How to Visit Burma

WHY TRAVELING TO THE COUNTRY MAY BE IN THE PEOPLE'S BEST INTEREST

article & photos by Shaughn McArthur

It is a hot day in a small market town nestled in the Shan hills of Northeastern Burma. Morning bustle has given way to midday heat, and I am drinking tea and chatting with a vendor outside his stall.

"Quiet," he interjects suddenly, cutting my sentence in half, "the walls have ears." Over my shoulder he has spotted a military intelligence officer working his way toward us. "They have been watching me all week." he says, "They think I talk too much…."

Public life in this Southeast Asian country is governed by an atmosphere of intimidation. Strictly speaking, it is not safe to discuss politics in Burma, and interaction with foreigners can attract special attention.

In the words of former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, "the Burmese people smile all the time to cover up their fear."

A ministry of information strictly controls the ebb and flow of information within its dominion, from the centrally served Myanma-net, to the government-owned daily newspaper, *The New Light of Myanmar.* It also does its best to limit what gets out.

Some of us remember hearing about Burma in the early 1990s, when Democratic Party leader Aung San Suu Kyi had to accept her Nobel Peace Prize in absentia. She had been placed under house arrest following a massive democratic uprising in August of 1988 in which the military government killed an estimated 10,000 unarmed protestors in the streets of the country's capital, Rangoon.

In 1990 Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy, won Burma's first free election in 30 years, yet the ruling junta still refused to set her free. The Burmese people were denied their chosen leader and the democracy she espoused.

Her message to the world at that time was: "Please use your freedom to help promote ours."

Burma has since been renamed Myanmar, Rangoon is now Yangon, and the ruling junta now calls itself the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). However, such ostensible renaming of institutions has not so far been met by any apparent change in policy. The United Nations and Amnesty International continue to report pervasive human rights abuses by the Myanmar government.

Suu Kyi has asked tourists to boycott visiting Burma as a means of undermining SPDC revenues, but many of her own supporters have argued that this only applies to package tourists, who dump significantly more into state coffers than budget-crunching backpackers do.

In two trips to Burma I have come to view the potential good of tourism in that country outweighing the bad. Many information-starved Burmese consider tourists a vital last link to the world outside. Author Rory MacLean quotes one Burmese: "To us you tourists are like stars in the night sky, we hope a little bit of that light will shine on us."

The vendor excuses himself to go catch the Radio Asia broadcast. In the cool of the evening he visits me at my guesthouse. He has brought me the information I had requested. "Please, write about Burma from your country," he says.

IF YOU DECIDE TO GO

While many Burma advocacy organizations base their platforms on the advice of Aung San Suu Kyi, who continues to support the tourism boycott in Burma, others, such as the Free Burma Coalition, have reversed their pro-isolationist approach to the military regime. Tourism in Burma could have a normative effect on the abusive military regime—certainly, international pressure is one of the regime's greatest fears—and the presence of tourists keeps the agents of oppression on their best behavior. Still, tourism puts some $100 million in state coffers annually. As the Lonely Planet guidebook says, "The decision to travel to Myanmar should not be taken lightly."

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MAXIMIZING THE EFFECTS OF YOUR STAY

Here are some tips to help you maximize your positive effect and engagement with locals as a tourist in Southeast Asia's xenophobic military dictatorship, while minimizing your potential benefit to the illegitimate regime.

1. Avoid government-operated tourist attractions. Unfortunately, these include many of Burma's most spectacular temples and palaces. The fees levied on tourists who visit such sights go directly to government coffers. The ancient city of Bagan, comparable in scope and size to Cambodia's Ankor Wat, was the sight of a forcible relocation of over 5,000 locals. Villagers in the area were uprooted from their homes and moved to underdeveloped areas on as little as 10 hours' notice, and received little compensation for the livelihoods they had to leave behind. Nowadays, tourists visiting Bagan and other tourist attractions must pay anywhere up to a $10 entry fee to men in army fatigues. There is no way to avoid the fees they demand, but—hard as it may be to pass up such historical and cultural splendor—the responsible tourist should avoid such sights altogether. A bustling morning market is more intriguing, and anything you spend there will go to real, deserving people.

2. At all costs, avoid package tours in Myanmar, especially those hosted by the government operated Myanmar Travel and Tours. You will see only what the government wants you to see and meet the families it patronizes, but you will learn little of the reality faced by most people living in Burma. Furthermore, your money will go directly to the regime rather than to the locals suffering under its iron fist.

3. Foreigners are not allowed to enter Burma by land. You will have to fly into either Yangon or Mandalay (Biman Bangladesh airline's weekly flight from Bangkok or Calcutta has the cheapest fare), having obtained your visa beforehand. Visas for Burma are valid for 28 days, and can be obtained in your home country or within a few days at the Myanmar embassy in Bangkok.

4. Arriving at the airport, you may be herded in line to buy Foreign Exchange Certificates (FECs). These you will supposedly need at various tourist destinations. Don't be fooled. FECs are completely useless pieces of Monopoly money designed to channel your cash directly to the regime. Stick $3 inside the cover of your passport, sticking out one side, and give that to the lady at the counter. It will go into her pocket, and you will not have to pay (the price of corruption might have risen by the time of publication).

5. There are no such things as ATMs in Burma, so bring lots of U.S. cash. After bribing the airport personnel, you will need another $3-$4 in small bills for a taxi into town. Then, you will need money for day-to-day transactions over the next 28 days (or however long you plan to stay). $300 should be enough to get by on for the duration of your 28-day visa. Bring a little more if you want to buy handicrafts or if you like to drink. The government fixes exchange rates at banks, which are absurdly expensive compared with real market prices, obtainable on the black market. When you arrive in Yangon or Mandalay you will be approached by money exchangers offering you the going rate, plus or minus commission of a few kyat. There are many of them, so you can easily shop around for the best deal. Tell the exchanger you choose how much you want to exchange, but don't give them anything until you have carefully counted the pile of bills they return to you with. This transaction will probably take place in a small tea shop somewhere. It is both safe and commonplace and as long as you don't come across as a pushover, you will not be ripped off. Change all that you think you will need then and there, as exchanging money in remoter towns is more difficult and costly, and off the beaten path dollars are not accepted anywhere. With a little common sense, you needn't worry about being robbed in Burma and you will be amazed at how far your money goes.

6. For a good laugh and cultural experience in Mandalay, visit one of the nightly performances of The Moustache Brothers, a traditional dance and comedy troupe. Once imprisoned for telling jokes offensive to the military regime, the Brothers and their wives perform for tourists every evening in the basement of their house in what they refer to as the West End or Broadway of Mandalay.

7. For hill-tribe trekking go with one of Eddy's brother's at the Golden Kalaw Guesthouse, Kalaw, South Shan State. The guesthouse is the best place to stay at in town, and Eddy is a revered elder amongst the tribespeople. A part of every kyat earned is spent on buying medicine, water systems, and other crucial pieces of infrastructure for the villages and their people.

8. Finally, don't overstay your visa. If you do, you will have to pay $3 per day before leaving at the airport. Again, this money goes to the regime. Since much of Burma as yet remains off-limits to foreigners, with a little advanced planning you should be able to manage a complete tour of this spectacular country in the 28 days permitted by your visa. ■

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