



# Southern Myanmar

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## Why Go?

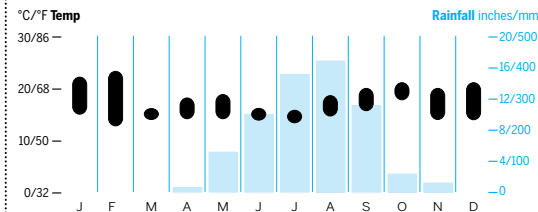
In addition to being largely unexplored, far off the beaten track and tragically neglected (do you get the picture?), the pleasures of southern Myanmar exist on a variety of other levels.

The caves around sleepy Hpa-an will escort visitors to unparalleled depths and darkness, while the ascent to the sacred golden boulder at Mt Kyauktiyo (Golden Rock) might have you believing that you've gone to heaven. And somewhere in-between are the history-soaked coastal cities of Mawlamyine and Myeik. Yet perhaps the region's, if not the country's, most dramatic intersection of water, land and sky is the Myeik Archipelago, home to some of the most gorgeous – and untouched – coastline in Southeast Asia.

And did we mention that you'll probably be the only one there?

## When to Go

### Southeastern Myanmar



#### Mar–May

Temperatures can reach as high as 86°F (30°C) during the summer

#### Nov–Jan

The days are relatively cool during the winter

#### Jun–Oct

Southern Myanmar sees more rain than elsewhere during the wet season

## MON STATE

Mon State (မွန်ပြည်နယ်) seems to have a bit of everything that's wonderful about Myanmar: golden temples, a palpable colonial past, charming villages and even some scenic coastline. Travelling in this region is generally easy (at least, for Myanmar), relatively free from bureaucracy, and the distances short; yet, strangely, few visitors seem to make it down here.

### History

Once native to a broad region stretching from southern Myanmar to Cambodia, the Mon have been absorbed – sometimes willingly, sometimes unwillingly – by the more powerful Burmese and Thai cultures in Myanmar and Thailand respectively over the last thousand years.

Though no one knows for sure, the Mon may be descended from a group of Indian immigrants from Kalinga, an ancient kingdom overlapping the boundaries of the modern Indian states of Orissa and Andhra Pradesh. They are responsible for much of the early transmission of Theravada Buddhism in mainland Southeast Asia.

Since 1949 the eastern hills of the state (as well as mountains further south in Tanintharyi Region) have been a refuge for the New Mon State Party (NMSP) and its tactical arm, the Mon National Liberation Front (MNLF), whose objective has been self-rule for Mon State. In 1995, after years of bickering and fighting, the NMSP signed a ceasefire with the Myanmar government. Since then, peace has largely been maintained, and as of 2013, foreign travellers have tentatively been allowed to travel by land to previously off-limits areas south of Mawlamyine.

### TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS

It's possible to travel as south as Mawlamyine by train, or to Dawei by bus, but beyond this point foreign tourists who wish to continue southward are generally required to take a boat or fly. Likewise, foreign travellers wishing to travel between Myanmar's southernmost cities, Dawei, Myeik and Kawthoung, can generally only do so by plane or boat.

## Mt Kyaiktiyo (Golden Rock) ကျိုက်တီးရိုးတောင်

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We'll admit it: a giant gilded rock on the top of a mountain seems like an odd, perhaps even gaudy, destination. But there really is something special about the boulder stupa of Kyaiktiyo.

The monument, an enormous, precariously balanced boulder coated in gold and topped with a stupa, is a major pilgrimage site for Myanmar Buddhists. Its image adorns many a local's car windscreen or family hearth, and every good Buddhist dreams of the day he finally set eyes on this holiest of shrines.

Not surprisingly, the atmosphere surrounding Kyaiktiyo during the height of the pilgrimage season (from November to March) is charged with magic and devotion: pilgrims chant, light candles and meditate all through the night; men (only) are permitted to walk along a short causeway and over a bridge spanning a chasm to the boulder to affix gold leaf squares on the rock's surface. And the boulder itself is stunning, especially when bathed in the purple, sometimes misty, light of dawn and dusk.

During the rainy season (June to October) the mountain is covered in a downright chilly and nearly permanent coat of mist, fog and rain. Although the area's hotels are open during this period, most restaurants and food stalls aren't, and the majority of pilgrims are foreigners.

There are several other stupas and shrines scattered on the ridge at the top of Mt Kyaiktiyo, though none is as impressive as Kyaiktiyo itself. Even so, the interconnecting trails sometimes lead to unexpected views of the valleys below.



### Activities

#### Climbing the Mountain

**Kinpun**, a busy hub of restaurants, souvenir shops and hotels, is the base camp for Mt Kyaiktiyo. It's from here that large trucks climb the seven winding, uphill miles to the rock (per person K2500). The truck beds are lined with padded wooden slats for benches and seat about 40 people. Five passengers are allowed in the much more comfortable front seats (per person K3000) but these are usually reserved in advance by groups or families. As an individual traveller it's difficult to secure a