

# Around Yangon



Let the adventure begin! As the last of the Yangon (Rangoon) suburbs disappear into the rear view mirror you enter an older world where time is measured less by the tick-tocking of a clock and more by the passing of the seasons.

Immediately south of the big city are the vast, squelchy swamps and river channels of the delta region. Travel here might be tough, but the rewards include starry nights on chugging river ferries and pagodas that float on rivers full of fish that jump in anticipation of your arrival. West, across more rivers and past paddy field after gorgeous green paddy field, is sticky Patheingyi, home of golden monuments to love and a Buddha who sailed on a raft from far away Sri Lanka. Beyond that charming city is carefree Chaung Tha Beach and the refined sands of Ngwe Saung, either of which are exquisite enough to send you to cloud nine.

Heading east out of Yangon it's only a short hop to Bago (Pegu), the former capital born of a chivalrous bird. Today Bago might look a little down at heel, but it has treasures to make any monarch jealous. Some, built by nasty kings who tried to block the path of true love, are obvious enough, but others, such as saintly snakes that speak to those who care to listen, are a little more off-beat. And off-beat sums this region up well – little visited and full of the weird and wonderful, this fascinating corner of the country promises adventures and escapades you'll remember forever.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Scan the horizon for giant purple swamp hens and relax to a chorus of frog croaks in the fresh air of the **Moeyungyi Wetlands** (p152)
- Search for monks disguised as giant pythons and *nat* (spirit beings) disguised as masculine women in **Bago** (p147)



## GETTING THERE & AROUND

To the west, Pathein is the transport hub with buses and boats to/from Yangon and minibuses to Chaung Tha and Ngwe Saung.

Bago, easily reached from Yangon by bus or train, is a natural stop before heading north or south to Kyauktiyo (Golden Rock; p154) and beyond.

Getting to most other places mentioned in this chapter will require some patience, particularly if you take public transport. The southwest part of the region affords travellers the chance to ride the same river ferries that the locals use. For information on travel restrictions and getting around in the delta region, see below.

## DELTA REGION

A vast, wobbly mat of greenery floating on a thousand rivers, lakes and tributaries, like a squishy waterbed, the delta region south of Yangon is one of the most fertile and dazzlingly green regions of Myanmar. A trip through this waterlogged land is nothing short of genuine adventure full of gentle rewards for the discerning traveller.

This riverine network irrigates millions of hectares of farmland, making the delta essentially one of the 'rice bowls' of Myanmar. In addition, the estuarine environments along the coast provide much of the country's salt-water and freshwater fish harvest.

## THANLYIN & KYAUKTAN

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One of the easiest escapes from the glamour and noise of Yangon is to the small, rural towns of Thanlyin and Kyauktan, just across the river from Yangon. The official goals of the trip are a couple of interesting religious sites, but the true goal is just getting into the groove of rural Myanmar.

During the late 16th and early 17th centuries, Thanlyin was the base for the notorious Portuguese adventurer Philip de Brito. Officially a trade representative for the Rakhaing (Arakan), he actually ran his own little kingdom from Thanlyin, siding with the Mon (when it suited him) in their struggle against the Bamar. In 1599 his private army sacked Bago, but in 1613 the Bamar besieged Thanlyin and de Brito received the punishment reserved for those who defiled Buddhist shrines – death by impalement. It took him two days to die, due, it is said, to his failure to take the recommended posture where the stake would have penetrated vital organs.

Thanlyin continued as a major port and trading centre until it was destroyed by Bamar King Alaungpaya in 1756, after which Yangon took over this role. Today Thanlyin is a low-key industrial town as well as the home of a large Hindu community.

Cyclone Nargis caused significant damage to this area; for more see p134.

## Sights

Thanlyin is a relaxing place, with shaded streets and a busy market to stroll through, but there is little of the ancient city to be seen.

A short bus ride out of town will take you to the **Kyaik-khauk Paya**, a scaled-down Shwedagon with stupendous views from its hilltop location. It's said to contain two Buddha hairs delivered to the site by the great sage himself. Most likely the first stupa on this hillock was erected by the Mon 600 to 800 years ago. You can hire a horse cart to the paya for about K500 each way.

Thanlyin was also the first place in Myanmar to receive Christian missionaries and the first place to have its own church. You can visit the remains of the Portuguese-built **church**, which was constructed in 1750.

**Yele Paya** (Midriver Paya; admission \$1) at Kyauktan, 7.5 miles southeast of Thanlyin, is a sparkling floating temple adrift on a chocolate river.

### TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS

Foreign tourists are not able to access many areas of the delta due to post-Cyclone Nargis travel restrictions. Even undamaged areas like Pathein, Chaung Tha Beach and Ngwe Saung Beach could not be reached at the time of writing because travellers must go through the delta to get to them. These restrictions are likely to be lifted as roads are mended – an undertaking that had not begun at the time of writing, as conditions in the wet season make road repair difficult. Check with local travel bureaus for up-to-date information.

For more on Cyclone Nargis, see p52.