

# Western Myanmar



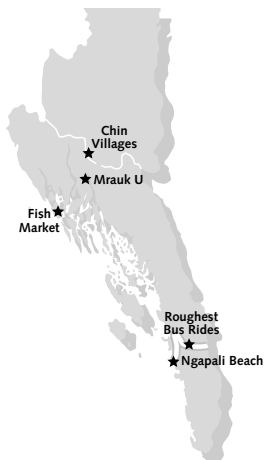
Visiting Myanmar's feisty Rakhaing (Arakan) State almost feels like entering a new country. Locals speak Rakhaing language – linked with Burmese at varying levels, depending on your viewpoint – the food comes with more chilli, and conversations quickly lead to 300-year-old events that bring out serious opinions. Traditionally the Rakhaing have looked more towards the sea than inland to the Bamar, and it still feels a bit that way – though they're unlikely to benefit much from the multimillion-dollar oil wells found just 37 miles offshore.

The 370-mile tall Rakhaing State borders Bangladesh and is often a lovely area, though travel is restricted to a few, relatively hard-to-reach spots. Many visitors limit a visit to a trip-ending cleansing in the turquoise waters of Ngapali Beach, Myanmar's top midrange beach resort, with snorkel trips and lots of free space to sprawl out on the sand. Few reach it by the gruelling bus ride over the Arakan Mountains from Pyay or Yangon (Rangoon), but zip here on a flight from Yangon. More rewarding is continuing – either by an eight-hour boat ride from nearby Taunggok or 30-minute flight – to Sittwe, where you can make boat trips to the ancient Rakhaing capital of Mrauk U, an archaeological site of 700 temples that remains embedded in thrilling-to-see, often-untouched village life.

Looming to the north is the bigger, elusive Chin State, a richly traditional area only visited with government permits. Some visitors get a taste of Chin life at Chin villages in Rakhaing State, reached on easily arranged boat trips from Mrauk U.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Bike between some of the 700 temples in timeless **Mrauk U** (p327), the last proud Rakhaing capital
- Savour the squid on the sand at **Ngapali Beach** (p319), Myanmar's top beach destination
- Boat to **Chin villages** (p333) outside Mrauk U, where tattoo-faced women lead you around by the arm
- Wander about one of Myanmar's most exotic scenes: Sittwe's morning **fish market** (p324)
- Skip the flight and try one of Myanmar's **roughest bus rides** (p322) – from Ngapali to Pyay



■ POPULATION: RAKHAING & CHIN STATES ABOUT 3.13 MILLION

■ HIGHEST POINT: MT WEIK-ZAR (3681FT)

## PEOPLE

### Rakhaing

Much of Western Myanmar is home to the fascinating Rakhaing ethnic group, which is in itself a controversial topic – are the Rakhaing actually Bamar (Burmans) with Indian blood, Indians with Bamar characteristics or a separate race (as is claimed locally)?

Although the first inhabitants of the region were a dark-skinned Negrito tribe known as the Bilu, later migrants from the eastern Indian subcontinent developed the first Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms in Myanmar before the first Christian millennium. These kingdoms flourished before the invasion of the Tibeto-Burmans from the north and east in the 9th and 18th centuries. The current inhabitants of the state may thus be mixed descendants of all three groups: Bilu, Bengali and Bamar.

The Rakhaing proudly speak ‘Arakan’, a language they claim birthed Bamar (and it’s certainly related).

### Rohingya

The Myanmar government denies the existence of a Rohingya minority, a group of anywhere between 750,000 and 1.5 million Muslims separate from another local Muslim group called the ‘Rahking Muslims’.

Many of the Rohingya – who speak a Bengali dialect – have been subjected to much Bamar persecution (including arbitrary taxes, forced labour, forced relocation, rape and murder, according to Amnesty International). The Rohingya must seek permission just to travel to the next village.

Between 1978 and the mid-’90s, half a million Rohingya people fled to Bangladesh, though many were repatriated to Myanmar following agreements between the two national governments. Similarly in the past few years, refugee camps in Thailand – where Rohingya had escaped, seeking exile in

Thailand or Malaysia – were seeing deportations back to Myanmar.

## CLIMATE

Those wishing to risk the heat or rains outside the high season (about October to March) will find that downpours or jellyfish will discourage much fun at Ngapali Beach. Sittwe and Mrauk U receive more rain than most of the country – about 200in per year. Sudden rainstorms during the monsoon (mid-May to mid-September) season are dangerous if travelling by boat to Mrauk U, or between Sittwe and Taunggyok. Cyclones and tropical storms tend to occur just before and after the rainy season.

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Malaria precautions should be taken during monsoon season. Seven people were killed when their boat was hit by a chance storm in late 2004, while heading from Sittwe to Mrauk U (see p326).

Both Sittwe and Mrauk U saw many locals march during the nationwide protests in September 2007, but there were no shootings.

## GETTING THERE & AROUND

Thandwe (Sandoway) is the major access point for visitors heading to Ngapali Beach. Most arrive by air from Yangon. Two long bus routes from Yangon go to Thandwe too, one via Pyay (Prome), and the other via Gwa in the south; both take 18 hours and may require vomit bags. See p322 for more details.

Sittwe is the necessary access point to Mrauk U. It’s possible to reach it by plane from Thandwe or Yangon, or by boat from Taunggyok (p323), four or so hours north of Thandwe.

Overland routes between Thandwe and Sittwe, or Taunggyok and Pyay, are restricted unless you have a government permit.

### RAKHAING OR ARAKAN?

The interchangeable terms Rakhaing and Arakan are frequently used and refer to the people, the state or the local language. Arakan, actually, is a version of Rakhaing muddled up by foreigners. As it harkens to the era when Mrauk U was a regional powerhouse, English-speaking locals often use the term with a particular pride.

Either term gets a bit touchy with the government, which officially uses Rakhaing but supposedly forbids study of the Rakhaing script. In 2007 the planned Mrauk U Princess Hotel in Mrauk U, apparently, had to change its name from Rakhaing Princess, per government orders.