

Bagan & Central Myanmar



Dotting the 42-sq-km plain east of the curving Ayeyarwady, Bagan's 3000-some temples not only make up the most wondrous sight in Myanmar, but rival Cambodia's Angkor Wat in terms of scope and jaw-droppability. If you are lukewarm on ruins, two or three days might change your temperature; if you love them, save as much time as you can afford.

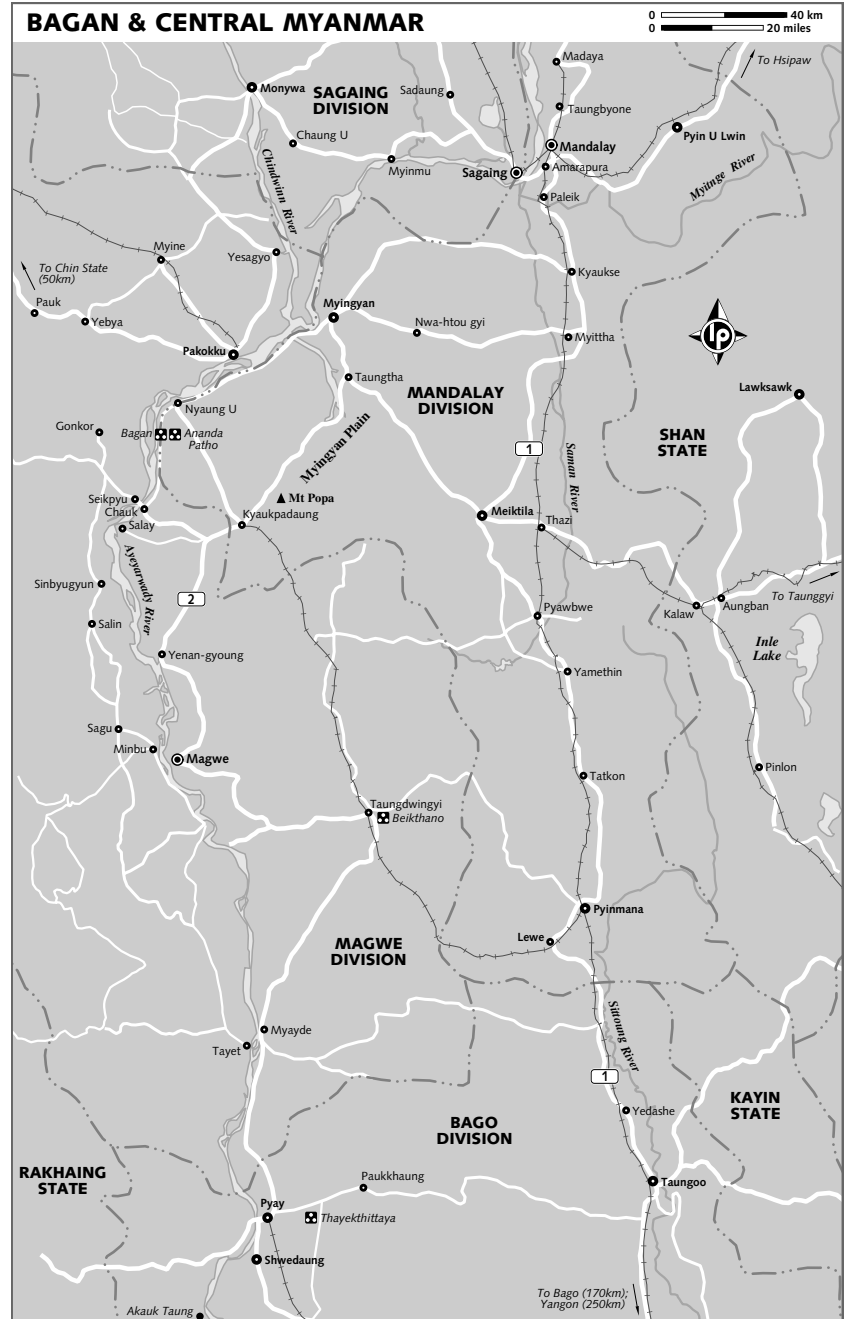
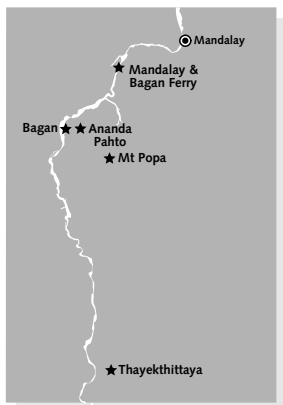
The tallest and most majestic temples are awesome, mingling Hindu styles from India with local-brewed Buddhist images in, atop and around the structures. Some get touristy, with postcard vendors following tour groups. Many others remain neglected, for you to explore on your own. In any, shine your torch into dark corners and you're likely to find a tight stairway leading up to wide-open views, or the frayed remains of a vibrant mural depicting Buddha's past lives that rarely sees an eyeball. See p293 for more details on Bagan's temples.

Apart from the temple-hop, nearby volcano-created Mt Popa (visible from a number of temples) beckons day-trippers with its spiritual home of Myanmar's 37 *nat* (spirits). In the evenings, there's the pizza chase in Nyaung U's expanding dining scene, or finer eats on the riverside in New Bagan (Bagan Myothit) or Old Bagan hotels.

Elsewhere in central Myanmar are the 'lost cities of the dry zone' – busy transit towns that mean a lot if you are looking to buy or sell bags of rice, but less to travellers. Yet *any* of these towns – riverside Pyay and Magwe on the Yangon–Bagan highway; Taungoo, Pyinmana and Meiktila on the busier Yangon–Mandalay highway – could soak up a quality day or two for the adventurer willing to make up their own fun.

HIGHLIGHTS

- As the sun drops, follow the hordes, or find your own temple, for **Bagan sunsets** (p300).
- One of Bagan's most powerful temples, **Ananda Pahto** (p300) features a 51m-high corncob (*sikhara*) top and lush murals at its neighbouring monastery.
- The best way to reach Bagan is by a day-trip on a **Mandalay–Bagan ferry** (p272) down the Ayeyarwady.
- A rocky outcrop east of Bagan, **Mt Popa** (p277) is the spiritual home to the 37 *nat* – and literal home to loads of monkeys.
- The ancient oval Pyu city of **Thayekhittaya** (p286), near Pyay, can't rival Bagan in scope, but visiting is usually just you and your ox cart.



HISTORY

Moving armies led by various people – the Pyu, the Mon, the Burmese – swish-swashed across this central plain, the ‘heart of Myanmar’, over the centuries. The area around Pyay served as the Pyu capital from the 5th to 9th centuries AD; some consider the Pyu as founders of Myanmar’s ‘first empire’, though little remains known of this vanished group. Bagan’s burst of energy ran two-and-a-half centuries, beginning in 1047 and ending – as footsteps of Kublai Khan raiders approached (literally) – in 1287.

See p293 for more on Bagan’s history.

CLIMATE

This area comprises the bulk of the ‘dry zone’ of Myanmar, and it remains hot and dusty for much of the year. Most visitors come in winter (November to February), when daytime temperatures are a relatively chilly 30°C during the day; about 10°C at night. From March to May, the hottest season, daytime temperatures boil at up to 43°C. Rains peak in June and October, but run throughout the monsoon.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Nyaung U is the principal gateway for Bagan, with a train station and airport. Most visitors by boat come downriver from Mandalay. Despite being a major destination, most long-haul bus routes (eg Yangon–Mandalay) miss Bagan, instead stopping at towns to the east; Pyinmana and Meiktila. But there are a few direct bus links with Yangon, Mandalay and Inle Lake. Coming from Yangon may require mandatory changes in Pyay and Magwe, and taking a couple of nights. Trains to the Bagan area are very slow. Most people coming directly from Yangon by road do so via Pyay and Magwe by private taxi.

WHERE TO STAY?

- Old Bagan** (p273) In the heart of the old palace walls; high-end hotels on the river cost from US\$50 to way more. There’s little life outside the hotels, but they are closest to the big-time temples.
- New Bagan** (Bagan Myothit; p275) Here are popular riverside restaurants (particularly for lunch), and the biggest choice of midrange hotels that charge from US\$20 to US\$40.
- Nyaung U** (p269) It has the liveliest restaurant options, tons of shoestringers guesthouses for about US\$5 and comfortable bungalows for US\$20 or less, but Nyaung U is furthest from the bulk of the ruins.

BAGAN



Officially known as the ‘Bagan Archaeological Zone’, this 42-sq-km area, 190km south of Mandalay and 690km north of Yangon, includes the principal areas Nyaung U, Old Bagan and New Bagan. This section includes sleeping, eating and transport options. See p293 for the history and descriptions of the temples themselves.

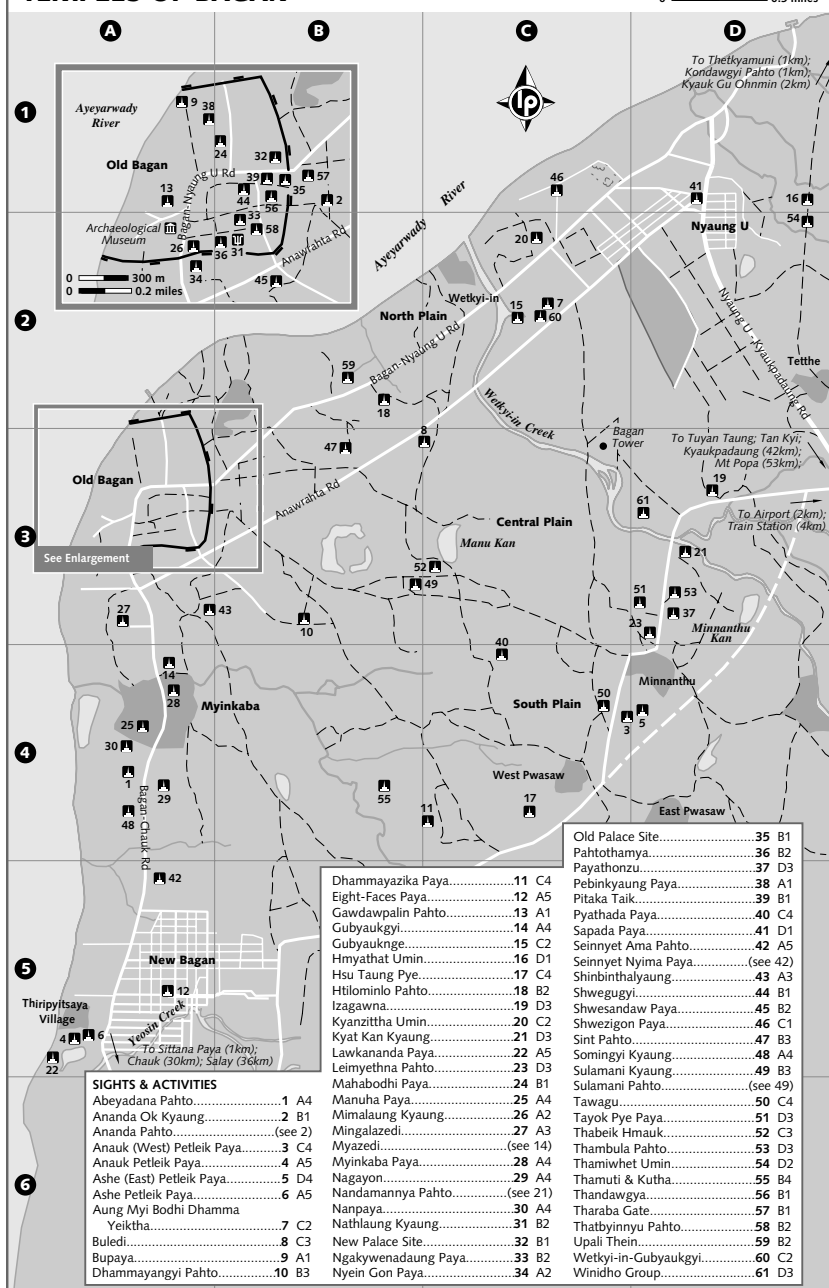
ORIENTATION

The Bagan Archaeological Zone is a massive area, not immediately a breeze to get to grips with. The Ayeyarwady drifts by its northern and western sides. Its most active town is Nyaung U (p269), in the northeast corner. About 4km west, Old Bagan, in the zone’s northwest corner, is the former site of the village that moved to New Bagan, 3km south, in 1990. Between the two is the scrappy village of Myinkaba, boasting a long-running lacquerware tradition.

Intersecting paved roads make a 20km oval that connects them. The Bagan–Nyaung U Rd (to the north) and more-level Anawrahta Rd (to the south), connect Nyaung U and Old Bagan; the Bagan–Chauk Rd leads south from Old Bagan to Myinkaba and New Bagan; the ‘airport road’ heads northeast from New Bagan, past the small villages of Pwasaw and Minnanthu, to the Nyaung U–Kyaukpadaung Rd, leading north to Nyaung U. Just east of the junction is the Nyaung U Airport, about 2km south of the airport.

In between it all, of course, is the bulk of Bagan action: the plain, featuring most of the temples, all connected with a vast

TEMPLES OF BAGAN



network of bumpy dirt roads and trails. At times, you'll be well over a kilometre from the nearest paved road.

Maps

In addition to the maps in this guide, you can purchase *The Map of Bagan* (K500) at most hotels. It shows many of the paths – though not always 100% accurate – and you're likely to mark it up with the latest word of 'nontouristy sunset' and the like.

INFORMATION

All foreign visitors to Bagan Archaeological Zone must pay a US\$10 entrance fee. If sellers don't find you when you arrive, your hotel will sell it to you. It technically lasts as long as you'd like to stay. Be sure to take it with you if you're leaving the zone on a day trip.

For travel information, often an excellent source of local information is hotel staff, or try Nyaung U's Ever Sky Information Service (opposite) or the government-run MTT office in New Bagan (p275).

Nyaung U has a post office. You can get online in Nyaung U and at select hotels.

Air ticket offices in Nyaung U and Old Bagan sell domestic fares only.

BOAT TRIPS

Sunset chasing in Bagan isn't restricted to the tops of temples. An interesting alternative is a dusk boat trip on the Ayeyarwady. The boat folk at the Old Bagan jetty tend to cater their hour-long tours for package tourists, but anyone can arrange a ride (K4000 for one person, K7000 for two to four), which leaves around 4.30pm. Cheaper are the boat guys just below the nearby Bupaya Paya (Bupaya Shrine; p299), who take six or seven people for K3000 or K4000 total.

You can also arrange an interesting boat/taxi sidetrip to mountaintop **Tan Kyi**, one of four stupas that marked the original edges of the city. The boat across the river is about K3500 return; taxis up the mountain and back are about K7000.

See p310 for boat trips to temples north of Nyaung U.

TOURS

Any accommodation option can arrange a ticket for 45-minute sunrise or sunset flights over Bagan with **Balloons over Bagan**

(☎ 061-60032; office in Bagan Hotel in Old Bagan; www.balloonsoverbagan.com; per person US\$250). Most people go in the morning. The price includes pick-up from your hotel (around 5am). The cost is US\$25 cheaper if you buy directly from the office a day in advance.

Mt Popa Adventure Tours (☎ 061-67158, 09-200 5501; day trip Oct-Apr US\$45) offers full-day guided tours of Mt Popa including a swim at the posh Mt Popa Mountain Resort. If you don't want a guide, you can do the same far cheaper by hired taxi.

You can also arrange tours to Chin State from Bagan (see p329).

GETTING THERE & AROUND

This section explains how to get around the sites (temples, towns, stations). See also the Getting There & Away sections for Nyaung U (p272), Old Bagan (p275) or New Bagan (p277) for details on getting to Yangon, Inle Lake, Mandalay and other destinations.

To/From the Stations

From the boat jetty near Old Bagan, there are set fees to go to hotels by trishaw, horse cart or taxi. These fees are shown in the following table.

Destination	Trishaw	Horse cart	Taxi
New Bagan	K1500	K2000	K2500
Nyaung U	K1000	K1500	K2000
Old Bagan	K500	K1000	K1500

Taxis meet arriving trains and flights in Nyaung U.

Bicycle

Bikes with baskets (and sometimes a bell) are widely available and can be a super way of getting around, despite the direct exposure to sun and some dirt roads that slow you up. Essentially all accommodation rents bicycles: in Nyaung U it costs about K500 per day; Old Bagan and New Bagan charge K2000 or K3000 per day.

Traffic is usually light on all roads. Early-morning or late-afternoon rides along the sealed Bagan–Nyaung U Rd are particularly pleasant. It's worth planning ahead a little, as the bulk of the temples in the Central Plain (p302) are far from much shade or lunch potential. The most convenient eating options are in Old Bagan (p274).

Many visitors have a 'greatest-hits temples' day on horse cart first, to get a sense of orientation, then follow it up checking further-flung or lesser-known temples by bike.

Horse Cart

An understandably popular way of seeing the ruins is from the shaded, padded bed of horse carts. Even if you're on a package trip – or especially so – it's a good idea to break away one day for the more intimate trip. Drivers speak some English (at least), know where to find the 'keymaster' to locked sites and can point out temples with few/no tourists around. (Some might stop by a shop with hopes for commission; it's OK to say 'no thanks'.) Two people can lounge in the back of the cart, four can sit cross-legged.

In Nyaung U a day with a horse cart and driver runs about K5000 to K6000. It's about K2000 or K4000 more if taken from Old Bagan or New Bagan. Finding one is not a problem: in 2004, there were 225 horse carts around (a 30% increase since 2002). Supposedly about 60% to 80% of the intake goes to a few businessfolk who rent out the carts.

Pick-Up

A pick-up (K200) runs regularly from outside the Nyaung U market, ending near the junction in New Bagan and passing Wetkyi-in, Old Bagan and Myinkaba on the way. Technically this could be used to jump from one place to the next, then walk around the temples, particularly in the Northern Plain (p300) or within the old walls in Old Bagan (p297).

BAGAN TELEPHONE CODES

Are a little crazy. The Bagan area has two area codes: ☎ 061 and ☎ 02. You may see some old numbers beginning with the borrowed Pakokku code (☎ 062), which were assigned in the rush for new telephone numbers as more businesses opened since 2000. All old numbers that start with ☎ 062 have been switched to ☎ 02. All local numbers are five digits. To add to the fun, any old numbers that previously began with 70 changed to 67, meaning the old number ☎ 062-70999 is now ☎ 02-67999.

Taxi

Hiring a shared taxi for the day in Nyaung U costs US\$18 to US\$20. An Old Bagan hotel will charge about US\$25. Hired taxis are also convenient ways of making day trips to Mt Popa (p278) and Salay (p280).

Trishaw

Bagan's 300 trishaws see little action outside trips within Nyaung U or between the jetty and the hotels.

NYAUNG U

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Most independent travellers call Nyaung U home while in Bagan. The biggest town in the area – and home to the key air, train and bus links – also has the most life after the sun has fallen. About 5km northeast of Old Bagan, along the Ayeyarwady, Nyaung U has a hopping, relatively lively 'restaurant row', a colourful market, and the prototype of many regional stupas, Shwezigon Paya.

The main road, aka Bagan–Nyaung U Rd, runs most of the way from the Nyaung U market to the small village of Wetkyi-in, 2km west towards Old Bagan. The strip of restaurants extends south of the main road, from just east of the bus station.

Other than Shwezigon Paya, most of Bagan's key temples are outside Nyaung U, but there are interesting ones nearby (p309).

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet Stand (per hr K1000; ☎ 8am–8pm) Tiny one-computer stand across from the market.

Memory Email & Phone Service (restaurant row; per hr K3000; ☎ 8.30am–9.30pm) Makes overseas calls for US\$5 or US\$6 per minute.

RMCG Computer Centre (per hr K2500; ☎ 7am–9pm) Burns digital camera shots onto CD for US\$2.

POST

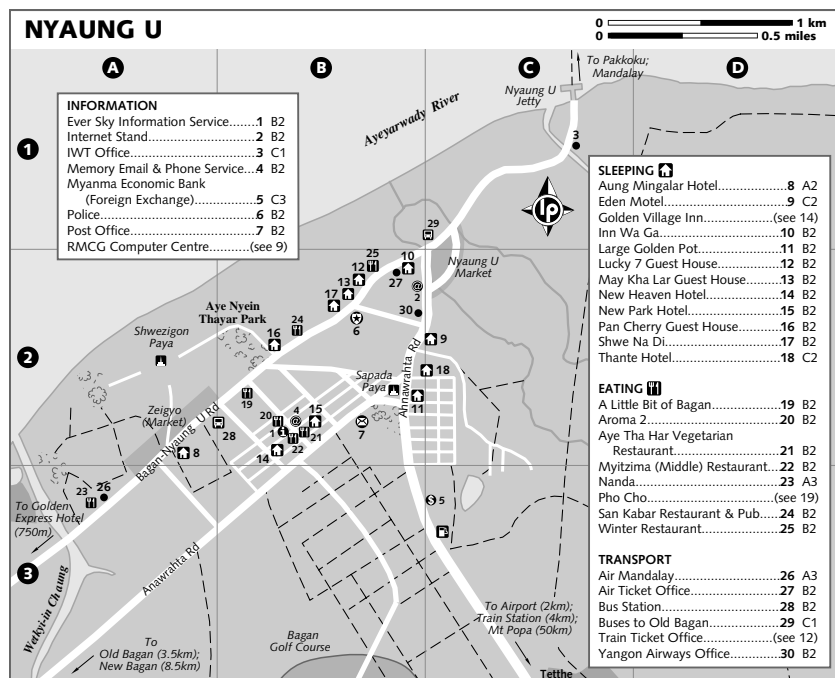
Post office (☎ 9.30am–7pm) Sends postcards overseas for K30.

TELEPHONE

Stands around town follow the same set prices. It's US\$5 per minute to call Europe or Australia, US\$6 to call North America.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Ever Sky Information Service (☎ 061-60146; restaurant row; ☎ 7am–9.30pm), on the restaurant



strip, helps arrange cars and trips (supposedly without commission) and offers other basic information. It has a small bookstore with several books on Bagan.

Golf & Swimming

The well-watered **Bagan Golf Course** (☎ 061-60303; greens fee US\$30, club rental US\$10), just south of town, has about a half-dozen pagodas on its 18 holes. There's also a swimming pool.

Sleeping

Guesthouses on the main road are the simplest, but usually come with air-con. Off the street, near the 'restaurant row' southeast of the centre, are quieter ones that have porches. Some of the best budget deals are not appreciably less comfy than some mid-range beds, here or in New Bagan.

BUDGET

Main Road

All the following come with free breakfast, can arrange bicycle rental for about K500 per day, and most drop their prices a dollar or three off season.

May Kha Lar Guest House (☎ 061-60306, 02-6706; s/d US\$6/10, with TV US\$8/12; 🏠) This well-kept, three-storey guesthouse has bright, clean rooms with air-con, ceiling fan and screen windows. It's quite pleasant. The guesthouse is run by the attentive Ms Cho, who will draw up Bagan maps (K500) to highlight temples most visitors miss. Rooms with TV have wooden floors (though the sound may carry through the panelled walls to your neighbour). The excellent Western or Bamar-style breakfast is served upstairs.

Eden Motel (☎ 02-67078; s US\$4-10, d US\$10-15; 🏠) South of the market on the main road, this motel has 18 great-value rooms. Rooms are cheaper – and a bit more inviting, honestly – in the older complex; they're small and get little light, but the bamboo wall, wooden floors and cranking AC make up for it. The little single up top is just US\$4. Across the street, the newer complex has new tiled floors, more space, bathtubs and TV.

Inn Wa Ga (☎ 02-67125; s/d US\$3/6; 🏠) A stone's throw from the market, the Wa Ga offers simple fan-cooled rooms and less light on

the main floor, and air-con and huge windows in the rooms upstairs.

Shwe Na Di (☎ 061-60409; r per person US\$3; 🏠) Run by a local English teacher (the school is just behind), this formerly unlicensed guesthouse offers basic rooms with new air-con units and cold-water bathroom.

Pann Cherry Guest House (☎ 061-60075; s/d US\$4/8, with shared bathroom US\$3/6) Basic rooms come with a bed, fan, screen window and four walls – but it's clean and cheap.

Lucky 7 Guest House (☎ 061-60474; r per person US\$3) It has fan-cooled rooms.

Large Golden Pot (Ahnwrahta Rd; s/d with fan US\$4/8, with air-con US\$5/10; 🏠) A bit low quality – concrete floor bathroom, iffy hot water, scuffed-up walls – but the Pot faces the wee Sapada Paya and is away from the main crawl. At research time the Pot was planning to expand – new rooms may be decked out better. Its super name comes from a consultation with a monk, who said 'It should be named Golden Pot...wait a tick, make that a large one.'

Near the Restaurant Row

These excellent budget choices give you (for an extra dollar or so) more peace than the main-road options plus a patio facing the leafy back lanes.

New Park Hotel (☎ 061-60322; 4 Thiripyitsaya; s/US\$6-7, d/US\$10-12; 🏠) The higher-priced rooms in this two-complex, 20-room hotel on a quiet sideline have teak floors rather than carpet and are a bit newer. All rooms have front porches.

Golden Village Inn (☎ 02-67088; s US\$6-12, d US\$8-15; 🏠) The Village is another shady spot with flower vines decorating room patios. The newer, higher-priced rooms come with fridge and satellite TV. Rates drop by US\$2 or US\$3 off season.

New Heaven Hotel (☎ 02-67088; s/d US\$5/8; 🏠) Behind the Golden Village, and under the same ownership, the rooms offered here are simpler.

MIDRANGE

Thante Hotel (☎ 02-67317, in Yangon ☎ 01-664 424; nyaungthante@mptmail.net.mm; Main Rd; s/d US\$30/35; 🏠 🏠) South of the market, just off the main road, the Thante offers roomy bungalows on shady grounds with a pleasant swimming pool (US\$3 for nonguests). Rooms come with satellite TV, twin beds,

refrigerator, bathtub, wooden floor and deckchairs on the small porch. Staff members are very welcoming, plus there's a bakery and restaurant on site. Breakfast is sometimes served on the lawn. Best mid-range comfort in Nyaung U.

Aung Mingalar Hotel (☎ 061-60171; s/d without TV US\$10/15, with TV from US\$15/20; 🏠) On the main road, 300m west of the bus station, this laid-back complex faces the Shwezigon Paya (kinda) and has three types of bungalow-style rooms, all with patios. It's comfy and most guests enjoy it, though the conditions are not appreciably better than the budget deals around restaurant row. Rooms with TV have wood floors.

Golden Express Hotel (☎ 02-67101; 🏠) This is a good midrange option, a couple of kilometres west of town. It has four price ranges. The top two tiers (doubles US\$24 and US\$30) are in nicer new wings; the most expensive is nominally nicer (tub instead of shower). All rooms have hot water – not to mention access to the lovely pool (US\$3 for nonguests). There are a couple of practically private pagodas nearby, for sunsets that few outsiders witness.

Eating

There are two kinds of food in Nyaung U: pizza and nonpizza. The former, starting at the San Kabar, has prompted an outpouring of (often good) copycats in essentially any noodle shack in town. On 'restaurant row' inviting thatch restaurants with candlelit tables serve a grab-bag of cuisines.

Aroma 2 (restaurant row; dishes K1500-3500; 🕒 11am-9pm or 10pm) Aroma 1 is in Inle Lake, and No 2 is about as good as food gets in Bagan, for Indian or otherwise. Lots of fresh curries – fish, mutton, veggie, chicken – come with dollops of condiments plopped on banana-leaf plates. A couple of the best dishes, says the enthusiastic manager, are ones that are ordered a day ahead, like the boneless chicken breast.

Pho Cho (restaurant row; dishes from K1000; 🕒 8am-9pm) Though it cooks up Chinese, Indian and other dishes, Pho Cho is best at Thai-style dishes. Its spicy 'Thai sauce' that accompanies several dishes may not be 100% authentic, but it's damn good. The vegetable salad is a particularly good deal, coming hot and on a platter. Most dishes are under K2000; prawns 'in Thai style' are K4000.

Nanda (☎ 02-67039; Main Rd; set meals K3500; ☎ 9am-10pm) Best at dinner, this higher-end restaurant (just west of town) serves fine Burmese meals in an open-air setting. Tables are surrounded by floodlit (but fake) ruins and two marionette stages for the nightly shows. The set meal is the best deal, including two meat dishes, soup, salad, a side dish, fruit and coffee; it's K5000 if you go for prawns. Veggie dishes off the menu cost K800 to K1000. Rates include 10% service charge.

San Kabar Restaurant & Pub (Main Rd; pizza K2400-3600, pasta K1600-3600; ☎ 7am-10pm) Famous as the birthplace of Bagan pizza, the San Kabar's streetside candlelit courtyard fills nightly with travellers seeking tomato sauce and thin-crust pies. It's quite good. At last pass, the wine – a too-sweet 'French' variety – couldn't compete with the food.

Winter Restaurant (Main Rd; pizza from K1500; pasta K2000; ☎ 7am-10pm) Back from the main strip, the Winter rallies for best pizza slice in its open-air setting.

A Little Bit of Bagan (restaurant row; pizzas K1700-K3000, Chinese dishes from K600, veggie dishes from K400; ☎ 7am-10pm) Just off the main road, this thatch-roofed restaurant covers it all – Chinese, Shan, Burmese, Thai, burgers, Indian and Italian. Pizzas are quite thin, but pretty good. The full Indian dinner (with soup, salad and dessert) is K3500.

Shopping

The main **market**, near the roundabout at the east end of the Main Rd, has many traveller-oriented doodahs (woodcarvings, T-shirts, antique pieces) on its northern end.

Getting There & Away

See Mt Popa (p278) and Salay (p280) for transport details on these popular day trips from Bagan.

AIR

The Nyaung U Airport is a few kilometres southeast of the market. Flight schedules vary. Presently Air Mandalay, Bagan Air, Myanma Airways (MA) and Yangon Airways connect Bagan daily with Mandalay (US\$45), Heho (US\$65) and Yangon (US\$93). Flights to Thandwe (US\$121) run daily October to April, though often stop in Yangon.

On the main road, a **ticket office** (☎ 02-67406, 09-204 2001; ☎ 9am-5pm) sells domestic tickets

for all but government-run MA. The MA office is in Old Bagan.

BOAT

Boats to/from Mandalay go from Nyaung U and Old Bagan, often depending on water levels. The **Nyaung U jetty** is about 1km north-east of the Nyaung U market. The **IWT office**, about 300m inland on the main road, sells tickets for Mandalay, Magwe and Pyay.

From the jetty, the Shwe Kein Naya Express boat leaves at 5.30am for Mandalay (US\$16, 12 hours) on Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday. Some ferries leave for Mandalay from the jetty in Old Bagan (p275). Ask your hotel for the latest times and jetty locations, which can change depending on the river's water level.

You can also take the slow boat to Mandalay (US\$10, two nights) on Wednesday and Sunday at 5.30pm. It stays overnight in Pakokku. The slow boat heading downriver leaves at 7am on the same days, stopping in Magwe (US\$9, one night) and Pyay (US\$9, two nights).

Most visitors prefer taking the boat to Bagan from Mandalay (p243), which takes less time.

It's possible to take Mandalay-bound boats and exit at Pakokku (p280) for about K8000, but it's cheaper on the local ferries, which leave for Pakokku (K1000, 2½ hours) five times daily, from 6am to 3pm or so. It's also possible to hire a long boat to Pakokku for about K10,000 or more. It's a fun trip. From Pakokku, there are direct buses to Monywa.

BUS

The main bus station serving Bagan is on the main road in Nyaung U. At research time, daily service included the following (times will likely change):

Destin.	Price	Duration	Frequency	Type
Magwe	K2500	4-5hr	7am	minibus
Mandalay	K4000	8hr	7am & 9am	local (no air-con)
Meiktila	K4000	-	7am & 9am	local
Taunggyi	K6000	10-12hr	5am	local
Yangon	K6500	14-15hr	3pm	air-con (Ye Thu Aug Express)

A local bus also connects Nyaung U with Yangon for K2500. You may be able to

catch an air-conditioned bus in Meiktila going between Yangon and Mandalay also.

During peak season, it's important to book bus tickets for Mandalay, Taunggyi (for Inle Lake) and Yangon a couple of days in advance.

PICK-UP

Pick-ups to Mt Popa and Salay, as well as Chauk (K1000, two hours) and Kyaukpadaung (K1000, one hour) leave from the bus station.

Pick-ups between Nyaung U, Old Bagan and New Bagan run along the main street, starting from the roundabout outside the Nyaung U market.

See New Bagan (p277) for info on pick-ups to Taunggyi (Inle Lake).

TAXI

Many travellers hire share taxis – often quite old cars, some with open backs, most without air-con – to destinations around the country. It'll save time and bruises. Ask at Ever Sky (p269) or at your hotel.

Sample taxi fares:

Destination	Fare (US\$)
Inle Lake	US\$75-80
Mandalay	US\$50-60
Meiktila	US\$25
Myingyan	US\$25
Pyay	US\$80
Yangon	US\$150

Another option is to take a van with air-con, which costs 15% or so more.

TRAIN

The Bagan train station is about 4km south-east of Nyaung U. A **ticket office** on the main road can help with changing times and tickets. Presently, two morning trains a day leave for Mandalay (US\$4/9 ordinary/1st class, 10½ hours), a lone evening train heads to Yangon (US\$11/31, 20½ hours) and another morning train to Pyinmana (US\$5/17, 12 hours).

Getting Around

Bicycles are cheaper to rent here than in New Bagan or Old Bagan. It's about K500 per day. See p268 for more on getting around the Bagan site.

OLD BAGAN

ဝပ်မြို့ဟောင်း

Although Old Bagan is no longer inhabited (except by hotel and government employees), it represents the core of the Bagan Archaeological Zone and contains several of the main temple sites, city walls and a museum. It's right on a bend of the Ayeyarwady River – some time during your stay, wander down to the waterfront and watch the coming and going of the river trade. You can take a boat across the river to the village on the other side (see p268).

Archaeological Museum

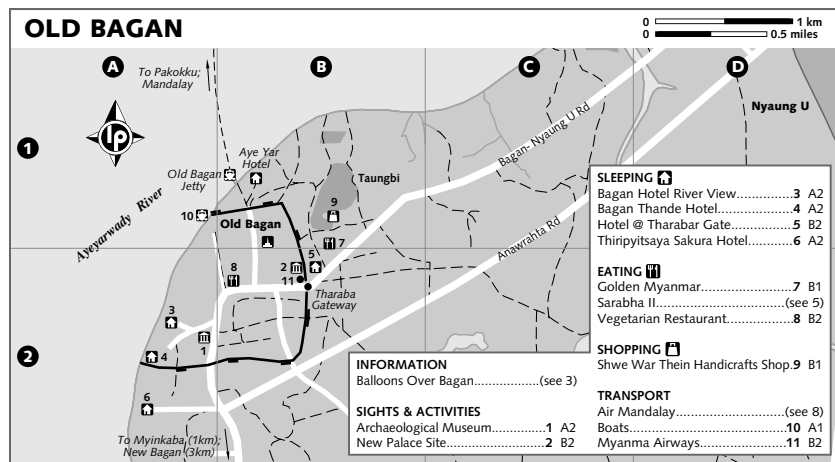
Housed in an absurd, out-of-place, 19th-century-style temple, the **museum** (admission US\$3; ☎ 9am-4.30pm) was built in 1996 by the same people who redid the Mandalay Palace. It features many fine pieces from Bagan (reclining Buddhas, original images, inscribed stones and mural recreations) and an unexpected room of modern-art renderings of the temples. Not many visitors go, but the collection is often good (though it could benefit from being ordered chronologically).

Sleeping

Old Bagan accommodation caters to a up-market crowd and often fills months in advance of peak season. From any of these hotels, you'll be fairly close – the eager can walk it – to some of Bagan's finest temples. All hotels here have pools, most of which nonguests can pay to use for the day. All also have restaurants and bars – some with nice river views. You'll get teak furnishings, satellite TV and minibar in your room; most rooms have bathtubs (not shower) in the private bathroom.

Prices listed don't include the 10% service charge and 10% government tax. From April to September, expect a drop of up to 50%. Rates often rise US\$10 or US\$20 from Christmas to the first week of January.

Bagan Hotel River View (☎ 061-60032; www.myanmar.net/baganhotel; s/d US\$70/80, ste from US\$100; ☎ ☎) Probably the most appealing hotel of the Old Bagan options, set right behind the Gawdawpalin Temple, this hotel features one-storey teak bungalows set around a curvy pool. Guests and nonguests can enjoy the riverside restaurant, bar, salon and 'night bazaar' shopping area. A big breakfast



comes with the price. Its 108 rooms are often full. There's a younger clientele here than at some of its neighbours.

Thiripyitsaya Sakura Hotel (☎ 02-67289; www.bagan-thiripyitsaya-sakura-hotel.com; r US\$90-120, ste from US\$250; 🍴 🚿) Spread out on a wide-open bank with big views of the Ayeerwady, this hotel was government-run until 1995, when it became a Japanese-run joint-venture. It's about 500m south of the Old Bagan walls. Rates don't include breakfast (US\$8 extra), but the all-day restaurant is excellent. The spa offers various scrubs, rubs and wraps; an hour-long foot massage is US\$18. The pool is big, with a nice bar nearby.

Bagan Thande Hotel (☎ 061-60025; www.bagan-thande.com; s US\$24-54, d US\$28-60; 🍴 🚿) Open since 1922, this riverside hotel is a longstanding Bagan accommodation – and certainly a big fixture on the package-trip circuit. It has three types of rooms, plus US\$200 suites. The higher-priced 'duplex' rooms have river views. Some guests have been disappointed with the older cheap rooms, though they also come with satellite TV, air-con and minibar. There's a good pool (nonguests can use it for US\$3).

Hotel @ Tharabar Gate (☎ 061-60037, in Yangon ☎ 01-211 966; www.tharabagate.com; r from US\$100; 🍴 🚿 📺) Away from the river (and 500m north of Ananda Temple), this newer hotel has 86 antique-filled rooms around a big, (fake) elephant-guarded pool. The hotel is quite pleasant (despite that tacky '@' in its name).

Avoid the riverside Aye Yar Hotel as it is government-run.

Eating

With few or no eating options amid the temples, Old Bagan's restaurants are a logical central point for lunch.

Sarabha II (dishes K1200-6000; 🕒 11am-10pm) Of the two Sarabhas back-to-back, between the gate and the Hotel @ Tharabar Gate, we like the one behind best, away from the road. The quiet area, under a big airy thatch roof, is good for Chinese, Burmese, Thai, some Western dishes and a few veggie options for K1200 to K1500. Chicken Kiev costs K4000, spaghetti K2000. The food's good, but best is the cold towels handed out to sponge the dust off your face.

Golden Myanmar (buffet K1500; 🕒 10am-10pm) Keep-it-real seekers (and lots of horse-cart drivers) prefer this roadside eatery with shaded seats on a brick floor. 'Buffet' (your pick of chicken, pork, fish or mutton curry) comes with usual tableful of condiments, fruit dessert and a tasty fried 'bean stick'.

About 250m west of the gate (at the turn-off for Pupaya), you'll see some simple restaurants, including Vegetarian Restaurant and a Chinese restaurant behind.

The restaurants at the hotels in Old Bagan add a little comfort (and *kyat*) to your meal. The Bagan Hotel and Thiripyitsaya Sakura Hotel are particularly good; the latter offering the biggest view of the river (try it for sunset gin-and-tonic).

Shopping

Just east of Tharabar Gate (and well signed off the Bagan-Nyaung U Rd), **Shwe War Thein Handicrafts Shop** (☎ 061-67032; dsavariau@mpmtmail.net.mm; 🕒 7am-9pm in peak season) is a treasure trove of Myanmar trinkets is one of the region's best souvenir shops. The collection includes antique and new puppets, wood carvings, chess sets, lacquerware and bronze pieces. There's essentially no pressure to buy, and staff dig the stuff too (at the last visit, one manager pulled an old puppet off the shelves to keep because she liked it too much).

Lacquerware selections are bigger in Myinkaba (below) and New Bagan (p277).

Getting There & Away

Depending on water levels, boats from Mandalay arrive in Old Bagan, near the Aye Yar Hotel; see p272 for more on boats leaving Nyaung U, the major gateway for buses, trains and planes out of Bagan.

You can buy plane tickets from the **Air Mandalay office** (☎ 02-67021) and Myanma Airways office; both keep irregular hours on the main road.

MYINKABA

မြင်းကဝါ

This village, about 1km south of Old Bagan and 2km north of New Bagan, is famed for its family-run lacquerware shops and some choice Early Bagan-period *pahto* (temples) and stupas (p304). King Manuha, the respected 'Captive King', built the poetic Manuha Paya while held here in the 11th-century.

Sleeping & Eating

Phyo Guest House (☎ 061-60307; s/d US\$10/15; 🍴) Next to busy-by-day Art Gallery of Bagan, this guesthouse has rather basic, overpriced rooms with clean but worn wood floors and wall panelling, hot showers and a desk. No TV or refrigerator. It's footsteps from the lovely Gubyaukgyi temple, though.

There are a few eating stalls across from Manuha Paya, serving mostly Chinese dishes for around K1000.

Shopping

If you're getting serious about lacquerware, Myinkaba's yer pal. More than a handful of workshops are signed along the main

road. Most keep long hours (from 7am to 9pm) during peak season. Cheap-quality stuff is generally what you'll be offered by hawkers at the Manuha Paya (and around Bagan actually).

Art Gallery of Bagan (☎ 061-60307) It has a nice-sized showroom, with top-tier 18-layer offerings in the air-conditioned room out the back. The workshop next door stays busy until 5pm or so.

Golden Cuckoo (☎ 02-67028) Just behind the Manuha Paya, this family-run workshop spans four generations. Seven-layer plates, cups, bowls and trays are up front; the more detailed 14-layer stuff is in the air-conditioned room in the back, where you can find some more unique spins on 'traditional' than at most workshops.

Getting There & Around

Pick-ups running between New Bagan and Old Bagan (and Nyaung U) stop here. You can rent bikes at Phyo Guest House for K1500 per day.

NEW BAGAN (BAGAN MYOTHIT)

ပုဂံမြို့လှိုင်

In 1990 the government relocated the locals from 'Old Bagan' here, and – give them credit – the locals have done their best in making the most of their new home. Located 3km south of Old Bagan, New Bagan has a number of new, more midrange guesthouses and hotels, and some nice river-spot restaurants.

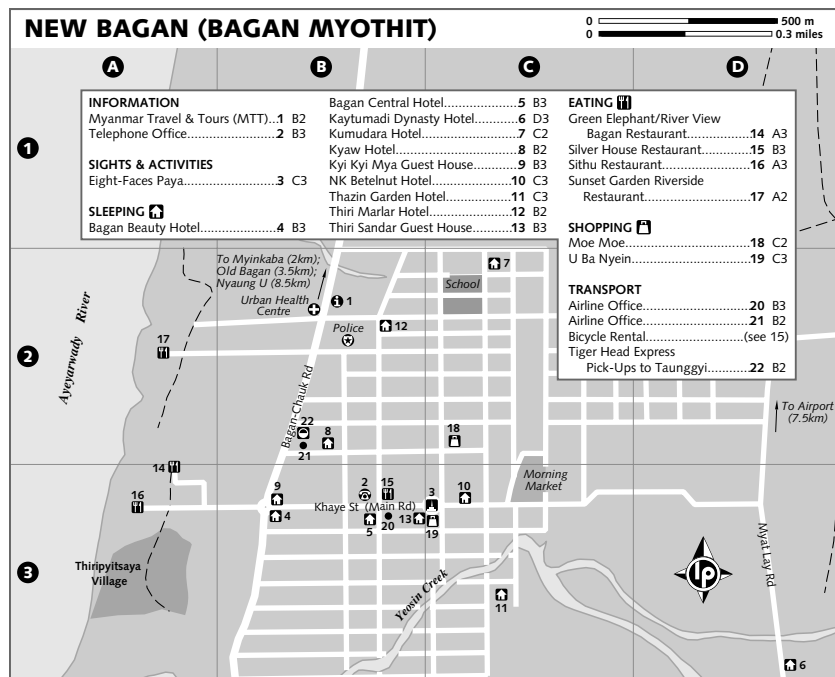
Information

The telephone office is on the main street.

Myanmar Travel & Tours (MTT; ☎ 061-60277, 02-67418; 🕒 8.30am-4.30pm), the government-run tourist office (the only one in the Bagan area), is just north of town. It can help organise excursions (and getting permission) to visit Chin State (p328). At the time of research (before negotiations), the office charged US\$150 per day per person on a three-day, two-night trip to visit Chin State villages and climb Mt Victoria, a bird-watching haven.

Sleeping

New Bagan is best for its midrange options, usually generator-run motels with a bit more comfort than the cheapies in Nyaung U. All prices here include breakfast.

**BUDGET**

Bagan Beauty Hotel (☎ 061-60351; Main Rd; s/d US\$3/6; 🏠) This friendly blockhouse cheapie is clean but no diva. Its 12 simple rooms have hot shower, twin beds and wrinkled vinyl floors.

Kyi Kyi Mya Guest House (☎ 02-67037; Main Rd; s/d US\$6/12; 🏠) Next to the Bagan Beauty, Kyi Kyi Mya rents its 10 basic rooms with air-con to foreigners (and discourages its fan-cooled rooms). It's cute enough from the outside, and the welcoming management bursts with good lacquerware tips, but it's probably not worth the extra kyat compared with the Beauty.

Thiri Sandar Guest House (☎ 061-60372; Main Rd; s/d US\$6/12; 🏠) Facing the centre *zedi* (stupa), this two-storey guesthouse has clean, carpeted rooms and hot shower, with breakfast served on a front terrace. It's a bit nicer than the other budget options. If a room is smoky, ask for another. Little English is spoken.

MIDRANGE

Expect hot water and satellite TV at each of the following.

Thiri Marlar Hotel (☎ 02-67370; thirimarlar@mptmail.net.mm; s/d US\$20/25; 🏠) This excellent-value hotel, a couple of blocks from the road to Old Bagan, has 21 often-filled rooms set around teak walkways facing a leafy courtyard with a bamboo coffeehouse. Up top is a wide-open bar, and further up, near the crenulated rooftop, is a breakfast deck overlooking Bagan's sprawl. Rooms have twin or double beds and come with showers with curtain and minibar. The staff isn't always versed in English, but they try hard.

Kumudara Hotel (☎ 02-67080; www.kumudara-bagan.com; s/d US\$30/36; 🏠) At the quiet north-eastern edge of town, the Kumudara has 50 pleasant motel-style rooms with wood floors, high ceilings and – best of all – back porches, some of which face the Bagan plain.

Bagan Central Hotel (☎ 02-67141; Main Rd; s US\$10 & 15, US\$15 & 20; 🏠) Good-value rooms in stone-covered units with hot water, armoire, wood floors (keep shoes outside!) and twin beds, all set around a courtyard with tables for open-air breakfast. Cheaper rooms are the best deals if you can deal without tub or TV.

NK Betelnut Hotel (☎ 061-60326; Main Rd; s/d/tr US\$15/18/23; 🏠) This cheapie midranger offers two dozen rooms decked in cute lavender hues or bamboo trim. Some rooms have windows on two sides, good for extra light. Rooms have wood floors and are comfy despite a nick or two. It's better value for a double or triple.

Kyaw Hotel (☎ 02-67377; Nwe Ni St; s/d US\$15/20; 🏠) Another midrange option nearby, with 10 rooms.

There is also a cluster of hotels on the south-east edge of town; one is the **Kaytumadi Dynasty Hotel** (☎ 02-67123; www.kaytumadi.com; s/d US\$25/35; 🏠), with 34 rooms in cabin-duplexes, all covered with toddy palm logs. The grounds are nice (with well-maintained creek and horse-cart-wheel bridge), but rooms are a bit worn for the price.

TOP END

Thazin Garden Hotel (☎ 061-60052; www.thazigardenhotel.com; s US\$45-55, d US\$55-65; 🏠 🏠) Several notches in comfort and style above the other midrange options, this hotel is nicely lost in New Bagan's southern side. It has two complexes: one is a leafy 'British colonial bungalow' style; the other is a pagoda-brick-style two-storey complex facing the pool and the hotel's personal pagoda. All rooms have dark-wood floors and some artful touches (such as hanging paper umbrellas). Dinner's served in high season on the lawn around the pagoda. Nonguests can swim for US\$5.

Eating

New Bagan's restaurants serve most meals at lunch, particularly the handful of riverside restaurants that draw some tour groups. At night most host 7pm marionette/music shows and set tables on the lawn overlooking the Ayeyarwady River – not a bad thing to do at all. Fish and prawns culled from the river are highly plugged (and priced).

The following three places have fish dishes for K2000 to K4000, prawns for K4000 to K6000 and vegetables from K1000 to K2000.

Green Elephant/River View Bagan Restaurant (☎ 02-67099; 🕒 11am-4pm & 6-10pm) This place has several bamboo-thatch covered areas around a central lawn, and there's a nightly music and puppet show.

Sunset Garden Riverside Restaurant (☎ 061-60404; 🕒 11am-3pm & 6-11pm) It has two covered

areas, with evening sitting on lawn between. There's no show, but you can overhear the Green Elephant's.

Sithu Restaurant (☎ 02-67173; 🕒 11am-3pm & 6-11pm) Another riverside eatery with a night show, Sithu is slightly less stylish than the other two.

On the main road in town, the simple Silver House Restaurant cooks up fish and prawns for about the same price, but fried rice (not on the menu; ask) is only K800.

Shopping

Nearby Myinkaba village has more lacquerware factories and shops, but New Bagan has two excellent options too.

Moe Moe (☎ 062-70031; Main Rd; 🕒 9am-9pm) Large showroom with mix of traditional and modern lacquerware; the factory is in full swing during the day.

U Ba Nyein (☎ 02-67050; Main Rd; 🕒 9am-9pm) Another showroom, across from the centre *zedi*.

Getting There & Around

See Nyaung U (p272) for most transport options to/from the region. Tiger Head Express Co sends daily pick-ups to Taunggyi (K1000, 10 hours) at 3am. There are airline offices on Main Rd a block north.

Bicycle rental is K1500 per day at budget hotels or at the stand next to Silver House Restaurant, or about K3000 at others. See p268 for more on getting around the Bagan site.

AROUND BAGAN**MT POPA**

ပုဂ္ဂိုလ်တော်

☎ 02

If you look towards the range of hills that rise, shimmering in the heat, behind Bagan, you can often see (barely) a solitary peak standing apart from the range's west end. Rising to 737m from the flat, surrounding Myingyan Plain, and topped with a superb pagoda, Mt Popa (Popa Daung Kalat in Burmese) is said to be the core of an extinct volcano last active 250,000 years ago. It's a popular and worthwhile half-day trip from Bagan (but you probably should consider it only if you have at least two full days to offer to Bagan).

Sometimes described as the 'Mt Olympus of Myanmar', Mt Popa is the most important *nat* worship centre in the country. The tiger-guarded **Mahagiri shrine**, at the foot of the mountain – just across from the steps guarded by elephant statues (loads of critters around here) – contains a display of mannequinlike figures representing the 37 *nat* and is a major pilgrimage destination. Burmese superstition says you shouldn't wear red or black on the mountain, nor should you curse, say bad things about other people or bring along any meat (especially pork) – any of these actions could offend the residing *nat* who might then retaliate with a spate of ill fortune. And no-one likes a mad *nat*.

Atop the impressive rocky crag clings a picturesque complex of monasteries, stupas and shrines that you can climb to via a winding, covered walkway, complete with some misbehaving monkeys. The 25-minute climb is steep and stiff, but it gets cooler as you get higher. Views are fantastic. Some of the frequent pilgrims here include nonordained, slow-walking hermit monks called *yeti*, who wear tall, peaked hats.

If you come by share taxi, ask the driver to point out bits of **petrified forest**, which are strewn along either side of the road.

Also present is much volcanic ash, which makes the surrounding plains fertile. The heights capture the moisture of passing clouds, causing rain to drop on the plateau and produce a profusion of trees, flowering plants and herbs. In fact, the word Popa is derived from the Sanskrit word for flower.

Festivals & Events

Mt Popa hosts two huge **nat pwe** (spirit festivals) yearly, one beginning on the full moon of Nayon (May/June) and another on the full moon of Nadaw (November/December). Before King Anawrahta's time, thousands of animals were sacrificed to the *nat* during these festivals, but this practice has been prohibited since the Bagan era. Spirit possession and overall drunken ecstasy are still part of the celebration, however.

There are several other minor festivals, including ones held on the full moons of Wagaung (July/August) and Tagu (March/April), which celebrate the departure and return of the famous Taungbyone *nat* – Min Gyi and Min Lay – each year. These *nat* are

brothers who were born to a marriage between Mae Wunna and an Indian Muslim in Anawrahta's employ. The two sons were murdered at Taungbyone, where Anawrahta built a shrine in their honour. Once a year, the Taungbyone *nat* are believed to travel a spirit circuit that includes Mt Popa, Taungbyone (about 22km north of Mandalay) and China.

Sleeping & Eating

Popa Mountain Resort (☎ 02-69168, in Yangon ☎ 01-202 071; www.woodlandgroups.com; superior s/d US\$50/60, deluxe r from US\$120; 🍴 🚿) On the mountain overlooking Mt Popa, this spectacular resort (a Singaporean joint venture) teams with sandalwood forest and views. The higher-priced deluxe bungalows, perched on stilts, face Mt Popa – making it one of the better splurge options in central Myanmar. The rates can often be negotiated. The pool is nice (nonguests can swim here for US\$2), and there are two restaurants and a bar. It's possible to climb Ma Gyi Taung (the mountain just behind) in four hours. Hotel transport to Mt Popa from here is US\$5.

Min Min Soe Guest House (☎ 02-67637; r US\$15) In Popa village, a couple of kilometres down from the mountain, are a couple of cheap sleeping places. Best is this seven-room job, with fan-cooled rooms, shiny tile floors, screen windows and also cold-water private showers.

There are a few restaurants at the base of Mt Popa and in Popa village.

Getting There & Away

Most travellers visit Mt Popa in half a day by share taxi or by organised tour from their hotel. In Nyaung U, guesthouses could get you a slot in a share taxi (without guide) for US\$5 per person. Hiring a whole taxi is US\$15 or US\$20. Hotels in Old Bagan and New Bagan charge more; eg the Thiripyitsaya Sakura Hotel in Old Bagan charges US\$100 for a full-day guided trip for up to six persons.

Mt Popa Adventure Tours (p268) offers a day trip, including area sights.

At research time, a direct pick-up left Nyaung U's bus station at 8am, waited two hours at Popa, then returned (K2500 return, one hour each way). Otherwise you can take an hourly pick-up from Nyaung U to

Kyaukpadaung (K1000, one hour) and then another to Mt Popa (K500, 45 minutes). This would take up a full day.

SALAY

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This village, 36km south of Bagan, developed in the late 12th and 13th centuries as the expanding influence of Bagan moved southward along the nearby Ayeyarwady River. Today the village of 7000 residents is much more of an active religious centre than Bagan, with some 50 monasteries (that's one per 140 locals if you're counting). Day-trippers take in working 19th-century wooden monasteries, some select Bagan-era shrines and more untouched British colonial buildings than you'll find in much of Myanmar. It can be paired with Mt Popa on a full-day trip, though the two are in different directions from Bagan.

In the late 1960s, Salay got some attention from a Japanese company that built a huge fertiliser plant (and a golf course for visiting execs). Myanmar has run it solo for a couple of decades. In 2004 a massive explosion killed two workers.

Sights

YOUQSON KYAUNG

ရွှေစံတော်တော်

Designed as a copy of the Crown Prince House in Mandalay, and built from 1882 to 1892, the huge **wooden monastery** (admission US\$3; 🕒 9am-4.30pm) is the best place to start a visit in Salay. Along two of its exterior sides are detailed original carvings displaying 19th-century court life, and scenes from the Jataka (stories of the Buddha's past lives) and Ramayana (one of India's best-known legends); sadly another side's pieces were looted in the 1980s. Inside, past the *naga* (dragon serpent) steps, in the 23m-long hall, are more original details as part of a small museum. The 17th- to 19th-century pieces are behind glass cases, while the Bagan-era woodcarvings (including a massive throne backdrop) stand in open view.

The monastery was renovated twice in the 1990s and now features a tin roof to protect the carvings. The Department of Archaeology runs the site; on-site staff can point you to other nearby sites, in and outside town. For general information, try ☎ 063-40221.

BAGAN-ERA MONUMENTS

Little of Salay's history is known outside a small circle of Myanmar archaeologists working with limited funds. So details on the 103 ruins – most of them known only by number rather than name – are sketchy. It is said that most of the monuments in Salay weren't royally sponsored but were built by the lower nobility or commoners – thus there are no structures on the grand scale of Bagan's biggest ones.

In the pagoda-filled area across from the Youqson Kyaung, you can see **Payathonzu** (see p308; Temples Nos 18, 19, 20), about 100m east, which is a small trio of corncob-like temple finial) and some faded murals inside. The westernmost one (to the left if you come from the museum) has the most visible murals and also a narrow set of stairs leading to a small terrace. Legend has it that it was constructed by three sisters. If it's locked, ask at Youqson Kyaung.

More interesting is the modern makeover of the Bagan-era **Shinpinsarkyo Paya** (Temple No 88; ☎ 063-40357), about 6km southwest of town via a dodgy road. The road passes two bridges (one was washed out by rains at last visit, but passable by makeshift road over dry creek bed). Inside the glass and tile-filled pagoda, you'll find an original 13th-century wood Lokanat (Mahayana Bodhisattva guardian spirit). The nearby northern entrance passageway features interesting 19th-century 3-D murals (some torture to see). Original woodcarvings abound, some of which are painted afresh in original design.

Another kilometre south (most taxis won't drive it, but it's an easy 15-minute walk) is **Temple No 99**, an unassuming 13th-century shrine that features 578 painted Jataka scenes inside. It's noted by some, for the last 16 paintings on the left as you enter; these represent the '16 Dreams of King Kosala'. Very few foreigners have come here.

Other Sights

One of the most interesting aspects of Salay is the faded **colonial buildings** around town, many of which still feature the Royal Crown (look around the market area, about 200m west of the museum). Few buildings in Myanmar still sport the lion-guarded crown.

In the complex across from the museum (west of the Payathonzu), the **Nan Paya** (aka

the Mann Paya) is a modern pagoda housing a 6m gold Buddha made of straw lacquer. As the story goes, the Buddha image was originally located near Monywa, and it was washed downstream during an 1888 monsoon – all the way to Salay! Ask for a peek inside from the latched door out the back.

Just north of the Payathonzu, the monastery and meditation centre of **Sasanayaunggyi Kyauing** (a bit of a stop-off point for day-trippers) features a lovely 19th-century glass armoire with Jataka-painted panels and 400-year-old scripture in Pali inside. The monks are chatty and friendly, and will ask for a donation for their onsite school.

Adventure-seekers could investigate 41 more Bagan-era temples around **Sarlai**, 80km (50 miles) south of Salay by bad road. You'd need to hire a 4WD jeep in Bagan. It's also possible to reach by boat – it's worth asking at Youqson Kyaung before setting off.

Sleeping & Eating

Salay has no hotels or guesthouses – for anyone – and police apparently frown at foreigners staying in local monasteries. Nearby Chauk has no licensed guesthouses either.

Eating options are better in Chauk, but you can find some noodles or rice at the Salay market.

Getting There & Away

Salay is 36km south of Bagan on an often-flood-damaged road. You pass through the larger town of Chauk on the way. From Chauk, another road goes east to Kyaukpadaung, with a turn-off for Magwe.

A hired taxi for a four- or five-hour trip to Salay from Nyaung U runs from US\$17 to US\$25. Often trips include Mt Popa (extra). There's also a morning pick-up from Nyaung U to Chauk (about K1000, two hours), where you can catch another (from roughly 11am to 4pm) to Salay (about K500, one hour). Considering that neither town have licensed guesthouses, and that some sites in Salay are spread out, this is not very feasible.

PAKOKKU

☎ 062

🏠

A stopping point of the Mandalay–Bagan ferries, and terminus of bus routes from Monywa to the north, Pakokku sees few travellers for more than 10 minutes, but its

lazy pace and rather tropical feel can make for a very rewarding day. A bustling tobacco centre, the town is about 25km north of Bagan on the Ayeyarwady.

Sights

In town there's little in the way of attractions. About 27km northeast, on the way to Monywa, are the remains of **Pakhangyi**, a 19th-century wooden monastery. It's supposedly US\$3 to visit, but the caretaker tends to ask only for a 'K1000 donation'. About 5km east (via the road behind the big modern pagoda) is the destroyed frame of **Pakhannghe Kyauing**, which was once the country's largest wooden monastery, with 332 teak pillars. Many still stand, and the area – near the fork of the Ayeyarwady and Kaladan Rivers – makes for interesting exploration. You could take a local bus bound for Monywa and stop at Pakhangyi. A shared taxi here is about US\$20, a motorcycle taxi about US\$10.

If time is limited, you might get more out of Pakokku by seeing its **market** or just wandering its picturesquely decrepit side streets, with old homes backed to the Ayeyarwady.

Festivals

One of the town's biggest *pwe* festivals, **Thihoshin**, is held during Nayon (May/June).

Sleeping

Mya Yatanar Inn (☎ 21457; 75 Lanmataw St; r per person K3500) Pakokku's main accommodation option is like no other in Myanmar. The managers are an outgoing English-speaking couple: a 70-something former boxing teacher and his Kachin wife. 'An old place run by old people', said one of them. The pair accidentally started the business when they invited in a couple of backpackers sleeping in the street in 1980. Based on the notebook postings scrawled by guests over the years, they've provided more than a share of trip highlights. Their appealing two-storey home has some (very) basic rooms with shared bathroom upstairs – electricity is mostly off here, as with all of Pakokku. They can help you find good food or get a taxi deal, or show you to local pagodas or where tattooing is done. It's on the river, a couple of blocks east of the market.

The Pye No Guest House (☎ 21166; Myoma Rd; r US\$4-8; 🏠) This is a basic backup. The higher-priced room has private bathroom and air-con running on the iffy local current.

Getting There & Away

You can travel by local bus to/from Monywa (K600, 4½ hours); four leave Monywa daily. The bus station is 3km south of the centre.

A handful of ferries go to Nyaung U (K1000, two to three hours) from a couple of jetties a kilometre or so southeast of the market; the first goes around 5am, the last around 2pm. You can also hire a private boat to make the trip for K10,000 to K15,000 – the earlier in the day, the cheaper.

Another way to reach Pakokku is via the Mandalay–Bagan ferry from Mandalay (p243) or Bagan (p272).

MYINGYAN

🏠

☎ 066

Despite its Ayeyarwady River location 88km north of Nyaung U (towards Mandalay by map), Myingyan – sorta rhymes with 'engine' – sees very few travellers, as major bus routes bypass the bumpier roads that come here. Some long-distance boats stop at the Ayeyarwady docks, just west of town, but not the Mandalay–Bagan express boats.

Sights

If you make it to this sprawled-out town of 260,000, the two-storey **central market** is a good starting point. About 1.5km east, accessed from the road just north of the train station, is the **Bodhi Dat Taw Taik** (meaning 'depository of Buddha's relics'), where (in the monastery just west) you can see Buddha relics (teeth, hair, bone, even skin) housed intriguingly in the former safe of a British colonial bank. Monks will open it for you.

About 1.5km south of the market, via the north–south Mandalay–Meiktila Rd, is the **Soon Lu Kyaung**, an important monastery where you can see the remains of the well-known Soon Lu Sayadaw draped in monastic robes. He died in 1951, though his body is (relatively) well preserved. An attendant said, 'He was a great man, very powerful. No chemicals on his body were used and he still is strong.'

Sleeping & Eating

One Star Drive In Inn (☎ 21389; Myo Pat St, 16th quarter; r per person K6000) The only licensed accommodation in Myingyan is this odd group of bungalows on a side street about 1km

southeast of the central market. Rooms are fan-cooled, mattresses are thin, and showers are cold. The shared bathrooms – plain concrete floor deals, with mosquito net and a plastic chair – are clean and save you from the rancid smells of some of the private-bathroom options. The staff is nice, but sometimes get confused by questions like 'Where can I get a trishaw?'

Diamond Restaurant (dishes from K1000) A bit northwest of the market, this is nothing special, but offers a menu in English for its Chinese food, which includes several veggie options.

Getting There & Around

Frequent buses and pick-ups leave from the street just east of the Myingyan–Meiktila road, a couple of blocks south of the market, for Meiktila (K1000/3000 for a back/front seat, 2½ hours). Passengers tend to take the pick-ups. Some buses, however, continue on to Mandalay. A lone daily pick-up goes to Nyaung U (two hours) at 4.30am.

The train station is a fine old building a couple of blocks east of the market. A couple of daily trains connect Myingyan with Bagan (three hours), and Mandalay (6½ hours).

Trishaw is the main transport around town. A trip to the two religious sites and back to the hotel is about K1000.

BAGAN TO PYAY

There are two major routes that lead north from Yangon. The places described below are on the western route, which is part of the Yangon–Bagan Hwy, sometimes called the 'low road'. It follows along the eastern bank of the Ayeyarwady River.

MAGWE

🏠

☎ 063

Capital of the Magwe Division, this dusty, predominately Burmese, midsize town on the Ayeyarwady River (about 150km south of Bagan) has some quirks. In 1988 it was supposedly the country's only city to sit out the prodemocracy marches, and still favours a noticeable play-it-by-the-rules vibe. It sees a rare tourist heading betwixt Pyay and Bagan, perhaps, as is evident by encircling curious staff at quiet restaurants.

In 2002 the 2930m (8789ft) Ayeyarwady Bridge connected Magwe with its hilly village neighbour of Minbu on the river's west bank.

Information

At the time of research, a telephone centre (and no one else apparently) could make international calls for US\$5 per minute to Europe and US\$6 to North America; it's a long block east of the market. The main hospital is a couple of more blocks east.

Sights

Magwe's chief pagoda, the 1929 **Mya Tha Lun Paya**, 2km north of the bridge, features a gilded stupa and occupies a hilltop site with great river views.

Just across the river, about the same distance north of the bridge, is Minbu and the fun **Nga Ka Pwe Taung** (Dragon Lake), a burping pool of butane gas and mud that has (over the years) built a few acres of lunar-like terrain with bubbling pools atop four odd mounds. The sludge isn't hot; if your toes slip in, wash them off below at a small

pagoda, which features two giant pythons that get fed 'buffalo milk' daily. The largest mound is named Thu Sei Ta, the second-largest Nanda, for the mythical Dragon King's daughter and son, respectively. On the winding road north from Minbu are a couple of eateries overlooking the river.

Depending on water levels, **islands** appear in the river. Consider hiring a boat for a day 'at the beach' on an isolated one, or to mingle with nomadic fishers who live there till the water rises.

Sleeping

Rolex Guest House (☎ 23536; cnr Mya Than Lun Rd & Ayeyarwady Bridge; s/d US\$8/15; 🏠) The more basic of the two licensed accommodation options in Magwe, the Rolex is within walking distance of the market and river, and has a more eager-to-please staff. Oldish but clean rooms include desk, twin or double beds, and bathroom with cold shower.

Sein San Hotel (☎ 23499; 235 17th St; r US\$15; 🏠) This is a bright complex of spick-and-span rooms – with skinny mattresses – a few long blocks east of the bridge.

Eating

Monalizer 2 River View (dishes K500-1500; 🍴 7am-10pm) On the river, just south of the bridge, this Chinese and Myanmar restaurant (and lively beer station) is clearly Magwe's hot spot. As the sun dips across the river, locals (mostly guys) hit the jars of beer (big pitchers are K1600) as a crew of 15 start up the 6pm music/dance show that some locals watch through the open doors from the outside.

There are several simple restaurants on the street a block east of the bridge roundabout. One is the (rather overpriced) **Sein Ya Thu** (dishes K1000-1500), which has portable privacy walls plastered with beer ads and a lone 'Myanmar Cares' sticker.

Getting There & Away

Magwe's highway bus station is about 2.5km east of the central market. A minibus connects Magwe with Nyaung U (K2500, four to five hours), leaving at 6am from Nyaung U, or at 4.30am, 6am or 7.30am from Magwe. A 9am bus leaves for Pyay (K1600, seven or eight hours), and 5pm buses head out for Mandalay (K3000, 12 or 13 hours) and Yangon (K3500, 11 or 12 hours).

Ferry-wise, the **IWT office** (☎ 21503), one block towards the river from the market's north side, isn't a lot of help. It can't sell tickets or even quote foreigner prices, but can confirm ever-changing boat times or dock location. At research time, the boat to Mandalay (four days) via Bagan left at 9am on Monday and Saturday, and for Pyay (30 to 35 hours) at 7am on Tuesday and Thursday. The ferry presently docks a few blocks west of the market, just south of the Monalizer 2 River View restaurant.

Getting Around

A trishaw ride between the bus station and hotels is about K500. It's slightly uphill on the way from the centre; plan on 30 minutes. Motorcycle-taxis are usually more expensive; you can rent one to see Dragon Lake and Mya Tha Lun Paya for about K3000 or K3500.

PYAY (PROME)

မြပွဲ

☎ 053

This quiet, stupa-studded Ayeyarwady town, 294km north of Yangon, is at the crossroads for bumpy bus rides west to Ngapali Beach, and less bumpy bus rides north to Bagan. Over the years it's practically seen more archaeologists than travellers, due to the much-excavated ancient Pyu capital of Thayekhittaya (p286), 8km east. But Pyay can fill a good day, with the ruins, hilltop pagodas (particularly the famous, lit-at-night Shwesandaw Paya), and a spectacled Buddha south of town (p286). Locals alternate the town's pronunciation between 'pyay' and 'pyi'. The Brits, apparently, couldn't deal with the confusion so called it Promé.

The current town site became an important trading centre during the Bagan era. The Mon controlled it when Burmese king Alaungpaya conquered it in 1754. Pyay boomed, along with the British Irrawaddy Flotilla Company in the 1890s. Today it's an important cargo town still, set at a transshipment point between northern and southern Myanmar.

Orientation & Information

Pyay's centre spills along the streets around the gold Aung San statue, at the corner of the Pyay–Yangon Rd and Bogyoke Rd. The bus station is 2km east.

For (slow) Internet access, try the **computer software store** (Madaw Rd; per hr K1000), a couple of blocks north of Aung San.

Sights

SHWESANDAW PAYA & AROUND

ရွှေဆံတော်တုရာ:

Set on top a hill in the centre, the stunning **Shwesandaw paya** (and the surrounding pagodas and monasteries) is not only Pyay's biggest point of interest, but one of the country's biggest Buddhist pilgrimage sites. Just over 1m taller than the main *zedi* at Yangon's Shwedagon – call it Shwe-D – the Shwesandaw stupa follows the classic Bamar design seen at Bagan's Shwezigon (p309).

Legend goes that it was built by a couple of merchants (with the king's help) in 589 BC, and that the golden *zedi* houses four strands of the Buddha's hair (the Golden Hair Relics).

Atop the *zedi* are two *hti* (umbrellalike pinnacles), unusual for Myanmar. The lower, bigger one dates from Pyay's days as a Mon city. The higher, smaller one was added by Alaungpaya as a symbol of peace between the Burmese and Mon, after brutally capturing the city in 1754.

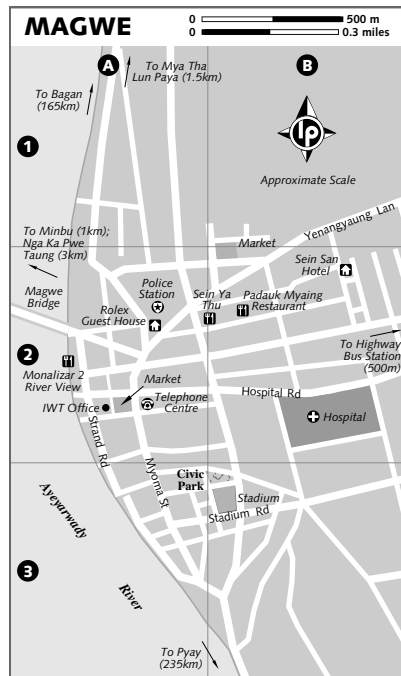
In the southwest corner of the complex, the **Sacred Tooth Hall** is said to house an original tooth from the Buddha. It's in the golden bell (locked with padlock) behind the glass. The locks come off once a year for the November full-moon festivities.

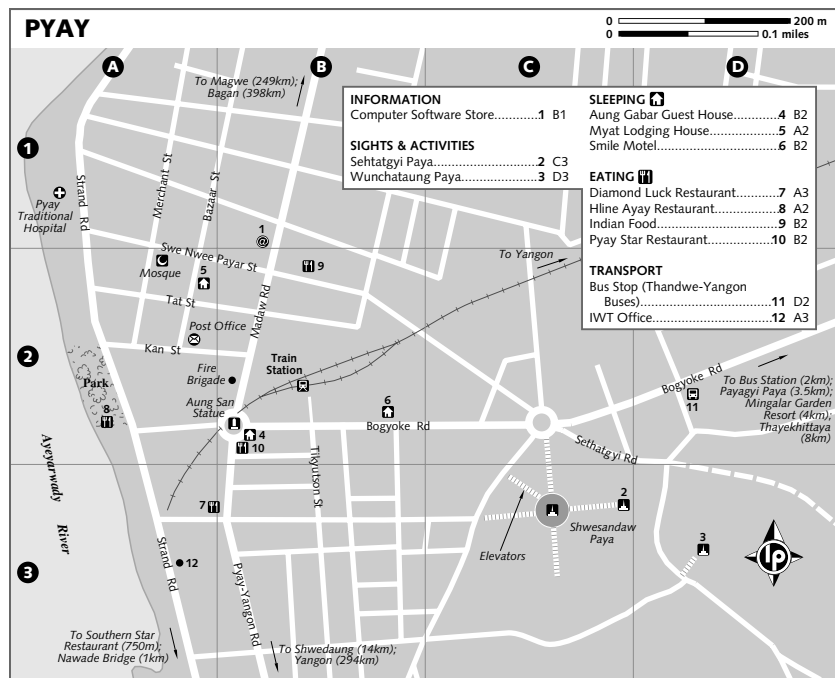
The panoramic views from the pagoda are pretty great too. To the east, you'll see the **Sehtatgyi Paya** (Big Ten Storey), a giant (maybe not 10 storeys though) seated Buddha watching over the Shwesandaw eye-to-eye.

The smaller gold stupa on the highest hill southeast of Shwesandaw is the **Wunchataung Paya** (Apology Mountain Pagoda), where people can say 'sorry' for misdeeds. They get the best view of Shwesandaw and mountains across the river while they're at it. You can reach it via Sethatgyi Rd, east of the Shwesandaw.

You can take an elevator up to the Shwesandaw platform from the northwest side, but it's not really that big of a hike up. The northern stairway is lined with shops.

There's a K200 fee for 'small cameras', K500 for 'big cameras' or video cameras.





PAYAGYI PAYA

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This towering **pagoda** stands on the road to Thayekhittaya, about 1.5km east of the bus station; it served as one of the four corners that bounded that ancient town. Its breast-like structure is slightly swollen, with some vegetation growing out of cracks in the exposed bricks. Three terraces encircle it from its base; 'ladies' are not allowed on the upper one. The modern *hti* is lit up at night.

Its history is linked with the nearby Thayekhittaya and most likely dates from the 5th- or 6th-century AD. Nearby stand a couple of lofty teak trees, safe from woodcutters' axes as they occupy sacred ground.

Sleeping

All of the following options include breakfast in the price.

BUDGET

Myat Lodging House (☎ 21361; 222 Bazaar St; s US\$8-10, d US\$10-12, tr US\$16-18; 🕒) This small backstreet guesthouse has well-loved, but simple rooms (green carpet, writing desks) a block from the

Pyay 'action'. The extra US\$2 for rooms gets you private bathroom, hot water and satellite TV. The shared bathrooms are spotless too. There's a lone double with fan and shared bathroom for US\$8. The English-speaking family that runs the Myat (Burmese for 'royal') give out a Pyay map. Cell-like rooms on the ground floor are for locals only.

Aung Gabar Guesthouse (☎ 21400; 1462 Bogoyoke Rd; s/d US\$3/6) Pyay's best dirt-cheap spot isn't bad. Nice people run it (one reader called them 'Myanmar's Cheech and Chong'). Small rooms with shared bathroom are basic (concrete floors, fan) but clean (and lighter than the dark hall suggests). Bogoyoke Aung San seems to like it; the statue of him on horseback outside looks right at it. The guesthouse was planning to add an air-conditioned room with private bathroom upstairs at research time.

Smile Motel (☎ 22523; 10-11 Bogoyoke Rd; s/d US\$13/15; 🕒) A block up Bogoyoke Rd from Aung San, this new motel has typical rooms with TV and hot-water showers attached. Rooms in front catch some traffic noise, but the place seems happy enough.

MIDRANGE

Pyay's nicest sleeping, by far, comes at **Mingalar Garden Resort** (☎ 25518; mgresort.pyay@mpmail.net.mm; s US\$30-36, d US\$36-42; 🕒), a quiet bungalow resort about 5km east of the centre (near the Pyaygi stupa). Seventeen standard bungalows, 13 Japanese-style bungalows and five 'European' superior bungalows are set around a network of nice artificial ponds and a big lake. It's quite comfy livin' (for Pyay at least) – enough to attract a passing tour group or two. Breakfast is served in the lakeside gazebos; the lake's slurping carp fish will clamour for your crumbs. It's pretty remote if you're without wheels. A taxi from the centre is about K1500, a trishaw (long ride) about K1000.

Eating & Drinking

Pyay Star Restaurant (cnr Bogoyoke Rd & Pyay–Yangon Rd; dishes around K1000) Overlooking the statue, is a buzzing, quite appealing two-floor beer hall with pretty good Chinese food. To the south are several more restaurants, including the more family-oriented **Diamond Luck Restaurant**, two blocks south.

The Strand takes in the river and is home to a few restaurants that double as music halls in the evening. Just west of the Aung San statue, **Hline Ayay** (Strand Rd; dishes veg K800, fish & meat K1200-2500; 🕒 7am-11pm) shows its years (and the bathroom has lots of mosquitos and is dark and damp), but the (mostly Chinese) food is good. A few seats are on the open deck; all have river views. The music starts at 7pm.

About a kilometre south, **Southern Star Restaurant** is a newer open-air riverside eatery that sells pitchers of beer (K1600). After sunset, food is less of a draw than the 7pm singers (female) playing for the drinking posse (mostly male).

A few grubbier spots are in the streets north of Aung San, such as the rather lonely **Indian Food Stall** (Swe Nwee Payar St).

Getting There & Away

BOAT

Routes along the Ayeyarwady start/stop in Pyay, heading either north or south. Few foreigners use either service.

The **IWT office** (☎ 24503; the Strand; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) is helpful on ever-changing times. Presently two or three ferries (depending on

petrol availability) depart weekly for Yangon (deck/cabin US\$8/18, two or three days) on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. Northward ferries leave for Mandalay (US\$12/24, about seven days) via Bagan two or three times weekly too.

BUS & TRUCK

Pyay is located at the junction between Yangon, Bagan and Thandwe (for Ngapali Beach). The highway bus station, 2km east of the centre (just off Bogoyoke Rd), sends frequent buses to Yangon (K1550, six hours) via one of the nation's smoothest two-lane roads. Half a dozen companies make the trip throughout the day, including **Asia Express** (☎ 21759), New Generation, Yoma and Sun Moon.

There are no direct buses north to Bagan from Pyay. At research time, a daily 9.30am bus headed north to Magwe (K1800, seven or eight hours) where you could change buses to Bagan, usually the next day.

Direct buses from Yangon to Thandwe (Ngapali Beach) do not stop at the Pyay bus station, instead letting off passengers a couple of blocks east of the Shwelandaw Paya on Bogoyoke Rd. Many buses at the station leave across the Nawade Bridge to Taung-gok (K2500 to K4000, eight or nine hours) around 6pm. From Taung-gok you can catch a bus or pick-up to Thandwe, or catch the boat north to Sittwe.

Two daily buses head to Mandalay (K4550, 13 hours) around 4pm. You can stop off at Meiktila for transfers to Inle Lake.

A giant cargo-style passenger truck goes to Patheingyi (K4000, 13 or more hours) on a bumpy road at 8.30am. You're far better off going from Yangon. See p292 for a backroads link with Taung-goo.

TRAIN

The train service is of little use to travellers, but a lone daily train connects Pyay with Yangon in nearly 12 hours.

Getting Around

Trishaws and blue bed-back taxis are the main ways of getting around. A trishaw ride to/from the bus station is around K1000, K1500 by blue taxi. Some locals may hesitate in renting a bicycle; apparently a foreigner 'got lost in a rice field' at Thayekhittaya in recent years.

AROUND PYAY Thayekhittaya

သရေခတ္တရာ

About 8km east of the Aung San statue in the neighbouring village of Hmawza, this ancient **site** (admission US\$4; ☎ 8am-5pm) – known to Pali-Sanskrit scholars as Sri Ksetra (Fabulous City) – is an enormous Pyu city that ruled in the area from the 5th to 9th centuries AD. Local legend links its origin to the mythical King Duttabaung, who supposedly worked with ogres and other supernatural creatures to build the ‘magical city’ in 443 BC. The earliest Pali inscriptions found here date to the 5th or 6th centuries.

Seeing it means taking a three- or four-hour ox-cart loop to spaced-out temples (most just outside its oval city walls). It can’t rival Bagan in terms of majesty, but lack of tourists and real peeks into local farming communities are serious bonuses.

Little is known about the Pyu; one useful book is *The Ancient Pyu of Burma* by Janice Stargardt.

SIGHTS

Visitors usually start at the small **museum**, with a posted map of the area and a collection of artefacts from excavations, including royal funerary urns; a *dvarapala* (gate guardian); statues of the Hindu deities Tara Devi, Vishnu and Lakshmi; several 6th-century Buddha images; and silver coins minted in the kingdom. From here, you can arrange an ox cart for K3000, really the only way to make the 12km loop around the handful of sites. Walking is possible, but it’s difficult to find your way without aid. Bicycles aren’t permitted.

Behind the museum to the south, the road soon follows the remains of the old palace walls; ox-cart drivers – at a speed that ebbs and flows to the mood of the ox – make a counterclockwise loop of the following sites.

After 4km or so, the road passes **Rahanta Gate**, where fragments of the overgrown brick gate run alongside the dirt road. Immediately south is the **Rahanta cave temple**, a small, quite rebuilt temple with eight Buddha images lined along the south wall.

About 2km south, the **Bawhawgyi Paya** is Thayekhittaya’s most impressive site: a 46m cylindrical stupa with a slightly banged-up golden *hti* on its top. It’s among the oldest

Pyu sights, the least obviously renovated, and the prototype of many Myanmar pagodas. You can walk up the three low-lying terraces.

A couple of hundred metres northeast is the smaller cube-shaped **Bebe Paya**, with a cylindrical top and a few Buddha images inside. Just north is the squat **Lamyethna Paya**, with a visible iron frame keeping it together. Inside four original Buddha reliefs (a bit cracked, some faces missing) are visible. On either side of the roads around here, look out for long ruts in the ground, made from old canals.

A couple of hundred metres to the north is a fork in the road; to the right (north) is a tin-roofed **cemetary**; to the left (west), on the way to ‘Thaungpye Mound’, is the better (but bumpier) way back to the museum. After 1km, you’ll pass by the old **city gate** along the overgrown trail, and then 2km on, through a booming farming village of thatch huts, with piles of radishes and other produce. Towards the north end of the village is the **East Zegu Paya**, a small four-sided temple with overgrown walls and (usually) locked doors. It’s off the main road, but worth seeing for the walk past fields and farmers to reach it.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The turn-off here is a few kilometres east of Payagyi Paya. A return blue taxi should cost about K4000 or K5000. No direct pick-up connects the centre with the site. You could take one to the bus station, then hop on another east-bound one to near the site.

Hmawza has a train station, but local trains supposedly were off limits to foreigners at research time.

Shwedaung

ရွှေတောင်

This small town about 14km south of Pyay, via the road to Yangon, contains the famous **Shwemyetman Paya** (Paya of the Golden Spectacles), a reference to the large, white-faced sitting Buddha inside the main shrine. The Buddha wears a gargantuan set of eyeglasses with gold-plated rims. Coming south from Pyay, the turn-off for Shwemyetman is located on the right-hand side of the road; a small green-and-white sign in English reads ‘Shwemyethman Buddha Image – 1 Furlong’.

Spectacles were first added to the image during the Konbaung era, when a nobleman offered them to the temple in an attempt to stimulate local faith through curiosity. Word soon spread that the bespectacled Buddha had the power to cure all ills, especially afflictions linked to the eyes. The first pair of spectacles was stolen at an early stage, and a second pair was made and enshrined inside the image to protect it from thieves.

An English officer stationed in Pyay during the colonial era had a third pair fitted over the Buddha’s eyes after his wife suffered from eye trouble and the abbot suggested such a donation. Naturally, as the story goes, she was cured. (This pair is now in a small shrine to the right of the image.) It requires nine monks to remove the present glasses for their fortnightly cleaning.

One block south of the pagoda is a grand ol’ 1925 **English home**; another ’20s beaut is two blocks south and two blocks east.

Another famous pagoda in town, south of Shwemyetman, is the **Shwenattaung Paya** (Golden Spirit Mountain), which reportedly dates back to the Thayekhittaya era. A large *paya pwe* (pagoda festival) is held here each year on the full moon of Tabaung (February/March).

To get here, you can hop on a pick-up headed towards Yangon, which leave frequently from the Pyay bus station and pass by the Aung San statue before hitting the highway.

Akauk Taung

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Carved into cliffs overlooking the Ayeyarwady, about 30km downstream from Pyay, are dozens of Buddha images at Akauk Taung (Tax Mountain). It’s named for the crafty toll-takers from the mid-19th century, who spent the hours between taxing boats by carving reclining and meditating Buddhas in the steep cliffside.

To get there, you’ll need to taxi across the Ayeyarwady to Htongo village, about 90 minutes by road from Pyay, then hire a boat (about K5000) for the 45-minute look. To do so, you must bring a copy of your passport or visa to show the *strict* immigration officers.

For some visitors, it’s too much travel for minimal payoff. A return taxi to Htongo from Pyay (sometimes with Shwedaung thrown in) is about K20,000 to K25,000.

MEIKTILA TO TAUNGOO

This popular north-south route following the Yangon-Mandalay Hwy – some call it the ‘high road’, though it runs west of the Shan Hills – is often taken on overnight buses. Meiktila, nearly three-quarters of the way to Mandalay from Yangon, is a gateway between the ‘big four’: Yangon, Mandalay, Inle Lake and Bagan.

MEIKTILA

မိတ္ထီလာ

☎ 064

For many travellers with noses pressed against bus-window glass, Meiktila is a crossroads between Yangon, Mandalay, Bagan and Inle Lake first, and a town second. It’s also an important and prosperous trade centre that sees a lot of locals in uniform, as several air-force bases are located north and south of town.

Legend goes that King Anawrahta, founder of Bagan, had a pond here broadened to the current lake that looms west of town; when he asked someone to see if it went to Mt Popa, the report came back, ‘Lord, it doesn’t go that far’ (‘Meiktila’ is an abbreviation of the wordy bad-news report).

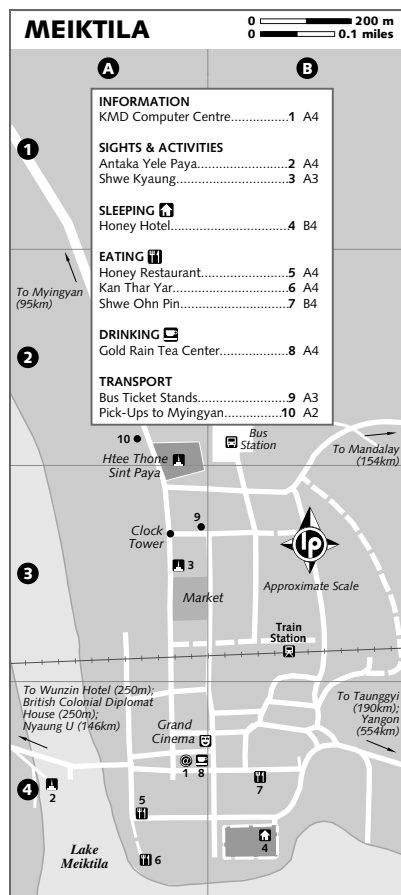
In March 1945, the British surprised the Japanese based here and killed 20,000 Japanese soldiers over the next few months in an important WWII loss for the Japanese. Much of the city was flattened. The trend has continued, sadly, with fires. Town-engulfing fires devastated the city in 1974 and 1991. In 2003 some of the centre was destroyed (evidenced by burned-out buildings facing the Grand Cinema). One local warned, ‘We have a fire every year. Better get fire insurance if you’re planning to stay.’

Information

When classes aren’t being held you can access the Internet at **KMD Computer Centre** (per hr K700; ☎ 9am-10pm).

Sights

Lake Meiktila is the town’s premier attraction. Though there are no boating options, you can cycle around it. From the bridge north of the centre, a dirt path leads away from the road; it starts just past the **Antaka Yele Paya**, a small island/pagoda reached



the lake is occupied by the military. Ask at the village for the best way back to Meiktıla, or turn back.

Sleeping

Honey Hotel (☎ 21588; Pan Chan St; s US\$5-10, d US\$8-15; 🏠) Right on the lake in town, this friendly lemon-coloured converted mansion sees a fair share of travellers stopping off. The free breakfast is served in a covered gazebo overlooking the water. All 14 rooms are clean and comfy. Cheaper rooms have fan, cold shower and squat toilet; the higher-priced ones have hot water, sit-down toilet and air-con (and some of these rooms are h.u.g.e). Room C-1 is a stand-alone bungalow by the water.

Wunzin Hotel (☎ 21848; 49A Than Lwin Rd; r economy US\$6, standard from US\$30; 🏠) This former government-run hotel on the north bank of the lake is showing its years. All but the economy rooms come with air-condition. Though under private (and quite chatty) management, the hotel does still give off a rather official air. Biking groups stop here often.

Eating & Drinking

Kan Thar Yar (dishes K800-2000) At the best spot in town, facing the Antaka Yele Paya on the lake and within walking distance of the centre, this open-air restaurant (with tables at the edge of the water) is focused on beer sales (or the staff singing Myanmar rock karaoke), but the food's not bad. Lots of guys congregate here. Most families prefer nearby Honey Restaurant (same owners as hotel); it faces the water, but all seating is inside.

Shwe Ohn Pin (dishes K800-2000; 🕒 7am-10pm) This simple tiled restaurant, located on the Mandalay-Yangon road in the centre, hands you an English menu for its Chinese and Myanmar dishes. The curd curry with rice (K1000) comes with big hunks of *hlan no kei* (Indian-style cheese) mixed with cauliflower and okra in a thick sauce.

Gold Rain Tea Center (tea K100) The combo of tree shade, high-up green tarpaulins, guys in air-force uniforms (and some civilians) gives this central, always-busy teashop a bunker feel. But not in a bad way.

Around Gold Rain are several snack vendors, certainly Meiktıla's liveliest spots on most nights.

Getting There & Away

BUS

Express buses zooming between Yangon and Mandalay stop on the road east of the clock tower (and not at the local bus station), and along this road you'll find half a dozen ticket-sales shops. Air-conditioned buses bound for Mandalay (K1500, four hours) leave around 9am; for Yangon (K4500, 10 to 12 hours) at 7pm or so. There's also an express bus for Pyay (K4300, 12 to 14 hours) at 5pm.

The 'ordinary' bus station is just east of the Htee Thone Sint Paya, north of the clock tower. Here you can catch local buses for Mandalay every 30 minutes or so, as well as pick-ups (K2000).

PICK-UP & TAXI

From the bus station, pick-ups for Taunggyi (K1200) leave regularly; three morning buses (K2500) go from 6am to 9am.

Three daily pick-up trucks for Nyaung U (K3500) go in the afternoon; about six go to Kyaupadaung (K1200). Pick-ups south to Pynmana (K1000/3000 for the back/front seat, four to six hours) leave regularly.

Pick-ups for Myingyan (K1000, 2½ hours) leave regularly from the main road in front of the Htee Thone Sint Paya.

From the bus station, you can hire sa-loon taxis for Mandalay (about K35,000), Bagan (about K30,000) and Taunggyi (about K50,000).

TRAIN

There's a small train station in town, catching slow trains heading east-west. A more useful station is in Thazi, about 25km east, at the crossroads of the Yangon, Mandalay and Taunggyi lines.

Getting Around

Horse cart is the chief mode of getting around town north of the clock tower, blue taxi to the south. A ride from the bus station to Honey Hotel is around K800 by horse, K1000 by blue taxi. You can rent a bike from Honey Hotel for K500 per day.

PYNMANA

ပျဉ်းမနား:

☎ 067

Coming from Yangon, Pynmana is the first major town in Mandalay Division. It is a

leafy, almost tropical place with a street-spilling market in the walkable centre spiced with mosques, pagodas and the small **Shan Lake** – a welcome change if you're arriving from the dusty 'dry zone' to the north. There's little of historic interest, and not much to do, but it's another great candidate for a 'real town' to explore around. Coconut palms are planted along the Ngalaik River, passing through the town's north side. You can see the Shan Yoma and Aleh Yoma (Shan and Aleh mountain ranges) to the east and west.

Traditionally there have been more propaganda signs here, erected to scare off visiting undercover rebels. Insurgent territory, technically, begins just 30km east.

Sleeping

Phoenix Hotel (☎ 21646; 18 Boletyar Rd; s US\$7-18, d US\$12-24; 🏠) is a boxy, four-storey place, a couple of blocks northeast of the market, and was the only place in town licensed for foreigners at research time. All rooms have private bathroom with cold water and air-con. The cheaper rooms are on the ground floor, where the lobby TV can disturb winks till midnight; superior rooms upstairs have TV.

Eating

Near the bus station are a number of places where you can eat.

Yan Naing Restaurant (☎ 21369; 1813 Bo Taik Htain St; dishes from K1000; 🕒 7am-11pm), across the highway, and a couple of hundred metres uphill, has friendly staff members who can help with area information and offer English menus and tasty rice dishes.

Golden View Tea & Cold, on the eastern end of Shan Lake, is a nice spot for sunset sipping.

A couple of other nice choices are on Bogyoke St, a couple of blocks northwest of the market.

Getting There & Away

The bus station, near a monument of a log-pushing elephant, is on the highway, 1km west of central Shan Lake. It's a short trishaw ride to the lake or hotels in town.

Several good-looking (but without air-con) buses leave for Yangon (K2400, eight hours) at 6.30pm and 8pm. Buses to Mandalay (K2700, eight hours) leave at 9am.

by a wooden pier in the lake and lit up at night.

About 250m south of the bridge, the dark building to the east of the Wunzin Hotel (its economy rooms actually) was once a **British colonial diplomat house**, and later was a fierce interrogation centre used by the Japanese in WWII. (Supposedly Aung San Suu Kyi and Michael Aris honeymooned here.)

Near the west end of the lake, **Shwe Kyaung** is a walled monastery on the inland side of the road with Japanese signs leading to a **WWII monument** that British and Japanese survivors put up in 1972. Monks will show you around. Just past, a picturesque path leads between the lake and (usually) flooded rice fields. Much of the east side of

Ask at Yan Naing about catching an express, air-conditioned bus going between Yangon and Mandalay. A local bus leaves for Magwe at 4am.

You can also get a pick-up heading north to Meiktila (K1000, four to six hours).

Trains chugging between Yangon and Mandalay stop in Bago, Taungoo, Pinyinmana and Thazi. From here it takes 7½ hours to reach Yangon, and six to nine hours to reach Mandalay.

TAUNGGO

တောင်ငူ

☎ 054

Taungoo (often spelt Toungoo), once the centre of one of the most powerful post-Bagan kingdoms, is today worth a stop less for historic reasons and more for convenience and comfort (and a beautiful guest-house just outside town). The area is one of the few places where coffee is grown, and the only place in the country where the antiquated steam engines are repaired.

Virtually nothing visibly historic remains to indicate its former 15th- to 16th-century glory. Today it's simply a typical central Myanmar town supported by the timber trade.

Among Burmese, the town is most known for its bounteous *areca* (betel) palms. In Myanmar, when someone receives unexpected good fortune they are likened to a betel-lover receiving a paid trip to Taungoo.

Kayin State is less than 35km east, and another 65km or so further east is Kayah State. Karen and Kayah insurgents have been known to operate within these distances. A dry-weather road continues east all the way to Loikaw, but any travel beyond the Sittoung (Sittang) River a few kilometres to the east of Taungoo still requires special permission, which is virtually impossible to obtain.

Sights

SHWESANDAW PAYA

ရွှေဆံတော်ဘုရား

Situated in the centre of town, west of the main road, this is Taungoo's grandest **pilgrimage spot**. The central stupa, a standard-issue bell shape, is gilded and dates to 1597; local legend says an earlier stupa on the site was built centuries before and contains sacred-hair relics. A pavilion on the western side of the stupa contains a 3.6m bronze,

Mandalay-style sitting Buddha, given to the paya in 1912 by a retired civil servant who donated his body weight in bronze and silver for the casting of the image. He died three years after the casting at age 72; his ashes are interred behind the image.

Another pavilion in the northwestern corner of the compound houses a garish reclining Buddha surrounded by *devas* (celestial beings) and monastic disciples. Glass cabinets along the wall display small, mostly modern, religious objects and Buddhas donated by the faithful. Among the other *tazaung* (shrines) is one that displays sculptures of the seven Taungoo kings, a small Kuan Yin pavilion to placate the Chinese, a *nat* shrine with images of Saraswati and her attendants, and a Shin Upagot shrine.

MYASIGON PAYA

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Though not as well known as Shwesandaw, this is the most interesting of the three famous *zedi* in town. A brick *pahto* (hollow shrine or temple) beneath the stupa features glass mosaic arches, paintings of Taungoo kings and a huge, bronze-and-silver-faced sitting Buddha in royal attire. The image is surrounded by planet Buddhas (Buddhas for specific planets, corresponding to the days of the week), an arrangement usually reserved for stupas. Smaller Buddhas, some of them old, are displayed in glass cases in the same building. Opposite the large sitting image, against a couple of pillars, are two Chinese bronze goddess statues, one sitting on an elephant, the other on a Fu dog.

A small **museum** (admission free; ☎ 9am-4pm) on the grounds contains bronze images of Erawan (the three-headed elephant who serves as Indra's mount), a standing Buddha captured from Thailand by King Bayinnaung and two British cannons dated 1897.

ELEPHANT CAMPS

Taungoo is the starting point for visits to the nearby working **elephant camps** in a mountainous area of Karen villages and teakwood plantations. The Seinyay Forest Camp, once the most accessible, has since closed and will be completely submerged when the area dam project is completed. How far you get and how much you see depends on whether you're on a day-return

trip, or spending the night at a camp 'resort', or even in one of the villages.

It's cheaper to book a trip to a camp out of Taungoo than Yangon. Ask for Dr Chan Aye of the **Myanmar Beauty Guest House** (chan_aye@yangon.net.mm), who can arrange a day-return trip for US\$45/40 per person for two/three or more people. The price includes the necessary permits, return transport, a walk into the forest, an elephant ride, a lunch of rice and curry, and plenty of bottled water. Bamboo rafting and motorbiking in the jungle can be added for an additional fee. Overnight trips with a stay in either Shwe Daung or Ngwe Daug, both Karen villages, cost US\$125 per person for three or four people. The good doctor provides free medical service to villagers in the area.

A few travel agencies in Yangon book trips for about US\$100 a day, including Woodland Travel (p89).

Note: elephants work 6am to around 11am daily, later in the rainy and cool season, so an early start is essential if you want to see the elephants doing anything more than dreaming of very attractive elephants.

OTHER SIGHTS

In spite of the fact that seven kings reigned over Taungoo for a total of 155 years, all that's left of the secular kingdom known then as Kaytumadi are a few earthen ramparts and a moat on the western side of town. Nearby **Lay Kyaung Kandawgyi**, the town's 'royal lake', features a few small islands topped with pavilions.

Follow the road west of the lake to reach **Kawmudaw Paya**, said to be the oldest religious site in Taungoo. The central pink-and-white, bell-shaped stupa is not that impressive. A mirrored pillar marks the 'earth-conquering' spot from which Taungoo kings set off to conquer other armies. Worshippers walk clockwise around the pillar in the hope of conquering their personal problems.

Sleeping

Myanmar Beauty Guest House II, III & IV (☎ 23270, 23527; Pauk Hla Gyi St; fourdoctors@mptmail.net.mm; r US\$8-25; ☎) This place is reason enough to visit Taungoo. The guesthouse is owned by two doctors (husband and wife), Dr Tin Thein and Dr Yee Yee Aye, who seem to delight in conversing with international travellers. We had his most spectacular breakfast

ever here: almost two dozen small plates with every variety of sticky rice, samosas, sweets and exotic fruits. There are three separate teak homes, all with wide porches and gorgeous views of surrounding rice paddies, palm trees and mountains. The room furnishings are also all in teak, some with four-poster beds, satellite TV and hot-water showers. The nicest and largest rooms are the two on the 2nd floor of home number four. If arriving by public transport from Yangon, ask to be let off just after the bridge before town. It's only a few minutes' walk down a dirt road on the right-hand side of the highway.

Hotel Amazing Kaytu (☎ 21977; zayya@myanmar.com.mm; 8th St Ohtkyauattin; s/d US\$18/30; ☎) This modern hotel is comfortable, especially its beds, and has well-furnished rooms and TV. It's maybe the most upscale place in town, but it doesn't compare to the rustic chic of the Myanmar Beauty Guest House.

Myanmar Beauty Guest House I (☎ 23270, 23527; 7/134 Bo Hmu Pho Kun St; r with fan/air-con US\$5/8; ☎) To get here – the original Myanmar Beauty Guest House (also known as Myanma A-Hla) – from the main road through Taungoo, turn west before the Taungoo Baptist Church onto Bo Hmu Pho Kun St. It's one block north of the main market. All rooms have mosquito netting on request, and an excellent Bamar-Western breakfast is served. At the front of this compound is a clinic run by Dr Chan Aye – Dr Tin Thein and Dr Yee Yee Aye's son – and his wife, Dr Yi Lay Mon.

The decaying, government-owned Myanma Thiri Hotel is well off the eastern side of the main road towards the southern end of town.

Eating

Private Home Restaurant (dishes K1200) This restaurant down a small dirt road off the main highway is difficult to find, but the Chinese and Thai dishes are tasty, especially the soups, and meals are served in small outdoor bungalows.

Other recommendations for Bamar and Chinese cuisine:

Tin Tin Aye Myanmar Restaurant Look for the red-and-yellow Tin Tin Aye sign on the right side of the main road coming from Yangon.

Moekaungki Restaurant Around the corner from the Myanmar Beauty Guest House I.

Happy Restaurant On the main road near the turn-off for the Myanmar Beauty Guest House II, III & IV.

At the night market that convenes next to the central market, vendors specialise in chapatis and meat-stuffed *palata* (fried flat-bread).

Win Sanda and Sein Taik, near Nansanda Guest House (which doesn't accept foreigners) at the corner of the market, are two popular side-by-side teashops. One focuses on samosas, the other on *paug-si* (Chinese buns); they're both open from 5.30am to around 9pm.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Myanma Airways has an office in town and has flights connecting Taungoo and Heho (US\$35), which is close to Inle Lake, four days a week.

BUS

Taungoo is considered a midway point for road trips between Yangon, Mandalay, Kalaw and Taunggyi. Coming north from Yangon or Bago or south from Mandalay, Thazi, Kalaw or Taunggyi, if you want a seat on the most comfortable buses you'll have to pay the full K6000 or so fare even though you're hopping on/off at Taungoo. Most of these services pass through Taungoo between 6pm and 10pm. The seven-to-eight-hour bus to Kalaw arrives extremely early in the morning.

Most buses to Taungoo stop at the Golden Myanmar Restaurant on the main road. A few may also collect passengers near the central market.

Cheaper, but a lot less comfortable public buses without air-con are available to Yangon (K1700) and Mandalay (K2000) around 6pm daily. These buses can be flagged down anywhere along the main road or at the central market. Count on taking around 10 hours to get to either city. See p123 for bus departure times from Yangon.

CAR

Taungoo makes an great stopover if you've hired a car. If you have your own vehicle and are feeling adventurous, the 100km unpaved logging road from Oktwin (15km south of Taungoo) to Pakkaung provides a unique shortcut to Pyay. For the remaining 39km from Pakkaung to Pyay the road is sealed but not in good condition. This is a tiring, at least all-day trip; start early and bring at least one spare tyre, plus food and plenty of water. Dr Chan Aye (see p290) can make this trip with you in his Toyota Land Cruiser, including a one- or two-night stop in a village or jungle camp along the way (US\$180).

Forget about travelling east to Loikaw. The narrow road beyond the Sittoung River is now in relatively good condition, but military checkpoints will undoubtedly turn you away and there are reports of bandits in the mountains.

TRAIN

The 15 Up or 16 Down (same train) and the 17 Up or 18 Down (same train) are express trains. These trains, which run between Yangon and Mandalay, all stop in Taungoo. The 17 Up and 18 Down services are run by Dagon-Mann, a private company. Tickets for these trains aren't sold in Taungoo but your guesthouse can make reservations.

In the northerly direction, the No 17 Up to Mandalay (upper class US\$18) leaves Yangon around 8pm and arrives at Taungoo at around 3am; the No 15 Up departs at 11pm and arrives at 5am; and the No 7 Up leaves at 8pm and gets to Taungoo around 3am to 4am, and Mandalay around 11am. Step lively, as the train only stops in Taungoo for 10 minutes. Two other trains with much more civilised departure times (ordinary class only US\$7) leave for Mandalay at 3pm and 10pm and reach Mandalay in about seven hours.

All of these trains stop in Thazi, where you can then connect to a train or bus to Kalaw, or a bus to Nyaungshwe (Inle Lake).