

A Taste of Myanmar

By Mike Yardley



Bagan



Kuthodaw Pagoda



Mandalay Teak Bridge



Shwedagon Pagoda, Yangon

First lyricised by Rudyard Kipling in 1890 and later adapted into song by Oley Speks, the Road to Mandalay has evoked exotic longing, ever since. As Myanmar continues to trend as one of the world's hottest "new" destinations, the fabled city of Mandalay, is the centre of Burmese culture.

The wonderful old teak monasteries are a revelation to discover. The **Shwe Nandaw Kyaung Monastery** is the last remaining remnant of the royal palace, built by King Mindon in 1861. Acting on a prophecy to commemorate the 2400th anniversary of Buddha's first sermon, King Mindon shifted the royal capital to Mandalay, building "a city of glittering gold". The palace is undergoing a restoration after being bludgeoned by the Japanese in World War II.

Home to a formidable army of artisans, there's an entire street dedicated to marble sculpture, where huge creamy Buddha statues are hand-crafted. You'll stop by the gold leaf workshops, where the artisans beat the snot out of a gold block for five hours, in brain-busting pursuit of producing the famed gold leaf foil. I tried my hand at this exhaustive manual technique, bailing out after barely a minute.

You'll see **Kuthodaw Pagoda**, a dreamy complex of 729 small cream pagodas. Each pagoda houses a marble slate, inscribed with the full text from every page of the Buddhist doctrine, earning it the sobriquet, the world's largest book.

But the climactic attraction is the world's longest teak wood bridge at sundown. The 200 year old **U Bein's Bridge** is a 1km long pedestrian promenade on stilts. Out on the water, in a Myanmar gondola, the golden glow at sunset is a pinch-yourself-moment, to treasure forever. You'll encounter a multitude of riverside villages, where daily routines appear frozen in time. We noticed a lot of cattle parked up in the front room of people's thatched houses.

The early morning village markets are a riot of colour, pungent fragrances and playful kids. Like their elders, they exude an endearing gentleness and a curious demeanour. Be welcomed into the monasteries, to hear the tinkling of bells, the swishing of vermilion robes and see poor village kids getting a priceless education.

But the belle of the ball is **Bagan**, home to over 2000 pagodas and temples scattered across the river plain of this ancient capital, glinting in the sun. Built



Marble Street, Mandalay



Village School



Reclining Buddha



around a thousand years ago, the terracotta plain is like a rolling sea, studded with man-made peaks. Bagan takes on an aura of glorious abandonment as it turns on a sunset show to confound the beauty meter. We climbed the five levels of steep steps up Shwesandaw Paya. From your chosen perch, it almost appears as though the plethora of stupas, pagodas and temples scattered across the countryside, outnumber the trees. As the sun dips, this ethereal landscape twinkles like a golden fairy-tale.

Formerly known as Rangoon under the British, Yangon is a heaving cleavage of high-density living with some serious Buddhist bling. But Myanmar's humming gateway is gracefully softened with colonial vestiges best enjoyed along The Strand, and gloriously placid lake-filled parks. Many of the historic buildings, largely neglected by the military junta, are being frenetically restored and repurposed as evocative hotel offerings. It was a thrill to see the house of Nobel Peace Prize winner, Aung San Suu Kyi, where she was detained for so many years, until 2010.

But **Shewdagon Pagoda** packs the biggest frisson. Casting its golden gleam over the city from its 100 metre tall bell-shaped golden stupa, studded with diamonds and gems, Yangon's 2,500-year old guardian temple contains the relics of four Buddhas. This breath-taking complex of shrines, pavilions and stupa is designed in strict accordance with Burmese astrology, so you can make symbolic offerings at your respective planetary post.

Nearby, head to Chauk Htat Gyi Pagoda, which houses a striking 65metre long **reclining Buddha**. Nicknamed the 'Sweet-Eyed Buddha', the statue's porcelain face is punctuated by expressively large eyes, vermilion lips and jet blue eye-shadow. In a country brimming with sensational artisans, head to Bogyoke Market and the roadside stalls spilling across the footpath, to admire the wealth of craftwork. From superbly woven rattan items and lacquerware, to gold, silver and brass work, haggle your way to some authentic bargains.

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