

Burma (Myanmar) – Burma Highlights – Explore.co.uk

Jim McAlpine

Type of tour

This tour included a combination of flights, cruises, horse rides, minibus and train. It was a small group tour.

Brief outline of tour

This tour lasted for 14 days, beginning in Yangon (Rangoon) and ending there. We made our flight arrangements to Myanmar with Qantas, flying in via Bangkok and home via Singapore without stopovers. The tour cost was \$3363. This included all transport within Myanmar, breakfasts every day and three dinners.

After an escorted day tour of Yangon (our guide and a total of five tourists were in our group), we flew north and spent three days at Inle Lake. We had two days in longtail boats on the lake, and we also visited a winery (of all things). Then we took a train (upper class!) to the hill town of Kalaw (where the British used to cool off), then a small bus to Mandalay. We had a couple of days of excursions while there, including boat trips plus a horse and cart, before a full day cruise on the Irrawaddy to Bagan. We explored Bagan in a small bus and another horse and cart. We took our final flight back to Yangon for a final night.



A moderate level of fitness only was needed. We walked every day, no formed footpaths as such, and boarding boats by walking planks required a reasonable balance. An advantage of this tour company was that it did not include 5 star experiences (you might as well stay at home if that is your travel plan), and we bought our lunch and most dinners at local cafes (restaurants weren't needed). This enabled us to have much more of a cultural experience, assisted by our local guide (she was a 28 year old from Shan State and was excellent – she very quickly got to understand us and discussed lots of aspects of their history as well as their current challenges).

The hotel accommodation was more than adequate, and the breakfasts started every day well. The group consisted of two Australians (my wife and I), a retired English engineer, a retired nurse from Dublin, and an IT woman (55 years old) from Portugal. The small group size meant that we got to know each other very well and were able to email each other our best photos after we got home.

Major highlights of the tour

I know it takes up some space but I thought I would insert the full itinerary below. Every day was full of highlights, and far too many to abbreviate. It was a great experience, not a holiday in the traditional sense. I only got a tummy bug for a few hours in Kalaw but our guide had some local medicine that did the trick.

To read Jim's **Burma Highlights** tour itinerary in full please see next page.

To read the current **Burma Highlights** tour itinerary as published on the tour company's website please [click here](#).

Other comments

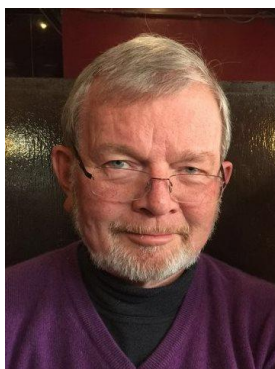
I can highly recommend the company (it was recommended to us by NSWSPC Life Member Terry O'Brien as she had done this tour a couple of years previously). Explore.co.uk now takes payment in Australian dollars whereas previously it was in English pounds, and direct debit saves credit card fees. Their communications with us prior to the tour were excellent. Check them out on <https://www.explore.co.uk/>

Acknowledgements

The Lonely Planet on Myanmar was worth studying before the tour but also made handy reading every evening. Read up on George Orwell before you go as he was an English policeman there when he was young, and his experiences advised his thinking and writing. *Burmese Days* in particular is worth a read, apart from 1984 (it might almost have foretold the years of military dictatorship).

Contributor details

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Jim was Principal of Tumut High (1990-2001) and Moss Vale High (2001-2008). He was also President of the NSWSPC (2006-2010) and Deputy President of ASPA (2006-2009). Jim is a Life Member of the NSWSPC, honoured with the Bill Kennedy Award in 2010 and a recipient of the Meritorious Service Award. He was awarded an AM in 2012.

Burma Highlights Itinerary

Wednesday 23 November 2016 - Own arrangements, transfer to Panda Hotel

Thursday 24 November 2016 - Join tour Rangoon (Yangon)

Arrive in Rangoon and check-in to our hotel. The rest of your day is free to relax after your flight. Alternatively, you may choose to venture out into Burma's largest city. Although replaced by Naypyitaw as the capital in 2006, it remains the industrial and commercial centre of the country.

Overnight Accommodation: Panda Hotel

Meals Provided: None

Friday 25 November 2016 - Discover the sights of Rangoon; fly to Inle Lake

This morning's sightseeing takes us by foot and vehicle to Rangoon's major sights, starting with the



magnificent Shwedagon Pagoda - the most revered temple in the country, which all Burmese Buddhists hope to visit at least once in their lifetime. Containing the relics of the past four Buddhas, its shimmering, 100 metre-high central stupa spire is covered in gold leaf and 4,531 diamonds, well and truly dominating the city skyline.

We continue to the downtown area to walk along Pansodan Street, where we will see some impressive British colonial architecture and pass by street markets. Indeed, years of Burmese isolation have resulted in Rangoon preserving the largest number of colonial buildings in Southeast Asia.



Our next stop is the Chaukhtatgyi Paya. Home to a giant 70 metre-long reclining Buddha, its serene features are topped by a crown encrusted in diamonds and other precious stones. This afternoon, we take a short flight to Heho, from where we drive to the idyllic setting of Inle Lake. Our base is in the nearby town of Nyaung Shwe for the next couple of days.

Overnight Accommodation: Hupin Nyaung Schwe Hotel

Meals Provided: Breakfast

Internal Flight from Rangoon to Heho will take approximately one hour and 10 minutes.

Saturday 26 November 2016 - Full day to explore Inle Lake by longtail boat

Inle Lake enjoys a picturesque, high-altitude setting on the Shan Plateau, surrounded by hills and home to the Intha people, as well as some Shan, Taungyo, Pa-o and Danu ethnicities. Local communities are devout Buddhists that live in simple houses of wood and woven bamboo, raised above the water on stilts. They are mostly fishermen, skilled artisans and self-sufficient farmers, whose vegetables are grown on floating gardens made of grass and seaweed.

The local fishermen are known for practicing a distinctive rowing style which involves standing at the stern of their boat on one leg and wrapping the other leg around the oar. We spend time amongst these village communities and visit their cottage industry workshops, admiring their talents for silk and cotton weaving, as well as paper and silver production. We are also likely to visit a local market over the course of the day.



Overnight Accommodation: Hupin Nyaung Schwe Hotel

Meals Provided: Breakfast

Sunday 27 November 2016 - At Inle Lake; boat to visit Shwe Indein pagoda complex

This morning's boat trip takes us up a small creek in the western part of the lake to Indein village. Here, we visit a complex of about 1,000 stupas of varying sizes built between the 17th and 18th centuries. We can enjoy wandering around these overgrown ruins before returning to the hotel in the afternoon, the rest of the day is free. You may choose an optional excursion to visit one of Burma's first wineries, or you may choose to sample a traditional massage in town.



Overnight Accommodation: Hupin Nyaung Schwe Hotel

Meals Provided: Breakfast

Monday 28 November 2016 - Train and drive to hill station of Kalaw

This morning we will enjoy a colourful train journey sitting among the locals to the town of Aung Ban. Although scheduled to take two hours, a relaxed timetable and frequent delays sometimes result in the journey taking longer, but this is all part of the experience and the stunning scenery that we journey through more than makes up for it.

Next we drive to Kalaw, which sits high on the western edge of the Shan Plateau and became a popular hill station in British colonial times for the escapism it provided from the searing summer heat. Nowadays, having maintained a sense of quaintness reminiscent of the colonial era, it serves as an ideal base for hilltribe treks. The rest of our day is free to explore the town or simply enjoy the peace and tranquillity of the area.



Overnight Accommodation: Dream Villa

Meals Provided: Breakfast

Tuesday 29 November 2016 - Walk in Shan Highlands; free afternoon in Kalaw

Today we can look forward to a gentle four-hour trek through the Kalaw tribal heartlands. Starting in the village of Say Wingabar, we ascend through pine forest to Lu Pyi village. Our trail passes through rural countryside and provides us with views of the valley - a picturesque patchwork of rice and vegetable fields. We might see tribal villagers working on their farms, or en route to the market with their produce. At the end of our walk we make a stop at Myinmathi Cave to see its many Buddha images and small stupas. After a lunch stop, we have a short transfer back to the hotel where we can relax for the rest of the day. For those who would prefer not to take part in the trek, there is the option to relax at the hotel for the day.

Overnight Accommodation: Dream Villa

Meals Provided: Breakfast & Lunch

Wednesday 30 November 2016 - Drive to Mandalay

Leaving the Shan mountain scenery behind us, we embark on an interesting land journey to Mandalay,

making our own version of Kipling's famous journey to the gateway to the north. The condition of the road can be poor in places, so we expect the 160 mile journey to take about 9 hours in total. We will make short stops where we can along the way. Mandalay was the last royal capital of the Burmese kingdom and is considered to be Burma's most historical and culturally-rich region. We spend time discovering its rich and beautiful heritage, much of which is represented in intricate and skilled local arts and crafts.

Overnight Accommodation: Hotel Queen

Meals Provided: Breakfast

Thursday 01 December 2016 - Explore Mandalay; boat trip to Mingun village

We begin day by exploring Mandalay. Today we view the world's largest book at Kuthodaw Pagoda, where the entire Buddhist scripture sits on 729 marble slabs. Our next stop is the magnificent Shwenandaw Monastery, originally a 19th century royal palace and famed for its teak carvings of Buddhist myths which adorn its walls and roofs.



Mahamuni Paya is the city's holiest temple where we can witness the local people paying their respects by applying gold leaf to an ancient Buddha image. We also plan to make stops at craft shops to watch skilled workers making gold leaf, ornate tapestries and intricate wood carvings.

After lunch, we take a short and pleasant boat journey upriver to Mingun - the site of what would have been the world's largest pagoda, had King Bodawpaya not died, thus halting all further work in 1819. What remains is the giant core of a brick pagoda, dramatically split by an earthquake in 1838 and towering 50 metres above the Irrawaddy (Ayeyarwady) River. The original plans would have created a structure three times this height. A nearby shrine houses the 90-tonne bell that was cast to be hung in the finished pagoda, now considered to be the world's largest uncracked bell. As the sun sets over the surrounding hills, we make the seven mile journey back down the river. On our return to Mandalay we have the opportunity to walk through the evening fish market, a lively hub of activity located close to the jetty and a fascinating place to visit.



Overnight Accommodation: Hotel Queen

Meals Provided: Breakfast & Lunch

Friday 02 December 2016 - From Mandalay, visit Inwa and U-Bein Bridge

After a leisurely start this morning we drive four miles southwest of Mandalay, we visit the ancient capital of Inwa (Ava), which had the longest stint of any royal capital between the 15th and 19th centuries. Our visit is conducted by horse-drawn cart along bumpy dirt roads. We plan to stop-off at the yellow stucco monastery of Manu Ok Kaung and Bagaya Kyaung Monastery, famous for its enormous teakwood foundation pillars. The Leaning Tower of Inwa is our final stop. As its name suggests, its precarious angle was the result of a 19th century earthquake.



After lunch in a local restaurant (not included), we head to Amarapura. Just seven miles south of Mandalay, this was Burma's penultimate royal capital from 1783 to 1863. We plan to walk through the serene confines of the expansive Mahagandayon Monastery complex, perhaps catching a glimpse of monks going about their evening rituals. We end the day at the 1.3 km-long teakwood footbridge of U Bein. Here we join the locals on their evening promenade across the lake as the sun begins to sink in the sky.

Overnight Accommodation: Hotel Queen

Meals Provided: Breakfast

Saturday 03 December 2016 - By boat along the Irrawaddy River to ancient Bagan

Tours taking place from October to April plan to take the express boat service from Mandalay Port to Bagan. Although requiring an early start, we can look forward to a relaxed, full day's cruise down the fabled and mighty Irrawaddy River, observing the sights and sounds of river life. From May to September, and sometimes during April, water levels are too low for this boat trip, requiring us to fly to Bagan.



If travelling by boat we arrive in Bagan in the early evening, we can look forward to a couple of days exploring this awe-inspiring site. As the stand-out highlight of the tour for a lot of our customers, many report that their photos do not do justice to Bagan's magnificence and scale. Without doubt one of the world's premier archaeological wonders, its vast plain is studded with literally thousands of 1,000 year-old temples and stupas. From the 9th to 13th centuries, Bagan was the capital of the Kingdom of Pagan - a precursor of modern Burma. During its height of success between the 11th and 13th centuries, over 10,000 buildings were constructed here, of which over 2,200 still remain. Its sheer magnitude can be realised when you

consider that there are more temples, stupas and pagodas on this Manhattan Island-sized plain than there are medieval cathedrals in Europe.

Overnight Accommodation: Arthawka Hotel

Meals Provided: Breakfast & Lunch Internal

Sunday 04 December 2016 - Explore the 1000 year old temples of Bagan

Before visiting the temples today, we stop in Phya Saw village to gain an insight into the traditional ways of life that have changed little over the centuries. We are likely to engage with the local people as they go about their daily business - cotton weaving by hand, grinding peanut oil with oxen and caring for various village animals.



Moving on to the temples of Bagan, with so many to choose from, we plan to visit some of the most iconic and distinctive. These include Shwezigon - a prototype of later Burmese stupas; Wetkyi-in-Gubyaukgyi - a 13th century cave temple with some interesting frescoes and Ananda Pagoda - one of the finest, largest and best preserved in Old Bagan. We are also likely to visit Ananda ok Kyaung - a former monastery with spectacular 18th century wall paintings.

In the late afternoon, a horse drawn carriage will take us through the temple complex to help us to gain a greater appreciation of the scale of the site. As we travel on and on, amongst a seemingly infinite number of temples and stupas, it is easy to understand why Bagan is known as 'The City of Four Million Pagodas.' We hope to finish our day with a memorable sunset view from an upper terrace of one of the temples.

Overnight Accommodation: Arthawka Hotel

Meals Provided: Breakfast & Lunch

Monday 05 December 2016 - In Bagan; optional visit to Mount Popa

A tremendous panoramic view of the temple-studded plain provides a great photo opportunity to kick-start our day before we continue with our visits to the most interesting sites. This will include Manuha Temple - built by King Manuha to represent his displeasure of captivity; Nanpaya - Bagan's first cave-style shrine and Gubaukgyi Temple - an early period temple with well-preserved paintings.

We took an optional trip to Mount Popa, about 30 miles from Bagan. At a height of 1,518 metres, Mt Popa juts impressively out of the tropical landscape. It is the famous home of the Nats (Spirit Gods) and, as such, Burmese superstition recommends that you don't wear red, black or green on your visit, for fear of offending the Nats. If you choose to climb the 777 steps to the stunning gold-tipped monastery perched on top of the mount, you will be rewarded with panoramic views. This trip also includes a visit to one of many toddy farmers to witness how toddy palm juice and sugar is produced.

Overnight Accommodation: Arthawka Hotel

Meals Provided: Breakfast

Tuesday 06 December 2016 - Fly to Rangoon; free afternoon

Leaving the temples and pagodas of Bagan behind us, this morning we make our way back to Rangoon by plane. The rest of the day is left free for us to explore more of this sprawling city. You may like to visit the immense Bogyoke Market, formerly known as Scott's Market, for souvenir or gift hunting, although please note that it is closed on Mondays, full moons and public holidays. You may also wish to experience the serene surroundings of Shwedagon Pagoda one last time.

Overnight Accommodation: Panda Hotel

Meals Provided: Breakfast

Internal Flight from Bagan to Rangoon will take approximately one hour and 20 minutes.

Wednesday 07 December 2016 - Tour ends Rangoon

Our tour ends after breakfast.