

MYANMAR – THE HIDDEN PARADISE

Myanmar: A Diamond In The Rough.

Myanmar, the former Burma and even before that Siam, evokes so many magical and legendary images, as do its cities: Rangoon, Mandalay, Bagan, Ayeyarwaddy, ...

If you can overlook the minor inconveniences and the lack of little amenities, a trip to Myanmar will offer the traveler a truly extraordinary experience. By “little amenities”, we are referring to the dearth of Western style rest stops on the highways and the more elementary public facilities... Lavatories are very often just a hole in the ground, or what they refer to as a “low toilet” which is actually a glorified porcelain hole in the ground with a 6 inch high rim.... However, we found these rudimentary facilities were initially quite clean, as compared to other Arab countries in which the same style of bathroom fixtures are common.

For most travelers at the time of writing this article, the really big inconvenience may be the lack of Internet and mobile phone connections and the very expensive long distance calls.

The so-called Business Centers set up in the better hotels may be a kind of insider’s joke, because it appeared to be just as easy to connect to internet as to win the national lottery. Air-conditioning does exist in most finer restaurants and hotels and on the tourist buses, but they are not always in optimal working conditions.

But all of this is compensated for by the warmth, charm and attentive nature of the Burmese people, particularly in the hotels, where any technical deficiencies that may arise are more than compensated for by the enthusiastic and serviceable nature of the staff, who make visitors feel like a maharaja or maharani.

Myanmar is located on the western portion of the Indochina peninsula and it is surrounded by Tibet and the Chinese province of Yunan to the north, India to the northwest, Bangladesh to the west, and Laos and Thailand to the east.

The country has approximately 53 million inhabitants, although the census is not totally reliable, and they correspond to 135 different ethnies. Yangon or Rangoon is the most populated city with roughly one million residents. Consequently, even though many languages and dialects are spoken, Burmese is considered the official language. It is complicated to speak for it is made up of 30 consonants and 9 vowels and 5 different tonal variations for each syllable. Its attractive cursive writing is vaguely similar to the script of Southern India.

The most widespread religion is Theravada, a form of Buddhism, and Myanmar is indeed the country of the temples and the pagodas. It is necessary to distinguish between the pagodas which are the hollow temples which can be visited in the interior and the stupas which feature a solid construction and have nothing inside. The most important Pagoda is Shwe Dagon in Yangon. There are certain very strict rules to be followed when visiting the pagodas and temple areas. Visitors must go barefoot, so it is advisable to wear sandals or thongs which can be slipped on and off easily. Despite the fact that sometimes it is necessary to traverse market

areas and the like, to enter the temple grounds as such, it is still necessary to remove and leave your shoes at the entrance. Normal visiting rules also require that women keep their legs and shoulders covered and so it is also a good idea to stuff a sarong in your bag.

When viewing the temples and pagodas, visitors should follow a circular clockwise route. Myanmar can indeed be a photographer's paradise as the people in general including the monks do not mind having their photos taken, as long as it is done with respect and discretion. The worshippers also appreciate foreigners participating in their local rituals and offerings... presenting incense, flowers, candles and water to the images in the hope of receiving their blessings.

The sari or sarong, called a *longhi*, is worn by both men and women, but with some slight variations. Women slip into the longhi, which does not have a slit, and tighten it around their waists tucking in the corner to secure it in place. Tops and blouses are worn over the longhi. Men, on the other hand, slip into the longhi and twist the upper part around to form a knot in the front. They wear their shirts tucked into the longhi.

Yangon, which the British called Rangoon, is located on the Ayeyarwaddy delta, and it still conserves some of its British influence. It became the capital of the country in 1885, when Mandalay was occupied by the British.

According to legend, the Schwe Dagon Pagoda was constructed over 2,500 years ago, but it eventually fell into disuse and disappeared, overrun by the surrounding vegetation. It was discovered in 308 B.C. by missionaries and has been a place of worship ever since, although subject to successive reconstruction and renovation, particularly after the major damage caused by an earthquake in 1768. The pagoda is really a stupa, which means that it cannot be visited inside, and it has a total height of 98 meters. From the base, there are three octagonal terraces, the dome and, finally, the tower, which is crowned at the very top by a 76 karat diamond.

Its religious significance lies in the fact that it was built to house the four relics of the four Buddhas of the universe and that its exterior is covered with 8,688 solid gold plates. The very tip of the tower is decorated with 5,441 diamonds, a total of 2,072 karats, and other "lesser" jewels like 2,317 rubies, sapphires and topazes. A total of 1,065 gold and 420 silver bells hang from the parasol and the dome is covered with approximately 53,000 karats of gold leaf.

Recognized as one of the great wonders of the world, it is important to point out that the octagonal shape of the terraces corresponds to the eight planets of Buddhism: The Sun, Moon, Mars, Mercury, Saturn, Jupiter, Venus and the whimsical *Rahu*, and each have their corresponding animal. Six are real animals: the guinea pig, tiger, elephant with tusks, elephant without tusks, lion and rat, and the other two are imaginary: *Garuda*, the sacred bird, and *Naga*, the mythical serpent.

The Burmese people believe that the day of the week on which one is born is far more important than the day of the year and it influences their character, their relationships with other people and even when they should do certain things, like cut their hair. It also determines their name and their lucky color.

Yangon's Chauk Htat Kyi temple features the enormous reclining Buddha, with its painted face, which measures seventy meters in length. The Sule Pagoda is located in the center of the city. Although it is believed to date back more than 2,000 years, with its 46 meter high dome, it has obviously undergone continuous restoration over the centuries. The Kandawgyi Lake and gardens is a beautiful area to relax in Yangon and there is a fine restaurant offering wonderful views of the very scenic and peaceful setting. The Botatgun Pagoda, where the relics of Buddha were first stored when they were brought from India 2,400 years ago, is of Zedi style, and is an actual pagoda, meaning that it is hollow and can be visited inside.

Bagan is one of the richest archaeological areas of the region and its monuments exude all the charm and magic of a distant past. Situated on immense plains, on the shores of the Ayeyarwaddy River, everywhere you look the landscape is dotted with pagodas, stupas and temples, which date back to the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries. In fact, a total of 2,217 monuments of this nature, many of which are still well-conserved, can be found in the region's 42 square kms. For this reason, it has been declared a World Heritage Site by the UNESCO.

The Shwe Zigon pagoda is indeed the pride and joy of the city. The gilded stupa was built at the beginning of the 12th century and it conserves relics of Buddha under its very beautiful bell-shaped dome, which dominates the city. The Ananda temple was also built about that time, although it suffered severe damage in the 1975 earthquake. It is covered with gold leaf and inside, a series of corridors lead to a huge standing Buddha made of theca wood. It is considered Bagan's Archaeological Museum, because it contains more than 1,000 statues. The Gu Byaukkyi Temple, built in 1113 with a quadrangular shape, is the Sanctuary of Sikhara. Highly reminiscent of a Hindu temple, inside are 11th century frescoes telling the life story of Buddha. There are many other temples, like Htilmonine, with its carved pillars, the Nathaukkyang Monastery, constructed in theca wood, the Manuha temple with its enormous Buddhas, the Dhamayangyi temple, the largest in Bagan, and the 12th century Sulamani temple with its unique lacquered decor. Probably one of the most memorable experiences on a visit to Myanmar is to climb the Shwe-san-Daw temple in order to contemplate the sunset over the plains which are dotted in every direction with pagodas and stupas.

It is also a special treat to visit the small village of Minanathu, to appreciate the traditional and rudimentary lifestyle of the locals. Here is yet another photographer's paradise.

Back at Bagan, another splendid way to enjoy the sunset is from a cruise boat along the Ayeyarwaddy River.

Mandalay, 688 kms north of Yangon, is the second largest city in the country with a million inhabitants. Mandalay means "The Center" in Burmese and it is indeed located in the very heart of Myanmar. The Kuthodaw pagoda contains 729 marble slabs which record the teachings of Buddha and for this reason, more than a temple, it is considered the largest "book" in the world. The Shwe Nan Daw monastery or the Golden Palace is noted for its traditional Burmese wood carvings.

We can visit Amarapura, actually the old capital of Myanmar, situated just 11 kms away from Mandalay. At its Mahagandayon Monastery, we can experience first-hand the daily life of the 1,000 Buddhist monks, of all ages, living there. It is best to get there at lunch time and follow

their daily ritual. Also on our route is the U Bein bridge and the region itself is noted for its silk-making factories.

This is Myanmar, previously Burma and before that Siam, where you will be continuously greeted with *Mingalabar*: "Have a very nice day!"... something which is practically guaranteed in this "hidden paradise".

What to eat: The main dishes are rice-based and include curry. A popular dish is the "Ngapi", a pasta made from fermented shrimp, which is served with fresh vegetables. There are many Chinese and Indian dishes as well, particularly, curry. In hotels and restaurants catering to foreigners, they will probably tone down on the spices.

Experienced travelers need not be forewarned about drinking the water and avoiding ice cubes in their drinks. However, bottled water is available all over; the local beers, Myanmar and Mandalay, are good, as are the Myanmar soft drinks, Crusher and Star. And of course, there is tea: Burmese tea is dark, strong and served with milk and sugar already added. The lighter and weaker Chinese tea, served without milk and sweetener, is also popular.

What to buy: Although Myanmar might not have the vast options offered by other Asian countries, there are, of course, silk scarves, bronze and silver objects, carved wood objects, and other cotton and fabric items. The big buy is jewelry, with precious stones, like rubies and sapphires, which are only available in the official government stores. Also be sure to bargain, wherever you go.

How to get around in the cities: Taxis are the best bet, buses are a possibility although probably crowded, and the tricycles, tuc-tucs and horse-drawn carriages are fun.

Where to stay: Hotel Chatrium in Yangon, Amazing Bagan Resort in Bagan and the Mandalay Hill Resort in Mandalay.

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