

# Welcome to Myanmar (Burma)

*Now is the moment to visit this extraordinary land, scattered with gilded pagodas, where the traditional ways of Asia endure and areas that were previously off-limits are opening up.*

## A World Apart

'This is Burma,' wrote Rudyard Kipling. 'It is quite unlike any place 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.

## 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 *National Geographic*, circa 1910! The country, for instance, has yet to be completely overwhelmed by Western fashion – everywhere you'll encounter men wearing skirt-like *longyi*, women smothered in *thanakha* (traditional make-up) and betel-chewing grannies with mouths full of blood-red juice. 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.

## International Interest

In 2013 Myanmar remained a Starbucks-free nation – but that could soon change. As the country makes tentative steps towards democracy, sanctions have been dropped and the world is rushing to do business here. In recent years conveniences such as mobile phone coverage, internet access and internationally linked ATMs have all improved or made their debut. Relaxing of censorship has led to an explosion of new media and an astonishing openness in public discussions of once-taboo topics, including politics. Swaths of the country, off-limits for years, can now be freely visited.

## Simple Pleasures

The pace of change is not overwhelming, leaving the simple pleasures of travel in Myanmar intact. You can still drift down the Ayeyarwady river in an old river steamer, stake out a slice of beach on the blissful Bay of Bengal, or trek through forests to minority villages scattered across 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, Author

On a recent afternoon in Yangon I was invited into the shack-like home of Patrick, the great-grandson of Burma's last king. With his daughter, he runs a humble English-language school in the shadow of Shwedagon Paya. As I chatted with this courteous, religious, eccentric man about his life, it underlined what I've always loved about Myanmar – meeting and sharing time with its charming people. Slow down, sit, listen and connect – it's the best way to appreciate what's truly golden about this land.

**For more about our authors, see page 424**