

The South-east Asian country is experiencing a gastronomic revolution, and is starting to show off its culinary expertise and indigenous ingredients

Caroline Phillips

It is said that the building up the road is inset with thousands of glittering diamonds and rubies.

Meanwhile, I am in a light and airy, bamboo-and-glass pavilion overlooking a lake dotted with purple lotus flowers.

Inside, there are decorative reclaimed mangrove roots, lamps that represent the moon and stars and a painted golden circle inspired by aikido philosophy: a reminder to be dedicated and humble.

I am served, among other dishes, seared foie gras with caramelised apples, star anise and spiced balsamico; truffle ravioli sprinkled with slivers of black truffle from Italy; house-marinated Norwegian salmon with glistening baubles of Sevruga caviar; and glazed scallops nestling on a green mango salad with pomelo and peanut crackers. Finally, a trio of chocolate pudding, fresh mango and dulce de leche ice cream.

It is contemporary, international fine dining that offers myriad tastes, textures, colours and temperatures alongside an excellent wine list.

I could be in New York, London or Singapore. But I am in Yangon (formerly Rangoon), in Myanmar, which was previously Burma.

Seeds (www.seedsyangon.com) is

a new-fashioned style of restaurant – it opened in February 2017 – that cocks a snook at Yangon’s colonial past. It is the creation of chef Felix Eppisser – who bagged a Michelin star for his Zurich restaurant in his native Switzerland – and his co-owner and wife, Lucia.

When I leave the restaurant, I pass the Shwedagon Pagoda, the aforementioned building that is set with thousands of gems and also embellished with enough gold leaf to decorate Paradise. I couldn’t be anywhere but Yangon.

There is a gastronomic revolution underway in Myanmar.

Until recently, the country lagged behind its Asian neighbours – the foodie big shots of India, Thailand and China – and its cuisine was one of Asia’s least known.

But now Myanmar is catching up.

It has just begun showing off its international and local culinary expertise and indigenous ingredients.

In September last year, MasterChef Myanmar was launched to a nation that is increasingly curious about food; and visitors are being invited by Amala Destinations (amaladestinations.com), a Singapore tour operator, into private homes and kitchens for home-cooked meals and cooking lessons.

The country has been opening up since 2015. In parallel, there has been a growth in culinary variety and quality, especially in Yangon.

Mr Edwin Briels, a business owner and expatriate Yangon resident of 15 years, says: “In the past, it was difficult to find anything but Bamar food (from Myanmar’s main ethnic group), and a few Indian and Chinese restaurants.

Now, there’s a range of high-end Western restaurants alongside a

mushrooming of venues offering Myanmar’s (very different) regional cuisines – everything from Kachin and Shan to Mon and Chin food.”

Ye Htut Win, judge on MasterChef Myanmar and founder of Sharky’s restaurants, adds: “Interest in good food is growing among Myanmar people, who are now better travelled at home and overseas, as well as through the spread of social media in the last few years.”

Meanwhile, a sign of how much the locals already enjoy food is the standard Burmese greeting to locals and foreigners alike: “Sa pyi bi la?”, which translates as, “Have you had your lunch yet?”

So, to the foodie highlights of my three-week holiday.

The newly launched Bagan Foodie Tour (book through www.amaladestinations.com) in Bagan, central Myanmar, is a big hit. It includes an evening tasting of traditional temple foods at the 11th-century Min O Chan Thar pagoda, accompanied by the light of candles in storm lamps and the tinkling of pagoda bells in the air.

I sit on a wicker mat to sample snacks such as “mummies and daddies” (quail’s egg in a chickpea flour batter) and pennywort akyaw (like tempura) served on a traditional lacquer tray – food, unsurprisingly, more authentic than that to be found in Singapore’s Peninsula Plaza, also known as “Little Burma” – with the background “music” of stridulating crickets and the chanting of monks.

The tour also encompasses a guided walk and a Grasshopper Adventures bike ride (www.grasshopperadventures.com).

We go to a market boasting piles of dragonfruit and Chinese apples and to a food festival where water-

melons are being carved with elaborate Burmese temples and flowers.

Then we visit a cottage industry producing fermented soya bean paste, where bare-chested men clad in longyi (a sarong-style garment) stir cauldrons with bamboo paddles. Women sit on bamboo floor mats gauging the weight of soya paste lumps – using their palms as “weighing scales” – before packing them.

There is also a 30-dish lunch of local specialities in the itinerary – based on the meals of the last king of Bagan, who would order 300 dishes. It is served under a tamarind tree overlooking ancient pagodas.

As with any Burmese meal, t’amin (rice) is central to this feast, plus side dishes and curries – the mildest in Asia – that blend Burmese, Indian, Chinese and Mon influences. And there are plates such as snake gourd curry, taro stem and ginger, tamarind and pickled tea leaf salad – the flavours predominantly savoury, salty and tart.

For pudding, there is a lump of jaggery (palm sugar), washed down with green tea.

Next, to another winner: my cooking class at the Tin Tin Cookery School (book through www.amaladestinations.com), which opened in 2016. This time, I am in a traditional stilt teak house on Inle Lake, eastern Myanmar.

A table is set with baskets of fresh vegetables, sauces and spices. The walls are decorated with a photo of the late Myanmar leader General Aung San, wicker baskets, pillows and conical bamboo hats.

A “boat shop” – a longboat – stops outside the door to deliver our freshly picked groceries: paniers of aubergines and green peppers.

Ms Tin Tin, a genial woman sport-

ing a Shan top and longyi, teaches Shan cuisine, which is similar to that of northern Thailand.

I hone my Burmese culinary skills under her expert guidance as well as that of her niece, the latter with thanaka (wood-based) make-up daubed on her face. Mr Naung Naung, my guide, translates.

First, we chop and prepare our ingredients, including green tomatoes. “They’re from the floating gardens,” says Naung Naung, “so they’re juicy.”

Next, I learn to create dishes such as Shan pumpkin soup, spring onion tempura and steamed Mekong River catfish in banana leaf. Then Ms Tin Tin demonstrates how to cook it over charcoal in vessels made from clay mixed with river sand (from the local pottery village of Naung Bo).

Afterwards, Mr Naung Naung and I eat what we have prepared, sitting at a traditional low table. “It’s usual,” he says, “for the hostess not to join her guests eating in a private home.”

Finally, to Yangon again and to Sharky’s (www.sharkys.com.mm). It is time to meet the gastro eminence of Myanmar, the aforementioned Ye Htut Win, founder and self-dubbed “chief artisan” of Sharky’s – with three pioneering, organic restaurant-cum-delis in Yangon, Bagan and Ngapali.

He has single-handedly created the beginnings of a food culture in Myanmar that mixes local resources and Western traditions.

He has experimented with varieties of grains, tomatoes and spinach that can take the steamy heat, and located a remote place along the Indian Ocean where he harvests salt flakes from the sea.

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golden teff, rice wheat and buck-
wheat to the country.

He has also improvised – using
local buffalo milk – to make Italian-,
French- and Swiss-style cheeses:
He was the first to make cheese in
Myanmar, influencing an entire
generation.

It does not stop here. Ye Htut Win
also makes his own charcuterie and
artisangelato, rears his own corn-fed
chickens and dry-ages striploin
(from 45 up to 150 days).

“To concentrate the flavour and
have less fat,” he says, as we taste
every dish.

The bread is so good that I wish I
could buy it wherever I am; the
chicken flavoursome; and the mango
ice cream better than any found in
Italy.

While filming MasterChef, Ye
Htut Win discovered the huge diver-
sity of Myanmar’s ingredients.

He was struck by the “multi-
dimensional tastes and unique
flavours” he found in regional for-
aged foods, wild herbs and veggie-
focused menus.

He believes “farm to table” – with
premium local ingredients, ethnic
cooking and foraged wild herbs –
will be the country’s next big thing.

On my final day, I sit over a steam-
ing cup of green tea suffused with
the flavour of roasted sesame
seeds. I am in the Yangon Excelsior
(www.yangon-excelsior.com), the
country’s latest, hottest hotel open-
ing: a stylishly contemporised re-
incarnation of the erstwhile colonial
headquarters of Steel Brothers
exporters.

“Myanmar food is great, isn’t it?”
asks Mr Briels from across the table.

I confess to him my love affair
with the country’s fermented tea
leaf and dried shrimp salad. I talk

about the delicious meals I have
had on this trip in private homes,
including the lunch cooked by a
Palaung tribeswoman in her tradi-
tional home amid the stupa-topped
hills near Hsipaw; another enjoyed
in a house in an isolated Shan
village near opium fields.

I wax eloquent about our guided
visits to vibrant, traditional markets,
especially the Nyandaw market –
with its several unidentifiable
species of mushrooms and three
types of mustard leaf and where we
breakfast on rice noodles and
ground peanut soup for 63 Singapore
cents a bowl.

All this in the colonial town of Pyin
Oo Lwin with its half-timbered,
turn-of-the-last-century mansions.

Ye Htut Win sees an upcoming
generation of top chefs emerging in
the country from MasterChef Myan-
mar.

“Not only for European-style cook-
ing,” he says, “but for Myanmar
cuisines from fine dining to street
food, where less oil is used, flavours
are more balanced and primary in-
gredients play a starring role.”

He himself cooks with passion.
“Interestingly, there’s no word for
that in Burmese.”

There could well be one soon
when it comes to food.

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• Caroline Phillips is an award-
winning journalist who reckons
the King of Bagan got it right by
having 300 dishes at a meal.

• The writer’s trip was sponsored by
Amala Destinations, a travel service
that specialises in private
personalised journeys.

