puddings. A bag of the sweet offerings can be taken to a restaurant for a cheap BYO dessert. Other options, though, are a little more of a challenge to Western stomachs. Some locals boast that ‘anything that walks on the ground can be eaten’, the following list is testimony to that saying:

- items at a *wek thaa douk htoe* (barbecue stand) – these stands are a few tiny plastic stools around a boiling pot and a circular grill filled with various sliced-up pig organs (liver, intestine, lung, pancreas, heart, head, lip, ears, nose, tongue); grab and grill and dip in the spicy sauce for about K20 per piece.
- *pa-yit kyaw* (fried cricket) – like the ol’ adage goes, there’s nothing like a 10-pack of fried crickets for K400 to kick off an evening; sometimes they are sold on a skewer – one local explained how to eat them: ‘take off the head, peel off the wings and gulp it’.
- *bi-laar* (beetle) – prepared like crickets, except diners ‘suck the stomach out, then chew the head part’.
- *thin baun poe* (larva) – these thick, cocoonlike insect larvae, freshly taken from bamboo poles, are lightly grilled and served still wriggling; a vendor explained, ‘It’s best to eat raw because it’s good for your stomach’, apparently there’s a big demand in China for these, so eat them while you can.

are necessary at most; just go to the line of curries and point to what you want. A meal comes with a tableful of condiments, all of which are automatically refilled once you finish them. An all-you-can-eat meal is about K1000 or K1500. Some basic eateries operate as long as restaurants (roughly 7am to 8pm or 9pm).

Another abundant option is the (usually) hole-in-the-wall Indian curry shop, which generally serves veggie dishes only and no beer. You can recognise Muslim (halal) restaurants by the numeral 786 over the door, sometimes flanked by the star-and-crescent symbol. This number represents the Arabic phrase ‘In the name of Allah the most beneficent and merciful’.

Like most Southeast Asians, the people of Myanmar are great grab-and-go snackers; stands at night markets, selling a host of sweets and barbecued meals and noodles, get going around 5pm to 8pm or later, and are generally the liveliest and cheapest eating in Myanmar. Generally you can get some fried noodles, a few pieces of pork, or sticky rice wrapped in banana leaf for K100 to K250. Street and market stalls tend to provide the regional dishes, but you’ll need to be a little wary of cleanliness.

**Restaurants**

Most restaurants keep long hours daily, usually from 7am to 9pm or until the last diner wants to stumble out – belly full of curry or beer.

Chinese restaurants are found in most towns, and can be quite appealing after a week or so of Burmese food. Most have similar sprawling menus, with as many as 50 rice or noodle chicken, pork, lamb, fish, beef or vegetable dishes. Veggie dishes start at around K500 or K600; meat dishes about K1000.

**SWISHY EATS**

More upmarket restaurants – sometimes serving a mix of Asian foods, others specialising (Italian, Thai etc) – can be found in Bagan, Mandalay,

Inle Lake and (especially) Yangon. Also, most top-end hotels, too, offer plushier eating places, sometimes set around the pool. Such comfort is rarer to come by off the beaten track. In Yangon, a dish at a Japanese, Korean or Italian restaurant, for example, can cost up to US\$10. A hot pizza at Nyaung U, in Bagan, is about K1200 or K1500.

Upscale hotel restaurants usually have a few Bamar dishes on their menus but these will be toned-down versions of the real thing, with less chilli and seasonings, and they’ll usually come with fewer accompanying dishes.

**Drinking Venues**

Outside Yangon, drinking gets done at restaurants or open-air barbecue restaurants sometimes called in Burmese-English, cutely, ‘beer stations’. Opening hours are therefore the same as for restaurants. All but Indian restaurants keep cold bottles of Tiger and Myanmar beer handy (charging from K1000 to K1200 in basic restaurants, upwards to K3000 in swankier ones). It’s perfectly fine to linger for hours and down a few beers.

Men and women don’t often intermingle at restaurants, so in many places you may see red-faced men lingering over a slowly amassing number of empty bottles, with full ones always kept nearby by waiting staff.

More upmarket restaurants will serve foreign wines and mix cocktails.

For information on Yangon’s lively drinking scene, including expat hang-outs and places where many famous Myanmar musicians go to get blitzed, see p118.

**Teashops**

At all times of day you’ll see locals sitting in teashops, where the tea flows freely and the assorted pastries are very inexpensive. Teashops are an important social institution in Myanmar, serving as meeting places for friends, family and business associates, as well as a source of cheap nutrition and caffeine.

The shops come in all shapes and sizes, indoor and outdoor, morning-oriented and evening-oriented. The morning teashops are typically open from 5am to 5pm, and generally serve the best-quality tea; many will also serve Burmese-style coffee. Evening teashops open from 4pm or 5pm and stay open till 11pm or later – even all night in some places, particularly near train or bus stations that have late-night activity.

**MYANMAR’S TOP FIVE RESTAURANTS**

- **Sandy’s Myanmar Cuisine, Yangon** (p112) If you’re tired of streetside stalls serving *mohinga* (noodles and chicken/fish), this stylish colonial building serves excellent Burmese fare on its outdoor patio overlooking Kandawgyi Lake.
- **Grilled squid at a private open-air restaurant, Ngapali Beach** (p316) Fresh squid dunked in chilli/garlic sauce is probably Myanmar’s best meal.
- **Seik Tie Kye Restaurant** (p199) You and three pals can share a giant steaming hotpot of chicken and beancurd then order fresh ice-cream chasers – for about K2000 each.
- **Aroma 2, Nyaung U** (p271) Fresh Indian curries – fish, mutton, veggie – come on banana-leaf plates; the best stuff needs to be ordered a day ahead.
- **Burmese Cuisine, Hsipaw** (p212) Sure the name’s obvious, but this hole-in-the-wall fills a host of pots with tasty curries; best is the pumpkin – for K300 a plate.



The quality of tea can vary dramatically from one teashop to the next. The best use only fresh, top-quality Indian-style tea for every brewing cycle, while the worst recycle tea leaves until the flavour and colour are gone. A cup of tea, served with condensed milk, is K100 to K200.

You can get hot Chinese-style tea at many restaurants for free with food; most restaurants do not serve 'Indian tea' (aka 'Burmese tea') with milk.

Myanmar's teashops are often excellent places to go for breakfast.

### ORDERING DELICIOUS TEA

Getting tea with milk at a teashop can be one of the country's great challenges. Some servers know the English word 'tea', but you may end up with Chinese-style tea (and no milk) unless you're willing to point-and-nod at fellow sippers' tables, or learn a couple of phrases.

- *lăp'eq-ye* – tea water, will come with a dollop of condensed milk
- *cho bouk* – less sweet version of *lăp'eq-ye*
- *kyauk padaung* – very sweet, the phrase comes from a famous sugar-palm-growing region near Bagan

### VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Vegetarians will be able to find fare at most restaurants in Myanmar. Even meaty barbecues have a few skewered vegetables that can be grilled up. The easiest way to convey your needs is saying 'I can't eat meat' (*āthà māsà-nain-bù*). In some cases, saying 'no chicken, no pork, no fish' in English gets the point across. Some Indian or Nepali restaurants are vegan.

Throughout the regional chapters, we highlight some particularly good vegetarian options or restaurants.

### EATING WITH KIDS

You won't find children's menus in Myanmar restaurants, but staff will be happy to serve kids and can offer smaller portions on request. Some more traveller-oriented restaurants have bonus features such as puppet shows or live music that may add to the fun.

### HABITS & CUSTOMS

At home, most families take their meals sitting on reed mats around a low, round table about 30cm in height. In restaurants, chairs and tables are more common. The entire meal is served at once, rather than in courses. In basic Bamar restaurants, each individual diner in a group typically orders a small plate of curry for himself or herself, while side dishes are shared among the whole party. This contrasts with China and Thailand, for example, where every dish is usually shared.

Traditionally, Bamar food is eaten with the fingers, much like in India, usually with the right hand (but using the left doesn't seem to be a taboo as it is in India). Nowadays, it's also common for urban Myanmar people to eat with a *k'āyin* or *hkayin* (fork) and *zùn* (tablespoon). These are always available at Bamar restaurants and almost always given to foreign diners.

#### DO'S & DON'TS

- A fork is held in the left hand and used as a probe to push food onto the spoon; you eat from the spoon.
- If you're invited to a home, it's common for the hostess and children to not eat at the table.
- Locals tend to focus on the flavours, not table talk, during meals.
- If you're asked to join someone at a restaurant, they will expect to pay for the meal.

### EAT YOUR WORDS

For some general Burmese phrases and pronunciation guidelines see the Language chapter on p379.

#### Useful Phrases

##### FINDING FOOD

##### Is there a ... near here?

... <i>di-nà-hma shí-dhàlà?</i>	... ဒီနားမှာရှိသလား။	
<b>Chinese restaurant</b>	<i>tāyouq-s'ain</i>	တရုတ်ဆိုင်
<b>food stall</b>	<i>sà-thauq-s'ain</i>	စားသောက်ဆိုင်
<b>restaurant</b>	<i>sà-daw-s'eq</i>	စားတော်ဆက်
<b>Shan noodle stall</b>	<i>shàn-k'auk-swèh-zain</i>	ရှမ်းခေါက်ဆွဲဆိုင်

##### ORDERING

##### I can't eat meat.

*āthà māsà-nain-bù.* အသား မစားနိုင်ဘူး။

##### Do you have any drinking water?

*thauq-ye shí-dhàlà?* သောက်ရေရှိသလား။

##### What's the best dish to eat today?

*di-né ba-hin àkaùm-zòun-lèh?* ဒီနေ့ဘာတင်းအကောင်းဆုံးလဲ။

##### Please bring (a) ...

... <i>yu-pè-ba</i>	... ယူပေးပါ။	
<b>chopsticks</b>	<i>tu</i>	တူ
<b>fork</b>	<i>k'āyin</i>	ခက်ရင်း
<b>spoon</b>	<i>zùn</i>	ဇွန်း
<b>knife</b>	<i>dà</i>	ခါး
<b>glass</b>	<i>p'an-gweq</i>	ဝန်ခွက်
<b>plate</b>	<i>bāgan-byà</i>	ဝန်းကန်ပြား
<b>bowl</b>	<i>bāgan-lòun</i>	ဝန်းကန်လုံး
<b>cup</b>	<i>k'weq</i>	ခွက်

##### I didn't order this.

*da māmha-bù* ဒါ မမှာဘူး။

### Food Glossary

#### MEALS

<b>breakfast</b>	<i>māneq-sa</i>	မနက်စာ
<b>lunch</b>	<i>né-leh-za</i>	နေ့လည်စာ
<b>dinner</b>	<i>nyá-za</i>	ညစာ
<b>snack/small meal</b>	<i>móun/thāye-za</i>	မုန့်/သေ့စာ

#### TYPICAL BURMESE DISHES

<i>āmèh-hnaq</i>	အမဲနပ်	beef in gravy
<i>ceq-thà-āc'o-jeq</i>	ကြက်သားအချိုချက်	sweet chicken
<i>ceq-thà-gin</i>	ကြက်သားကင်	grilled chicken (satay)
<i>ceq-thà-jaw</i>	ကြက်သားကြော်	fried chicken
<i>hin</i>	တင်း	curry
<i>āmèh-dhà-hin</i>	အမဲသားတင်း	beef curry
<i>ceq-thà-hin</i>	ကြက်သားတင်း	chicken curry
<i>hin-dhi-hin-yweq-hin/</i> <i>thi-zoun-hin</i>	တင်းသီးတင်းရွက်တင်း/ သီးစုံတင်း	vegetable curry
<i>hin-jo</i>	တင်းချို	soup (clear or mild)
<i>s'an-hlaw-hin-jo</i>	ဆန်လှော်တင်းချို	sizzling rice soup
<i>s'eh-hnām-yò-hin-jo</i>	ဆယ်နှစ်မျိုးတင်းချို	'12-taste' soup
<i>móun-dí</i>	မုန့်တီ	Mandalay <i>mount-ti</i> (noodles & chicken/fish)
<i>móun-hin-gà</i>	မုန့်တင်းခါး	<i>mohinga</i> (noodles and chicken/fish)

*móun-s'í-jaw*  
*móun-zàn*  
*ngà-dhouq*  
*ngà-bàun-(douq)*  
*t'ámin*  
*kauk-hnyin-bàun*  
*òun-t'ámin*  
*t'ámin-gyaw*  
*t'àn-thì-móun*  
*weq-thà-ni*

မုန့်ဆီကြော်  
 မုန့်ဆန်း  
 ဝါးသုင်  
 ဝါးပေါင်း(ထုပ်)  
 ထမင်း  
 ကောက်ညှင်းပေါင်း  
 အုန်းထမင်း  
 ထမင်းကြော်  
 ထန်းသီးမုန့်  
 ဝက်သားနို့

sweet fried-rice pancakes  
 sticky rice cake with jaggery (palm sugar)  
 fish salad  
 steamed fish (in banana leaves)  
 rice  
 steamed sticky rice  
 coconut rice  
 fried rice  
 toddy-palm sugar cake  
 red pork

**MEAT & SEAFOOD**

*ámèh-dhà*  
*ceq-thà*  
*k'âyú*  
*ngà*  
*ngàk'u*  
*ngàshín*  
*pin-leh-za/ye-thaq-tàwa*  
*pyi-jì-ngà*  
*thálaug-paùn*  
*weq-thà*

အပဲသား  
 ကြက်သား  
 ဒဂူ  
 ဝါး  
 ဝါးဂူ  
 ဝါးရှည်  
 ဝင်လယ်စာ/ငေသတ္တဝါ  
 ပြည်ကြီးဝါး  
 သလောက်ပေါင်း  
 ဝက်သား

beef  
 chicken  
 shellfish  
 fish  
 catfish  
 eel  
 seafood  
 squid  
 carp  
 pork

**VEGETABLES**

*bù-dhì*  
*ceq-thun-ni*  
*gaw-bi-douq*  
*hìn-dhì-hìn-yweq*  
*hmo*  
*hngápýaw-bù*  
*káldàbèh*  
*k'âyàn-dhì*  
*k'âyàn-jìn-dhì*  
*moun-la-ú-wa*  
*pàn-gaw-p'í*  
*p'áyoun-dhì*  
*pèh-dhì*  
*pyaùn-bù*

ဘူးသီး  
 ကြက်သွန်နီ  
 ဝေါဖီထုပ်  
 ဟင်းသီးဟင်းရွက်  
 မိုး  
 ငှက်ပျော့  
 ကုလားပဲ  
 ခရမ်းသီး  
 ခရမ်းချဉ်သီး  
 မုန့်လာဥဝါ  
 ဝန်းငါဖီ  
 ဝရံသီး  
 ပဲသီး  
 ပြောင်းဖူး

zucchini/gourd  
 onion  
 cabbage  
 vegetables  
 mushrooms  
 banana flower  
 chick peas  
 eggplant/aubergine  
 tomato  
 carrot  
 cauliflower  
 pumpkin  
 beans  
 corn (cob)

**FRUIT**

*àw-za-thì*  
*ceq-mauq-thì*  
*cwèh-gàw-dhì*  
*dù-jìn-dhì*  
*lain-c'í-dhì*  
*lein-maw-dhì*  
*meq-màn-dhì*  
*māji-dhì*  
*na-naq-thì*  
*ngápýaw-dhì*  
*òun-dhì*  
*pàn-dhì*  
*paun-móun-dhì*  
*shauq-thì*  
*t'àw-baq-thì*

ညှဉ်ဇာသီး  
 ကြက်ဟောက်သီး  
 ကျွဲကောသီး  
 ဒူးရင်းသီး  
 လိုင်ချီးသီး  
 လိမ္မော်သီး  
 မက်မန်းသီး  
 မန်ကျည်းသီး  
 နားနတ်သီး  
 ငှက်ပျော့သီး  
 အုန်းသီး  
 ဝန်းသီး  
 ပေါင်မုန့်သီး  
 ငှောက်သီး  
 ထောပတ်သီး

custard apple ('influence fruit')  
 rambutan ('cocksomb fruit')  
 pomelo  
 durian  
 lychee  
 orange  
 plum (damson)  
 tamarind  
 pineapple  
 banana  
 coconut  
 apple ('flower fruit')  
 breadfruit  
 lemon  
 avocado ('butter fruit')

*than-báya-dhì*  
*thiq-thì/a-thì*  
*tháyeq-dhì*  
*thin-bàw-dhì*

သံပရာသီး  
 သစ်သီး/အသီး  
 သရက်သီး  
 သဘော်သီး

lime  
 fruit  
 mango  
 papaya ('boat-shaped fruit')

**SPICES & CONDIMENTS**

*ceq-thun-byu*  
*gyin*  
*hnàn*  
*hnin-ye*  
*kalà t'àw-baq*  
*kùn-ya*  
*meiq-thálin*  
*mye-bèh-(jaw)*  
*nan-nan-bin*  
*ngan-pya-ye*  
*ngáyouq-thì*  
*ngáyouq-ye*  
*òun-nó*  
*p'a-la-zé*  
*pèh-ngan-pya-ye*  
*t'àw-baq*  
*tha-gu*  
*t'òun*  
*s'ù*  
*s'ánwin*  
*sha-làka-ye*  
*thàjà*  
*tó-hù/tó-p'ù*

ကြက်သွန်ဖြူ  
 ဂျင်း  
 နှမ်း  
 နှင်းရည်  
 ကုလားထောပတ်  
 ကွမ်းယာ  
 မိတ်သလင်  
 မြေပဲ(ကြော်)  
 နံနံပင်  
 ဝဲပြာရည်  
 ဝရုတ်သီး  
 ဝရုတ်ရည်  
 အုန်းနို့  
 ဝါလာစေ့  
 ပဲခဲပြာရည်  
 ထောပတ်  
 သာဂူ  
 ထုံး  
 ဆား  
 ဆန္ဒင်  
 ဂူလကာရည်  
 သကြား  
 တိုဟူး/တိုဝး

garlic  
 ginger  
 sesame  
 rose syrup  
 ghee  
 betel quid  
 galangal (white gingerlike root)  
 peanuts (fried)  
 coriander  
 fish sauce  
 chilli  
 chilli sauce  
 coconut cream  
 cardamon  
 soy sauce  
 butter  
 sago/tapioca  
 lime (for betel)  
 salt  
 turmeric  
 vinegar  
 sugar  
 tofu (beancurd)

**COLD DRINKS**

*áyeq*  
*bi-laq-ye/p'yaw-ye*  
*bi-ya/tábálin*  
*can-ye*  
*lein-maw-ye*  
*nwà-nó*  
*òun-ye*  
*s'o-da*  
*t'àn-ye*  
*than-báya-ye*  
*ye*  
*thán-ye*  
*ye-è*  
*ye-jeq-è*  
*ye-nwè*

အရက်  
 ဘီလင်ရည်/ငေရည်  
 ဘီယာ  
 ကြံရည်  
 လိမ္မော်ရည်  
 နွားနို့  
 အုန်းရည်  
 ဆိုဒါ  
 ထန်းရည်  
 သံပရာရည်  
 ငေ  
 သန့်ငေ  
 ငေအေး  
 ငေချက်အေး  
 ငေခွေး

alcohol  
 soft drink  
 beer  
 sugarcane juice  
 orange juice  
 milk  
 coconut juice  
 soda water  
 toddy  
 lime juice  
 water  
 bottled water ('clean water')  
 cold water  
 boiled cold water  
 hot water

**HOT DRINKS**

*kaw-fi*  
*dhàjà-nèh*  
*nó-s'í-nèh*  
*nwà-nó-nèh*  
*láp'eq-ye-jàn/*  
*ye-nwè-jàn*  
*leq-p'eq-ye*

ကော်ဖီ  
 သကြားနို့  
 နို့ဆီနို့  
 နွားနို့  
 လက်ဝက်ရည်ကြမ်း/  
 ငေခွေးကြမ်း  
 လက်ဝက်ရည်

coffee  
 with sugar  
 with condensed milk  
 with milk  
 green tea (plain)  
 tea (Indian)

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