

Yangon

ရန်ကင်း



Once upon a time in the land of Suvannabhumi, a great king was presented with a gift of eight strands of hair. The bearers of these gifts, two merchant brothers who had journeyed from faraway lands after looking for an enlightened one, told King Okkalapa that he should guard these strands well for they were no ordinary hairs.

The king set to his task with zeal and on the summit of a 10,000-year-old sacred hill he enshrined the hairs in a temple of gold, which was enclosed in a temple of silver, then one of tin, then copper, then lead, then marble and, finally, one of plain iron-brick.

Two and a half thousand years after the death of good King Okkalapa, the small town that had sprung up around the shrine on the hill has grown into a city.

A half-finished work in progress, a picture of dishevelment, the city of Yangon, recently dethroned capital of Myanmar, might have lost its good kings of old, but it has matured into the most fascinating city in the country. From the fading yesterdays visible in the crumbling colonial architecture of downtown, to the glass office blocks pointing to a wealthier tomorrow, this is an endlessly exciting city of startling contradictions. No visitor can hope to understand anything of modern Myanmar without first knowing something of Yangon – the city King Okkalapa conceived when he enshrined a gift from faraway lands in that star-studded pinnacle of gold that dominates Yangon and Myanmar to this day. This is Yangon. This is the city of the Shwedagon Paya.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Offer a slack-jawed prayer of wonder at the **Shwedagon Paya** (p92), the pyramid of gold that is the Burma of old
- Overload your bags in the **Bogyoke Aung San Market** (p128), a bargain-shopper's paradise
- Massage the person-sized toes of the jewel-bedecked enlightened one at the **Chaukhtatgyi Paya** (p101)
- Have your palm read on the watercolour streets and search for a glittering paya and Chinese dragons on a walking tour through **downtown Yangon** (p114)
- Eavesdrop on the gossip at a street-side teashop and chow down on flavours from around the world in Yangon's excellent **restaurants** and **teashops** (p120)



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 01

■ POPULATION: 6 MILLION

■ ELEVATION: 46FT

HISTORY

Myanmar's biggest city, Yangon is comparatively young. It only became the capital in 1885 when the British completed their conquest of northern Myanmar, and Mandalay's brief period as the centre of the last Burmese kingdom ended.

Despite its short history as the seat of national government, Yangon has been in existence for a long time – although as a small town for much of that time, in comparison to places such as Bago (Pegu), Pyay (Prome) or Thaton. In 1755 King Alaungpaya conquered central Myanmar and built a new city on the site of Yangon, which at that time was known as Dagon. Yangon means 'end of strife': the king rather vainly hoped that with the conquest of central Myanmar, his struggles would be over. In 1756, with the destruction of Thanlyin (Syriam) across the river, Yangon also became an important seaport.

In 1841 the city was virtually destroyed by fire; the rebuilt town again suffered extensive damage during the Second Anglo-Burmese War in 1852. The British, the new masters, rebuilt the capital to its present plan and corrupted the city's name to Rangoon.

Yangon's early history as Dagon is tied very closely to its grand Buddhist stupa, the Shwedagon Paya. It doesn't stand in the city centre (rather about 2 miles to the north) yet it totally dominates the Yangon skyline.

In 1988 around 15% of Yangon's city centre population – all squatters – were forced to move to seven *myo thit* (new towns) northeast of the city centre. Many of the old colonial buildings once occupied by the squatters have

now been refurbished for use as offices, businesses and apartments.

The city has changed dramatically following the 1989 banishment of socialism. Starting in the early 1990s, the government began sprucing up the city's appearance by cleaning the streets and painting many public buildings. Since 1992, when the procapitalist General Than Shwe took power, new cars and trucks have taken to city roads, mobile phones are commonly seen in the city centre and satellite dishes dot the horizon. To try and keep blood-red spittle off the streets, the selling of betel nuts was banned in 1995. As with many such decrees, the results have been negligible.

From the early '90s until 2006 Yangon pattered along nicely. In November 2005, quite unexpectedly, the government announced that the newly constructed city of Nay Pyi Taw in central Myanmar was to be the nation's capital. Despite the government upping sticks for the new capital, Yangon remains the commercial and diplomatic capital and by far the largest city. However, many Yangon residents say that basic public services, which had long been poor, have got even worse since the move to the new capital.

In late 2007 Yangon was the centre of huge nationwide fuel protests, which were led by the monks. The protests quickly escalated into antigovernment demonstrations, which resulted in the deaths of many protestors, and worldwide condemnation.

ORIENTATION

The city is bordered to the south and west by the Yangon River (also known as the Hlaing

CYCLONE NARGIS

In May 2008 the worst natural disaster in Myanmar's recent history hit the south of the country (see p52 for more). Yangon was declared a disaster area by Myanmar's government. Many of the city's pagodas and temples, shops and hotels had minor to serious damage from falling trees, lampposts and fences. However, when reconstruction work began, it was found that most of the city had escaped major structural damage. By mid-June 2008 electricity and telecommunications were back to normal, and shops and restaurants had reopened with brand-new corrugated tin roofs. Yangon returned to business as usual – aside from a lack of customers.

Bus and taxi fares rose for a few weeks after the storm but soon returned to normal. Highway buses were not affected, except those running to the Ayeyarwady (Irrawaddy) Delta (p133), where roads were badly damaged.

Recovery in Yangon happened quickly, particularly when compared with rescue efforts in the delta area, but the effects of Nargis can be seen in the lack of shady trees. For many years these beauties played a significant role in the identity of Yangon, which in the 1960s was known as 'the garden city of the East'.