

# Bagan & Central Myanmar



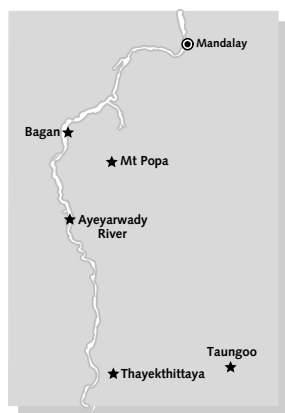
Traditionally the heart of Bamar culture, central Myanmar provides the rural countryside setting for road-tripping travellers getting about by bus, train or private car. Those coming through the bulk of this 'dry zone' are treated to some nice scenes out the window: ox carts, rice fields and rolling plains, all rimmed by the Shan Mountains visible to the east and the snaking Ayeyarwady (Irrawaddy) River to the west. But the majority of visitors treat much of the area as a 'fly-over zone' of sorts, rushing on to the region's clear highlight, Bagan (Pagan), or beyond to places like Mandalay, Kalaw or Inle Lake.

A destination making nearly all Myanmar itineraries, Bagan fills a 26-sq-mile plain of 4000-plus temples that date back centuries. It's one of Myanmar's most wondrous sights and rivals Cambodia's Angkor Wat in terms of scope and jaw-droppability. Its tallest and most majestic temples – made of brick and topped with gilded *hti* pinnacles – are awesome, mixing Hindu and Buddhist images with locally brewed *nat* (spirits) in nooks. Visiting is done over dirt paths by slow-going horse carts or (more adventurously) by bikes. A few highlight temples like Ananda Pahto attract bigger crowds, including vendors, but it's easy to find space to yourself.

Apart from the temple-hop, nearby (extinct) volcano Mt Popa (visible from a number of temples) beckons day-trippers with its spiritual home of Myanmar's 37 *nat*. Elsewhere in central Myanmar are frequently fun highway cities not short on history. Taungoo and, particularly, riverside Pyay (Prome) are former capitals with a bit of ruins to see. Nay Pyi Taw, 3 miles off the Yangon–Mandalay highway, is Myanmar's latest capital – an expensive project in a nation without money to burn.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Watch the **sun set** (or rise) over the hills around Bagan – most visitors pack onto Shwesandaw Paya (p213) before dusk but it's one of many options (see p215)
- Hit the **Ayeyarwady**: on a Bagan–Mandalay boat (p183), a half-day trip to nearby cave temples (p220) or a self-arranged sunset cruise at Old Bagan (p184)
- Pay respects to Myanmar's 37 *nat* at their spiritual home, the monkey-arama volcanic mountaintop temple at **Mt Popa** (p188)
- See the ancient Pyu city of **Thayekhittaya** (p200) at ox's pace
- Hang with elephants at a working camp outside **Taungoo** (p194)



■ HIGHEST POINT: MT POPA (2418FT)

## HISTORY

Moving armies led by various people – the Pyu, the Mon, the Burmese – swish-swashed across this central plain, the ‘heart of Myanmar’, over the centuries. The area around Pyay served as the Pyu capital from the 5th to 9th centuries AD; some consider the Pyu as founders of Myanmar’s ‘first empire’, though little remains known of this vanished group. Bagan’s burst of energy ran two and a half centuries, beginning in 1047 and ending as the pounding footfall of Kublai Khan raiders approached in 1287. The latest empire to lodge in the area is the military junta, who founded a new capital at Nay Pyi Taw (Royal Capital), outside Pinyinana, in 2005.

See p203 for more on Bagan’s history.

## CLIMATE

This area comprises the bulk of the ‘dry zone’ of Myanmar, and it remains hot and dusty for much of the year. Most visitors come in winter (November to February), when daytime temperatures are a relatively chilly 30°C during the day and about 10°C at night. From March to May, the hottest season, daytime temperatures boil at up to 43°C. Rains peak in June and October but run throughout the months between.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

Nyaung U is the principal gateway for Bagan, with a train station, jetty and airport. Most visitors by boat come downriver from Mandalay. Despite being a major destination, most long-haul bus routes (eg Yangon–Mandalay) miss Bagan, instead stopping at Meiktila. But there are a few direct bus links between Bagan and Yangon, Mandalay and Inle Lake. Trains to the Bagan area are very slow and not very practical. Most people coming directly from Yangon by road do so via Pyay and Magwe by private taxi.

## BAGAN

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One of Myanmar’s top attractions, the area known as Bagan (or, more bureaucratically, ‘Bagan Archaeological Zone’) occupies an impressive, 26-sq-mile area, 118 miles south of Mandalay and 429 miles north of Yangon. The zone is made up of several principal

areas, including Nyaung U, Old Bagan and New Bagan.

This section includes sleeping, eating and transport options; see p203 for the history and descriptions of the temples themselves.

## ORIENTATION

The Bagan Archaeological Zone is a massive area and isn’t immediately a breeze to get to grips with. The Ayeyarwady drifts by its northern and western sides. Its most active town and chief transport hub is Nyaung U (p180), in the northeast corner. About 2.5 miles west, Old Bagan is the former site of the village that moved to New Bagan (2 miles south) in 1990. Between the two is Myinkaba, a village boasting a long-running lacquerware tradition.

Connecting the towns are paved roads making a 12-mile oval. The Bagan–Nyaung U Rd (to the north) and more-level Anawrahta Rd (to the south) connect Nyaung U and Old Bagan; the Bagan–Chauk Rd (the southern extension of the Bagan–Nyaung U Rd, sometimes just referred to as ‘Main Rd’ in the following Nyaung U listings) leads south from Old Bagan to Myinkaba and New Bagan; and the ‘airport road’ heads northeast from New Bagan, past the small villages of Pwasaw and Minnanthu, to the Nyaung U–Kyaukpadaung Rd, leading north to Nyaung U. Just east of the junction is the Nyaung U Airport, about 1 mile southeast of town. The train station is 1 mile south of the airport. See the map on p204 for the layout of Bagan.

In between it all, of course, is the bulk of Bagan action: the plain, featuring most of the temples, all connected with a vast network of bumpy dirt roads and trails. At times, you’ll be about a mile from the nearest paved road.

## Maps

In addition to the maps in this guide, you can purchase *The Map of Bagan* (K1000) at most hotels. It shows many of the paths, but isn’t always 100% accurate.

## INFORMATION

For travel information, try Nyaung U’s Ever Sky Information Service (p180) or the government-run MTT office in New Bagan (p186).

Nyaung U has a post office. You can get online in Nyaung U and at select hotels.

Bagan used to have two area codes, and you may find dated listings with area code ၀၀2. A rare few still use ၀၀2, which we indicate,