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PEROWNE CHARLES COMMUNICATIONS

Burma for beginners

YOUR
FOUR-PAGE
PULL-OUT
GUIDE

*Charming locals,
quiet villages and a
colonial capital full
of character await
in the country that
is top of many
travellers' wish lists*

Gill
Charlton



In the two years since Aung San Suu Kyi announced that she would welcome "responsible tourism", Burma (Myanmar), a country that many avoided at her request, has become one that everyone wants to see. There are some extraordinary sights: the wonder of Pagan's plain of a thousand temples, the leg-rowing fishermen of Inle Lake and the glittering gold stupa of Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon (Yangon). But what really draws tourists is the chance to visit a place where the 21st-century world has barely intruded. In Burma there is a sense of an old Orient where following the precepts of Buddhism is still a way of life.

I first went there in 1984 and have returned regularly since, all through the dark days when the arrival of a foreigner could clear a teahouse in Mandalay, such was the level of fear induced by the military junta that ruled the country for almost 50 years. While Burma may now claim to have an elected civilian government, this is hardly a country free of oppression. Most large "private" businesses are owned or

controlled by military men and their cronies and people must still take care over what they say in public.

The difference now is that the Burmese are hopeful that the changes they have witnessed cannot be reversed: the release of the opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi; access to the World Wide Web, including sites critical of the government; and the arrival of hundreds of thousands of Western tourists with dollars to spend in the local community.

Chronic temple fatigue is a big danger for the first-time visitor. Plan your itinerary to go beyond the main tourist draws and spend time in the neat teak villages, local tea-houses and small-town markets, getting to know some of the most endearing people you will meet anywhere in the world.

When to go

The best time to visit is during the cool, dry season between November and February, when it can be chilly at night in the hills. In March the thermometer leaps from daytime highs of around 28C (82F) in central Burma to 40C (104F), with debilitating levels of humidity. The monsoon rains start in late May and often continue into October, though the wettest month is August.

Try to time your visit to include a full moon as this is a popular time to put on traditional festivals.

Getting there

There is a limited choice of good connecting flights from Britain. Thai Airways (0844 561 0911; thaiairways.co.uk) has the best flight timings: departing Heathrow at 12.30, arriving in Rangoon at 08.50; journey time 15 hours. The cheapest return costs about £1,000.

Look out for special offers on other regional airlines. Singapore

Air (020 8961 6993; singaporeair.com) currently has returns via Singapore from £635 for the 20-hour journey; Malaysia Airlines (0871 423 9090; malaysiaairlines.com) has returns via Kuala Lumpur from £880 for an 18-hour journey.

Getting around

The recent Air Bagan crash has not helped allay fears over Burma's patchy aviation safety record. However, given the potholed state of the main roads, flying is the only way to cover the main sights in two weeks. Trains are slow and unreliable.

By air

Tour operators use Asian Wings (asianwingsair.com), Air Mandalay (airmandalay.com), Air Bagan (airbagan.com) and Yangon Airways (yangonair.com) for domestic flights. Flights cost £40 to £50. Independent travellers can book online but should check by email to ensure that seats are confirmed.

You pay for all domestic flights on arrival in Rangoon at the airline's office before taking the first flight, but this system may change as credit cards become more widely accepted.

Domestic flights must be reconfirmed a day or two before departure; ask your hotel to make the call. Flight schedules can change and tourists may be bumped in favour of others with more clout. It is wise to add a final night in Rangoon before flying home.

By car

Local travel agents in Rangoon can arrange car-with-driver rentals for day trips or longer journeys. City taxis used to be un-roadworthy rust-buckets, but many have now been replaced by newer imported vehicles. Fares must be negotiated.

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Where to stay

Burma has a dearth of tourist-standard hotel rooms. Most so-called four and five-star hotels would be regarded as three-star properties in neighbouring Thailand, though quite a few have plans for renovations this summer.

Prices have shot up, especially in Rangoon, where a four-star hotel in need of refurbishment can charge £250 a night for a standard room. Such is the demand that many hotels will not yet quote rates for next winter to independent travellers.

Online booking agents are working with an increasing number of hotels that post late-availability deals. Looking a month ahead, I found the four-star Park Royal in Rangoon offering double rooms for £145 through booking.com.

Agoda (agoda.com) has also signed up a number of Burmese hotels. Use the hotel price comparison site Trivago (trivago.com) to find offers.

Some customers who booked through online agents have reported being quoted, on arrival, a higher room rate. If travelling independently book via email (we have listed hotel websites) and bring all the paperwork.

As more hotels open and rooms can be secured with credit cards, such problems should disappear; for the moment, booking through a tour operator or good local agent will give peace of mind.

For those travelling on a budget, there are plenty of one-star hotels, also used by middle-class Burmese and Chinese workers, charging £10-£20 a night in tourist areas. The Lonely Planet guide is a good source of budget accommodation. Officially, foreigners are allowed to stay only in accommodation authorised by the government.

Eating out

Most tourist hotels serve bland versions of Burmese, Thai and Chinese dishes as well as the usual burgers, grilled chicken and pasta. A buffet dinner will cost about £18 a head; an à la carte dinner in a top hotel £30 plus. Wineries around Inle

Lake produce passable wine, but demand is so high that a bottle in a restaurant costs £20 or more.

The Burmese are passionate about food. On the edge of any market there will be stalls selling noodle soup, pancakes and sticky rice; even the smallest village has a tea shop serving snacks.

Smarter private restaurants are springing up all over towns visited by tourists, and serve classic Burmese curries, noodle soups and fresh salads tossed in sesame oil as well as grilled fish and chips. You can dine well in these places for less than £10 a head.

Tour operators

Mainstream tour operators are introducing coach tours of Burma to their Far East programmes. However, you will have a more rewarding experience if you travel with a small group or with your own private guide.

Some Rangoon-based travel agents such as Good News Travels (myanmargoodnews.travel.com) will book hotels and internal flights for independent travellers who want to save money by organising their own transfers and local guiding. However, the internet connection with Burma is unreliable: in my experience website servers crash regularly and emails may not get through.

The following is a selection of British tour operators with a strong presence in the country.

● **Abercrombie & Kent** (0845 485 1518; abercrombiekent.co.uk) has had its own office in Rangoon for many years and can organise pretty much anything you want to do in Burma. As well as classic car-and-driver itineraries and river cruises, it can obtain permission to visit off-limits hill tribe areas, or organise a trek up Mount Victoria or diving on the Mergui peninsula.

● **Wild Frontiers** (020 7736 3968; wildfrontiers.co.uk) prides itself on creating holidays that let you get behind the tourist facade and engage with the locals while sleeping in good hotels. Group size is kept to a maximum of 12. This year's offbeat itineraries include a

river cruise along the Upper Chindwin, a journey from northern Thailand into the tribal areas of eastern Burma and trekking in the foothills of the Burmese Himalaya. It also runs mainstream "Road to Mandalay" tours and can arrange private journeys.

● **Audley Travel** (01993 838105; audleytravel.com) has been offering tailor-made tours of Burma since 1995. As well as classic "highlights" trips (including a group tour for up to 16), it can arrange offbeat trekking in the Chin Hills and around Inle Lake and visits to tribal villages. It also offers a 19-day epic journey along the famous Burma Road from Mandalay via Lashio to Lijiang in China.

● **Explore** (0845 291 4541; explore.co.uk), a specialist in small-group adventures, has entered Burma with a bang. There are 10 itineraries with multiple departure dates, including plenty of choice during the school summer holidays. The maximum group size is 20. For cyclists, there is a well-researched trail from Inle Lake via Mandalay to Pagan, using minor roads and village paths and with vehicle backup.

● **Orient-Express** (020 3117 1300; orient-express.com) will this summer launch its new luxury river cruiser, the 50-passenger Orcaella, offering 11-night cruises on the Chindwin and upper Irrawaddy (Ayeyarwady) rivers stopping at lesser-known ports. The company's long-established 80-passenger Road to Mandalay will continue its one-week Mandalay-Pagan cruises.

Next January, Cazenove & Loyd (020 7384 2332; cazloyd.com) is chartering the Orcaella for a 14-night escorted journey from Mandalay to Bhamo led by the former British ambassador to Burma, Robert Gordon.

Other tour operators include: **Ampersand Travel** (020 7289 6100; ampersandtravel.com), Experience Travel (020 3355 6979;



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experientcetravelgroup.com); Mountain Kingdoms (01453 844400; mountainkingdoms.com); Selective Asia (01273 670001; selectiveasia.com) and The Ultimate Travel Company (020 3582 2515; theultimatetravelcompany.co.uk).

Where to head

A classic two-week tour of Burma takes in Rangoon, Inle Lake, Mandalay and Pagan, usually spending three nights in each place with transfers by air. Ask to transfer from Mandalay to Pagan by river. This takes around nine hours on a local boat or three nights on the luxury Road to Mandalay river cruiser, which also includes excursions.

Rangoon

Rangoon may present a dilapidated air after decades of neglect, but it has a lot more character than Asia's modern high-rise cities. Laid out by the British as their colonial capital a century ago, it has red-brick government offices, Art Deco shipping offices, stone churches and mock-Tudor mansions still standing among lawns and flower beds.

At the city's heart is the 300ft gold-plated Shwedagon Pagoda, one of the finest temples in Asia. At sunset it is packed by camera-toting tourists; visit it instead at dawn (it opens at 6.30am), when locals come to chant, meditate and make offerings on their way to work.

Rangoon is best visited at the end of a tour, not least because the British-built Bogyoke Aung San Market (also called Scott Market) has become an emporium of covetable souvenirs – lacquerware, silver, woodcarving and textiles – from all over Burma.

The best hotel is the Governor's Residence (governorsresidence.com), a former royal guesthouse in the quiet embassy district now owned by the Orient-Express group; double rooms from £300. My favourite is the boutique Savoy Hotel (savoy-

myanmar.com) near the Shwedagon; double rooms from £175.

Monsoon (monsoon myanmar.com), 85 Theinphyu Road, near the Botataung Pagoda, is a good place for a first meal. Upstairs, Pomelo sells top-quality Fairtrade crafts.

Inle Lake

The image of a leg rower propelling his fishing skiff across glassy blue Inle Lake is used to sell Burma all over the world. The result is that the lake is becoming a victim of its celebrity. Noisy tourist longboats clog the narrow canals through stilt villages and floating gardens, and there are growing problems with rubbish disposal and water pollution.

That said, the lake has many historic Buddhist monasteries and temple complexes, some ruined, others with exquisite centuries-old carved and gilded Buddha images. The local Intha people are known for their weaving, including fabric made from the fibres of the lotus stem.

To see Inle at its best, drive down the west bank through a landscape strongly reminiscent of Tuscany with its vineyards, sunflowers and half-timbered farmhouses, to Pekhon, from where it's a half-day journey upstream back to the main lake.

Stay on the east shore for a grandstand view of the sunset. The Inle Princess Resort (no website at present), which is owned by a former political prisoner, is considered the best hotel on the lakeshore. A cheaper option is Golden Island Cottages (gic myanmar.com), run as a cooperative by the local Pa-O community; double rooms from £62.

Mandalay

The fabled Mandalay of Kipling's poem is no more. Now 40 per cent Chinese, the city has a noisy neon-lit and traffic-choked centre. Beyond, there are glimpses of the old Mandalay: the dusty lanes of teak

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homes, temples created by master woodcarvers, and the impressive blood-red walls and moat of the former 19th-century royal palace complex (its pavilions were destroyed by fire following Allied bombing in the Second World War).

However, the city is the starting point for cruises along the Irrawaddy and day trips to the former royal capital of Amarapura, site of the photogenic teak U Bein bridge that winds for nearly a mile across a shallow lake. Coach parties swamp the place at sunset, so keen photographers come for sunrise and hire a boat to get the perfect shot.

The Mandalay Hill Resort (mandalayhillresorthotel.com) is the best of the tourist hotels, set in extensive gardens with pool and spa; double rooms from £155.

For a rare chance to engage with a fluent English-speaking Burmese family, stay at Peacock Lodge (peacocklodge.com); basic double rooms £16.

Pagan

Pagan (Bagan) is Burma's big draw: more than 2,000 brick temples scattered across a green plain beside the Irrawaddy – the impressive remains of the capital of a great medieval kingdom. Many are once more active places of worship, and Burmese visitors often outnumber foreigners.

The largest temples are awash with gift shops selling religious artefacts, locally made lacquerware and plastic Chinese toys.

Hire a bicycle or a horse-drawn cart (about £15 a day) and escape across fields of sesame and groundnuts to discover unrenovated

pagodas with traces of fine murals and plasterwork.

Riverboats dock at Nyaung U, a busy port with an excellent local market, but the heart of the archaeological zone is a few miles away in Old Bagan. The four-star Hotel@Tharabar Gate (tharabargate.com) is the most convenient place to stay and has a large pool; double rooms from £120. There is a choice of family-run restaurants across the way, including the excellent vegetarian Be Kind to Animals.

Several new hotels are being built. The best of the current crop are the Thiripyitsaya Sanctuary Resort (thiripyitsaya-resort.com), beside the Irrawaddy, and the new boutique Bluebird (bluebirdbagan.com). Rates quoted on inquiry only.

River cruises

Joining a river cruise is a good choice for anyone who prefers to avoid the clamour of the cities in favour of village Burma, where most people still live. The Irrawaddy is navigable all the way from Rangoon to Bhamo, near the Chinese border. As the boats have shallow draughts they can stop at small landing places, allowing passengers to walk into villages and remote monasteries. Note that access to the riverbank can be up slippery mud steps.

The Chindwin river, which runs along the border with India and joins the Irrawaddy north of Pagan, is also opening up to tourism. Many of the small towns and villages have seen few Westerners over the past 50 years.

Paul Strachan, a Scottish historian, pioneered cruises on the Irrawaddy and the Chindwin rivers in the Nineties after renovating a

paddle steamer belonging to the colonial Irrawaddy Flotilla Company. Well-researched itineraries on comfortable boats visit monasteries and villages north of Mandalay, including Katha, the colonial town where George Orwell spent time as a policeman. Book online direct with the Singapore-based Pandaw (pandaw.com) or through a British tour operator.

The beach

The best beach resort is Ngapali (Sandoway) in Rakhine State – which the Foreign Office is currently advising Britons to avoid because of communal violence centred around Sittwe, 150 miles to the north. The unrest has also blocked access to Mrauk U, the former capital of Arakan, which has a rich collection of 16th-century temples. Tour operators will send customers to Ngapali only if they have insurance cover for places subject to Foreign Office advice. Transfer from Rangoon is by air.

I visited Ngapali in December, and it was business as usual, though hotels were not full. It is a beautiful long sandy beach untroubled by touts.

The long-established, Italian-managed Sandoway Resort (thesandowayresort.com) is the best of the top-end hotels; double rooms from £90. For a more authentic local experience, try the new Yoma Cherry Lodge (yomacherrylodge.com). Run by a British resident in pretty Lintha village, it has large stylish rooms and a beachside restaurant; double rooms from £40.

The best alternative beach is Ngwe Saung, a five-hour drive from Rangoon, which has clean sand and a choice of three-star hotels.



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What to read and watch

Reading list

● *The River of Lost Footsteps* by Thant Myint-U (Faber), a readable history;
From the Land of Green Ghosts by Pascal Khoo Thwe (Flamingo Books), a revealing autobiography of a student rebel who finds his way to Cambridge; and *The Trouser People* by Andrew Marshall (Penguin), an account of Burma before the recent reforms, which was updated at the end of 2012. Everyone should dip into Aung San Suu Kyi's *Letters from Burma* (Penguin).

Good novels include *The Glass Palace* by Amitav Ghosh, *The Piano Tuner* by Daniel Mason and *Burmese Days* by George Orwell, a shocking portrait of British colonial life.

On the web

● Andrew Marshall, a Reuters correspondent, also writes excellent

features on Burmese politics: blogs. reuters.com/andrew-rc-marshall.

Burma's leading independent weekly newspaper, *The Myanmar Times*, is available online: mmtimes.com.

Guidebook choice

● *Myanmar* (Lonely Planet), published in December 2011, remains the best practical guide. Print and download formats; check lonelyplanet.com for web updates.

Myanmar: Burma in Style by Caroline Courtald (Odyssey Guides) is good on cultural background and the main sites. Nelles publishes the best map of the country.

Films

● *The Lady*, a biopic of Aung San Suu Kyi, directed by Luc Besson, and *Beyond Rangoon*, the story of the 1988 student uprising based on real accounts, directed by John Boorman.



The Road to Mandalay, the Orient-Express ship, on the Irrawaddy



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Know before you go

How to get a visa

There is talk of a visa-on-arrival scheme, but the Foreign Office recommends applying for a tourist visa in Britain. It costs £14 and is valid for three months from the date of issue.

You can apply direct to the Myanmar Embassy in London (020 7499 4340). Its website is currently down so consular staff advise Googling "myanmar visa application form" and printing out one from another Myanmar embassy or agency.

Postal processing takes around four weeks but you can apply in person at the embassy in Mayfair.

It is quicker to use a visa agent. Travcour (020 8543 1846; travcour.com) charges a £35 service fee and says applications are taking seven working days.

Health requirements

For online advice consult Fit for Travel (fitfortravel.nhs.uk) or Nathnac (nathnac.org), which is used by GPs to assess health risk abroad. Make sure your hepatitis A, typhoid, diphtheria and tetanus immunisations are up to date. Malaria is prevalent outside Rangoon and Mandalay in all areas below 3,000ft, so antimalarial tablets are an essential.

Money matters

The US dollar is king in Burma, but notes (larger denominations preferred) will be refused that have folds, tears or marks. The exchange rate is around 830 kyat to the dollar. The best rates are given by money shops in Bogyoke Aung San Market in Rangoon. Tourist hotels will also exchange notes.

The good news is that both Visa and Mastercard have now signed agreements with Burmese banks. ATMs in Rangoon, Mandalay and Taunggyi started accepting international cards in January. Most five-star hotels now also take credit cards.

Even so, taking a stack of dollars as a backup remains essential until the reliability of ATMs is proven. The Governor's Residence hotel in Rangoon has its own ATM, which can dispense up to 240,000 kyats a day (about £180) and charges a handling fee of £4 per transaction.

Allow at least \$100 (£60) a day for extras such as meals, drinks, souvenirs and entrance fees if you are on a b&b package based in four-star hotels.

How to dress

The Burmese dress conservatively: both men and women wear the *longyi*, a floor-length tube of cloth, and consider sleeveless T-shirts and shorts to be underwear that should be hidden.

Visitors should wear loose casual clothes (no cleavage, no bare shoulders, no see-through skirts, no leggings). A few urban Burmese have started copying Western singers by wearing shorts, leggings and micro-minis, but outside Rangoon and Mandalay this is seen as very disrespectful.

Tourists wearing "spaghetti-strap" tops and shorts will not be admitted to temples as shoulders and knees must be covered. Shoes and socks must be removed to enter temples and Burmese homes.



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ALAMY, JANE MINGAY

Shwedagon Pagoda, above, is best visited at dawn. At Pagan, right, 2,000 temples are scattered across a plain by the Irrawaddy, and can be explored by bicycle or horse-drawn cart. Inset: Aung San Suu Kyi



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ALAMY

**The teak U Bein
Bridge, which winds
for almost a mile
across a shallow lake
near Mandalay**