

WITH QATAR AIRWAYS RESUMING FLIGHTS TO YANGON, MICK SHIPPEN TOUCHES DOWN

# Yangon:

## Gateway to the Golden Land

IN THE ENIGMATIC FORMER CAPITAL AND GATEWAY TO MYANMAR, THE 'GOLDEN LAND'.

**EMERGING FROM FIVE DECADES OF ISOLATION,**

Myanmar's recent bold and welcome decision to open its doors to the world heralds a new era for the country, its people, and for cultural travellers.

Words by Mick Shippen

There can be few cities that remain as intriguing and unexplored as Yangon. Known to the British as **Rangoon**, the city is situated in **Lower Myanmar** at the convergence of the **Bago** and **Yangon** rivers, a short distance from the **Gulf of Mottama**. It was more than a century ago that Yangon's crowning glory, the **Shwedagon Paya**, cast its spell on visitors from the West. Back in 1898, the People's Laureate and acknowledged poet of the British Empire, Rudyard Kipling, wrote of the time he first laid eyes on its shimmering temple spire, saying "Then, a golden mystery upheaved itself on the horizon... a shape that was neither Muslim dome nor Hindu temple spire... the golden

dome said: 'This is Burma, and it will be quite unlike any land you know about.'"

A sight of wonder for Europeans and one of pilgrimage for Buddhists from all over Asia, the Shwedagon Paya rises 100 metres from the top of **Singuttara Hill** in the centre of Yangon. It is best visited twice; once at dawn when locals and monks can be seen in moments of prayer and meditation, and again at dusk when the enormous golden *zedi* or *stupa* and its jewel-encrusted pinnacle are illuminated by spotlights. The magnificent temple is open from 4am until 10pm and can be accessed by stairways at four entrances, each guarded by two huge mythical lion-like creatures



**677,000**

Situated on the western edge of Southeast Asia, Myanmar encompasses an area of 677,000 km<sup>2</sup>, making it the region's second largest nation after Indonesia.

**2,000**

The lifeblood of Myanmar, the mighty **Ayeyarwady River** winds its way 2,000 km north to south, fertilising the country's rice bowl as it does so and eventually spilling out into the delta.

**56**

The population of 56 million is predominantly Bamar but there are seven main races, Chin, Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Mon, Rakhine and Shan, and 130 ethnic minorities speaking 110 languages and dialects.

known as *chinthe*, and lined with shops selling religious imagery and souvenirs. For those who cannot manage the steep climb, there is also a lift at one of the entrances.

Another significant temple in Yangon is the **Sule Paya**.

Established more than 2,500 years ago, the site of worship is thought to pre-date the Shwedagon Paya. During British rule in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Lieutenant Alexander Fraser of the Bengal Engineers was responsible for implementing Yangon's Victorian-style grid street plan that makes the city so easy to navigate to this day. It was Fraser who declared that the Sule Paya marked the city centre. Today, the 46-metre octagonal *zedi*, which is said to contain two hairs of the Buddha and remains an important spiritual compass for Yangon, is encircled by small shops and also acts as a traffic roundabout at a busy intersection.

**EXPLORING DOWNTOWN**

Compared with other regional cities, traffic in Yangon is light considering its population is around 4.5 million. This is a result of years of restrictions on the importation of vehicles. Unusually, there are also no motorcycles in the city, as they were outlawed several years ago. The



→ Located three hours east of Yangon, the magnificent Golden Rock is one of Myanmar's most sacred Buddhist sites.



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→ Just 35 km from Yangon is the Taukkyan War Cemetery for Allied soldiers who died during World War II.

**PUPPET THEATRE**

Myanmar marionette theatre (*yokhte pwe*) was at its most popular during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the 50cm intricately-carved figures – some requiring two people to control the tens of strings – would act out the Buddhist *Jataka* stories.



Performances were not only for entertainment, but were a means of making people aware of current events, and educating them in literature, history and religion, lifestyles, and customs.



© Illustration by Ann Smith

easiest way for visitors to explore is by agreeing to a fare in advance with the driver of a battered Toyota Corolla unmetered taxi, or by taking a leisurely short trip in one of the many sturdy old trishaws that ply the streets day and night.

However, Yangon's grid system, colourful street scenes, and architectural splendour make it an easy and pleasant place to discover on foot. The central location of the Sule Paya is a sensible starting point

and is a short distance from many spectacular colonial-era buildings. Opposite the nearby **Victory Monument in Maha Bandula Garden**, formerly known as Fytche Square, is the grand old redbrick Yangon Courthouse, while **Maha Bandula Road** and its side streets reveal architectural gems partially covered with billboards and advertisements. Included among the many abandoned treasures on the Yangon City Heritage List and currently awaiting restoration is the

**Secretariat**, also referred to as the Ministers' Buildings, a huge complex dating from 1902 that was the seat of power in British Burma. **Merchant Road** and **Strand Road** on the riverfront also have numerous examples of fine period buildings.

For an insight into the rhythm of daily life in Yangon, a visit to one of its atmospheric markets is essential. A stroll through a market is an experience to savour, as bountiful

**THE STRAND**



This charming hotel exudes a colonial-era ambiance. The stately property dates from 1901 and was built by the renowned Sarkies Brothers, four wealthy traders from Armenia who also owned several other grand hotels in Southeast Asia, including Raffles in Singapore and the Eastern & Oriental in George Town, Penang,

Malaysia. Lovingly restored, The Strand is resplendent with period decor, rich teak wood and marble, and slowly turning ceiling fans. Afternoon tea is still served and Friday evening in The Strand Bar is an institution among the burgeoning expatriate community and guests, who come to share travellers' tales and sip

refreshing rum sours. The Strand is just one of Yangon's 200 majestic British period buildings, many dating from as early as 1880. Although they have fallen into a state of disrepair, they add to the city's distinctive character. Fortunately, there are plans to return many of them to their former glory.

© Credit / source

→ Lacquerware has been produced in Myanmar for centuries. Items can be found at Yangon's renowned Bogyoke Market.

**MYANMAR CUISINE**

Authentic Myanmar cuisine is virtually unknown outside the country and as such is a new culinary frontier for travellers to explore. Diners will be delighted by exciting flavour combinations and unfamiliar ingredients but will also detect influences from neighbouring India, China, and Thailand. There's also a feast of regional cuisines such as Shan and Rakhine to savour.



In common with many Southeast Asian countries, rice is the staple and a meal consists of several dishes shared between friends and family. These may include a meat or fish curry,

a soup, a salad, and steamed vegetables with a spicy relish. The dominant flavours are fried shallots, garlic, turmeric, and ginger.

Tamarind is commonly used to add a sour note to soups while *nam pya ye* or fish sauce and *ngapi*, shrimp paste, provide saltiness and chillies add a touch of fire. Butter beans and split peas are also common ingredients and sesame seeds and peanuts are used in salads. *Mohinga*, a delicious and fragrant fish soup ladled over rice noodles and enjoyed for breakfast, lunch, or dinner is considered the country's national dish.



Karaweik floating restaurant, Kandawgyi Lake

displays of fresh ingredients are laid out like paints on an artist's palette – the air filled with the sound of friendly banter and a persistent sales pitch. In the early morning and late afternoon, impromptu markets are set up along the streets of central Yangon. The cavernous indoor **Theingyi Zei** on **Shwedagon Paya Road** sells just about everything imaginable from meat and spices to textiles and household goods, while in the streets behind it vendors hawk fish, fruit, and vegetables.

Shopping in the markets, the local currency *kyat* (pronounced 'chat') is expected but it is important to

remember, when exchanging US dollars, that only pristine notes are accepted. This applies throughout the country. Even the slightest tear, crease or pen mark and the note will be refused outright. It's a curious demand given that *kyat* seem to remain in circulation until they almost disintegrate.

**BEAUTY, MYANMAR STYLE**

One of the most unusual and enchanting features of Myanmar women is their love of *tanaka*, a natural face powder extracted from the bark of the applewood tree and used as a sunscreen. The perfumed powder can be seen for sale in all markets and is prepared by grinding

the bark into a paste on a flat stone with a little water. Applied to the cheeks in creative ways, it dries as a pale yellow powder and is said to be the secret of the ladies' beautiful complexions. Babies and young children are also routinely plastered with *tanaka* as a sun block. Today, *tanaka* is also available in paste form but many women still prefer to grind their own.

Unique and exotic, Yangon's beauty, its rich culture and history, and its charming people make it one of Asia's most rewarding and fascinating cities. Discovery awaits. ✕