

# Eastern Myanmar



Back in the days when Myanmar was only open to package tourists, Inle Lake was one of the four areas that foreign visitors were free to explore. The lake, and the rolling hills between Mandalay and the Thai border, are still an established part of the traveller circuit – hotels are plentiful, famous sights abound and flights drop in daily from all over Myanmar to the tiny airstrip at Heho. That said, it's easy to escape the crowds, particularly if you go trekking from Kalaw or Kengtung.

Travel routes in Myanmar are dictated by road conditions and the shifting government restrictions on the roads travellers are allowed to use. Most of the towns in the eastern half of Shan State are accessible via the pitted highway or the slow but picturesque railway line from Thazi to Taunggyi. Travellers are only allowed to continue to Kengtung by air – which will involve using a government-linked airline – or overland across the Thai border on a two-week entry permit.

The highlight of eastern Myanmar has to be Inle Lake – despite the crowds, speeding through a maze of marshes and stilt houses on a motorised canoe is one of the definitive Myanmar experiences – and nearby Kalaw offers some of the best trekking in the country. Because of the logistical difficulties of getting to Kengtung, the border region sees far fewer visitors, but it's worth making the effort to reach this intriguing enclave of hill-tribe culture. As well as treks to hill-tribe areas, you can soak up the uniquely Thai atmosphere of the area.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Drift around the backwaters of **Inle Lake** (p232) to ruined stupas, tribal markets and workshops run by the industrious Intha
- Sample medicinal herbs and learn the local folklore as you trek to hill-tribe villages around **Kalaw** (p224)
- Gasp at the sight of 8000 golden bud-dhas in the atmospheric cave pagoda at **Pindaya** (p229)
- Go pagoda hopping then trip out to traditional hill-tribe villages in **Kengtung** (p247), the gateway to the Golden Triangle



■ HIGHEST POINT: SHAN PLATEAU (UP TO 8600FT)

## CLIMATE

The hilly topography of eastern Myanmar produces a markedly cooler climate compared to the sweltering heat of the plains. Even during the hot season (March to June), daytime temperatures are refreshingly bearable, and night-time temperatures can plummet to near zero in December and January. At any time of year, it's wise to bring a coat or blanket to keep out the early morning or evening chill.

## PEOPLE

Eastern Myanmar is the heartland of the Buddhist Shan tribe, who have strong cultural links to the Tai peoples of northern Thailand. Many of the towns in eastern and northern Myanmar were once ruled by hereditary Shan chieftains known as *sao pha* (sky lords). With their strong sense of cultural identity and separatist leanings, the Shan have long been perceived as a threat by the central government, and clashes with rebels are not uncommon.

The Shan dominate the cities of eastern Myanmar – particularly Kengtung – but the surrounding villages are home to dozens of smaller tribes, each with their own languages and traditions. Many tribal villages can be visited on treks from Kalaw, Inle Lake and Kengtung (see p226, p242 and p250 respectively).

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

There are still pockets of insurgency in eastern Myanmar, particularly in the far south and the so-called Golden Triangle, the remote hilly region bordering Laos, China and Thailand. However, travellers are unlikely to be able to visit any of the affected areas because of government restrictions on travel.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

Although tourists can move freely through most of eastern Myanmar, restrictions have been tightened in recent years. In particular, tourists entering Myanmar from Thailand via Tachileik are now only permitted to travel as far as Kengtung and Mong La. Heading in the other direction, they can only leave Myanmar at Tachileik with a government permit from Myanmar Travel & Tours (MTT) in Yangon (p91). If you do not have this permit, you will not be allowed to leave the plane at Tachileik.

Most places between Taunggyi and Thazi are open to foreigners, but the only way to reach Kengtung from inside Myanmar is by air. All of Kayah State and the far south of Shan State are off limits, allegedly because of problems with insurgents. Bear in mind that flying or travelling by state-owned trains and boats puts money directly into the pockets of the junta.

See under individual towns for more information on travel restrictions.

## THAZI TO INLE LAKE

The rolling hills between Mandalay and Inle Lake have attracted travellers ever since Myanmar first opened up to international visitors. From the junction town of Thazi, a pitted highway cuts east across a series of mountainous ridges, divided by broad valleys covered in a multicoloured patchwork of fields, villages and hedges. After Yangon and Bagan, this is probably the most visited part of Myanmar – not least because of the enduring appeal of Inle Lake.

The Shan Plateau is heavily farmed for oranges, maize, soya, corn and christophines (a

### MAJOR GROUPS IN EASTERN MYANMAR

Tribe	Area	Religion
Akha	Kengtung	Animism/Christianity
Danaw	Kalaw/Inle Lake	Animism/Buddhism
Danu	Kalaw/Inle Lake	Buddhism
Eng	Kengtung	Animism
Intha	Inle Lake	Buddhism
Lahu	Kengtung	Animism
Pa-O	Kalaw/Inle Lake	Buddhism
Paduang	Kayah State/Inle Lake	Buddhism/Animism
Palaung	Kalaw/Kengtung	Animism/Buddhism
Taung Yo	Kalaw/Pindaya	Buddhism
Wa	Northeast Shan State/Yúnnán (China)	Animism