

Welcome to Myanmar

It's the dawn of a more democratic era in this extraordinary land, where the landscape is scattered with gilded pagodas and the traditional ways of Asia endure.

Golden Wonders

'This is Burma', wrote Rudyard Kipling. 'It will be quite unlike any land you know about.' Amazingly, more than a century later, Myanmar retains the power to surprise and delight even the most jaded of travellers. Be dazzled by the 'winking wonder' of Shwedagon Paya. Contemplate the 4000 sacred stupas scattered across the plains of Bagan. Stare in disbelief at the Golden Rock at Mt Kyaiktiyo, teetering impossibly on the edge of a chasm. These are all important Buddhist sights in a country where pious monks are more revered than rock stars.

The New Myanmar

In 2015, Myanmar voted in its first democratically elected government in more than half a century. Sanctions have been dropped and the world is rushing to do business here. Relaxing of censorship has led to an explosion of new media and an astonishing openness in public discussions of once-taboo topics. Swathes of the country, off-limits for years, can now be freely visited. Modern travel conveniences, such as mobile phone coverage and internet access, are now common, but largely confined to the big cities and towns, where the recent economic and social improvements are most obvious.

Traditional Life

In a nation with more than 100 ethnic groups, exploring Myanmar can often feel like you've stumbled into a living edition of the *National Geographic*, c 1910! For all the momentous recent changes, Myanmar remains at heart a rural nation of traditional values. Everywhere, you'll encounter men wearing skirt-like *longyi*, both genders smothered in *thanakha* (traditional make-up) and betel-chewing grannies. People still get around in trishaws and, in rural areas, horse and cart. Drinking tea – a British colonial affectation – is enthusiastically embraced in thousands of traditional teahouses.

Simple Pleasures

Thankfully, the pace of change is not overwhelming, leaving the simple pleasures of travel in Myanmar intact. Drift down the Ayeyarwady (Irrawaddy) River in an old river steamer or luxury cruiser. Stake out a slice of beach on the blissful Bay of Bengal. Trek through pine forests to minority villages in the Shan Hills without jostling with scores of fellow travellers. Best of all, you'll encounter locals who are gentle, humorous, engaging, considerate, inquisitive and passionate – they want to play a part in the world, and to know what you make of their world. Now is the time to make that connection.



Why I Love Myanmar

By Simon Richmond, Writer

It doesn't matter whether this is your first or 51st visit to Myanmar: you won't fail to notice the energy, hope and possibilities for the future that hang in the air. Exiles are returning, joining others in rising to the challenge of bringing their country into the 21st century at the same time as preserving the best of the past. Myanmar has many problems to fix but its people remain as stoic and charming as ever. Slow down, sit, listen and connect with them – it's the best way to appreciate what's truly golden about this land.

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