

Northern Myanmar



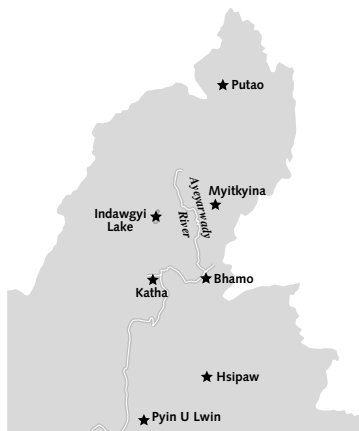
The region formed by Kachin State and northern Shan State is only tenuously connected to the rest of Myanmar. Few roads cross this rugged and undeveloped area and the main conduit for freight and passenger transport is the mighty Ayeyarwady (Irrawaddy) River, which snakes south across the plain from Myitkyina to Mandalay. Beyond Myitkyina lie the so-called Ice Mountains – the snow-capped peaks of the Myanmar Himalaya, which can only be visited on organised tours to Putao.

The most visited places in northern Myanmar are the towns strung out along the highway to Lashio though these are still sleepy backwaters, even by Myanmar standards. Hsipaw remains one of the most idyllic getaways in Southeast Asia, and growing numbers of adventurers are visiting the rolling hills around Kyaukme and Namhsan in search of an even more utopian vision of Myanmar.

Foreigners travel to Myitkyina with one objective in mind – the slow, mesmerising journey south along the churning, mud-yellow Ayeyarwady River. Depending on how much time you have, you can ride the river all the way to Mandalay or break the trip south at the laid-back riverbank towns of Bhamo and Katha. The most important thing to remember is that travel in this region is time consuming – buses are infrequent, boats and trains move more slowly than Galapagos tortoises, and airlines fly only a few days each week.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Promenade in the cool mountain air at **Pyin U Lwin** (p294), the old British summer capital of Myanmar
- Spend lazy days drifting down the mighty Ayeyarwady River from **Myitkyina** (p307), **Bhamo** (p309) or **Katha** (p312)
- Let your hair down in **Hsipaw** (p300), a laid-back mountain village with something going on down every side street
- If money allows, head north to the land of ice and snow – **Putao** (p313) is the gateway to the Myanmar Himalaya
- Escape from it all at tranquil **Indawgyi Lake** (p310), a rarely explored gem in the west of Kachin State.



- HIGHEST POINT: HKAKABO RAZI (19,295FT)

Climate

The area northeast of Mandalay experiences similar climatic conditions to the rest of the Shan plateau, ie moderately warm days and cold nights, particularly in December and January. North of Myitkyina, rugged foothills climb to the snowy peaks of the Myanmar Himalaya. Putao has a similar climate to towns on the Shan Plateau, but bring serious mountain trekking gear for walks above the snowline.

Dangers & Annoyances

Clashes between the government-backed United Wa State Army (UWSA) and Shan rebels are not uncommon in the northern part of Shan State, including the area east of Lashio. Check the security situation before travelling off the beaten track in this area.

People

The largest tribe in Shan State is the Shan (p61), the remnants of a tribal nation that once stretched across Myanmar, Laos, northern Thailand and southern China. Several groups of Shan rebels are involved in an ongoing separatist struggle against the government and its allies from the Wa tribe.

Across the state border in Kachin State, the Tibeto-Burman Kachin people (p59) are fighting for their own independent homeland in the far north of Myanmar. See www.kachinstate.com for more information. Many Kachin have converted from animism to Christianity under the influence of Western missionaries.

You may also see Lisu, Rawang, Drung, Daru, Nung, Naga and Tibetan tribal people on treks through the hills around Putao. Villagers from the Taron tribe, the only known pygmy group in Asia, are occasionally seen in the remote region around Mt Hkakabo Razi.

Getting There & Away

Visitors are free to visit the towns along the Mandalay–Lashio highway, but travel from Lashio to Mu-se is prohibited. However, it is possible to enter Myanmar from China at Mu-se and continue by road to Lashio with a permit – see p307 for details.

Most people visit Myitkyina and the towns of southern Kachin State for the express reason of riding the river boats back to Mandalay – see p308 for more information. The only way to reach Putao in the far north is by air, with a permit from Myanmar

Travels & Tours (MTT; see p315 for details). Bear in mind that a portion of what you pay to fly or travel by state-owned trains and boats goes directly to the junta.

PYIN U LWIN TO LASHIO

From the dusty plains around Mandalay, the road to Lashio climbs steeply into the green hills of the Shan Plateau. It passes through a string of quiet country towns, which offer a taste of rural life that is a million miles from the commercialism of Inle Lake or Bagan. The only way to reach the northern part of the state is through Mandalay – there are no direct road links and no direct flights linking the north and south.

PYIN U LWIN

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The British generally left only a light mark on the culture of Myanmar but Pyin U Lwin is a notable exception to this rule. The town was founded in 1896, on the site of a small Danu village, as a hill station where the colonial government could come to escape the heat of the plains. It was originally called Maymyo (May-town), after Colonel May of the 5th Bengal Infantry. After the construction of the railroad from Mandalay, Pyin U Lwin became the summer capital for the British colonial administration, a role it held until the end of British rule in 1948.

The name was changed after the British departed but the colonial buildings remain. So too do the descendants of the Indian and Nepali workers who came here to lay the railway line and construct the road to Lashio.

The main way to get around town is by horse and cart, which adds an extra layer of nostalgia to the mix. For locals, Pyin is famous for its fruit and vegetables – and jams and fruit wines – and for its huge military academies, which train the soldiers of the Tatmadaw (the Myanmar Army).

Information

Hotels can advise you on things to do in the area. Alternatively, point your browser towards www.pyinoolwin.info.

Shwe Htay Internet (share-taxi stand, Mandalay–Lashio Rd; per hr K800; ☎ 8am–8pm) Fast internet connections (with proxy servers) and international calls from K2000 per minute.