



PAST

PRESENT

MYANMAR OPENS THE DOOR TO OLD

ASIA. BY AARON GULLEY

Big in Bagan: Twelfth-century
Sulamani Temple (right) at dawn.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEN JUDGE



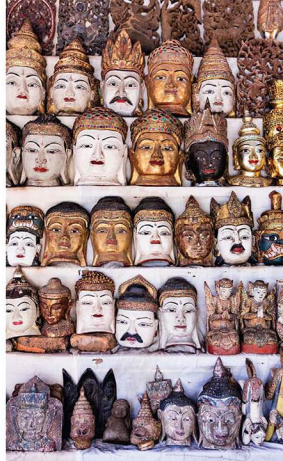
N A DRIZZLY DAY

in a Yangon market, in a gallery so cramped with bright canvases that they tumble off the walls into cheerful stacks, 25-year-old art dealer Taw Win is struggling – again – to sell a painting. I’ve chosen a pair of six-foot-tall impressionistic street scenes, and we’ve settled on a price of around \$1,000. The problem is that, like most travelers, I carry limited cash, and because of the decades-old economic sanctions on Myanmar, Taw Win can’t accept credit.

Scenes like this play out daily across the Republic of the Union of Myanmar – Southeast Asia’s second-largest country after Indonesia – which many still know as Burma. Though the British called it the latter and the current government favors Myanmar, both names are ethnically and historically correct (locals are commonly referred to as Burmese). No matter what you call it, the country, which is sandwiched on the Andaman Sea between India, China, and Thailand, has languished behind its neighbors thanks to two decades of international embargoes aimed at crippling the ruling military junta. “We lose sales – everyone does,” Taw Win explains. “Many tourists don’t even come to Myanmar. And when they come, how can they carry so much money?”

Such struggles, however, are easing as dramatic change sweeps Myanmar. After almost half a century of ruthless military rule and international isolation, the government, led by a former army general named Thein Sein, has backed off press censorship, freed political prisoners, eased travel restrictions for foreigners, and invited opposition head and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi to participate in parliamentary elections. “The Lady,” as Suu Kyi is known, joined the process and reversed her earlier appeal that foreign tourists boycott her country. As a result, Myanmar has leapt up many travelers’ must-see lists, including Virtuoso travel advisors’ recommendations for top places to visit in 2013 (see page 84 for the full list). Even President Obama

Myanmar’s most sacred pagoda, Shwedagon, is topped with 4,521 diamonds (including one that’s 73 carats). Opposite: Hsinbyume Pagoda near Mandalay, and Buddha masks for sale.



acknowledged the progress with a diplomatic stopover last November, the first time a U.S. president has set foot on Burmese soil.

The country’s travel buzz builds upon the promise of beaches as pristine as Thailand’s, temples as moving as Cambodia’s, and locals as friendly as Lao. It’s reputedly Asia before

package tourism and KFC. I’ve spent a decade traipsing all over the region, but I’ve always passed on Myanmar due to the politics. Now that its government has cut the hard-line routine, I’ve come to see if the hype is true on Absolute Travel’s private ten-day trip to some of Myanmar’s most iconic places.

“For better or worse, Myanmar has just begun a stage of dramatic and rapid transformation,” says Absolute Travel president Ken Fish. “The elements that make the country so unique, pristine, and even quirky now may not survive the changes.” This is the year to poke into back alleys in Yangon, the country’s biggest city, to clamber through Bagan’s musty thousand-year-old temples, and to slip a sinewy canoe through still waters on Lake Inle. In short, it’s time to see if Old Asia still exists.

Judging by my art deal at Bogyoke Aung San market, Myanmar’s infrastructure, at least, lags behind most of the continent. Sure, there are places in other countries where you can’t pay with a credit card, but in the entire country of Myanmar,

SHE TAKES THE MONEY,
THEN GENTLY REMOVES
A DOVE FROM THE CAGE,
SMILES AT ME, AND
THRUSTS THE BIRD IN THE
AIR LIKE A MAGICIAN.



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3



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there are just a handful of places where you can. Taw Win's been told he can likely accept credit again soon, but for now he knows of a spot across town that will run my transaction for a fee, and we set off on a last-ditch effort to close the sale.

Outside, the rain picks up, turning the cobbled market lanes silvery-slick and knotting traffic. We hop in a taxi and pick our way through the neat urban grid, a holdover from the British. Many people still call Yangon by its colonial name, Rangoon, and whitewashed neoclassical buildings with broad columns and cornices still persist, though palm seedlings and ferns poke through broken windows and cracked plaster on most of them. Hawkers and street-food vendors and crowds fill the sidewalks and shops below. It's impossible to escape the sense of watching the new Myanmar take root from the ruins of the past. As if on cue, we drive past a Ministry of Hotels and Tourism billboard announcing, "Warmly welcome and take care of tourists."

FROM COLONIAL YANGON, I FLY ABOUT 400 miles north to sleepy Bagan on the banks of the Irrawaddy River. Like Egypt's pyramids, Bagan's temples are the country's best-known tourist draw and its most enduring image. Brick stupas and spires stipple the flat emerald plains like a vast colony of anthills, stretching impossibly in every direction to the horizon. Politics has kept Bagan off the World Heritage site list, though UNESCO recently signaled its interest in reconsidering the town for inclusion. Some 2,200 Buddhist temples spread across 16 square miles – a sight that's every bit as perplexing as it sounds and more temples than you could see in a lifetime, so my guide, Rosie, and I set out straight from the airport to explore.

First up is Shwezigon Paya, a monstrous, upside-down bell-shaped temple enshrining sacred Buddhist relics, where shadowy corridors provide refuge from the heat. Each of Bagan's temples tells a chapter of Burmese history, and Shwezigon's is especially poignant. King Anawrahta constructed it in the 11th century after he unified the Burmese kingdom for the first time and converted the land to Theravada Buddhism, the less ritual-oriented strain of the religion. Today, 89 percent of the population is Buddhist.

"The bigger the pagoda or the more

temples you built, the better off you'd be in the eyes of the Buddha."

Rosie explains of the devotion behind Bagan. She takes me to site after site, where Burmese pilgrims and monks light-joss sticks and kneeling before three-story Buddhas far outnumber tourists. Even at the famous temples with crowds, seclusion isn't far away. We arrive at Shwesandaw Pagoda to find the place overrun by tour groups, so Rosie leads me 100 or so feet down a dusty track before we find a completely deserted temple beneath a nest of thorny acacias.

We have to wake the caretaker to unlock the door, and after showing us in, the stooped old man gestures with a dim flashlight at pristine 11th-century murals depicting great battles and sacred white elephants. Judging by the man's emphatic pride – and his waning flashlight batteries – this temple sees few guests.

Bagan's brickwork and murals don't quite reach the grandeur of Cambodia's monumental stone carvings, but the place feels much like Angkor did two decades ago. Even as the town readies for a building boom to rival the one a millennium ago, you can still wander freely and find solitude. The Burmese are curious but not yet jaded by the tourist surge, and when you ramble off into the landscape on your own, sleepy locals nod and wave but don't heckle you to buy something as they might in other places.

I do, however, make a purchase on one such outing. Strolling through the temple-strewn fields, I meet a thin woman carrying a wicker cage with half a dozen doves inside. Her cheeks are ghostly white with *thanaka*, the sandalwood make-up local women use to trace beautiful shapes on their faces, and like most Burmese she speaks only a little English. She manages to convey that she'd like to sell me a dove. Though I don't wholly understand why, 2,000 kyats – little more than \$2 – seems a small price to satisfy my curiosity. She takes the money, then gently removes a dove from the cage, smiles at me, and thrusts the bird in the air like a magician. (Rosie later tells me the Burmese believe that freeing any life is good luck and a means of accruing merit.)

As it flaps past the filigree of temple spires toward the evening sun, I imagine that the bird is Myanmar itself lifting up

tip

"Book well in advance: Relatively limited tourism infrastructure contributes to Myanmar's authenticity, but it also means fierce competition for hotel rooms and cruise cabins."

— Ken Fish, *Absolute Travel*

LIKE HIGH-WIRE ARTISTS, THEY BALANCE ONE FOOT ON THE STERN AND USE THEIR FREE LEG, WRAPPED TELEPHONE-CORD-STYLE AROUND A LONG OAR, TO PROPEL THEIR DUGOUTS.



from its shuttered past. Merit aside, I can barely resist the urge to buy the rest of the doves' passage.

LEAVING BAGAN, I HEAD THROUGH MAN-dalay (Myanmar's cultural seat of power and last royal capital) to Inle, a 45-square-mile lake in the northeast Shan state. Whole communities live on Inle, with homes, markets, and temples constructed on stilts. We cruise to the Inle Princess Resort through canals tangled with reeds and water hyacinths and floating gardens brimming with tomatoes and cilantro, passing dozens of fishermen along the way paddling in the traditional manner – with their legs.

Like high-wire artists, they balance one foot on the stern and use their free leg, wrapped telephone-cord-style around a

long oar, to propel their dugouts with more force than they could with their arms, all while being able to see over the tall reeds. It's improbable water yoga, especially when the men, still balanced on one leg, trade oars for seven-foot-tall conical bamboo nets that they operate with simian ease using their free limb and toes. Near the Inle Princess, our boatmen kill the engine and take to leg paddling. The flat water mirrors the sharp clear sky and rolling mountains, and the swish of the oars is the only sound. This is how life here has been for centuries.

Before coming to Inle, I'd caught glimpses of timeless Asia in Myanmar, but it was always tempered by the march of progress – Bagan's boomtown enthusiasm and the rat-a-tat of motorcycles in Mandalay and Yangon. Here, though,

A few of Bagan's 2,000-plus temples, and (bottom) a fisherman demonstrating traditional fishing and rowing techniques on Inle Lake.





life feels quaint – preserved. Villagers at Shwe Insein Pagoda, on the western shore, beckon travelers to join them on the floor for lunch. At a tiny hamlet on the lake, women still hand-weave silk on wooden looms. And everywhere, acrobatic fishermen work their canoes and nets. Places like Inle, glimmering little gems that feel lost in time, are Myanmar's true lure. But to uncover them in the country's headlong rush to tourism you'll need to be willing to adventure. That's part of the appeal.

My second evening on Inle, I met Yin Myo Su, the Inle Princess' 40-year-old manager, whose family owns the property. Bursting with enthusiasm for what she sees as Myanmar's renaissance, she explains how the resort is contributing: a reforestation program above the lake, advocacy to curb the flow of toxic pesticides from China, a heritage museum to promote Burmese art and culture, and numerous other

MYANMAR RISING

Four ways to see the country while it's hot.



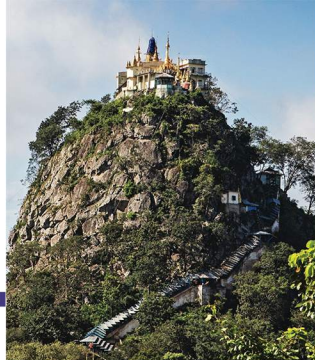
A personal guide accompanies you throughout Myanmar on **Absolute Travel's** custom trips. On a ten-day clockwise loop around the country's biggest sites, your host can arrange permission to enter hard-to-access temples in Bagan, put you in touch with a fifth-generation fortune-teller in Mandalay, and set up a private canoe sundowner at Inle. The trip features top hotels throughout, but the most memorable is Inle Princess Resort, where lakefront rooms let you meld into life on the water. If you can, add a few days to your journey for more time in Bagan, which can feel rushed in two days. *Departures: Any day through 2013; from \$6,800.*

Butterfield & Robinson's nine-day trip takes in the same four destinations that most operators do – Yangon, Bagan, Mandalay, and Inle – but its daily walking itineraries get you up close with locals and in touch with Myanmar's natural appeal. From an afternoon vineyard stroll near Inle Lake to a pilgrimage to the hillside monastery at Kaung Dang to witness monks chanting their morning prayers, this trip is all about immersion. *Departures: January 8 and February 16; from \$6,995.*

Get off the tourist track aboard **Orient-Express'** Orcaella riverboat, which launches this summer. Eleven-day cruises feature sights that few travelers get to see, including a novitiate ceremony at a monastery in Moklaw and a visit to the lively market at Kalay, known as the trade gateway to India. The elegant 50-passenger ship is a perfect platform for taking in village life as scenes of farmers working rice paddies roll past. And because the final port of call is Bagan, you won't miss Myanmar's most iconic destination. *Departures: July 22, August 5 and 19, and September 2; from \$5,610.*

For time-pressed travelers, **Travco's** eight-day spin through Myanmar's big three is the most economical way to see this far-flung land. Temple-hop in Bagan, stop by the glorious monasteries in the seventeenth-century capital of Amarapura, and visit Mandalay's Mahamuni Paya temple to see the venerated Buddha that's coated in six inches of gold leaf, followed by a few days of canoe tours on Inle Lake. *Departures: Any day through 2013; from \$3,145.*

OPPOSITE PAGE: JAMES HAMILTON



projects. Even bucolic Inle is changing fast, it seems, though with the long-view oversight of people such as Yin and her family, perhaps it will maintain its character for years.

Today, Myanmar remains an emerging destination for seasoned travelers. The country faces many challenges: questions over the legitimacy of government reforms, ethnic strife in the provinces, and crushing poverty resulting from years of mismanagement. "Myanmar is a work in progress," Yin says one evening. "Sanctions and the travel boycott didn't hurt the generals – it was the people who suffered. They had nothing. But now, finally, they have hope."


Seventh heaven:
 Climb 777 steps
 to Taung Kalat,
 a Buddhist
 monastery near
 Mandalay.
Opposite:
 Silk shuttles
 ready to weave in
 Amarapura.


Before my return flight to Yangon, I meet a friend of a friend at a café near the airport. She's a guide for tour operator Butterfield & Robinson, and like Yin, she's both bullish about the country's prospects and cautious about the way ahead. "Tell the world to come to Myanmar – just not too many at a time," she says earnestly. "Come. But for now, come slowly." As she speaks, a dual-prop plane carrying more expectant travelers to Inle roars onto the landing strip outside. I barely make out her words over the engine's throaty growl. **VL**