

Myanmar in 2017: Tourism Benefits People, So Go GoNomad



Planting rice in Myanmar. Mike Smith, Asia Photostock photos.

The Road Less Travelled – Yangon and Beyond, Myanmar

By Mike Smith

When I mentioned to friends that I was going to Myanmar I got at least one of these three reactions.

- 1) "Wow, amazing!"
- 2) "Is it safe?"
- 3) "What about the humanitarian issues?"

Having returned I can confirm that Myanmar is an amazing place for tourism and that safety is rarely affected as the problems are in a remote area near the Bangladesh border that is off limits for tourists.

The displaced people in North Rakhine State need safe conditions to live in but tourism usually benefits people from all backgrounds so I made the decision to go.

At Yangon airport clearing immigration and exchanging money at a competitive rate was a breeze. My guide, Mr. John from Myanmar Shalom Travel, was waiting with car and driver.

Workers unload cargo at Yangon Station.

Monks collecting alms along the road.

Yangon Roads

It was soon apparent that traffic in Yangon is a nightmare. Imported second-hand cars are right-hand drive despite driving on the right side of the road; motorcycles and bicycles are banned in the city on safety grounds.

City Highlights

The city tour started at Strand Road a street full of classic colonial buildings from the British era. Well preserved architecture includes Yangon Post Office, The Strand Hotel and the British and Australian Embassies. Mahabandula Park, a short walk away, is a refuge of peace and quiet with the lovely white City Hall dominating one side.

You can buy almost any souvenir at the 2,000 stalls in Bogyoke Aung San Market. It specializes in Burmese handicrafts, jade, rubies, gold, art and clothes but is also great for people watching.

I stepped back in time at Yangon Railway Station and watched strong coolies loading and unloading heavy sacks as trains waited at the platform.





Shwedagon Pagoda.

No trip to Yangon is complete without a visit to **Shwedagon Pagoda** where for the first, but certainly not the last, time I took off my shoes and socks, as is customary at all temples and pagodas in Myanmar, before entering. The glittering stupa, rumoured to be covered with 50 tons of gold and thousands of diamonds is the most sacred Buddhist pagoda in Myanmar. It is undergoing a facelift but still looks stunning. I was tempted to stay longer but was getting tired so checked into Inya Lake Hotel for the evening.

On The Road



Leaving Yangon for Bago next morning we were soon clear of traffic and into the countryside. Monks were collecting alms and roadside stalls sold fruit and ceramics. Women and girls covered their faces in thanaka, a natural, environmentally friendly cosmetic made from roots or branches of the thanaka tree, to protect the skin from sunlight



At a water melon stall, a local girl covered her face with thanaka.

We made several photo stops including one at the 4 sided, **Kyaik Pun Pagoda**, where a young couple and a 45-day old baby happily passed time.

Rubber plantations dotted the landscape, road works were a constant irritant and fishing villages a welcome distraction alongside the canal.

"It's a Question of Balance"

We finally reached **Golden Rock base camp** and transferred to a truck where we were crammed in like cattle for an hour long, uncomfortable ride to the peak and Kyaiktiyo Pagoda. Famous for its precarious position and religious importance, the huge boulder is covered by gold leaf and delicately balanced on the edge of a cliff, as are many of the tourists who pose with it.

Walking barefoot as the sun sets it started to get cool but the crowds, hawkers and food sellers keep spirits high. Many devotees rent bamboo mats and woolen blankets and sleep overnight to absorb the good karma but I stayed at **Mountain Top Hotel**, perfectly situated a short walk from the pagoda.

At 7 am we descended, crushed together in another truck stopping at strategic passing points, where stallholders sold food and bamboo items. We met our driver and headed for Mawlamyine.

Reclining Buddha and Hell



Reclining Buddha - Win Sein Taw Ya.

En route I saw more evidence that Religion can make one do crazy stuff! The approach to Win Sein Taw Ya is truly fascinating with hundreds of monk statues lining the road. The shadows are surreal, as is the uncompleted world's largest reclining Buddha despite ongoing construction over 17 years.

The inside of the Buddha is full of half complete dioramas of Chinese traditions, folklore and the gruesome depictions of Hell. An absolute must visit!



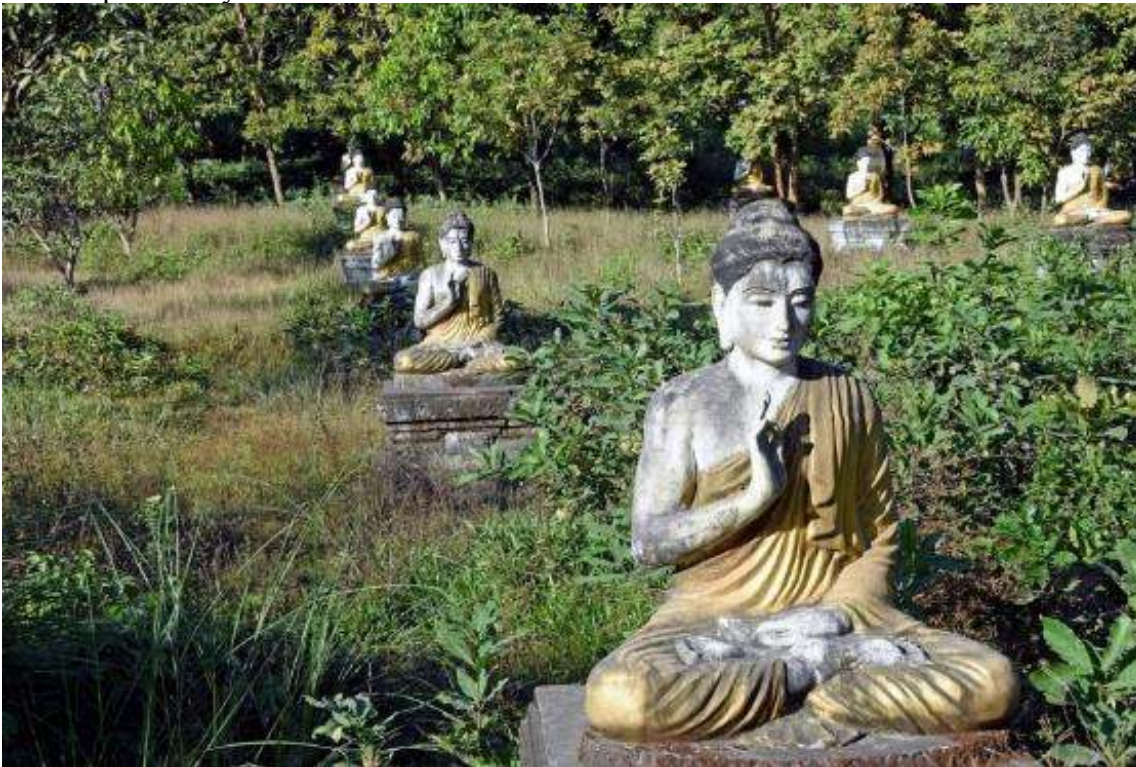
Monk statues Win Sein Taw Ya

Hpa-an – Buddhas, Caves, and Bats

After an early breakfast at the tasteful **Cinderella Hotel**, we explored Mawlamyaine market before boarding a small long-tailed boat for a 5-hour ride to Hpa-an the capital of Kayin State.

It was an interesting ride; the Thanlwin River was initially covered in mist, fishermen went about their work and sand collecting boats kept the river navigable. Mountains appeared as we neared our destination.

Our first call was **Lumbini Gardens** home to hundreds of neatly lined up Buddha images at the foot of Zwegabin Mountain before we admired sunset at Kyauk Kalap Pagoda where a large family started smiling, staring and wanting to touch me. It turned out they were from a remote area and had only seen Caucasians in movies previously – Photo time!



Lumbini Gardens.

Bats out of Hell

We spent two nights at the excellent Zwegabin Hotel as we toured Hpa-an. The caves are what Hpa-An is famous for and the bat cave inspired me most.



Bats flying out of the Hpa-An Bat Cave.

The highlight of this trip was the bats exiting their cave in their millions flying low above my head as the sun was setting. A dozen black hawks had a feeding frenzy on unlucky stragglers.

All Good Things Come to an End

We drove leisurely back to Yangon the next day for dinner at the excellent **Prime Grill restaurant** then I spent my final night in Myanmar on a cruise boat moored on the river. The unique **Vintage Luxury Yacht Hotel** with its classic 1920's, retro layout and great location continues to re-invent its brand to appeal to a larger market that fully appreciates its themed, stylish decor.



Vintage Luxury Yacht Hotel



Fishing on Thanlyin River

Myanmar certainly didn't disappoint – it is an amazing place for tourism!