

# Burma. The Golden Land.



SAGAING HILLS TO TWIN PAGODAS,  
SHWE KYETKYET PAGODA AND  
SHWE KYETKYA

“It is not power that corrupts but fear. Fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it and fear of the scourge of power corrupts those who are subject to it.”  
Aung San Suu Kyi



INLE LAKE FISHERMAN

## By Dean Harden

Burma at independence in 1948 was, despite the ravages of WWII, amongst SE Asia's richest countries. The isolationist and nationalisation policies pursued by the military government since a coup in 1962 have transformed Burma into one of the world's poorest countries.

I decided to visit Burma to see for myself how things were, and ended spending 6 weeks in and around Rangoon, staying with friends, then a two-week tour of Central Burma.

Physically, Burma is an enormous fertile plain flanked by steep mountain ranges running north and south from the Himalayas. The population of over 50 million, while dominated by the Bamar at about 68% of the total, comprises a further 100-plus ethnolinguistic groups. Burmese, whatever their ethnolinguistic make-up are overwhelmingly Theravada Buddhist.

Parts of Rangoon look as if urban England had been transplanted and left to moulder for a century or so. The colonial blueprint on hospitals, Customs House and government offices is unmistakable. There are a surprising number of churches, most still in use, and the wide, garden-lined streets are reminiscent of those one can find in other countries once occupied by the British Empire.

New condominiums and retail plazas have been built since the late 1980s, and many of Rangoon's older buildings have been swept away. Despite this, and the damage caused by WWII, several examples of a more ancient culture exist: the Sule Pagoda, perhaps over 2000 years old; Shwedagon Pagoda, one of the most spectacular Buddhist shrines anywhere, rebuilt in 1769, dates back over 2,500 years.

Shwedagon, known to locals as the Golden Dragon, is 98 m high, and its exotic beauty takes one's breath away. The huge central stupa is surrounded by many minor stupas and temples, and most of these are crowned with gold, but none compare to that of the main Shwedagon stupa. The base of this Pagoda is painted in gold, and halfway up the paint is replaced with pure, wafer-thin gold leaf which, untarnishable, gleams in the sun to make the structure a beacon. Above the gold-leaf covering, the gold becomes more solid, changing to 13,153 plates of solid gold measuring 30 square centimeters each.

Modern Rangoon with its many diverse temples, markets and impressive colonial-era buildings is green with lush tropical trees, shady parks and beautiful lakes. Ancient buses still pack in the commuters and rumble up and down the colonial British grid-like streets.

Burma's attraction is its history and artistic culture. Burma lies at the meeting point of the world's two oldest surviving great civilisations: India and China, and blends both of these influences with its very own special local characteristics. The people have preserved traditional values, and are deeply devout in their religion, with a close-knit family system and respect for elders still powerfully observed.

Mandalay, the centre of my exploration of Central Burma, was scorching in the sun of a delayed monsoon. The strikingly modern airport, opened in '98, is connected to the city by a road as yet unfinished. Little remains of the old Mandalay as described by Maugham, Orwell and Kipling, but its strategic position on the eastern bank of the Irrawaddy makes it a key trading centre for commerce with China, and the language in the streets and shops is Mandarin. This strategic position unfortunately made it a bitterly-contested place in WWII, and much of the city and its monuments were destroyed.

It was in Mandalay that I decided to start my day with Burma's National Dish, Mohinga, a breakfast consisting of catfish stew, noodles and assorted condiments including boiled egg, fried garlic, sautéed onions, scallions, coriander, bean fritters. 38 cents for two, including tea, and I was energised for the day.

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Amarapura, 11 km south, is a former capital, and was originally founded to replace a former royal enclave forever polluted by the power struggle, massacre and destruction of a royal succession. Later the site of the first British embassy to Burma in 1795, it is now a centre for cotton and silk weaving. Here also is the Mahagandhayon, one of the country's most famous monasteries. 2/3rds of the country's monastic inhabitants live around Mandalay.

Maymyo, a hill-town built near Mandalay as a colonial summer retreat, still has many surviving relics of the colonial era in good condition: a former chummery – or bachelor's mess-cum-residence; a botanical gardens, a copy of London's Kew Gardens, 432 acres of trees; a Watchtower in the centre of town.

Nearby Bagan, another former capital of central Burma, once held 13,000 pagodas. A third have been lost to the Irrawaddy, another 7,000+ lost to destruction and soil erosion over the years, but more than 2,000 still remain.

A panorama of the surrounding locale puts into perspective the sight of the many thousands of scattered edifices, a large number already repaired to some degree by people working tirelessly to promote tourism of this amazing archaeological legacy of the Burmese empire that had flourished for 300 or so years prior to being sacked by Kublai Khan in 1287.

Onwards by air to Heho, via Mandalay, and an elevation of 1000m, I moved on to Lake Inle. 61 sq miles, Lake Inle is surrounded by 200 stilted settlements. The 22 km by 10 km lake is shallow, and the perimeter is studded with floating islands formed from the growth and decay of vegetation. Many of the Lake's inhabitants work on the floating island gardens.

I visited silver & blacksmiths; Shan paper & cheroot makers; boat builders and silk weavers, all family or community enterprises built on stilts, accessible by canal and located on either fixed or floating neighborhoods.

Inle lake is perhaps most renowned for its local fishermen who propel their flat bottomed boats with a combined arm/foot paddling maneuver. These fishermen get way out onto this relatively shallow lake (3 meters at its deepest) several miles across. They watch for revealing underwater motion and then drop their conical framed nets to entrap the fish, which attract premium prices.

Some of the people of Burma have asked that tourists not support the military regime that oppresses its people, by not even travelling there. Others, with perhaps more of an open eye to the future, ask only that tourists avoid the regime-run businesses and patronise private enterprise where possible. Given the political and economic situation, this is a matter for each traveller's conscience. I chose the latter course: the Burmese are an especially friendly people, and I was made welcome wherever I went, and on a return journey (I want to explore the coastal strip south from Rangoon), I will do the same.



SHWEZIGONE PAGODA IN BAGAN