



Bagan & Central Myanmar

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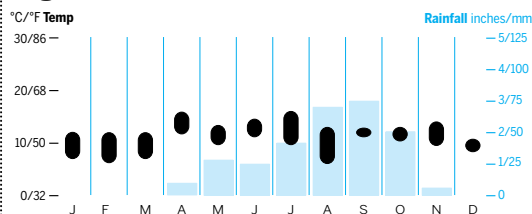
Why Go?

This heartland of the Bamar people has been the location of three former Burmese capitals – Bagan, Pyay and Taungoo – as well as the latest surreal one, Nay Pyi Taw. Of this quartet, it's Bagan with its wondrous vista of pagodas and stupas, many dating back to the 12th century, that's the star attraction. The tallest and most majestic of Bagan's temples, built of brick, decorated inside with beautiful frescos and topped with gilded *hti* pinnacles, mix Hindu and buddhist images with locally brewed *nat* (spirits) in nooks and crannies.

Most visitors fly directly to Bagan, but central Myanmar also provides scenic rewards for adventurous travellers. It may be known as the 'dry zone', but the region is far from a desert. Beside highways and rickety train tracks amble ox carts through rice fields and rolling plains, all rimmed by the Shan Mountains to the east and the snaking Ayeyarwady (Irrawaddy) River to the west, creating scenes that hark back centuries.

When to Go

Bagan



Nov–Feb 'Winter', when most visitors come and temperatures are 'cool' at around 86°F (30°C).

Mar–May The hot season, when temperatures reach 100°F (40°C) and higher.

Jun–Oct The rainy season, but the landscape is lush and hotel rates are at their lowest.

History

Conquering armies led by various peoples, including the Pyu, the Mon and the Burmese, have marauded 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 and some historians consider the Pyu to be founders of Myanmar's 'first empire', although little is known of this vanished group.

Bagan's burst of spiritual creativity lasted two-and-a-half centuries, beginning in 1047 and ending as the pounding footfall of Kublai Khan's raiders approached in 1287. The latest empire to lodge in the area is the military junta, which founded the new capital of Nay Pyi Taw in 2005.

① Getting There & Away

Bagan is the main entry point to the region for visitors arriving by air, although Mandalay is also convenient for northern destinations such as Monywa. Yangon is a convenient international entry point for more southerly destinations such as Pyay or Taungoo. Nyaung U is the principal gateway to Bagan, with a train station, a jetty and the airport. Most visitors by boat come downriver from Mandalay on a fast boat or a slower, luxury cruise. The majority of long-haul bus routes (eg Yangon–Mandalay) miss Bagan, but there are a few direct bus links between Bagan and Yangon, Mandalay and Inle Lake, including some luxurious sleeper options. Trains to the Bagan area are slow and impractical, with the exception of the Yangon–Bagan sleeper trains. The more interesting road route from Yangon to Bagan is via Pyay and Magwe.

BAGAN

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One of Myanmar's main attractions, this is a temple town. The area known as Bagan (ပုဂံ) or, bureaucratically, as the 'Bagan Archaeological Zone', occupies an impressive 26-sq-mile area, 118 miles south of Mandalay and 429 miles north of Yangon. The Ayeyarwady River drifts past its northern and western sides. See p165 for more on the temples.

The area's most active town and main transport hub is Nyaung U, in the northeast corner. About 2.5 miles west, Old Bagan is the former site of the village that was relocated two miles south to New Bagan in 1990. Between the two is Myinkaba, a village boasting a long-running lacquerware tradition. One thing to keep in mind, particularly for travellers exploring the region, is that

Bagan is most definitely not Siem Reap or even Luang Prabang. It's more of an overgrown village and lacks anything resembling a night scene, although it does have basic traveller amenities. Plan your partying somewhere else.

Connecting the towns are paved roads making a 12-mile oval. In between and around these towns is the bulk of the Bagan action: the plain, featuring most of the temples, all connected with a vast network of bumpy dirt roads and trails.



Activities

Boat Trips

Sunset chasing in Bagan isn't restricted to the tops of temples. An interesting alternative is a dusk **boat trip** (per boat \$10-15) on the Ayeyarwady. The hour-long tours offered by the boat folk at the Old Bagan jetty tend to cater to package tourists, but drop by to arrange your own cruise.

You can also arrange an interesting boat and taxi side-trip to the mountaintop **Tan Kyi Paya**, one of four stupas that marked the original edges of the city. Another possible boat trip is to three temples north of Nyaung U.

Ballooning

The best way to truly appreciate Bagan's size and sprawl is from the basket of a hot-air balloon belonging to **Balloons over Bagan** (📞 061-60058; www.balloonsoverbagan.com; office in Bagan Thiripyitsaya Sanctuary Resort; per person stand-by rate \$320). These magical 45-minute rides over one of the world's most highly acclaimed ballooning spots only run from October to March. Sometimes sunrise flights are booked up to a month or more in advance, but *if* there's space, any hotel or guest-house should be able to arrange a ticket.

The slickly run company, owned by an Australian-Burmese couple and employing about 100 locals, has 10 balloons that usually fit up to 10 passengers and a pilot. The experience begins with a pick up from your hotel in one of their fleet of lovingly restored, pre-WWII Chevrolet CMP buses partly made of teak. You can have coffee and snacks while watching the UK-made balloons fill with hot air, and sparkling wine and snacks after you land and watch them get packed up again.

Although sunset flights are offered (depending on weather conditions), the sunrise ones are preferable as the cooler dawn air allows pilots to fly the balloons at lower altitude for a closer view of the temples.