



Dhammayangyi Temple is the largest of the four Bagan temples. Above: A long-necked woman

BURMESE DAYS

Tourism to Myanmar is up and the 21st century has barely intruded. There are majestic rivers, thousands of temples and Buddhism is still a way of life. It will be quite unlike any land you know about...

For the
CULTURE
VULTURE

Mingalabar' – 'Hello' in Burmese – starts the welcome letter slotted into the vintage typewriter in our bedroom. We're at the Yangon Excelsior – Yangon's newest tip-top hotel and a witty, contemporary reincarnation of an historic building: formerly the HQ of colonial trading company, Steel

Brothers. Mingalabar. It's a word we're soon using with ladies with thanaka (wood-based make-up) painted on their faces, with gemologists selling us world-class sapphires, and with smiling novice monks in betel-nut robes; the everyday folk in this magical land.

We're in Myanmar on a 21-day bespoke family trip. A vacation that sees us hiking among remote, stupa-topped hills; bumping along red-mud tracks in ox carts to visit animist shrines; and travelling in local tuk-tuks to eat snake gourd curry in village stilt-houses. Not to mention clapping along in a horse-drawn carriage to the ancient imperial capital of Ava; and taking a historic train ride in 'upper class' over the dizzyingly high (318 feet) Gokeik Viaduct.

One of the highpoints is Yangon, the country's erstwhile capital. It's a place where we kneel before saffron-robed monks at the Shwedagon Pagoda for a traditional blessing ceremony; enjoy an exclusive tour of the 400,000 square foot Secretariat (it's being turned into a museum), just opened after being closed since the sixties and where General Aung San and his six colleagues were gunned down; and then gossip royally in a private meeting with the great grandson of King Thibaw, the last King of Burma, in his home.

It's also where we visit old gem-trading families with a local gemmologist, to select from pigeon-blood red rubies and sparkling sapphires: the best on earth and from just Dhs185 to Dhs184,000. We then then savour fine European-meets-Asian dining – think seared scallops on green mango salad – in just-opened Seeds: an uplifting bamboo and glass lakeside restaurant from Swiss chef Felix Eppisser who bagged a Michelin star at his eaterie in Switzerland.

What are the other highlights of the trip? Our cruise down the Ayeyarwady – visiting the pottery village of Yandabo, its gates guarded by two 300-pound live sows – and waking up to a dawn of golden stupas glittering on the shore. And our moonlight and candlelit visit to Bagan – the 9th to 13th-century capital of the Pagan kingdom – to see its deserted stupas, whilst eating temple foods like 'mummies and daddies' (quails' eggs in batter) off a traditional lacquer dish, the sound of tinkling pagoda bells and monks chanting in the air. Plus our 15-mile cycling tour of villages near Bagan: taking in 11th-century temples, markets, and smiling women with tamarind-tattoos on their faces.



The façade of the Sanctum Inle Resort

Another must-see is the colonial hill station of Pyin Oo Lwin with its kestrel-red mansions and turreted colonial piles. And Kalaw where army officers play golf on a manicured course midst a town of half-timbered architecture – including the 1903-built Heritage Hotel with its hunting trophies on the wall. We also love the nearby Green Hill Valley's elephant sanctuary where we bathe with the elephants – washing them with acacia bark (natural shampoo) before they're set free to roam at night – and the elephant apothecary and its vet who prescribes 'frequent mud-wallowing and dust baths' for his patients.

Another favourite destination is far-flung Pekon Lake, which is two hours from Inle Lake in a longtail boat over submerged paddy fields, passing Samkar's 18th-century stupa complexes. Here we stay in the new Inle Sanctuary boutique hotel, which boasts just six rooms set on stilts on a pier above the water in a beautiful, remote spot. Next morning we open our sleepy eyes to paradise: sunlight-dappled water, 'leg rowers' (men guiding their boat with one leg) and fishermen wearing conical hats floating gently past our window.

There are so many special moments. Everyone in *longyis* (sarong-style garments) welcoming us with endless smiles and cups of green tea suffused with sesame and the markets with mounds of mustard leaves, tamarind paste candies and turmeric. Oh yes, and the water buffalos and egrets alongside the children waving from the riverbanks. And the young men playing *chinlone* (feet only volleyball) with a cane ball. There's little to add but: Pyan Lar Ke' Par Me'. It translates as: We'll be back. And sooner than last time. ■

WORDS: CAROLINE PHILLIPS. PHOTOS: CEES RIJNEN

The awe-inspiring Shwedagon Pagoda temples

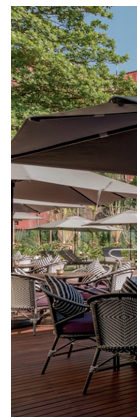
A 'leg rower' uses his leg to paddle and steer his fishing boat



Local fisherman make their way across the water



The pool at The Strand Hotel



Left: Young monks in betel-nut robes

BOOK IN AT...

Best for luxury: Yangon Excelsior Hotel

A Mr&Mrs Smith approved option in Yangon with Art Deco elegance, high ceilings, parquet floors and a spa offering ancient healing techniques.

Yangon-excelsior.com

Best for exploring: Tai House – Hsipaw

The hotel's central location in Hsipaw makes this the perfect base for trekking the nearby Shan mountains.

Thahara.com

Best for views: Loikaw Lodge

Expect a warm and welcoming feel, and spacious rooms with views overlooking Hteengarhlyar Lake and the smokey mountain ranges beyond.

Loikawlodge.com

Best for an eco stay: Inle Sanctuary – Phayar Taung

Stay in a luxury stilt house built on a pier which juts out into the middle of Inle's three lakes. Inle Sanctuary is also an eco lodge, it is 100 per cent solar powered and sources all food locally.

nlesanctuary.com

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WHAT TO...

EAT: At Seeds. Colourful organic Myanmar vegetable salad with olives, goat's cheese and fresh black truffle. www.seedsyangon.com

EXPERIENCE: The Green Hill Valley Elephant Camp and get to know the guests of his unique retirement village. www.ghvelephant.com.

SEE: The landscape from a different perspective and head off the beaten track on an organised bike tour. www.grasshopperadventures.com