

Country Guide for

MYANMAR



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1 CONTACT ADDRESSES

Location: South-East Asia.

Myanmar Travel and Tours
c/o Ministry of Hotels and Tourism, 77-91 Sule Pagoda Road, Yangon, Myanmar
Tel: (1) 283 997 or 282 013. Fax: (1) 289 588 or 254 417.
E-mail: mtt.mht@mptmail.net.mm
Web site: <http://www.myanmars.net/mtt>

Embassy of the Union of Myanmar
19a Charles Street, London W1J 5DX
Tel: (020) 7499 8841 or (0906) 550 8924 (recorded visa and tourism information; calls cost 60p per minute). Fax: (020) 7629 4169. Opening hours: 1000-1300 and 1400-1600 (visa collections) Monday to Friday.

British Embassy
80 Strand Road, Yangon, Myanmar
Tel: (1) 281 702 or 295 300. Fax: (1) 289 566.

Embassy of the Union of Myanmar
2300 S Street, NW, Washington, DC 20008
Tel: (202) 332 9044/5. Fax: (202) 332 9046.
Web site: <http://www.myanmar.com>

Embassy of the United States of America
Street address: 581 Merchant Street, Yangon, Myanmar
Postal address: PO Box 521, Yangon, Myanmar
Tel: (1) 282 055-6 or 282 181. Fax: (1) 280 409.

Embassy of the Union of Myanmar
85 Range Road, Suite 902, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 8J6
Tel: (613) 232 6434. Fax: (613) 232 6435.
Web site: <http://www.myanmar.com>

Note: The Canadian Embassy in Bangkok deals with enquiries relating to Myanmar (see Thailand section).

Country dialling code: 95.

2 GENERAL

Area: 676,552 sq km (261,218 sq miles).

Population: 46,402,000 (1997).

Population Density: 68.6 per sq km.

Capital: Yangon (Rangoon). Population: 2,513,023 (1983).

Geography: Myanmar is a diamond-shaped country extending 925km (575 miles) from east to west and 2100km (1300 miles) from north to south. It is bounded by China, Laos and Thailand in the east, by Bangladesh and India in the north and by the Indian Ocean in the west and south. The Irrawaddy River runs through the centre of the country and fans out to form a delta on the south coast; Yangon stands beside one of its many mouths. North of the delta lies the Irrawaddy basin and central Myanmar, which is protected by a horseshoe of mountains rising to over 3000m (10,000ft), creating profound climatic effects. To the west are the Arakan, Chin and Naga mountains and the Patkai Hills; the Kachin Hills are to the north; to the east lies the Shan Plateau, which extends to the Tenasserim coastal ranges. Intensive irrigated farming is practised throughout central Myanmar, and fruit, vegetables and citrus crops thrive on the Shan Plateau, but much of the land and mountains are covered by subtropical forest.

Government: Socialist Republic since 1974. Power assumed by the army in 1988. Head of State and Government: General Than Shwe since 1992.

Language: The official language is Myanmar (Burmese). There are over 100 dialects spoken in Myanmar. English is spoken in business circles.

Religion: 87% Theravada Buddhist. The remainder are Hindu, Muslim, Christian and Animist.

Time: GMT + 6.5.

Electricity: 220/230 volts AC, 50Hz.

Communications:

Telephone: IDD is available to the main cities. Country code: 95. Outgoing international code: 00. For emergencies, dial 199 (police), 191 (fire) and 192 (ambulance). There is a limited public internal service. Only larger cities can be dialled direct from within Myanmar; smaller towns still use manual switchboards and callers need to ask the operator to connect them to a specific town operator. The Central Telephone & Telegraph (CTT) office on the corner of Pansodan and Mahabandoola Streets is the only public place in the country where international telephone calls can be conveniently arranged. The office is open 0800-1600 Monday to Friday and 0900-1400 at weekends and on holidays.

Mobile telephone: GSM 900 network is operated by Myanmar Posts and Telecommunications. Fees are high.

Fax: May be sent from the Central Telegraph Office on Mahabandoola Street and there are further facilities at the Post and Telecommunications Corporation in Yangon.

Internet/E-mail: ISPs include the Ministry of Post and Telecommunication (web site: <http://www.mpt.net.mm>). Set-up fees are high.

Post: Service to Europe takes up to a week and letter forms are quicker than ordinary letters. To ensure despatch it is advisable to go to the post office personally to obtain a certificate of posting, for which a small fee is charged.

Press: The only English-language newspaper is The New Light of Myanmar. Myanmar Travel & Tours also publishes a tourist publication, Today, in English. Locally published magazines in English include Golden Myanmar, Myanmar Chronicle and Myanmar Perspective, which are all available from bookshops.

BBC World Service and Voice of America frequencies: From time to time these change.

BBC:

MHz21.6615.369.5806.035

Voice of America:

MHz15.2915.169.7606.160

3 PASSPORT

	<i>Passport Required?</i>	<i>Visa Required?</i>	<i>Return Ticket Required?</i>
British	Yes	Yes	Yes
Australian	Yes	Yes	Yes
Canadian	Yes	Yes	Yes
USA	Yes	Yes	Yes
OtherEU	Yes	Yes	Yes
Japanese	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note: Holders of Taiwanese passports are advised to contact the embassy prior to travelling.

PASSPORTS: Passport valid for at least 6 months beyond date of intended departure required by all.

VISAS: Required by all except:

(a) transit passengers continuing their journey by the same or first connecting aircraft provided holding valid onward or return documentation and not leaving the airport.

Note: A separate visa is required for each child over 7 years of age even if travelling on their parent's passport.

Types of visa and cost: Tourist: £14. Business: £20.

Validity: Tourist visas are valid for 2 months (or 3 months for those on package tours) from the date of issue for stays of 28 days in Myanmar. Business visas (which require the recommendation of the Myanmar government) are valid for 3 months from date of issue for stays of 10 weeks, extendable up to 3-12 months on an individual basis.

Application to: Consulate (or Consular section at Embassy; see address section) or a Myanmar travel organisation.

Application requirements: Tourist visa: (a) 1 application form. (b) 2 passport-size photos. (c) Package tour confirmation from travel agent. (d) Valid passport. (e) Fee (cash accepted if applying in person; cheque or postal order only if applying by post). (f) Return ticket. (g) Self addressed, stamped envelope for postal applications with sufficient postage (registered post is recommended).

Individual tourists: (a)-(g) and, (h) US\$300 (or equivalent in other currency) which must be exchanged into local currency on arrival.

Business visa: (a) 2 application forms (can be photocopied). (b) 2 passport-size photos. (c) Letter from sponsoring body, firm or department stating detailed reasons for the applicant's visit and the name of the Myanmar government department, corporation or agency to be contacted; the letter must state the precise nature of the business to be conducted and indicate the financial status of the applicant. (d) Valid passport. (e) Fee (cash accepted if applying in person; cheque or postal order only if applying by post). (f) Return ticket. (g) Self addressed, stamped envelope for postal applications with sufficient postage (registered post is recommended).

Working days required: 3-4.

Exit permits: A Report of Departure Form D is required by all persons holding Entry or Transit visas for stays exceeding 30 days. The permit must be acquired before booking passage.

4 MONEY

Currency: Kyat (Kt) = 100 pyas. Notes are in denominations of Kt1000, 500, 200, 100, 90, 45, 20, 15, 10, 5 and 1, and 50 pyas. Coins are in denominations of Kt1, and 50, 25, 10, 5 and 1 pyas. Kt100,000 is known as a lakh, and Kt10 million as a crore. Kyat is pronounced like the English word 'chat'. To combat the black market and limit the financial power of dissident groups, currency denominations are occasionally declared invalid without prior notice. Limited refunds are usually allowed for certain sectors of the population.

Currency exchange: Individual tourists are required on arrival at Yangon international airport to exchange a minimum of US\$300 into 300 FECs (Foreign Exchange Certificates). Any unused foreign exchange certificates out of this amount will not be converted (though FECs in excess of US\$300 can be reconverted on departure). Visitors on a package tour are not subject to this requirement, but if they wish to spend extra money in Myanmar, they can also exchange US Dollars or Pound Sterling for FECs. FECs, which are printed in China, are Myanmar's second legal currency and are issued by the Bank of Myanmar specifically for visiting tourists. They come in denominations equivalent to US\$20, 10, 5 and 1. Payment for FECs is only accepted in US Dollars or Pounds Sterling in the form of cash, travellers cheques and credit cards (although credit cards may, at times, not be accepted). One US Dollar equals one FEC (the Pound Sterling equivalent fluctuates according to the Pound-Dollar variance). FECs can be spent anywhere in the country. FECs can be exchanged into kyats at officially authorised banks, bureaux de change, hotels and Myanmar Travel and Tour offices. Cash payments can also be made in US Dollars, but only at establishments (eg, hotels, railway stations, airlines) that have an official licence allowing them to accept dollars. The FEC system (and the possibility to pay in US Dollars at numerous establishments) largely eliminates the necessity to exchange national currencies into kyat. It is advisable to carry small change as large notes may be difficult to change.

Credit cards: Visa, Diners Club, American Express, JCB and MasterCard are accepted by airlines, major hotels and supermarkets. Check with your credit card company for details for merchant acceptability and other services which may be available.

Travellers cheques: Accepted. To avoid additional exchange rate charges, travellers are advised to take travellers cheques in US Dollars or Pounds Sterling.

Currency restrictions: The import and export of local currency is prohibited. There are no import limits on foreign currencies, but any amounts in excess of US\$2000 must be declared on entry and the declaration certificate kept safe - on departure, foreign currencies are checked with the amounts declared on entry. There are regular customs checks at Yangon airport, aimed at

curbing black-market activities; this makes it essential to keep all receipts in order to account for money spent while in the country.

Banking hours: 1000-1400 Monday to Friday.

5 DUTY FREE

The following goods may be taken into Myanmar by persons over 17 years of age without incurring customs duty:

400 cigarettes or 100 cigars or 250g tobacco; 2 litres of alcohol; 0.5 litres of perfume or eau de cologne.

Prohibited and restricted items: Playing cards, gambling equipment, antiques, archaeological items and pornography are prohibited. Jewellery, electrical goods and cameras must be declared; failure to do so may result in visitors being refused permission to export it on departure. Video cameras will be held in safe custody at the airport and will be returned on departure.

Note: All gems, jewellery and silver ware purchased from authorised shops can be taken out of the country.

6 PUBLIC HOLIDAYS

Jan 4 2001 Independence Day. Feb 12 Union Day. Mar 2 Peasants' Day (anniversary of the 1962 coup). Mar 8 Full Moon of Tabaung. Mar 27 Armed Forces Day. Apr 13-16 Maha Thingyan (Water Festival). Apr 17 Myanmar New Year's Day. May 1 May Day. May 6 Full Moon of Kasone. Jul 19 Martyrs' Day. Aug 4 Full Moon of Waso (Beginning of Buddhist Lent). Nov 1 Full Moon of Thadingyut (End of Buddhist Lent). Nov 30 Tazaungmon Full Moon Day. Dec 10 National Day. Dec 25 Christmas Day. Dec or Jan Kayin New Year; Idul Athwaha. Jan 4 2002 Independence Day. Feb 12 Union Day. Mar 2 Peasants' Day (anniversary of the 1962 coup). Mar Full Moon of Tabaung. Mar 27 Armed Forces Day. Apr Maha Thingyan (Water Festival); Myanmar New Year's Day. May Full Moon of Kasone. May 1 May Day. Jul 19 Martyrs' Day. Aug Full Moon of Waso (Beginning of Buddhist Lent). Oct Full Moon of Thadingyut (End of Buddhist Lent). Nov Tazaungmon Full Moon Day. Dec National Day. Dec 25 Christmas Day.

Note: Buddhist holidays are determined according to lunar sightings, and dates given here are approximations only. Other festivals celebrated by minorities include the Hindu Devali festival in November; Islamic observance of Bakri Idd in late November; Christmas and Easter; and the Karen New Year in early January. For further information, contact the Embassy (see address section) or see the World of Buddhism appendix.

7 HEALTH

	<i>Special Precautions</i>	<i>Certificate Required</i>
Yellow Fever	Yes	1
Cholera	Yes	2
Typhoid and Polio	Yes	-

Malaria	3	-
Food and Drink	4	-

1: A yellow fever vaccination certificate is required from all travellers arriving from infected areas. Nationals and residents of Myanmar are required to possess certificates of vaccination on their departure to an infected area.

2: Following WHO guidelines issued in 1973, a cholera vaccination certificate is no longer a condition of entry to Myanmar. However, cholera is a serious risk in this country and precautions are essential. Up-to-date advice should be sought before deciding whether these precautions should include vaccination, as medical opinion is divided over its effectiveness. For more information, see the Health appendix.

3: Malaria risk (predominantly in the malignant falciparum form) exists below 1000m in the following areas: (a) throughout the year in Karen State; (b) from March to December in Chin, Kachin, Kayah, Mon, Rakhine and Shan States, in Pegu Division, and in Hlegu, Hmawbi and Taikkyi townships of Yangon; (c) from April to December in rural areas of Tenasserim Division; (d) from May to December in Irrawaddy Division and rural areas of Mandalay Division; (e) from June to November in rural areas of Magwe Division and in Sagaing Division. The falciparum strain is reported to be highly resistant to chloroquine and resistant to sulfadoxine/pyrimethamine.

4: All water should be regarded as being potentially contaminated. Water used for drinking, brushing teeth or making ice should have first been boiled or otherwise sterilised. Milk is unpasteurised and should be boiled. Powdered or tinned milk is available and is advised, but make sure that it is reconstituted with pure water. Avoid dairy products which are likely to have been made from unboiled milk. Only eat well-cooked meat and fish, preferably served hot. Pork, salad and mayonnaise may carry increased risk. Vegetables should be cooked and fruit peeled. Rabies is present. For those at high risk, vaccination before arrival should be considered. If you are bitten, seek medical advice without delay. For more information, see the Health appendix. Diarrhoea and amoebic and bacillary dysentery may be present. Japanese encephalitis may be caught via mosquito bites, particularly in rural areas between June and October. A vaccine is available, and travellers are advised to consult their doctor prior to departure. Filariasis and dengue fever are also present. Cases of poliomyelitis continue to be reported. Trachoma is present. Hepatitis A, B and E are present. The WHO advises that foci of plague are present in Myanmar. Further information should be sought from the Department of Health or from any of the hospitals specialising in tropical diseases listed in the Health appendix.

Health care: Health insurance is strongly recommended. There are hospitals and clinics in cities and larger towns, and regional health centres in outlying areas. It is advisable to carry a remedy against minor enteric upsets.

Travel - International

AIR: Myanmar's national airline is Myanmar Airways (UB). Yangon has direct air links with Bangkok, Singapore, Jakarta, Bangladesh, Calcutta, Kunming and Moscow. Airlines serving Myanmar include Myanmar Airways, Aeroflot, Air China, Air France, All Nippon Airways, Bangladesh Airlines, Civil Aviation and Administration of China, Druk Air Corp, Eva Airways, Indian Airlines, Lufthansa, Pakistan International Airlines, Silk Air and Thai Airways International.

INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT: Yangon (RGN) is 19km (12 miles) from the city. Airport facilities include restaurant, bar, snack bar, bank, post office, duty-free shop and tourist information. Buses go to the city (journey time - 30 minutes). Taxis are also available (journey time - 45 minutes).

DEPARTURE TAX: US\$10, payable in FECs (Foreign Exchange Certificates; see also Money section for details). Passengers in direct transit are exempt.

SEA: Cruise ships call at Yangon Port

ROAD: Overland entry with a border pass is, in theory, permitted at the following border check points: Kyukoke, Namkhan and Muse on the Myanmar-Yunnan (People's Republic of China) border; and Tachileik, Myawaddy and Kawthaung on the Myanmar-Thailand border. Generally speaking, however, foreigners are only allowed to travel as part of an organised group. Owing to continuing political instability, borders may periodically close. Contact the nearest Embassy for up-to-date details.

NOTE: It is recommended to only use air travel as a means of access into Myanmar.

Travel - Internal

AIR: Air travel is the most efficient way of moving within Myanmar and the only permissible means of transport for independent travellers, but there is a rather limited schedule of flights. Air Mandalay and Air Yangon operate internal flights. Internal security can restrict ease of movement. There are daily flights to most towns; charter flights are also available. There are over 60 airstrips in the country. For tickets and information, contact Myanmar Travel and Tours (see address section).

INTERNAL FLIGHT TIMES: From Yangon to Mandalay is 2 hours 10 minutes; to Pagan is 1 hour 30 minutes; and to Heho is 1 hour 25 minutes.

SEA/RIVER: The best way of seeing Myanmar is by boat, particularly between Bhamo-Mandalay and Mandalay-Pagan. Myanmar has about 8000km (5000 miles) of navigable rivers. Trips can only be arranged as part of an organised tour group. It is generally necessary to provide one's own food.

RAIL: Myanmar Railways provide services on several routes, the principal line being Yangon to Mandalay (travel time - 12-14 hours). Overnight trains have sleeping cars. There is also a good service from Mandalay-Lashio-Myitkyina. The state-run railway has 4300km (2700 miles) of track and serves most of Myanmar. First class is available but, with the exception of the Yangon to Mandalay line, services are regularly afflicted with delays caused by climatic, technical and bureaucratic difficulties. Tickets must be purchased through Myanmar Travel and Tours as part of an organised tour group. There are regular services from Yangon to Mandalay and from Yangon to Thazi.

ROAD: Traffic drives on the right. There has been some modernisation of Myanmar's once antiquated vehicles. Bus: Buses are generally operated by the state-owned Road Transport Enterprise. Public bus services tend to be unreliable and uncomfortable; visitors may pay using the kyat currency on certain lines only. Owing to the ongoing privatisation programme of the transport industry, a fleet of privately operated buses is also available. The main lines are from Yangon to Meiktila, Pyay, Mandalay and Taunggyi. Private buses are air conditioned and accept payment in kyat, US Dollars or FECs. Bicycles are available for hire. Documentation: An

International Driving Permit is required. This must be presented to the police, who will endorse it or issue a visitor's licence.

URBAN: Yangon has a circular rail service. There are also antiquated and overcrowded bus services in all cities. Yangon has blue government taxis with set fares. Unmetered 3- and 4-wheel taxis are available in cities, as are rickshaws; it is wise to pre-arrange fares.

8 ACCOMMODATION

Since the privatisation of the hotel industry in 1993, a large number of new hotels and guesthouses have been completed or are under construction, particularly in Yangon. Advance booking is advisable, particularly from November to March. There are also hotels at the resorts of Sandoway, Taunggyi and Pagan. For further details, contact Myanmar Travel and Tour (see **address section**). **Grading:** An increasing number of hotels are divided into three categories: luxury, first class and lower.

INNS: These are another option for visitors. Although reserved for state officials in many towns, inns will often accommodate travellers who have been granted official permission. Visitors travelling away from the normal tourist routes should carry sleeping bags or blankets, as pagodas, temples and monasteries will usually only accommodate visitors for a night or two.

The South

Tourist numbers are rising steadily. Certain areas in Upper and Lower Myanmar are currently out of bounds owing to the past civil war - check with the embassy or consulate for the latest information. Most coastal resorts have now been opened to tourists and Sunday round-trip flights are arranged by Myanmar Travel and Tour to Napali and Sandoway beaches during the dry **season. For the purposes of this guide, Myanmar has been divided into three sections:** The South (including Yangon); Central Myanmar (including Pagan and Mandalay); The East and The Northwest.

Yangon: Yangon (or Rangoon), the capital, is a city of Buddhist temples, open-air markets, food stalls and ill-repaired colonial architecture. It has a population of over two million. Although most of the city has been built in the last hundred years, and although it suffered considerable damage during the Second World War, there are still several examples of a more ancient culture. These include the golden Shwedagon Pagoda, one of the most spectacular Buddhist shrines in Asia and reputedly 2500 years old (although rebuilt in 1769); the Sule Pagoda, also over 2000 years old; the Botataung Pagoda, hollow inside with a mirrored maze; and the Maha Pasan Guha or 'Great Cave'.

Outside the capital, places worth visiting include the Naga-Yone enclosure near Myinkaba, with a Buddha figure entwined and protected by a huge cobra - a combination of Buddhism and Brahman astrology; Kyaik Tyo and its 'Golden Rock Pagoda', a 5.5m (18ft) shrine built on a gold-plated boulder atop a cliff; and Pegu, founded in 1573, with its golden Shwemawdaw Pagoda and market. Just northeast of Pegu is the Shwethalyaung Buddha, revered as one of the most beautiful and lifelike of reclining Buddhas, which was lost and totally overgrown by jungle after the destruction of Pegu in 1757. It was rediscovered in the British era, during the construction of the railway line.

Central Myanmar

Pagan: Pagan is one of the greatest historical areas in the country. It is best seen at sunrise or sunset. More than 13,000 pagodas were once spread over this dry plain during the golden age of the 11 great kings (roughly 1044-1287); this came to an end with the threat of invasion by Kublai Khan from China, and this extraordinary area was abandoned. Now there are fewer than 3000 pagodas. The actual village of Pagan has a museum, market and places to eat and stay; within walking distance of Pagan, there are lacquerware workshops and an attractive temple. There are dozens of open temples in the Pagan area (about 40 sq km), but places of special interest include the Shwegugyi Temple, built in 1311 and noted for its fine stucco carvings; the Gawdawpalin Temple, badly damaged in the 1975 earthquake, but still one of the most impressive of the Pagan temples; and the Thatbyinnyu Temple, which is the highest in Pagan.

Mandalay: Mandalay, the old royal city, is rich in palaces, stupas, temples and pagodas (although the city has suffered several bad fires which have destroyed some buildings), and is the main centre of Buddhism and Burmese arts. There are some excellent craft markets and there are thriving stone-carving workshops and gold-leaf industries. Taking its name from Mandalay Hill (rising about 240m/787ft to the northeast of the palace), the city was founded by King Mindon in 1857, the old wooden palace buildings at Amarapura being moved and reconstructed. Sights of interest include the huge Shweyattaw Buddha, close to the hill, with its outstretched finger pointing towards the city; the Eindawya Pagoda, built in 1847 and covered in gold leaf; the Shwekyimyint Pagoda containing the original Buddha image consecrated by Prince Minshinzaw during the Pagan period; and the Mahumuni Pagoda or 'Great Pagoda', housing the famous and revered Mahumuni image. Covered in gold leaf over the years by devout Buddhists, this image was brought from Arakan in 1784, although it is thought to be much older. The base, moat and huge walls are virtually all that remain of the once stupendous Mandalay Palace, which was an immense walled city (mostly of timber construction) rather than a palace. It was burnt down in 1942. A large-scale model gives an indication of what it must have been like. The Shwenandaw Kyaung Monastery was at one time part of the palace complex and was used as an apartment by King Mindon and his chief queen. Like the palace, the wooden building was once beautifully gilded. There are some extraordinary carved panels inside and also a photograph of the Atumashi Kyaung Monastery, destroyed by fire in 1890. The ruins can be seen to the south of the Kuthodaw Pagoda, called 'the world's biggest book' because of the 729 marble slabs that surround the central pagoda - they are inscribed with the entire Buddhist canon. The area around Mandalay contains several older, abandoned capital cities. Sagaing is easily accessible to the visitor, and contains interesting pagodas at Tupayon, Aungmyelawka and Kaunghmudaw. Sagaing was for a time the capital of an independent Shan Kingdom. In the 15th century, Ava was chosen as the kingdom's new capital and it remained so until well into the 19th century, when the kingdom vanished; the old city walls can still be traced. Mingun (a pleasant river trip from Mandalay) possesses the famous Mingun Bell, supposedly the largest uncracked, hung bell in the world. It was cast in 1790 by King Bodawpaya to be hung in his giant pagoda, which was never finished, due to the king's death in 1819. The base of the pagoda alone is about 50m (165ft) high. Amarapura, south of Mandalay, was founded by Bodawpaya in 1783 and the city is famous for its cotton and silk weaving.

The East and the Northwest

This region of the country offers the visitor opportunities for walking and rock-climbing, and the various hill stations, such as Kalaw, provide a pine-forested escape from the heat and humidity of Yangon. The caves and lake at Pindaya are famous; the caves contain thousands of Buddha images. Near the village of Yengan are the Padah-Lin Caves, containing prehistoric paintings. Inlay Lake on the Shan Plateau is famous for its floating gardens and leg-rowing fishermen. Maymyo is a charming British hill station further north, with attractive waterfalls and a pleasant climate because of its high altitude.

Difficult communications usually prevent tourists from visiting the largely tribal Northwest. Many of Myanmar's minority peoples live here.

9 SPORT & ACTIVITIES

The national game is Chinglone; its object is to keep a cane ball in the air for as long as possible using only feet and knees with teams of six players. Burmese boxing is another popular sport; it can appear extremely vicious to the uninitiated spectator. Many Western sports are also played. Football can be seen at Aung San Stadium in Yangon and on small fields throughout the country. A large number of Buddhist festivals are held annually in Myanmar and provide an interesting way for visitors to experience local traditions and culture (see also Special Events in the Social Profile section). For serious practitioners, there are several centres for the study and practice of Theravada Buddhism, the most famous of which is the Mahasi Meditation Centre in Yangon. The centre was founded in 1947 by Mahasi Sayadaw, one of Myanmar's greatest meditation teachers. Visitors wishing to participate in Buddhist retreats need to obtain a special, long-stay entry visa (allowing stays of up to 12 weeks). The application procedure takes up to 10 weeks. For further details about the necessary application requirements, contact the Embassy or Consular section at the Embassy (see address section).

Visitors can also attend performances of Myanmar's traditional popular theatre, known as pwe (or show). Performances take place in a variety of contexts, including religious festivals, weddings, sporting events or even funerals, and sometimes last for an entire night. Of further interest are performances of traditional dance forms (nat pwes), which pay homage to the spirit world, or marionette theatre (yok-thei pwe), widely practised during the late 18th century in Mandalay and one of the most characteristic forms of national cultural expression.

Swimming: Swimming and other types of watersports are possible on the following beaches: Kanthaya Beach (located on the Rakhine coast); Maung-ma-gan Beach (located on the Taninthayi coast in the south and reached from Dawei); Ngapali Beach (located on the Rakhine coast); and Chung-tha Beach (located west of Patheingyi).

Ecotourism: Ecotourism is encouraged by Myanmar Travels & Tours and there are a number of national parks and wildlife sanctuaries which also offer trekking and safaris. The best parks are the Alaungdaw Kathapa National Park (located northwest of Monywa); Hlawga National Park (near Yangon, good for birdwatching); Popa Mountain Park (extinct volcano covered in forests in the desert area of central Myanmar); Lampi Island (Myeik Archipelago) (which can be reached by boat trips from Myeik and Kawthaung); and Shweseztaw Wildlife Sanctuary (located in Minbu).

10 SOCIAL PROFILE

Food & Drink: The regional food is hot and spicy. Fish, rice, noodles and vegetables spiced with onions, ginger, garlic and chillies are the common local ingredients. Local dishes include lethok son (a sort of spicy vegetarian rice salad), mohinga (fish soup with noodles) and oh-no khauk swe (rice noodles, chicken and coconut milk). The avocados by Inle Lake are very good. Delicious fruits are available in the markets and food stalls appear on the corners of most large towns. Chinese and Indian cuisine is offered in many hotels and restaurants. Drink: Tea is a popular drink; the spices which are added to it can make the tongue turn bright red. Locally produced soft drinks are generally of poor quality and rather expensive. Coffee is not common. Locally produced beer, rum, whisky and gin are generally available.

Nightlife: Western-style nightlife is almost non-existent, although there are occasional performances in Yangon's three theatres as well as a number of rock and pop groups gaining in popularity. Cinemas are popular and seven of Yangon's 50 cinemas regularly show English-language films.

SHOPPING: Souvenirs include handicrafts and jewellery. In Yangon a good place to shop is Bogyoke Aung San Market which sells luxury items, handicrafts, food stuffs, clothing, jewellery and consumer goods. It is open from 0800-1800 (except Sunday and public holidays) but the best time to visit is around 1000. Mandalay is a good place for traditional handicrafts which can be purchased at Zegyo Market. Phatahe Bazaar sells Buddhist articles of worship. Shopping hours: 0800-2200 Monday-Sunday.

Special Events: The Buddhist calendar is full of festivals, many timed to coincide with the full moon. Any visitor would be unlucky not to be able to enjoy at least one during their stay. The Myanmar New Year, Maha Thingyan, takes place in mid-April and celebrations last for at least three days. Two other major festivals are Thadingyut, at the October full moon, and Tazaungdaing, in early November. The Buddhist Lent (July to October) is marked by three months' fasting and other religious observances. Other events are: the annual Gems Emporium in February; the Cultural Performances Festival in March; the International Machinery Expo in May and the Trade Fair in Sept/Oct.

Social Conventions: Handshaking is the normal form of greeting. Full names are used, preceded by U (pronounced oo) in the case of an older or well-respected man's name, Aung for younger men and Ko for adult males; a woman's name is preceded by Daw. Courtesy and respect for tradition and religion is expected; for instance, shoes and socks must be removed before entering any religious building and it is customary to remove shoes before entering a traditional home (in most modern residences this is no longer observed except in bedrooms). When sitting, avoid displaying the soles of the feet, as this is considered offensive. Small presents are acceptable and appreciated, although never expected. Shorts and mini-skirts should not be worn. Tipping: It is usual to give 5-10% on hotel and restaurant bills. Taxi drivers do not expect a tip.

11 BUSINESS PROFILE

Economy: The largest single sector of Myanmar's economy is agriculture, mainly livestock and fishing, but it continues to rely on traditional non-mechanised methods. Rice, generally the principal export earner, has diminished in importance in line with the continually depressed state of the world market in the commodity. Teak wood is the country's other main export (much of it felled and traded illegally). Other crops include oil seeds, sugar cane, cotton, jute and rubber. Myanmar has significant deposits of tin, copper, zinc, gemstones, silver and coal: commercial exploitation has recently begun. The Government has also invited foreign operators to take up oil exploration licences: although Myanmar's oil production, never substantial, has been falling during the last ten years, there are thought to be large untapped reserves of both oil and gas inland. Domestically produced gas meets about half the country's energy needs; hydro-electric power covers most of the rest. A wide range of manufactured goods are assembled locally but the majority are imported. Otherwise, Myanmar's industrial sector is mostly concerned with processing domestically produced raw materials. Additional significant sources of revenue are opium trafficking and gemstone mining, both of which are largely controlled by the military government. After years of political isolation, Myanmar became a member of ASEAN in July 1997. However, the government's appalling image has deterred many potential investors; those that have moved in have attracted much international opprobrium.

Business: Lightweight suits are recommended during the day; jackets needed for top-level meetings. Most commercial business transactions will be conducted in English. Business cards in Burmese script can be useful. The best time to visit is October to February. Office hours: 0930-1630 Monday to Friday.

Commercial Information: There are over 20 Government Corporations dealing with all aspects of business. The Inspection and Agency Corporation in Yangon promotes business with foreign companies. For further information, contact the commercial section of the Embassy (see address section).

12 CLIMATE

A monsoon climate with three main seasons. The hottest period is between February and May, with little or no rain. Rainy season exists from May to October and dry, cooler weather from October to February.

Required clothing: Lightweight cottons and linens throughout most of the year are required. A light raincoat or umbrella is needed during the rainy season. Warmer clothes are advised for coolest period and some evenings.

13 HISTORY AND GOVERNMENT

History: Burmans first settled in the area during the 9th century and by the 11th century, led by the Buddhist King Anawratha, had established a powerful kingdom. During the Mongol invasions, the country was captured by Kublai Khan (1287) and subsequently Burma was divided. By the mid-18th century, a new dynasty was established under King Alaungpaya with its capital in Yangon. Burma was annexed as part of British India in the 19th century, but in 1937 was granted separate dominion status. The independent Union of Burma came into formal existence in 1948, and in 1974 was named the Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma. In 1988, years of idiosyncratic policies, isolationism and chronic economic mismanagement by the then Burma Socialist Programme Party finally brought on a popular uprising, with students and Buddhist monks to the fore. A military coup in September, followed by the brutal suppression of the demonstrations, brought the political upheaval to a halt. Far from threatening it, the coup strengthened the position of Ne Win; the leader of the coup, General Saw Maung, and his senior staff are all known to be long-standing supporters of the reclusive dictator. Ne Win has recently relinquished his official title as leader of the nation, but he continues to exercise considerable influence over the running of the country. The principal internal opposition is led by ex-army General Tin Oo and the Western-educated liberal Aung Sang Suu Kyi, who is under house arrest. The major armed threat, however, is posed by a variety of border insurgencies. The largest of these groupings is the Karen tribe, whose ranks have been swelled by dissident students fleeing from the capital. In 1989 Burma became officially known as the Union of Myanmar. After the disturbances of 1988 and 1989, which were savagely put down with the loss of thousands of lives, the Government concluded that some political concessions were essential and announced that elections would be held. The main opposition movements campaigned under the banner of the National League for Democracy and its charismatic figurehead, Aung San Suu Kyi (daughter of Aung San, hero of Burma's independence struggle) won the election, which was held in May 1990, with around 80% of the seats in the National Assembly. However, the Ne Win regime used elaborate delaying tactics and harassment of opposition leaders to hold onto power; Suu Kyi herself was put under house arrest and remained there for five years. After 1990, the main

opposition to the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) came from outside the capital. Of several movements, the best organised have been the Karens who have operated from a stronghold on the Thai border. Despite setbacks in the last two years, following a ferocious campaign launched by government forces, the Karens remain an organised fighting force, with their ranks bolstered by a flood of recruits escaping SLORC repression. Less fortunate were the Rohingya, a Muslim minority in the north of the country who were subjected to a systematic campaign of terror from SLORC in 1992: those who survived and avoided forced labour or the army went into exile in Bangladesh. The past 18 months have seen important policy changes on the part of the regime. Self-imposed diplomatic isolation has been replaced by a diplomatic offensive to improve relations with Myanmar's neighbours and with the West (especially Japan and the US). Suu Kyi was released from house arrest in the summer of 1995; despite minimal contact with the outside world, she was an important figurehead for opposition to SLORC. Initial hopes that these moves were part of a more liberal approach by the regime were dashed when military and political measures against the opposition were pursued with renewed vigour. The changes appeared to be associated with the rise of ex-intelligence chief Khin Nyunt as the new SLORC strongman, a more astute figure than the ageing and increasingly demented Ne Win. As a known hardliner, Khin Nyunt's leadership did not augur well for compromise or negotiation on the part of the Yangon regime. Increased revenues from logging, gem deposits and drug trafficking, moreover, allowed SLORC to re-arm and shore up its military position. In July 1997, Myanmar was admitted to full membership of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), thereby gaining an appreciable measure of international legitimacy. (ASEAN policy stresses strict non-interference in the internal affairs of member states.) The task of all the opponents of the regime, both Aung San Suu Kyi and the Karen, has become more difficult during the last three years. SLORC's decision in November 1997 to rename itself as the more media-friendly State Peace and Development Council was, perhaps, an indication of its confidence. Since then the Government has concentrated on dealing with local insurgencies. By 1999, most of these had been quelled - or at least reduced to manageable levels - through a combination of force and negotiation. Public opposition to the regime continues to meet with brutal reprisal but, as the situation stands, the longer the State Peace and Development Council holds power, the more secure it will become.

Government: A constituent assembly was elected in 1990 but is devoid of effective powers, all of which are held by the State Peace and Development Council (formerly the State law and Order restoration Committee, SLORC).