

Destination Myanmar (Burma)

The temples are 2000 years old and covered in gold. Locals reach street markets or river ferries by trishaw and ox cart. Yangon businessmen wear skirtlike *longyi* and women decorate their faces with dollops and stripes of tree-bark paste. Some travellers leave saying: 'It's like Asia 75 years ago', but it's much more than that. As Rudyard Kipling wrote a century ago, Myanmar is 'quite unlike any land you know about'.

Locals cherish an outsider's ear, and yours is likely to be filled with your trip's most memorable moments. Much of it is good-natured, delivered with a sweet dose of 'Burmeseness' – the gentle trait that favours subtlety to making waves. This happens when, say, that 70-year-old grandfather stops you to talk for a few minutes about the nation's three great passions: family, football or Buddha. Then thanks you for listening. Despite limited access to the internet or (for many) proper education, you'll find a public that is remarkably well informed of outside events, thanks to Burmese-language radio shows from the BBC or Voice of America, which the government bans and calls 'killers of the airwaves'. Such government decrees are frequently taken with a shrug or an ironic smirk. A Rakhaing woman footballer described the generals to us as 'Christmas trees with all their medals', and a farmer near Sagaing drily likened the intelligence of passing cows to that of the leaders.

There's also a local saying that 'bad news only lasts seven days' – wait it out and it'll be forgotten. But it's probably going to take a lot longer for anyone to forget a couple of recent events that stunned locals and outsiders watching a drip-drop of news relayed by smuggled video and on-scene reports. First, in September 2007, after monks peacefully protested rising gas prices, military forces cracked down on unarmed protestors and raided monasteries. Then, in May 2008, Cyclone Nargis blew across the Ayeyarwady (Irrawaddy) Delta, leaving tens of thousands dead and many more homeless.

During this book's research period we witnessed many whispered conversations at homes and in teashops from Mandalay to Sittwe, Taunggyi to Mawlamyine – all of which hovered on the immediate future and the promise of 'multiparty elections' by 2010. Most locals remain frustrated that change for a country without regular electricity is 'beyond hope'. Many found solace in Sylvester Stallone, who took on the military in *Rambo IV*; the banned film appeared on the Yangon black market in 2008. It sounds tense but after the disturbing events the bulk of day-to-day life soon returned to discussing Champions League scores, eating curry, drinking tea and going to temple.

Visitors can ease into this day-to-day with little difficulty around most areas, though most first-timers are content with seeing the main destinations – Yangon (Rangoon), Mandalay, Bagan and Inle Lake – in 10 to 14 days. Traffic is lighter than in some of Southeast Asia, but miles on bumpy roads tend to pass slowly. So does time spent waiting for answers. Many locals don't get why you'd use '10 words when a thousand would do' (author Peter Olszewski)...and never really get around to answering the question. Basic enquiries can often yield long, thrilling replies, which tap into things like local nicknames for ghosts that drowned nearby a couple of centuries before. In Myanmar, more so than most places, this is where the real trip lies. If you're in a hurry here...well, try not to be.

If you're thinking of visiting Myanmar, please read our *Should You Go?* chapter (opposite), which outlines the pros and cons of a visit.

FAST FACTS

Population: 47.4 million (officially)

Population growth rate: 0.8% (2008 estimate)

Area: 421,600 sq miles

GDP: \$13.7 billion

GDP per capita: \$1900

Cost of a mobile phone SIM card: \$1000

Favourite ring tone in Yangon: 50 Cent or Beyoncé songs

Number of refugees or displaced persons: at least 500,000 before Cyclone Nargis; the current number is unknown

Internet users: 0.1% of the population

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

Getting Started

WHEN TO GO

The best time to visit Myanmar is between November and February. During these months it rains least (if at all in places) and it is not so hot. March to May brings intense heat. At this time, the daily temperatures in Yangon (Rangoon) often reach 40°C, while areas around Bagan and Mandalay go a few digits higher. The cool hill towns of Shan State offer relief from the heat, though.

The southwest monsoon starts between mid-May and mid-June, bringing frequent rains that dunk the country through till October, peaking from July to September. The dry zone (between Mandalay and Pyay) gets the least rain, though roads anywhere (and particularly in the delta region) can become impassable. Rakhing State bears the full force of the rains – often exceeding 195in of rain annually.

COSTS & MONEY

Even though fuel prices jumped by 500% in 2007 and the government keeps a 'foreigner price' system (affecting all transport, accommodation and entrance fees), Myanmar can still be very cheap to visit.

On a 10-day trip to the 'big four' (Yangon, Mandalay, Inle Lake and Bagan), staying in budget family-run guesthouses (about \$7.50 to \$10 for a single, \$12 to \$15 for a double), eating your free breakfast and other meals at local rice-type eateries (\$1.50 or \$2 a meal, perhaps a \$1 beer) and using buses to get around, you could comfortably get by with \$400 per person.

Doing the same 10-day trip with a bit more comfort – staying at midrange hotels (from \$15/25 for a single/double), adding a nicer meal each day (about \$5 to \$10 per person), hiring a local guide a couple of times (maybe \$7 to \$10 per day), buying a puppet and adding a couple of internal flights – will be more like \$600 or \$700 per person.

Add more if you're planning to get a private driver and car (around \$80 or \$100 per day for a good one). And more if you're going for the top-end hotels (up to \$400 per night!).

Only US dollars and euro can be exchanged in Myanmar. Baht can be exchanged only at the border with Thailand. Official rates at the airport were K450 for \$1. Also see p346 regarding money in Myanmar.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Few countries warrant more pretrip reading than Myanmar.

Thant Myint U's engaging *River of Lost Footsteps* (2006) has recently emerged as the new must-read historical overview. The grandson of former UN Secretary-General U Thant, Thant Myint recounts kings' blunders and successes, while adding occasional family anecdotes of Burma's early days of independence. He ends with a passionate case against isolation.

HOW MUCH?

Ride on a Yangon city bus K100

Burmese all-you-can-eat buffet lunch K1500

Overnight bus from Yangon to Mandalay K10,000

Hired car with driver per day \$40-100

Local phone call: about K200

'The number one concern visitors have is coming without cash!' – the British Consulate in Yangon

Check p340 for climate charts for Yangon and Mandalay.

GET YOUR CASH READY

Considering Myanmar has essentially no places that accept a credit card, travellers cheques or ATM cards, you need to plan how much money you're going to spend – and get the *right kind* of bills (clean, crisp, new US dollar bills) well before your plane lands in Yangon (Rangoon). Many, many visitors forget to do this, and end up heading back to Thailand to get some. See p347 for more on moneychangers.

TOP PICKS

Bangladesh

MYANMAR
(BURMA)

Vietnam

Laos

KEY FIRST QUESTIONS

- 1 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 people and the language.
- 2 Where to change money? Not at the airport. You get better rates from your hotel or in town.
- 3 Should I lie about my profession? If you're a writer or journalist, put down your dream job instead.
- 4 Men in skirts? Most Myanmar men wear *longyi* (saronglike wraparound 'skirts').
- 5 Mud on face? No, that's *thanakha* (powdered bark) used as a make-up and sun-block.
- 6 Is that blood? No, those puddles of red on the ground are from spit betel nuts – known to revive if you're tired.
- 7 Is the water OK? Go with bottled water. Many guesthouses give a free bottle.
- 8 How to shake hands? It's local custom to shake hands or hand money with your right hand, with your left hand 'holding up' your right arm.
- 9 Will I be followed? At some point, most likely, though very few visitors ever realise it.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

- 1 Independence Day, 4 January (p30)
- 2 Kachin State Day (Myitkinya), 10 January (p308)
- 3 Shwedagon Festival (Yangon), February/ March (p116)
- 4 Buddha's birthday, full moon, April/May (p30)
- 5 Water Festival (Thingyan) & Burmese New Year, mid-April (p67)
- 6 Dawei Thingyan, April (p171) – giant bamboo effigies and drums
- 7 Nat Festival (Mt Popa), Nayon full moon, May/June (p189)
- 8 Start of Buddhist Rains Retreat, full moon June/July (p30)
- 9 Nat Festival (near Amarapura), after Wagaung full moon, August (p280)
- 10 Taunggyi's balloon festival, October/ November (p245)

SOUVENIRS

- 1 *Longyi* (sarong-style lower garment) – found wherever a breeze might blow.
- 2 Marionettes from Yangon's Bogyoke Aung San Market (p128) or in Mandalay (p272).
- 3 Pathein's paper parasols (p139).
- 4 Myanmar's best lacquerware at Myinkaba (p186).
- 5 Glazed pottery from workshops in Kyaukka (p290).
- 6 Moustache Brothers T-shirt from Mandalay (p270).
- 7 Tatmadaw army hat. Public markets sell the (infamous) floppy green hats that many locals wear.
- 8 Mini sheets of gold leaf. Locals put it on buddhas, and occasionally on bananas (p271).
- 9 Kachin jewellery or ceremonial swords (p307).
- 10 Water buffalo in Kengtung (p248), or maybe just browse for one.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Reading up on the political situation as well as the question of 'Should You Go?' (p13)
- Having enough US dollars in cash for your full trip (see p27)
- Getting your visa (p352)
- Packing a sweater or fleece jacket for chilly overnight bus rides or the mountains
- Passport photocopies, which can be useful for permits in some, far-flung places
- Flip-flops or sandals
- Bug spray

You can find things like batteries, video tape and tampons in bigger destinations like Yangon and Mandalay.

From the Land of Green Ghosts: A Burmese Odyssey (2002), by Pascal Khoo Thwe, is a self-told tale of a reluctant rebel of the government from a hill tribe in Shan State who escaped – unlike many of his friends – out of Myanmar.

In Andrew Marshall's excellent *The Trouser People: A Story of Burma in the Shadow of the Empire* (2002), the British author retraces the steps of a gutsy Scot named Sir George Scott who traversed unmapped corners of British Burma ('where people are small and ghosts are big') in the late 1800s.

Emma Larkin's *Finding George Orwell in Burma* (2004) ploughs a more delicate path, following Orwell's footsteps of his days here. It could do with fewer forced comparisons of 1984 and the military junta, but it's worth it for the inside looks of backwaters like Mawlamyine (Moulmein) and the delta.

Peter Olszewski may not be the sort of guy you want to share a tea with, but his *Land of a Thousand Eyes* (2005) is a refreshing look at day-to-day life in modern Myanmar (without fixating much on politics). The ageing Australian journalist came for long enough to train journalists at the *Myanmar Times* (and find a wife), but it's not quite as sleazy as it sounds.

April may be Myanmar's new year, but to TS Eliot April in Myanmar is 'the cruellest month'.

INTERNET RESOURCES

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

Burma Today (www.burmatoday.com) Posts recent Myanmar articles.

Irrawaddy (www.irrawaddy.org) Bangkok-based publication focuses on political issues, but covers many cultural news topics.

Lonely Planet's Thorn Tree (www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree) Best resource to mix and mingle with fellow travellers.

Mizzima (www.mizzima.com) A nonprofit news service organised by Myanmar journalists in exile.

Myanmar Home Page (www.myanmar.com) Provides a funny government dictum, and two local English-language papers.

Online Burma/Myanmar Library (www.burmalibrary.org) Comprehensive database of books and past articles on Myanmar.

Events Calendar

Festivals usually take place or culminate on full-moon days, but the build-up can last for a while. Many follow the 12-month lunar calendar (p353). Also, nearly every active *paya* or *kyaung* (Buddhist monastery) community hosts occasional celebrations of its own, often called *paya pwe* or 'pagoda festivals'. Many occur on full-moon days and nights from January to March, following the main rice harvest.

JANUARY

INDEPENDENCE DAY 4 Jan
This major public holiday is marked by a seven-day fair at Kandawgyi Lake (p104) in Yangon (Rangoon), and nationwide fairs.

KACHIN STATE DAY 10 Jan
Rice beer and buffalo sacrifices in Myitkyina (see p308).

FEBRUARY–MARCH

UNION DAY 12 Feb
This two-week festival celebrates Bogyoke Aung San's (short-lived) achievement of unifying Myanmar's disparate ethnic groups.

SHWEDAGON FESTIVAL
The lunar month of Tabaung brings the annual Shwedagon Festival (p116), the largest *paya pwe* in Myanmar.

PEASANTS' DAY 2 Mar
Dedicated to the nation's farmers.

ARMED FORCES (OR RESISTANCE) DAY 27 Mar
Myanmar's army stages parades to celebrate its resistance against Japanese occupation during WWII.

APRIL–MAY

BUDDHA'S BIRTHDAY
The full-moon day of Kason is celebrated as Buddha's birthday, the day of his enlightenment and the day he entered *nibbana* (nirvana).

WATER FESTIVAL (OR THINGYAN)

This is the celebration of the Myanmar New Year. See p67 for more details.

JUNE–JULY

START OF THE BUDDHIST RAINS RETREAT

The full moon of Waso is the beginning of the three-month Buddhist Rains Retreat (aka 'Buddhist Lent'), when young men enter monasteries and no marriages take place.

MARTYRS' DAY 19 Jul
This date commemorates the assassination of Bogyoke Aung San and his comrades on this day in 1947.

JULY–AUGUST

WAGAUNG FESTIVAL

During Wagaung, many offer alms to monks; a highlight event is at Taungbyone, near Mandalay (see p266).

SEPTEMBER–OCTOBER

BOAT RACES

In the rainy season, boat races fill rivers, lakes and ponds nationwide. The best is in Inle Lake (see p234).

THADINGYUT

During Thadingyut, the Buddhist Rains Retreat ends, a popular time for weddings and monk pilgrimages to Mt Popa or Kyauktiyo.

OCTOBER–NOVEMBER

TAZAUNGMON

The full-moon night of Tazaungmon, known as Tazaungdaing, is the biggest 'festival of lights', particularly famous for the fire-balloon competitions in Taunggyi (see p245).

KAHTEIN

Tazaungmon also brings Kahtein, a one-month period during which new monastic robes and requisites are offered to the monastic community.

NOVEMBER–DECEMBER**NATIONAL DAY**

Myanmar's national day falls in late November or early December.

NADAW

During Nadaw, many *nat pwe* (spirit festivals) are held; Nadaw is spelt with the characters for *nat* and *taw* (a respectful honorific).

CHRISTMAS

A surprisingly popular public holiday in deference to the many Christian Kayin, Kachin and Chin.

DECEMBER–JANUARY**KAYIN NEW YEAR**

On the first waxing moon of Pyatho, the Kayin New Year is considered a national holiday, with Kayin communities (Insein in Yangon, Hpa-An) wearing traditional dress.

ANANDA FESTIVAL

Enormous religious festival in Bagan (p210).

Itineraries

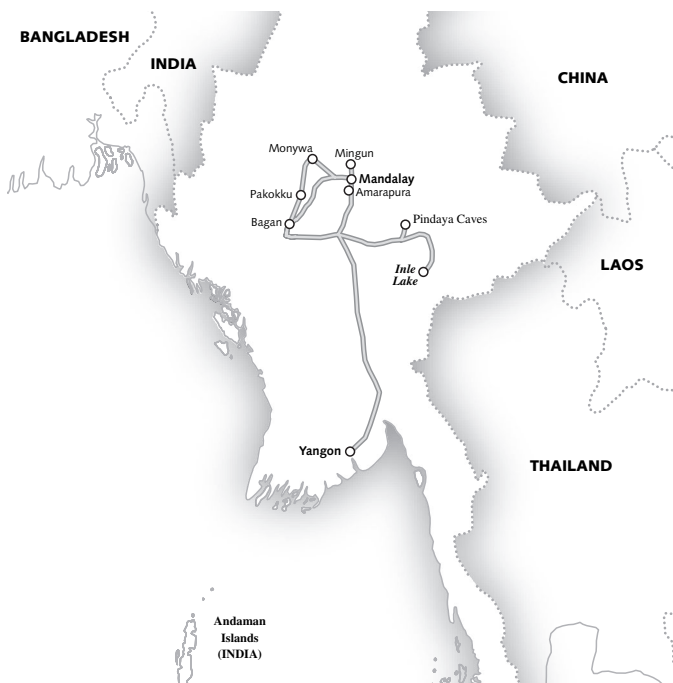
CLASSIC ROUTES

THE BIG FOUR

11 Days / Yangon to Inle Lake

Starting in **Yangon** (Rangoon, p87), visit the **Shwedagon Paya** (p92) at night, when its golden *zedi* (stupa) glows under floodlights. The next day, wander around **downtown** (p114) and shop for handicrafts at **Bogyoke Aung San Market** (p128). Overnight on a bus to **Mandalay** (p255), climb **Mandalay Hill** (p258), see the famed **Mahamuni Paya** (p263) and **Moustache Brothers** (p270). The next day take a morning boat trip to **Mingun** (p284) to see an earthquake-cracked stupa, then take a sunset boat ride past U Bein's Bridge at **Amarapura** (p278). Bus to the often-missed **Monywa** (p288), home to a colourful buddha-rama (Thanboddhay Paya). Catch the next morning bus to **Pakokku** (p191) for a private boat ride to **Bagan** (p183) and take a horse cart or cycle around Bagan's 800-year-old temples. Catch the 4am bus towards **Inle Lake** (p232) then, after a day on the lake, where dugout canoes take you to floating markets under the flight path of egrets, consider a day trip to **Pindaya Caves** (p229) to see 8000 buddha images. Take an overnight bus back to Yangon.

Most first-time visitors with a week-and-a-half stick with Myanmar's four most-popular attractions. Flying saves a couple of travel days, but we've planned it with two overnight buses and the off-the-beaten-track 'Monywa loop' from Mandalay to Bagan instead.



NO FEES PLEASE!**17 to 18 Days / Yangon to Hsipaw & Chaung Tha**

Start with two nights in **Yangon** (p87). Skip the \$5 Shwedagon Paya fee and visit the 2000-year-old **Sule Paya** (p114) while on a downtown walking tour. The next day, ferry to nearby rural villages **Thanlyin** and **Kyauktan** (p133), then return for an overnight bus to **Mandalay** (p255). The government \$10 fee is easily skipped (p261) with alternative sights, such as **Yankin Paya** (p264) and a day trip to **Amarapura** (p277). Bus or taxi into the Shan Hills at **Hsipaw** (p300) and take a privately guided trek to Palaung villages. After two nights, taxi downhill to **Pyin U Lwin** (p294) for a night in the old British hill station. Get back to Mandalay in time for the night bus to Yangon, but stop in the wee hours at **Bago** (p147; don't stay, it's \$10 to visit). Catch an 8am bus to Kipling and Orwell's old stomping grounds at far-flung **Mawlamyine** (Moulmein, p159) in Mon State. You'll want two nights, enough to make a day trip to the 'Burma Railroad' **cemetery** (p165) two hours south. Try timing your trip for the lovely boat ride to Kayin State's **Hpa-an** (p167), which goes Monday or Friday. Stay a couple of nights and climb nearby Mt Zwegabin for a free breakfast with monkeys (not of monkeys!). Afterwards bus back to Yangon.

If there's time, bus the next day to low-key **Pathein** (Bassein, p136) to pick up a sun parasol from private workshops, then finish with a couple of days at the locals' favourite sun spot at **Chaung Tha Beach** (p140). At the time of writing, travel restrictions in the delta area (p133) prevent foreigners travelling to Pathein and Chaung Tha Beach so check for updates before you travel.



Some destinations (eg Bagan, Inle Lake, Golden Rock and Bago) can't be seen unless you pay a fee that goes to the government. This itinerary skips them all – and gets more out of Myanmar by going local.

ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

AYEYARWADY HO!

24 to 28 Days / Myitkyina to Yangon

Fly to **Myitkyina** (p307), where you can wait for the next ferry south by taking in Kachin culture; every 10 January animal sacrifices are made to satisfy the *nat*. Begin the river ride on a small local boat for a full-day drift, changing in Sinbo, to reach **Bhamo** (p309), a leafy town with 5th-century Shan ruins. A fast boat or ferry (thrice weekly) heads south for an eight-hour trip to **Katha** (p312), where George Orwell based his *Burmese Days* and where you can visit an elephant camp. The ferry out of Katha goes overnight so consider a cabin. Get out in the morning at **Kyaukmyaung** (p292) for a quick look at riverside pottery factories, then catch a pick-up ride an hour west to the former Burmese capital **Shwebo** (p290) for the night. Detour from the river via a 3½-hour bus ride to pleasant **Monywa** (p286), near a **buddha-shaped mountain** (p289) with budda-filled caves (and monkeys).

Take a bus to **Mandalay** (p255) and spend three or four days visiting the **ancient cities** (p277) and maybe one of the local **festivals** (p277); then get back on the Ayeyarwady (Irrawaddy) to **Bagan** (p177), to witness the 3000 temples. If you're worn out by boats, take the morning bus south to Magwe (four hours) and peek at a gurgling mound of sludge at Nga Ka Pwe Taung at **Minbu** (p202); then hop on an afternoon bus to **Pyay** (Prome, p198) and stay a couple of nights. On one day you can go by ox around the ruins and see a nearby spectacled buddha at **Shwemyetman Paya** (p201). Frequent buses reach **Yangon** (p87), six hours south.

This may be Myanmar's ultimate journey – from top to bottom, mostly following the Ayeyarwady, hitting the far-flung backwaters and still making it to Mandalay and Bagan. It's not all on the water so savour those ferry trips – they're best for meeting locals.



TAILORED TRIPS

THE ACTIVE LIFE

Many activities take place under the hot Myanmar sun and more travellers are planning their own loops on treks in Shan State. The best, and certainly most popular, are the overnight treks from **Kalaw to Inle Lake** (p226), while day treks around **Kengtung** (p250) see more traditional garb, and those from **Hsipaw** (p302) take in waterfalls. With a government permit, you can hike **Mt Victoria** (p334), which is popular with birders. The journeys to some religious sites are hikes in themselves, famously up **Mt Kyaiktiyo** (the Golden Rock; p154), up Mandalay Hill (p258) or past monkeys at **Mt Popa** (p188), the spiritual centre of the 37 *nat*.

Bicycles are regular transport around towns. Long-distance cyclists, often on tours, enjoy the ride from **Mandalay to Bagan** (p338) via Myingyan – or take to the hills along the road from **Pyin U Lwin** (p338) to **Lashio** (p304).

You can take kickboxing classes at the YMCA in **Yangon** (p115) or if you have less angst in your system opt for t'ai chi in the city's central **Mahabandoola Garden** (p104).

Ngapali Beach (p319) has low-key island snorkelling tours; **Chaug Tha Beach** (p140) has plenty of snorkelling options too, though travel restrictions (put in place after Cyclone Nargis in 2008, p133) may prevent foreigners reaching it. The best diving by far is off the islands near **Kawthoung** (p173), currently reached with diving operators from Phuket. And in the far north, at the foothills of the Himalaya, you can go white-water rafting on the **Maykha River** (p314).



MYANMARVELS & THE OUTRIGHT ODD

Certain aspects of Myanmar are a little 'unusual' – and memorable. In **Myingyan** (p192) the remains of a famous monk have been on view since 1951. Snakes are another thing: three pythons in **Paleik** (p282) are lovingly fed at 11am daily; in **Minbu** the Nga Ka Pwe Taung (p202) is guarded by a snake or two, and you can dip your toe into a 'volcano' of bubbling butane gas.

Buffalo-browse at the water-buffalo market in **Kengtung** (p248) or see monk-trained cats jump through rings at Nga Hpe Chaung at **Inle Lake** (p240). No tricks are needed – just nerve – to eat live wriggling larva, served at many **street markets** (p78).

The wonder of Myanmar is the Golden Rock at **Kyaiktiyo** (p154), a gravity-defying boulder atop a mountain. The lesser-seen **Nwa-la-bo** (p164), near Mawlamyine, features three sausage-shaped boulders topped by a stupa. The unique spectacled buddha of Shwemyetman Paya sits in a temple at **Shwedaung** (p201). Across the river from Yangon, **Thanlyin** (p134) hosts a hot coal-walking, skin-piercing festival in January. If that's too much to stomach, sip a German-made wine from a **Shan State winery** (p245) near Inle Lake. Now, that's odd.



The Authors



ROBERT REID

Coordinating Author

Raised in Oklahoma, Robert has worked for years for Lonely Planet, both in-house and out. No place he's been to for Lonely Planet (such as Chiapas, Petropavlovsk, Sliven, Transylvania, Nebraska) equals Myanmar – particularly for things like shirtless old men who chased him down to return a dropped K500 note or stopped him to talk family and football. He first visited the area when he moved to Vietnam in the mid '90s. This is his second time working on this guide, writing most front-matter and back-matter chapters, plus Bagan & Central Myanmar, Mandalay, Around Mandalay and Western Myanmar. He now lives in Brooklyn, New York.



JOE BINDLOSS

Eastern Myanmar & Northern Myanmar

Joe first visited Myanmar in the early '90s, and something clicked. He jumped at the chance to get deep into the north of the country for this guide. Joe was born in Cyprus and grew up in England, but he's since lived and worked in half a dozen countries, including the USA, Australia and the Philippines. When he isn't rumbling around Myanmar on rattletrap jeeps, Joe lives in London with his partner, Linda, and a growing collection of Buddhist curios and obscure musical instruments that he still hopes to one day learn how to play.



STUART BUTLER

Yangon, Around Yangon, Southeastern Myanmar & Environment

English-born Stuart Butler was first inspired to visit Myanmar after listening to a friend wax lyrical over the Shwedagon Paya. He went, he saw and he too was hooked. Since that first captivating trip he has contributed a number of Myanmar-based articles and photographs to magazines. In 2003 he became one of just a few lucky souls to have surfed the wild west coast of Myanmar. He now calls the beaches of southwest France home, though his travels have taken him across Southeast Asia and beyond, from the desert beaches of Pakistan to the coastal jungles of Colombia. He still waxes lyrical over the Shwedagon Paya.

LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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