



TRAILS OF INDOCHINA

*Artisans of bespoke journeys to
Southeast Asia & beyond*

MYANMAR

COUNTRY OVERVIEW





Myanmar remains one of the most mysterious and undiscovered destinations in the world. As this ancient land struggles to forge a new modern identity, its history and colonial past sit side by side with centuries old temples and a population optimistically looking towards the future. Indeed, the country's people and culture are amongst the most charming and authentic in the region. Visually, Myanmar is spectacular. From the ancient temples of Bagan & Mrauk-U to the cacophony of Mandalay, from the northern snow-capped mountains to the tranquillity of Inle Lake, Myanmar provokes the senses with a series of challenging contradictions.

Myanmar today offers a rich and varied travel experience that takes you back in time. Commonly referred to as the "Golden Land", Myanmar is a deeply religious Buddhist country with countless numbers of glistening temples and ancient monuments that date back thousands of years. Although the country is still very traditional, there are visible western remnants from the British colonial era as evident in the grand faded colonial architecture in Yangon.

While Myanmar may be considered to be changing rapidly in recent years, essentially it is still a very poor country with limited infrastructure and services. We ask you to be understanding of the plight of its people and that they may not have been afforded the same opportunities for education and development provided elsewhere in the region. As a result, the standards of some hotels or transportation is not first class, however, the people's cheerful character and genuine interest in the world outside of their own should keep you entertained throughout your travels.



LANDSCAPE

Myanmar is the largest country by geographical area in mainland Southeast Asia and is bordered by China, Laos and Thailand to the east, by Bangladesh and India to the north and by the Indian Ocean in the west and south. The Ayeyarwaddy River runs through the centre of the country and fans out into smaller tributaries to form a delta on the south coast. Intensive irrigated farming is practiced throughout central Myanmar, and fruit, vegetables and citrus crops thrive on the Shan Plateau. Nearly half of the country is comprised of preserved forests and natural ecosystems mainly due to the country's slow economic development. The Himalayas stretch into Myanmar, with the highest peak reaching 5,889 meters. With its long stretch of coastline facing the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal, Myanmar offers many beautiful and undeveloped beaches. The islands of the Mergui Archipelago (in the far south, bordering Thailand) offer great diving.

CLIMATE

The hottest season in Myanmar falls between March and mid-May (average temperatures 25°-38°C or 77° to 100° F), when the rainy season begins. The rains last from mid-May until the end of September (23°-33°C or 73° to 91°F) and are followed by three months of relatively cool weather (average temperatures 18-24°C or 64° to 75°F). It can even get down to near freezing at night around Inle Lake.

YANGON

Average daily temperatures in Yangon ranges from 18° to 32°C (64°F to 90°F) during the cool season and from 24° to 39 °C (75° to 102°F) during the hot season with relatively high humidity. However, even during the rainy season, the rain is generally sporadic and visitors can still enjoy Yangon sightseeing.

MANDALAY

Mandalay is drier than Yangon. During the peak of the wet season in May and June, the total rainfall is only about a quarter of the rain that Yangon receives. Although temperatures in the hot season from March to May can be warm 25°C - 38°C (77°F -100°F), in the cool season from December to February, night time temperatures can be cool 13°C - 28°C (55°F – 82°F) You may wish to bring a light jacket or sweater for evening wear during those times.

The central region has average annual rainfall of about 70 cm (28 inches) with mean annual temperature around 27°C (81°F).

BAGAN

Slightly more than 100 miles southwest of Mandalay, Bagan is a dry and hot area. During the hottest months of April and May the temperatures may range from 25°C - 40+°C (77°F – 105+°F) and in high season (October - March) from 15°C - 32°C. During the rainy season (May – September), rainfall is sparse averaging around 7- 8 cm (2.5-3 in) per month with average temperatures range from 25°C - 35°C (77°F - 95°F).

INLE LAKE

Located in the southwest Shan state Inle Lake is located at 900 meters' elevation and enjoys a cooler climate during the year. Rainfall is usually mild with a range of 10 - 20 cm during the months of May - September. The temperature during the rainy period averages about

17°C - 27°C (62°F - 80°F). From October – April, the temperature ranges from around 4°C - 32°C (39°F – 90°F) with the lowest night time temperatures coming in December, January and early February when it may reach near freezing at times. Because of the relatively light rainfall, visitors travel to Inle Lake year round.

PUTAO

Temperature in Putao region tends to be quite cool in the mornings and evenings. Climatically, it ranges from subtropical to temperate and alpine. Average temperature varies from a low of 10°C (50°F) to a high of 28°C (82°F). The rainy season is from May to October with average temperature from a low of 20° (68°F) and a high of 30°C (86°F) with relatively high humidity.

MRAUK U & NGAPALI

The Rakhine state coast and delta areas have an annual rainfall of about 250 cm (100 in) and an average annual temperature of about 32°C (90°F). In these areas, depending on the season, temperatures can fluctuate between 16° to 40°C (61° to 104°F). The season for beach holidays is October - May. Nearly all beach hotels close during the rainy season from mid-May – September.

PEOPLE AND RELIGION

Myanmar is home to people of many different ethnicities, including the Bamar or Myanmarns (around 65 per cent), Shan (10 per cent), Kayin (7 per cent) and the smaller Kachin, Chin and Mon tribes. There are also sizeable Chinese and Indian populations. The Bamar tend to be concentrated in the lowlands while ethnic minority groups live at higher elevations. Close to 90 per cent of the population is Theravada Buddhist, although many people also believe in nats (animist spirits). Some hill tribes are Christian and there are also Hindu and Muslim communities.

HISTORY

The land's original settlers, the Mon, were pushed out of the lowlands by the arrival of the Bamar from the Tibetan Plateau during the ninth century. King Anawrahta established his court in Bagan in 1044 and declared Theravada Buddhism as his kingdom's official religion, founding an era of great architectural, religious and artistic achievement.

When fighting between warring Burmese kingdoms touched on Bengal in the 19th century, the British moved in, taking Myanmar as a colony. Japanese forces invaded in WWII and at the end of the war, Myanmar was left under the leadership of the freedom-fighter Aung San, who was assassinated along with most of his cabinet in 1947. The country declared independence in 1948, although fighting between different ethnic groups continued.

Following a left-wing army coup in 1962, General Ne Win set the nation on a socialist course that proved economically devastating. Popular discontent erupted into huge demonstrations in 1987 and 1988. In 1988, a military junta seized power in Yangon, and changed the country's name to Myanmar in 1989. Elections were held in May 1990 where the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) won in a landslide. But the military, or SLORC, refused to recognize the election results and placed the leader of the opposition, Aung San Suu Kyi, under house arrest. She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991. Recent changes in Myanmar have awakened international attention to this once-ostracized Southeast Asian nation. These changes include the release from house arrest of Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi in 2011, her subsequent election to parliament, the visits of

leading politicians from the US, UK and Europe, the dropping of many international sanctions and a renewed increase in tourism.

TIME ZONES

Myanmar operates on Greenwich meantime +6.5 hours.

COUNTRY CODES

Myanmar country code is +95.

MOBILE PHONES

Myanmar uses a GSM mobile phone network. It is not possible to roam with your own mobile phone purchased outside Myanmar, but it is now possible to purchase a prepaid SIM card in Yangon. **The best place to buy a SIM is at the airport on arrival in Yangon.**

Elsewhere in the country, they are difficult to find.

INTERNET

In Myanmar, internet access is confined to large hotels and internet cafes in the cities; however, the connection is often slow. Be careful to not save your password or sensitive information on public computer terminals.

ELECTRICITY

The electrical current in Myanmar is 220-230V. The most common sockets are two pronged, usually able to take round or blade style plugs, although sometimes you need a three-prong adapter. Many hotels will provide adapters, but it is safer to bring your own. As in all countries, protect sensitive electronic equipment like laptops from power fluctuations by using a surge-protector.



YANGON

Located in the fertile delta region of central Myanmar, Yangon was the capital city until 2005. With its wide streets, parks and lakes Yangon has the sleepy charm of a provincial town. Crumbling British colonial mansions stand beside glittering pagodas, including one of the most remarkable religious shrines in all of Asia – the magical Shwedagon Pagoda. Much of Yangon's allure stems from its colourful street life: peddlers food on the sidewalk in gems in the gem market; rickshaw drivers in striped longyis (sarongs) peddle lazily through tree-lined streets; and people drink endless cups of sweet, milky tea at roadside tea stalls.

Getting here: There are daily direct flights from Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok, and flights several times per week from other points in Southeast Asia and the Middle East.

BAGAN

On par with Angkor Wat, Bagan ranks as one of the great wonders of the world with over 2000 awe-inspiring pagodas. Situated in central Myanmar on the plains next to the Ayeyarwaddy River, this ancient city is dotted with thousands of ancient stupas and temples from different eras making it one of the most remarkable archaeological sites in Asia. The breath-taking view of the brick temples, against the backdrop of a vast river plain is unforgettable.

Getting here: It is a 45-minute direct flight from Yangon; 30-minute direct flight from Mandalay; and 1 hour, usually via Mandalay from Heho.

MANDALAY

As the last royal capital of the Burmese Kingdom, Mandalay in the central dry zone of Myanmar today is the religious heart of the country possessing some of Myanmar's most beautiful pagodas, including the highly revered Mahamuni Paya, which holds a famous Buddha-image covered in gold leaf. Those interested in Buddhist religion will appreciate the Mahagandayone Monastery where more than a thousand monks and novices live and study the doctrine of Buddha. An additional attraction is the world's largest book – 729 marble slabs of Buddhist scriptures at Kuthodaw Pagoda. Famous for its arts and crafts, Mandalay is a good place to buy everything from traditional wooden puppets to hand-woven fabrics.

Getting here: It is a 1 hour 15-minute direct flight from Yangon; 30 mins direct flight from Bagan; and 25 mins direct flight from Heho.

INLE LAKE

Heho in central Myanmar is known as the gateway to Inle Lake, which is just a short one-hour drive away. The people who live around this serene 22km-long lake are known for their peculiar style of rowing: standing on one leg they use the other leg to row. Floating vegetable gardens dot the lake's surface and there are colourful morning markets on the lake shores. In addition, Inle Lake is home to silk and lotus weaving craft shops located on stilts on the lake. A wide range of bird species also inhabits the lake and its grasslands, adding to the beauty of this fascinating water world.

Getting here: A 1 hour 15 min direct flight from Yangon; 1-hour flight usually via Mandalay from Bagan; and a 25-minute direct flight from Mandalay.

PUTAO

Formally known as Fort Hertz, Putao, the most northerly town in Myanmar in the foothills of the Eastern Himalayas, was one of the British Empire's most remote outposts. Today, Putao remains completely cut off from the outside world by millions of acres of subtropical rainforest and jagged peaks. It is famous as a jumping-off point for trekkers who want to explore the region's deep forests, wildlife sanctuaries, snow-capped mountains and variety of ethnic hill tribe villages.

Getting here: Air Bagan flies to Putao during the cool, dry season from October to April. It is a 4 hour connecting flight from Yangon to Mandalay then stop over at Myitkina and onto Putao.

NGAPALI

Located relatively close by to Yangon along Myanmar's west coast, the quiet Ngapali beach resort offers palm tree-fringed golden sandy beaches which dip down into the clear green waters of the Bay of Bengal. The area is peaceful and relaxing, and there are also activities like windsurfing and sailing available. Hire a bicycle or a small boat to explore the shoreline and fishing villages, and in the evening, lie back under the romantic night sky as the tropical moon moves through a sky peppered with bright stars.

Getting here: It is a 45-minute flight from Yangon to Ngapali.

VEHICLES



Choice of transportation in Myanmar is still limited. Vehicles are generally between 5-10 years old. All vehicles have air-conditioning (except the jeeps in Rakhine state) but some do not work well due to the heat stress from the constant hot weather. Wearing a seatbelt in Myanmar is still not common practice – be aware that the vehicles in which you travel may not be fitted with seatbelts in accordance with current convention

HOTELS



Myanmar is still a developing country in all areas including hospitality and customer service. While there are high quality hotels and resorts in Myanmar, one should not come to Myanmar and expect the same level of service as in high end hotels in many other parts of the developed world. Expecting that level of service will surely lead to disappointment. It's best to accept the country for what it currently offers and appreciate that you are seeing the country during such an important part of its history

EATING & DRINKING



The staples of Myanmar cuisine are rice, rice noodles, and curries but not as spicy as those from India or Thailand. A clear soup called *hingyo* accompanies most meals and a fermented fish sauce or paste called *ngapiye* is usually served to add to the flavour. Chinese, Indian and European food is served in restaurants at most tourist places.

BUDDHA IMAGES



Myanmar government has recently become strict about the import/export of Buddha statues and images and also the use of images of the Buddha as tattoos or other decoration. We would like to inform all travellers in Myanmar to exercise caution with regards to displaying the Buddha image and not to openly display a tattoo of the Buddha or any clothing with the Buddha image. Likewise, do not attempt to take antique Buddha images out of the country without proper documentation and permission

SHOPPING



Myanmar is still developing, and so its people can be very persistent when trying to make money, especially around tourists whom they perceive as very wealthy. People will try to overcharge you, but rather than becoming irritated, join the game! Bargaining in antiques stores and art galleries is fine, but be aware that handicraft and souvenir sellers in Myanmar make very little money. There are large numbers of sellers competing for relatively few tourists, and while you might feel happy with a “good bargain”, they will be left with almost no money to take home to their family. Try to agree a fair price so you can both have some fun and they can continue to support their dependants. It is also recommended to check prices of the same items in the neighbourhood before reaching a deal.

If you are being followed by street vendors and do not wish to make a purchase, often the best course of action is say “no” firmly and politely, and continue on your way. Do not hesitate or linger, as this will encourage the seller to try and engage you further.

If you choose to ship items home, we highly recommend that you buy shipping insurance and check the policy details. As shops are not responsible for damages incurred en route, it's better to be safe than sorry.

Trails of Indochina and our guide cannot accept responsibility for any misrepresented or faulty goods. We do not take responsibility for following up on merchandise that you choose to ship home. Our guides only make suggestions, not guarantees.

CULTURAL ETIQUETTE



- Myanmar people have a different view on upper and lower parts of the body. The upper part is considered sacred while the lower part is considered inferior to the upper part, even dirty. Therefore, never mix the things you use for your upper part with that of the lower part. For example, a towel used for the lower part should never be mixed with the upper part, especially the one used for the head and the one for the feet.
- Never put your feet on the pillow used for the head, or sit on the pillow for the head.
- Never touch a person's hair, head or cheek, even if you consider it as a friendly gesture. Myanmar people would not consider it friendly, and will think you are rude.
- Do not touch any part of a lady's body. You might end up in a police station.
- Do not point your feet towards Buddha's image, elder person or any sacred place.
- Beckoning someone by crooking your finger is considered rude. The correct way to call someone over is to extend your hand with the palm down and flap your fingers towards your wrist. To ask for the bill in a restaurant or shop, extend one hand in front of you with the palm raised and pretend to write on your palm with the other hand.
- When visiting pagodas and temples. Your knees and shoulders must be covered. Footwear and socks must be removed. Be prepared for temple/pagoda touring by wearing sandals/flip flops or having them ready for temple visits.

SAFETY TIPS



- In general Myanmar is very safe for travellers. Violent attacks are rare, and even theft is relatively rare providing you take normal precautions. When possible, secure your valuables in the hotel safe. Remember to record your travellers cheque numbers and credit card info—just in case.
- Do not leave your wallet or mobile phone in the back pocket of your pants or anywhere else that's easily reached (like an outer zip-up compartment on a backpack). Be especially vigilant in markets and other crowded places like ports and train stations.
- Use common sense and don't walk alone after dark. If confronted by a mugger, do not resist. You're always better off taking a taxi at night; ask your hotel or restaurant to call a reputable taxi firm.

PACKING



PACKING ESSENTIALS

What you take will naturally depend upon where you are traveling, and it can often be difficult to decide what to pack, nevertheless the following should act as a useful checklist of essential items worth thinking about taking.

- Passport – Ensure that it is valid and in good condition with empty pages available. Make a photocopy as well
- Copy of visa approval letter (if visa is to be obtained on arrival)
- Insurance – Ensure that it will be valid for the whole journey
- Passport Photos – Will invariably be needed for identification passes and certain overseas visas
- Emergency contact numbers: Trails of Indochina, insurance company, friends and family.
- Debit/credit card cancellation numbers
- Air tickets and Itinerary
- Money belt – Ensure that it is discrete and comfortable to wear
- First Aid kit - Basic travel kit to cover basic mishaps which may occur along the way
- Personal Medication –with international doctors' note to ensure easy passage of medication across international borders
- Sun block – High UVA protection ideally
- Sunglasses & sunhat
- Comfortable walking shoes and sandals/flip flops for visiting temples or pagodas.
- Mosquito spray & insect repellent
- Long sleeve top and trousers – Useful to protect against mosquitoes at dawn and dusk and the sun through the day
- Camera & battery
- Security code pad lock
- Electricity adapters
- Sufficient amount of currency in USD small and large notes to last the duration of your stay.

CLOTHING

Myanmar is a conservative Buddhist culture and improper dress can be offensive and inappropriate. Shorts, short skirts or revealing clothing are not appropriate especially when visiting temples or any religious site. Lightweight, easy to care cotton clothing are ideal all year round. A winter sweater or jacket and socks may be needed in the cool season when visiting up country especially around Inle Lake and Kalaw when the weather can dip to near freezing during the night. Wear sensible comfortable walking shoes which can be easily removed when required. Sandals, thongs or flip-flops (available locally) are very convenient footwear, especially for visiting temples where shoes must be removed prior to entering.

TOILETRIES & MEDICATION

Imported beauty products are not commonly available in Myanmar due its isolation from the world. You'd be wise to pack staples like sunscreen, contact lens solution, tampons and mosquito repellent. It is advised that your prescription medication is in its original box with the label along with the prescription to avoid any complications that may arise at Customs. Many medicines are available in Southeast Asia without prescriptions. If you plan to purchase medication, choose a reputable supplier and read the labels carefully, particularly paying attention to expiration date.

TRAVEL DOCUMENTS

You should bring a money-belt to safely carry your travel documents and cash, and ensure that your luggage has a lock. Bring photo-copies of your passport and visa, plus some extra passport-sized photos if you're applying for on-arrival visas

TREKKING



Trekking requirements in Myanmar vary by region.

Putao is a hidden honeymooners' paradise in Myanmar. It is the perfect place to just simply enjoy the beautiful Himalayan Mountains in northern region of the country. Sit by the river for a romantic picnic and enjoy a wide range of outdoor activities like soft trekking or an experienced high level of hiking.

Hsipaw is for any level of experience but reasonable fitness levels and ability to trek up steep rocky terrain is required.

For **Inle Lake** area soft trekking are available but it does still mean reasonable fitness, minimum 4 hours walking up hill on unstable ground required.

Loikaw has recently opened the area for visitors to explore their unique culture and history. Located in the Kayah State, the region is home to the long neck Kayan tribes. The rugged landscape makes it a destination to not only to meet hill tribe villagers while participating in community based tourism projects but also embark on soft trekking excursions.

POLITICS IN MYANMAR



Myanmar has come out of nearly 50 years of isolation by a regime that strictly controlled the country. Although open to tourism, it is still illegal to openly discuss politics inside the country, with potentially severe consequences for both those inside the country and travellers, should such conversations be reported. We aim to protect our clients, guides to the fullest and respect the law of the Union of Myanmar. We understand the political history of Myanmar is fascinating to some, however due to such risks and legal restrictions, our guides will not engage in political conversations during your tour. Additionally, we strongly advise caution in both the discussing and filming of such conversations whilst you are in Myanmar including open discussion on using social media, which is also monitored whilst you are in Myanmar.

STATEMENT ON TRAVEL TO MYANMAR



Dear Travelers,

Recent changes in Myanmar have awakened international attention to this ostracized Southeast Asian nation. These changes include the release from house arrest of Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi her subsequent election to parliament, the visits of leading politicians from the US UK and Europe, the dropping of many international sanctions and a renewed increase in tourism. As supporters of the Burmese people, we truly welcome these changes in Myanmar.

Over the years, we have been asked, "Is it ethically responsible to travel to Myanmar? At Trails of Indochina, we believe that if visitors to Myanmar travel responsibly and are politically aware, then the positives outweigh the negatives. There is some indirect support of members of the former military regime, however, much more benefit is provided to the local people in terms of being able to share their culture and to experience new ideas. There are also the commercial benefits of increased employment for those working at hotels, restaurants, drivers and tour guides to name a few, as well as the flow on effect of this increased tourism to the retail sector.

The National League for Democracy Party, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, has formally dropped its long-standing opposition to tourism. The party announced in 2011, "The NLD would welcome visitors who are keen to promote the welfare of the common people and the conservation of the environment and to acquire an insight into the cultural, political and social life of the country while enjoying a happy and fulfilling holiday." Trails of Indochina supports this sentiment, and encourage those travellers who visit Myanmar to do so with an understanding of the unique path this country has taken over the last few centuries - from kingdom, to British colony, to isolation and now a budding democracy.

We accept that things are not perfect in Myanmar. There are still civil rights issues and political prisoners. However, the move towards a democracy in Myanmar heralds the start of a more responsible and transparent government and we expect to see improvements in Myanmar's civil rights policy.

In closing, we do support travel to Myanmar and encourage all travellers to be aware of the situation and to travel responsibly. To that end, Trails of Indochina are actively pursuing responsible travel projects which will support the stable and sustainable growth of Myanmar's tourism industry and to help provide future opportunities to its deserving people.

Sincerely,

Rob Rankin

Regional Product Manager

Trails of Indochina

CONTACT US



If you have any questions or encounter any issues, please contact us at our Myanmar office so we can provide an immediate solution.

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