

ABOUT MYANMAR

Myanmar is rightly referred to as the “last frontier of untouched Asia” as it boasts rugged mountain terrain; wide sweeping plains dotted with glittering golden pagodas; floating village communities; and a 2,000-km long sweeping coastline. It offers intrepid travellers a glimpse of the old Indochina. Each destination in the country offers a different geographical vista; wide rivers and expansive plains characterize the central regions, whereas rugged mountains rise to the east along the Thai border and to the north to meet the eastern end of the Himalayan range. Besides the stunning scenery, Myanmar is also a melting pot of rich cultural heritage. Once referred to as Amarapura, the “Land of Immortality” – today it is known as the Golden Land, due to its abundance in gilded pagodas and temples. Once you have experienced the rich heritage and natural beauty of this nation you will see why these titles are a true reflection of this enchanting land.

FAST FACTS

AIRPORTS

The majority of visitors arrive by air at Yangon International Airport. Yangon’s brand new international terminal offers basic facilities such as a restaurant, post office, duty-free shop and a currency exchange kiosk. The airport is located nine miles from the centre of Yangon and taxis are in abundance.

ARRIVAL / DEPARTURE INFORMATION

Visitors need a passport valid for six months. Since recently, visa requirements have been fixed by the government to make it easier for visitors to enter the country. Nationals of 100 countries now qualify for an e-visa via <http://evisa.moip.gov.mm/>, the official online visa approval. The procedures take no longer than 3 – 4 working days for tourist visas to get the approval.

A tourist visa’s validity expires 90 days after issue and only allows a 28-day, single-entry visit. Applicants no longer need to bring passport-sized photos for the process. Regarding visa extensions, at the time of the publication of this guide it was not possible to extend a tourist visa.

All the above information may change without prior notice. It remains the traveler’s responsibility to check visa requirements before traveling.

BUSINESS HOURS

Office hours are usually Monday to Friday, from 9.30-am until 4-pm. Most shops are open every day with the exception of the famous Bogoye Aung San Market (or Scott’s Market) in Yangon which is closed on Monday, public holidays and on full-moon holidays, as are most markets in the country. Shopping centres in the country are often open until 9-pm

BANKS

Though the economy is rapidly modernizing following political reforms, banks and exchange facilities very rarely accept travellers’ checks and the banks are only just beginning to offer ATM services. Reports of customer complaints resulting from technical problems with ATM machines and faulty withdrawals can be common. Travellers who choose to use ATMs should carefully scrutinize online banking records to ensure that transactions are registered accurately. In January 2013, Western Union introduced money transfer services in seven banks. The seven banks involved in the partnership are: Kanbawza Bank; First Private Bank; Myanmar Oriental Bank; Cooperative Bank; United Amara Bank; Myanmar Apex Bank; and the Myanmar Livestock and Fisheries Development Bank.

Although moneychangers sometimes approach travellers with an offer to change dollars into Burmese kyat at the market rate, it is illegal to exchange currency except at authorized locations such as the airport, banks and government stores, as long as they visually display a license. Don’t expect to change any rumpled or torn US dollar bills. Moneychangers accept only crisp, clean bills, and tend to only take the “new” US dollar bills with the larger full-frame heads.

CLOTHING

Due to Myanmar’s tropical climate, we recommend light cotton clothing in order to remain comfortable while out and about during the day. Smart casual is the attire for the evening (Some hotels and higher-end restaurants impose dress codes so it is always best to check in advance with your Asian Trails guide). It is advisable to cover arms and legs in the evenings to protect against mosquito bites. An umbrella is a good idea in both the hot and rainy seasons as it will offer protection from the strong sun and the tropical downpours.

CLOTHING (Cont.)

Tourists should respect a dress code at temples and palaces; visitors should not wear the following when entering these places: sleeveless shirts; sportswear; tights/leggings; shorts; short skirts; three-quarter length trousers; flip flops/sandals without a strap behind the heel; swimwear/beachwear; and shirts with offensive texts or images. Evenings in the hill stations and on Inle Lake can be quite cold so bring a sweater or other warm clothing if visiting these areas. This applies especially to the winter months between November and February.

CURRENCY

Myanmar's national currency is the kyat (MMK). There are 100 pyas in one kyat. Banknotes come in denominations of MMK10,000, 5,000, 1,000, 500, 200, 100 and 50. US dollars are widely accepted throughout the country. Although the country officially still accepts 10 and 20 kyat notes, these are hardly used any longer.

CUSTOM ALLOWANCES

All visitors over the age of 17 years can import the following without incurring a customs duty:

- 200 cigarettes, 50 cigars or 250 grams of tobacco.
- One liter of alcohol.
- 0.5 liter of perfume or eau de cologne.

MYANMAR (Do's and Don'ts)

Dos in Myanmar

- Ask for permission before taking photographs of people or monks.
- It is customary to remove your shoes when entering a place of worship such as a pagoda or a temple, as well as someone's home.
- If invited to dine in a family's home it is polite to bring a small gift for the host such as fruit or dessert

Don'ts in Myanmar

- Don't use your feet to point at someone.
- Don't touch a person on the head.
- Don't begin eating if you are a guest at a dinner and the host has yet to take a bite.
- Women should never touch male monks or hand something directly to them.
- Keep public displays of affection to a respectful minimum.
- Don't wear shorts, or revealing clothes.

ELECTRICITY

Myanmar uses 220V and a combination of flat two-pin, round two-pin, or three pin plugs. Therefore, visitors are recommended to bring a universal plug adaptor for ease of use across the country. Power cuts can be quite common, especially outside of the big cities, but the larger hotels and resorts have their own generators for emergency electricity supplies.

ENTERTAINMENT AND NIGHTLIFE

As the country is still opening up to new tourism opportunities, the hotel bar is probably the most vibrant center of nightlife in most places. Nonetheless, Yangon has an abundance of pubs, clubs and discos primarily located in five-star hotels. There are also entertainment plazas that include karaoke, fashion shows and traditional dance performances.

Local drinking establishments are called "beer stations" and these offer cheaper drinks, but they are not usually frequented by tourists. Mandalay has some satire shows and puppets. Theater arts are also represented at night thanks to the Mandalay Marionettes. Nightlife in Bagan consists of going to riverside restaurants to watch the sunset over the Irrawaddy River. Tourists who wish to experience nightlife in Inle Lake can enjoy cultural shows and boat races. These traditional events showcase the culture, customs and traditions of the people of Myanmar.

FOOD

Myanmar's favorable seasonal conditions, fertile soil and abundant water resources provides an abundant supply of food of a great variety all year. Rice comprises about 75 per cent of the diet and this is served with meat or fish, soup, salad and vegetables. As with other South East Asian cuisines, an effort is made to balance the four primary flavors of sour, salty, spicy and bitter. Although these basics are relatively simple, one of the pleasures of eating an authentic Burmese meal is the sheer variety of dishes at a single setting. Having chosen a curry, fried dish or salad, a succession of side dishes will be served including soup, either an Indian-influenced lentil soup or dhal, or a tart leaf-based sour soup. A tray of fresh and par-boiled vegetables and herbs is another common side dish and these are eaten with various dips. Myanmar's neighbors have greatly influenced its cuisine, especially India, China and Thailand. The Chinese influence can be seen in some spice preparations. The Indian influence has led to the replication of many dishes, including curries, naan, biryani and samosas. Insects are often a part of Myanmar cuisine, fried in the same manner as in Laos and North Eastern Thailand.

HEALTH

No vaccinations are required except for yellow fever if visitors are travelling from an area where the disease is present. However, visitors should be inoculated against the following diseases: cholera, hepatitis A & B, polio, typhoid and tetanus, Malaria is present across the country and it is advisable to take prior precautions. Although medical facilities are being developed as the country opens up and enjoys more visitors, facilities can be limited in the more remote areas and it is essential to take out a good medical insurance policy before entering the country. This should cover the cost of a medical evacuation flight out of Myanmar – most likely to Bangkok – in the event of an emergency.

HOTELS

Myanmar has hundreds of privately run hotels and guesthouses licensed to accept foreigners with more coming on stream. To get approval, operators must provide at least ten rooms of a set standard. On a grander scale, a number of new hotel deals are being signed to alleviate the shortage of rooms across the country after political reforms and a relaxation of visa rules spurred a surge in visitor arrivals.

INSURANCE

Medical facilities are limited in Myanmar, especially outside of the popular tourism destinations. It is therefore essential to take out a good medical insurance policy prior to travelling.

INTERNET

Internet provision has grown at a fast pace and has become as reliable as neighboring countries. The country now has implemented 3G networks in the main urban areas and SIM cards are widely available. Connection times rarely are slow so the time of fast uploads and downloads has also arrived in Myanmar. The Internet is still subject to some regulations and access to certain websites is filtered or may be banned outright. The country has very limited internet cafes.

LANGUAGE

The national language of Myanmar is Burmese and there are an estimated 80 different dialects spoken across the country. The written script is based on ancient Asian characters. A legacy of colonial rule is a high command of English, especially among the older generations and city residents. As the country opens up to new opportunities, many of the younger generation are now also learning foreign languages, especially English.

PEOPLE

Linguists have identified 110 distinct ethnolinguistic groups in Myanmar and the government officially recognizes 135 ethnic groups. The Burmese account for about 68 per cent of the population. Other major ethnic groups include the Shan (approximately four million); Karen (about three million); Arakanese or Rakhine (about two million); Chinese (over one million); Chin (over one million); Wa (about one million); Mon (about one million); Indians and Bengalis (about one million); Jingpho (less than one million); and Palaung (less than one million). With the exception of the Chinese, Indian, and Bengalis, each minority group occupies a relatively distinct area. Asian Trails has a number of fascinating tours that take people to hill tribe villages to interact with these people.

PUBLIC HOLIDAYS

Closure of tourist sites can occur at short notice on public holidays and our Asian Trails guides will give guests advice about this situation. The dates of national holidays change every year.

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

The most obvious choices are air, bus and car hire but for a more romantic and scenic way to travel in Myanmar, look no further than trains and boats. Invariably, if you take public transport services – as opposed to luxury boat cruises – these are both slow and unreliable, but they give a leisurely and fascinating view of the country and allow visitors to interact with the locals. Taxis are inexpensive and plentiful in most towns and cities. Cycling and walking are popular activities in some rural locations and the scarcity of traffic makes this option even more attractive. Asian Trails can help with all travel arrangements, be it airport transfers, car hire, or river cruises.

RELIGION

Buddhism is the dominant religion in Myanmar with nearly 85 per cent of the population followers of this faith. An appreciation of Buddhism and its history in Myanmar is advantageous for visitors wishing to better understand the mind of the majority of the population. The monastery is the traditional focal point of village life in Myanmar and every Buddhist boy in Myanmar is expected to spend time as a monk. Major cities, such as Yangon, have some of the most ornate and important Buddhist temples on the planet. Other religious faiths include Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and followers of animist faiths.

SAFETY

Myanmar is a safe country to visit. However, never leave bags unattended and always maintain a firm grip on cameras and shoulder bags. Leave expensive jewelry at home and always use hotel safety deposits boxes or in-room safes for valuables.

SHOPPING

The historic Bogoye Aung San Market, a major tourist attraction in the former capital, is the best place to visit for authentic souvenirs. The indoor trading complex is a diverse space that offers the best opportunity to buy a wide variety of goods with 1,641 shops selling antiques, handicrafts, clothes, jade jewelry, paintings, lacquer ware, wood carvings, tapestries, silverware, brassware and silk and cotton fabrics. Set in a large colonial building built in 1926, the facility was previously known as Scott's Market after James George Scott, the British civil servant who was notable for introducing football to Myanmar. The name was later changed to Bogyoke Aung San Market in honor of national hero General Aung San.

Be sure to use your utmost bargaining ability as the traders start their prices high when selling to tourists. After browsing the abundance of stalls, a food court in the center of the market offers delicious local cuisine. The market is situated in the center of the city on Bogyoke Aung San Road, just a short walking distance from the Sule Pagoda and the Sule Shangri-La Hotel. It is closed on Mondays and public holidays. Glitzy shopping malls like those in Bangkok and Singapore do not exist, however, this is a bonus as shoppers can browse for unique goods not available elsewhere in the region.

STREET STALLS

The country has an abundance of markets in both the major tourism destinations as well as smaller towns that offer fantastic handmade local products and excellent souvenirs. Prominent among these are traditional crafts such as lacquer ware which is of a very high standard in Bagan. Other recommended buys are wood and stone carvings, bronze pieces, rattan, silver items, traditional silk *longyis* and hand-woven textiles.

TELEPHONE

Please double check with your mobile provider for any roaming agreement with Myanmar. Hotels provide international calls.

TIME ZONE

Myanmar is GMT + 6.30 in winter and + 5.30 in summer and does not operate a daylight-saving system.

TIPPING

Tipping for good service is not expected but is always appreciated in a country where average annual incomes are a fraction of the majority of countries. It is customary, though not compulsory, to tip tour guides and drivers at the end of a tour. Always tip hotel and station porters who assist with bags.

WATER

It is not safe to drink tap water but purified bottled mineral water is available everywhere. All hotels provide a complimentary bottle of local mineral water per person in the room. Ice cubes in drinks are generally okay in good standard hotels and restaurants but it is best to avoid them on street stalls or in rural areas. Some minor stomach problems are always possible when travelling in exotic countries so it is advisable to bring a supply of anti-diarrhea medicine.

WEATHER

The country has a tropical climate with three distinct seasons. The cool season runs from November to February when it is dry; the hot season from March to May with average temperatures in the 30s (86F); and the rainy season from May to the beginning of October, when frequent short rainstorms are prevalent. For those heading to Myanmar's expansive 2,000-km long coastline, the coast has two distinctive seasons. During the rainy season (April-September) many resorts and restaurants scale back operations and some close down entirely. In contrast, the dry season offers sunny skies and average daytime temperatures of between 30 (86F)-to-34 Celsius (93F).

EMERGENCY CONTACT NUMBERS

For the emergency services – police, fire and ambulance – dial 199.

DISCLAIMER

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