



# Around Yangon

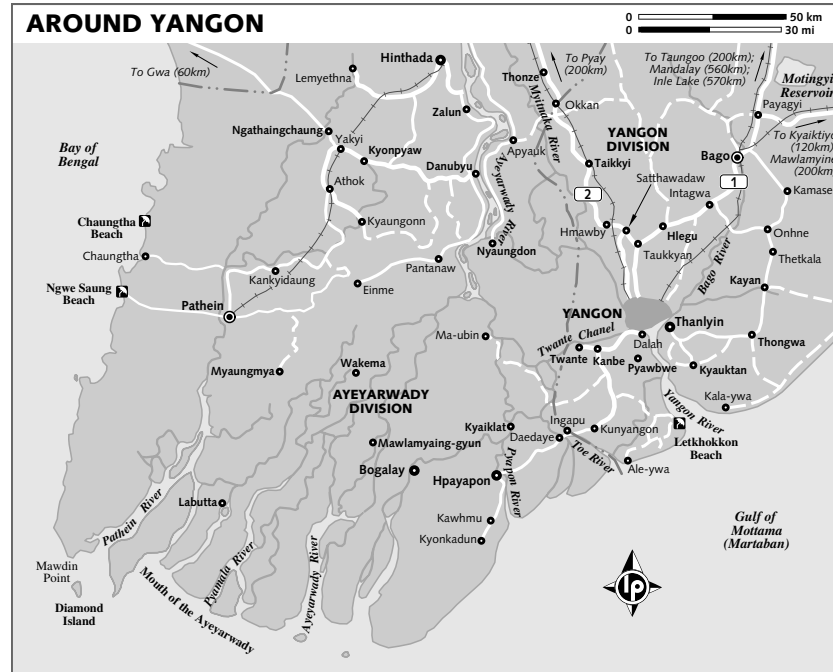
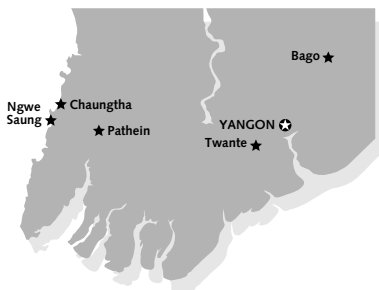
AROUND YANGON

The area around Yangon is a microcosm of the country as a whole. It offers magnificent temples, unspoiled beaches and little-visited villages clinging to the delta's muddy shores. Bago, just a short drive from Yangon, is the home of some fabulous Buddhist sights, including many huge Buddha statues. Pathein, the fourth-largest city in Myanmar, is hardly urban and receives few visitors, but is worth a visit before doing some good old sunbathing and maybe a bit of snorkelling in Chaungtha Beach or Ngwe Saung.

Travel around parts of the region can be slow and feel like a punch to the solar plexus. However, many parts can be seen on day trips or longer excursions from the capital. The vast delta is great for jumping on a ferry transporting local people between the capital and their waterlogged villages; you can spend the day bopping around a town in a horse cart and be back in your Yangon hotel in the evening if you so wish. But you'll be better off taking things a bit more leisurely; the region's true allure is only revealed through the smiles and perseverance of the local people you will meet.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- The white-sand beaches of **Chaungtha** (p135) and **Ngwe Saung** (p138) offer a vacation from your vacation
- Several gargantuan **Buddha statues** (p140) take it easy in Bago
- Life along the delta is a water world revealed by hopping on a ferry to **Pathein** (p134) or **Twante** (p129)
- Shade yourself from the sun with a **parasol** (p134) from Pathein
- A 115-year-old old boa constrictor at the **Snake Monastery** (p144) eats 5kg of chickens at a time in Bago



AROUND YANGON

## Getting There & Around

To the west, Pathein is the transport hub with buses and boats to/from Yangon and minibuses for getting to Chaungtha and Ngwe Saung, two popular beaches on the Bay of Bengal. A new bridge and ongoing road work have made these two destinations more readily accessible from Pathein.

Bago, easily reached from Yangon by bus or train, is a natural stop before heading north via Taungoo or south to Kyaiktiyo (Golden Rock) and beyond.

Getting to most other places mentioned in this chapter will require some patience, particularly if you take public transport. The southwest part of the region affords travellers the chance to ride the same river ferries that the locals use.

## DELTA REGION

Any trip in the delta area, which is criss-crossed by tributaries and canals and mostly flat vistas, drives home the region's vulnerability and reliance on water. One of

the most fertile regions of the country, this vast basin stretching from the Bay of Bengal coast across to the Bago Range receives the rich nutrients deposited by the Ayeyarwady (Irrawaddy), Bago, Yangon (Hlaing) and Pathein (Ngawan) Rivers.

This riverine network irrigates millions of hectares of farmland, making the delta essentially one of the 'rice bowls' of Myanmar. In addition, the estuarine environments along the coast provide much of the country's saltwater and freshwater fish harvest. Because of such natural abundance, the delta is one of Myanmar's most populated – and interesting – regions to explore.

Several communities in the coastal areas of this region felt the impact of the December 2004 tsunami and the majority of the resulting deaths reported by the government occurred here.

## THANLYIN & KYAUKTAN

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Though the religious sites in Thanlyin and Kyauktan across the river from Yangon aren't

particularly impressive, trips to the villages themselves reveal how far Yangon's relative cosmopolitanism and urbanity extends – that is, not very far. Although neither place is especially charming, they do make for an easy morning or afternoon escape from the hustle and bustle of the capital.

During the late 16th and early 17th centuries, Thanlyin was the base for the notorious Portuguese adventurer Philip De Brito. Officially a trade representative for the Rakhaing, he actually ran his own little kingdom from Thanlyin, siding with the Mon (when it suited him) in their struggle against the Bamar. In 1599 his private army sacked Bago, but in 1613 the Bamar besieged Thanlyin and De Brito received the punishment reserved for those who defiled Buddhist shrines – death by impalement. It took him two days to die, due, it is said, to his failure to take the recommended posture where the stake would have penetrated vital organs. Thanlyin continued as a major port and trading centre until it was destroyed by Bamar king Alaungpaya in 1756, after which Yangon took over this role.

## Sights

Although there is no longer any of this ancient city to be seen, Thanlyin is a relaxing place, with shaded streets and a busy market to stroll through. A short bus ride out of town will take you to the large, golden **Kyaikhauk Paya**, rising on a hillock to the north of the road. It's said to contain two Buddha hairs delivered to the site by the great sage himself. Most likely the first stupa on this hillock was erected by the Mon 600 to 800 years ago. If it's too hot to climb the stairs, you can always take the lift for K5. You can hire a horse cart to the paya for about K500 each way.

Much more interesting if only because it includes a short boat ride is **Yele Paya** (Midriver Paya; admission US\$1) at Kyauktan, 12km south-east of Thanlyin, where the road terminates at a swiftly moving, wide river. The paya (shrine) is appropriately named since the complex is perched on a tiny island in the middle of the river. In the temple there are paintings of other famous paya both in Myanmar and further afield. Pilgrims feed crumbs to the weirdly domesticated fish splashing about at the temple complex's edge. To reach the islet, catch one of the

launch ferries reserved for foreigners from the riverbank (K1500 return).

## Sleeping & Eating

About the only accommodation option, as none of the several guesthouses in Thanlyin proper are licensed to accept foreigners, is the **White House Restaurant & Guest House** (dishes about K700), a friendly place about 100m off the main road. The guesthouse serves good Chinese fare in a small air-conditioned café.

Near the ferry landing are several food vendors.

## Getting There & Away

The most convenient way to visit both Thanlyin and Kyauktan on the other side of the Bago River is to hire a taxi in Yangon (US\$10 to US\$15 for a half day). By taxi, it takes about 20 minutes to get to Thanlyin.

However, if you're passionate about Myanmar's uncomfortable local transport or are counting kyat, very slow minibuses to Thanlyin (K200, one hour, 25km) leave frequently throughout the day from a spot at the corner of Bogyoke Aung San and Lower Pazundaung Rds. It costs an extra K100 if you continue by minibus from Thanlyin to Kyauktan and the Yele Paya.

In Thanlyin, horse carts are a good way to get around.

## TWANTE

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If your time in the delta area is limited, Twante, a small town noted for its pottery, cotton-weaving and an old Mon paya complex, is a worthwhile day trip. There's a large market in the centre of town – really only a wide, dusty road lined with ramshackle wooden shops.

The journey to Twante is enjoyable, whether you go by hired jeep or ferry. The drive passes through leafy villages, where kids spill out from thatched huts to play. The ferry provides a glimpse of life on and along the famous Twante Canal, which was dug during the colonial era as a short cut across the Ayeyarwady Delta.

## Sights

### SHWESANDAW PAYA

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Standing at 76m tall, this Mon-built *zedi* (stupa), a kilometre or two south of the

canal, is just a few years younger than the one at Yangon's Shwedagon Paya. In a chicken-wire enclosure to one side is a casual display of ancient Twante pottery, plus religious and royal regalia from early Mon and Bamar kingdoms. One corner of the compound commemorates King Bayinnaung's (also spelt Bayint Nyaung) defeat of a local rebellion.

Along the western side of the *zedi* stand some old bronze Buddhas. Continuing counter clockwise, near the southern entrance you'll come to a 100-year-old sitting bronze Buddha in Mandalay style. Instead of focusing on the floor, the Buddha's eyes stare straight ahead.

From the ferry dock to Shwesandaw Paya, the cost is K250. A horse cart from Shwesandaw back to the dock is about K200.

## OH-BO POTTERY SHEDS

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Pottery is a major cottage industry in Twante, which supplies much of the delta region with well-designed, utilitarian containers of varying shapes and sizes. The pots are made in huge thatched-roof sheds in the Oh-Bo district south of the canal, about 15 minutes' walk from the dock.

Twante pots can be purchased directly from the sheds or, perhaps more conveniently, at the central market near the Twante ferry landing. However, transporting these mostly large and heavy objects to one's home potentially thousands of miles away is an iffy proposition.

Trishaws from the dock to the pottery sheds cost K200 per person.

## Getting There & Away & Around

The most accessible way to get to Twante from Yangon is via a short cross-river ferry and public jeep or pick-up ride. Pedestrian ferries from Pansodan St jetty (near the foot of Pansodan St and opposite the Strand Hotel) take passengers across the Yangon River to Dalah (US\$1, 20 minutes). In Dalah, catch one of the dark green jeeps or pick-ups that leave for Twante every 45 minutes or so throughout the day. Both leave only when completely full, so you can either secure a comfortable front seat early in the loading process or you can hop in the back of a vehicle that looks ready to leave. The ride takes 30 to 45 minutes and

the fare is around K300 or so for a front seat in a jeep; or about K500 for a front seat in a pick-up. Come prepared for a crush. Minibuses (K150) round out the possibilities.

Taxis between Dalah and Twante cost around K1500 one way per person. Most, though, are booked by entire families. For comfort and speed it's worth asking to share one.

The seemingly slower but more scenic trip along the Yangon River and the Twante Canal takes two hours – even though it's only 24km from landing to landing. Although there are several boats that pass by Twante on their way across the western delta, the most frequent departures are aboard Hpayapon-bound craft (ordinary/1st class US\$1/3). These leave from the Hledan Rd and Kaingdan St jetties in Yangon at 7am and 1pm daily; the latest return trip leaves Twante at 4pm.

When you add up the waiting times for the cross-river ferry/jeep departure versus the canal ferry, both modes of transport end up taking about the same amount of time from start to finish. A good way to vary the trip would be to do the more frequent ferry-jeep combo out to Twante, then catch one of the canal ferries back to Yangon around sunset when the waterways are the most picturesque.

Trishaws and horse carts are great ways of getting around town.

## AROUND TWANTE

Other interesting delta towns are **Labutta** and **Hpayapon**, both of which can be reached by long-distance ferry from Yangon. Finding accommodation is not a certainty in these places, so both are destinations for the adventurous.

Boats for Hpayapon leave from the Hledan Rd and Kaingdan St jetties in Yangon at 7am and 1pm daily and travel via Twante.

## LETKHOKKON BEACH

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Travelling to Letkhokkon, about four hours by taxi or jeep from Dalah, is no easy matter and in the end not much quicker than visiting the more beautiful beaches at Chaungtha and Ngwe Saung. Nevertheless, it is the closest beach to the capital.

Located in **Kunyangon** town, near the mouth of the Bago River, Letkhokkon is

a delta beach facing the Gulf of Mottama (Martaban), with powder beige sand and a very wide tidal bore that tends towards mudflats at its lowest ebb. Copious coconut palms along the beach help make up for the less-than-crystalline waters. The lack of clarity is part of the estuarial milieu here and doesn't mean the water isn't clean. At low tide the local kids like to stage mud fights.

An excursion to Letkhokkon is more than just a beach trip; it offers a glimpse of relaxed delta life. Along the way, the road passes by rice paddies, betel-nut gardens and several Kayin (or Karen) villages.

Adjacent to the main beach area, the village of Letkhokkon itself is a fairly typical seaside town that thrives on coconuts and fishing. Though the town itself isn't too interesting, there's a long beach nearby called **Anauntphettokan** (Westward-Moving Beach; named for its heavy sand drift). The beach can be approached by boat from Ingapu or other spots along the coastline. You can rent a launch for visiting these areas from the Letkhokkon Beach Hotel. The asking price is K3000 per hour, but this is negotiable for multihour hire.

As you approach Letkhokkon from the north, there's a two-lane, palm-flanked avenue leading off to the right where you'll see the **Letkhokkon Beach Hotel** (booking office in Yangon ☎ 01-224 346; 68 11th St, Lanmadaw Township, Yangon; s/d US\$38/45; 🏠), a tidy row of painted wooden beach bungalows. The hotel has spacious rooms with mosquito nets and private bathrooms. The power supply is unreliable, though. The hotel restaurant serves good seafood.

### Getting There & Away

Vehicle ferries (passengers US\$5, 15 minutes) cross the Yangon River to Dalah from Sin Oh Dan St jetty between 18th and 19th Sts in Yangon at 9am, 1pm and 5pm. The road between Dalah and Letkhokkon is in very poor condition in places. Count on close to four hours to complete the journey from Dalah without stops; more by public transport.

Expect to pay about K5000 each way to hire a car or jeep from Dalah to make the trip. Of course you could always hire a car and driver in Yangon; however, some drivers refuse to do the trip because the road is so hard on their vehicles.

It's not easy getting to Letkhokkon by public transport. First you must cross to Dalah via the Pansodan St jetty pedestrian ferry (US\$1, 20 minutes); departures are every 20 minutes, starting at 5am and stopping at 8pm. Ask around on the other side in the jammed lot next to the ferry terminal in Dalah to see if anyone's going to Letkhokkon; usually only a couple of vehicles a day do this route direct.

Once in Letkhokkon it's usually not difficult to find a vehicle heading back to Dalah.

## PATHEIN

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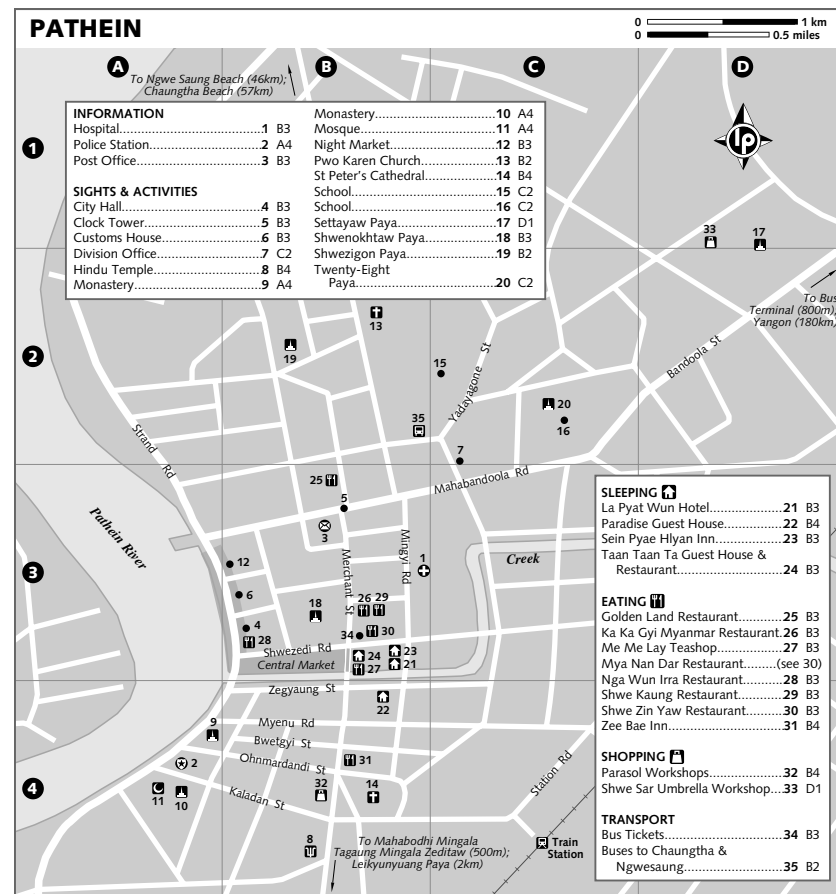
For the country's fourth-largest city Pathein seems compact and small. It receives few visitors so you're likely to draw lots of smiles and curious stares. Most travellers only stop off on their way to the beaches on the west coast, yet the workshops that produce colourful, hand-painted parasols, along with the shady, tree-lined village lanes to the northeast of the market, are worth a stroll, as is the bustling riverside road.

A boat trip between Pathein and Yangon along the river where large boats are laid up on the mud flats like dinosaurs taking their last gasp of air, is a rare window on the pattern and pace of the everyday lives of Burmese in the delta region.

Situated on the eastern bank of the Pathein River (also known as the Ngawan River) in the Ayeyarwady Delta, about 120km west of Yangon, Pathein is the most important delta port outside the capital, despite its distance from the sea. It is surrounded by a major rice-growing area that produces the best rice available in Myanmar, including a high-quality variety called *pawsanmwe t'amin* (fragrant rice). The growth of the delta trade, particularly rice exports, has contributed to a general air of prosperity in the city.

### History

The town is of some historic interest and was the scene for major clashes during the struggle for supremacy between the Mon and the Bamar. Later it became an important trade relay point for goods moving between India and Southeast Asia. The city's name may derive from the Burmese word



for Muslim – *pathi* – due to the heavy presence of Arab and Indian Muslim traders here centuries ago. The colonial Brits – or more likely their imported Indian civil servants – corrupted the name to Bassein.

Today, Pathein's population includes large contingents of Kayin (Karen) and Rakhaing. Although once part of a Mon kingdom, Pathein is now home to only a few Mon. During the '70s and '80s, the Kayin villages surrounding Pathein generated insurgent activity that has since generally calmed.

### Information

Despite the city being one of Myanmar's largest, there are no banks here offering foreign exchange and there are no Internet services.

### Sights & Activities

If you want to check out Pathein's parasol workshops, see p134.

The following sights don't charge an admission fee.

### SHWEMOKHTAW PAYA

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In the centre of Pathein, near the riverfront, looms the golden, bell-shaped stupa at Shwemokhtaw Paya. One legend says it was originally built by India's Buddhist king Asoka in 305 BC as a small stupa called Shwe Arna. Standing 2.3m tall, this original stupa supposedly enshrined Buddha relics and a 6in (15cm) gold bar. Another legend says a Muslim princess named Onmadandi

requested each of her three Buddhist lovers to build a stupa in her honour. One of the lovers erected Shwemokhtaw, the others the less distinguished Tazaung and Thayaung-gyaung paya.

Whichever story you choose to believe, Bagan's King Alaungsithu is thought to have erected an 11m stupa called Htupayon over this site in AD 1115. Then, in 1263, King Samodagossa took power, raised the stupa to 40m and changed the name to Shwemokhtaw Paya, which means Stupa of the Half-Foot Gold Bar.

The stupa's main shape has remained the same since Samodagossa's reign, although the changing of the decorative *hti* (umbrellalike decorated top) has increased the height to its present 46.6m. The current *hti* consists of a topmost layer made from 6.3kg of solid gold, a middle tier of pure silver and a bottom tier of bronze; all three tiers are gilded and reportedly embedded with a total of 829 diamond fragments, 843 rubies and 1588 semiprecious stones.

The southern shrine of the compound houses the **Thiho-shin Phondaw-pyi** sitting Buddha image, which supposedly floated to the delta coast on a raft sent from Sri Lanka during ancient times. According to legend, an unknown Sinhalese sculptor fashioned four different Buddha images using pieces from the original Bodhi Tree mixed with a cement composite. He then placed the images on four wooden rafts and set the rafts adrift on the ocean. One landed in Dawei (Tavoy), and is now housed at the Shinmokhti Paya; another landed at Kyaikkami (Amherst), and is now at Yele Paya; the third landed at Kyaiktiyo and is now at Kyaikpawlaw; and the fourth landed near Phondawpyi, a fishing village about 97km south of Pathein. In 1445 the Mon queen Shinsawpu purportedly had the latter image brought up to Pathein, then known as Kuthima.

A marble standing Buddha positioned in a niche in the fence running along the western side of the stupa marks a spot where Mon warriors once prayed before going off to battle. In the northwestern corner of the compound is a shrine dedicated to Shin Upagot, the Bodhisattva who floats on the ocean and appears to those in trouble. Turtles swim in the water surrounding the small pavilion.

### SETTAYAW PAYA

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Of the several lesser-known ones in Pathein, perhaps the most charming is this **paya** dedicated to a mythical Buddha footprint left by the Enlightened One during his legendary perambulations through mainland Southeast Asia.

The paya compound wraps over a couple of green hillocks that are dotted with well-constructed *tazaung* (shrine buildings) – altogether a nice setting and a change from the flat paya compounds near the river. The footprint symbol itself is the usual oblong, 1m-long impression and not very interesting. Very visible in the compound is a garishly painted 11m standing Buddha.

### OTHER RELIGIOUS MONUMENTS

One of the standard sights in town is the so-called **Twenty-Eight Paya**, a rectangular shrine building containing 28 sitting and 28 standing Buddha images – none of them are particularly distinguished except that the latter appear in the open-robe style rather than the closed-robe pose typical of Mandalay standing images. At one end of the hall stands a group of crude sculptures depicting a scene from the Buddha's life. It's a short walk from Pathein's main umbrella workshops. You may have to ask the caretaker to unlock the building.

More interesting from an artistic perspective is **Tagaung Mingala Zeditaw** (Tagaung Paya), centred around a graceful stupa that sweeps inward from a wide, whitewashed base to a gleaming silver superstructure. Look for the small squirrel sculpture extending from the western side of the upper stupa and representing a previous life of the Buddha as a squirrel. One of the pavilions at the base of the stupa contains a very large sitting Buddha image. Local legend says the stupa is the same age as Shwemokhtaw, but like other famous stupas in Myanmar, the truth is buried beneath several layers of royal renovations. The latest refurbishing was carried out in 1979. Tagaung Paya is about 3km south of Kaladan St, past the railway line.

West of Tagaung Paya, a little way towards the river, stands **Mahabodhi Mingala Zedi**, patterned after the world-famous Mahabodhi stupa in Bodhgaya, India. **Leikyunaung Paya**, a couple of kilometres directly south of Mahabodhi, was renovated by the

State Law & Order Restoration Council (Slorc), now the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), using forced labour in the early 1990s to create a facsimile of Ananda Paya in Bagan. Since the renovation few people outside the government worship here.

A kilometre or so northeast of Leikyunaung Paya is **Leimyetna Paya**, which features a large, but particularly ugly, sitting Buddha. Even aesthetically worse is the gaudily painted sitting Buddha at **Shwezigon Paya**, at the northern end of town.

### MARKETS

At the **night market** (Strand Rd) that is set up each evening in front of Customs House, teenagers cruise, flirt and hang out while vendors purvey food, clothing and tools and just about every other requisite for daily life at low prices. Just south of Shwemokhtaw Paya is the **central market**, and just south of that is a newer market, with all manner of goods. Both of these markets are closed on Sunday.

### Festivals & Events

The people of Pathein celebrate **Vesakha** (a celebration of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and passing away) with a huge *paya pwe* (pagoda festival) during the full moon of Kason (April/May). The festival is held at the Shwemokhtaw Paya.

### Sleeping

Most of the hotels' electricity supplies are at the mercy of the citywide rationing schedule, which means power generally is available from early evening to early morning.

**Taan Taan Ta Guest House & Restaurant** (☎ 22290; 7 Merchant St; s US\$5-7, d US\$6-10; 🍷) At five storeys, this centrally located hotel is one of Pathein's tallest. The Taan Taan offers simple, brightly painted and clean rooms with private bathroom. Larger and more expensive rooms with more sunlight are on the top floor.

**Paradise Guest House** (☎ 25055; 14 Zay Chaung Rd; r US\$10; 🍷) Another Pathein high rise, the Paradise is alongside the canal a block from the market. Rooms here are slightly more modern than those at the Taan Taan, ie they have TVs, though the low ceilings in some make it feel cramped. For late nights a karaoke lounge is attached.

**La Pyat Wun Hotel** (☎ 24669; 30 Min Gyi Rd; s/d US\$15/25; 🍷) This newcomer to Pathein is a squeaky clean all-white multistorey building. Rooms have private bathroom, hot-water shower and TV.

**Sein Pyae Hlyan Inn** (☎ 22985; 32 Shwezedi Rd; s/d US\$8/10; 🍷) A step down from the others, the Sein Pyae Hlyan is more austere, though the unadorned concrete rooms do have TVs and air-con.

Those hoping to avoid government-owned properties should steer clear of the Pathein Hotel, a two-storey building on spacious grounds near the bus station.

### Eating

Eating out in Pathein is limited to a few un-spectacular restaurants that do basic Bamar and Chinese.

**Shwe Zin Yaw Restaurant** (24/25 Shwezedi Rd; sweet & sour chicken K1300) Near Merchant St, this restaurant does Bamar and Chinese cuisine with good curries and soups.

**Ka Ka Gyi Myanmar Restaurant** (68 Mingalar St; meals K1000) Across from Shwemokhtaw Paya, this place offers fish, vegetable and meat curries.

**Golden Land Restaurant** (Merchant St; mains around K2000; 🍷 until 10pm) Just north of the clock tower, this restaurant has a nice, quiet, front-yard, open-air eating area. The menu is a wide-ranging mixture of Chinese and Bamar dishes, including some seafood. It's pricey by Pathein standards.

**Zee Bae Inn** (Merchant St; dishes K1000; 🍷 until 10pm; 🍷) Zee Bae is among the more well-known and longest-running Chinese places. It is a saloon-style, popular little place that has been serving large bowls of noodles and other Chinese dishes since the 1950s. The downstairs area opens onto the street, while upstairs there's an air-con dining room.

**Nga Wun Irra Restaurant** (cnr Shwezedi & Strand Rds; mains from K300; 🍷 until 9pm) It is a pleasant little dinner spot next to the night market down by the water. This simple place offers friendly service but, strangely enough, only chicken, pork and vegetable dishes – no seafood.

Other recommendations:

**Shwe Kaung Restaurant** (dishes K1000) On the same block as the Ka Ka Gyi.

**Mya Nan Dar Restaurant** (dishes K1000) This place is equally as good as the Shwe Kaung and serves tasty Bamar dishes.

## Shopping

Most of the ‘umbrellas’ made in Pathein are actually **parasols**; ie they aren’t waterproof, but are used to counter the hot delta sun. There are a few workshops scattered throughout the northern part of the city, particularly in the vicinity of Twenty-Eight Paya, off Mahabandoola Rd. The parasols come in a variety of colours; some are brightly painted with flowers, birds and other nature motifs. One type that can be used in the rain is the saffron-coloured monks’ umbrella, which is waterproofed by applying various coats of tree resin; a single umbrella may take five days to complete, including the drying process. Parasols and umbrellas can be ordered in any size directly from the workshops. The parasols are reasonably priced, even cheap, though Burmese seem to prefer foreign-made modern umbrellas. Several shops in Pathein sell cheaply made smaller parasols with bright, fluffy pompoms, not good for either decoration or protection from the elements.

Workshops welcome visitors who want to observe this craft.

**Shwe Sar Umbrella Workshop** (☎ 25127; frangi pani@myanmar.com.mm; 653 Tawya Kyaung Rd; ☎ 8am-5pm) This family-run workshop with high-quality work is just around the corner from the Settawyar Pagoda. If you decide to purchase these beautiful handiworks in bulk – you won’t find the same quality elsewhere, even in Yangon – they can be securely and conveniently packaged.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

Pathein has an airstrip out at the north-eastern edge of the city, but at the time of writing it didn’t field any regularly scheduled flights. However, newcomer Bagan Air (BA) was planning to start daily flights in the high season between Pathein and Yangon (US\$40, 25 minutes) and Heho (US\$88, one hour). There were also plans to link up with ground transport to Ngwe Saung Beach in order to compete with Ngapali as an easily accessible beach destination for high-end travellers.

### BOAT

**Inland Water Transport** (IWT; Map p98; in Yangon ☎ 01-284 055; Lan Thit jetty, Yangon) operates Chinese triple-decker ferries between Yangon and

Pathein. Ordinary class costs US\$7, and puts you on the open deck (with an easy chair if you get in early). For US\$42 you can get an air-conditioned cabin with private bathroom. These express boats leave Yangon’s Lan Thit jetty daily at 5pm, arriving the next morning in Pathein at 10am. Foreigners must buy tickets from the deputy division manager’s office next to Building 63 on Lan Thit jetty.

A more luxurious option worth every kyat is a river cruise aboard the **Delta Queen** (in Yangon ☎ 01-246 752; www.myanmar-rivercruises.com; 343 Bo Aung Kyaw St, Yangon; per person US\$170) between Pathein and Yangon (20 hours). All cabins are done in teak and there are two special ‘family’ rooms with large picture windows on three sides facing directly out the front of the boat. Both the dining area and lounge/bar area are tastefully done but the real highlight is the superb five-course dinner and ‘concert’ that the nine staff members put on for guests after dinner. During high season the Delta Queen generally makes one round trip a week.

### BUS

Buses to Pathein are available from Yangon’s Hlaing Thar Yar bus station, a 45-minute to one-hour taxi ride (K3000) west of the city on the other side of the Yangon (Hlaing) River. From here, there are several departures from 5am to 1pm to Pathein (three to four hours, 181km). The cost – depending on the standard of bus – can range from K1000 to K3000. Most are comfortable and have TV, reclining cushioned seats and air conditioning, though they probably won’t turn it on. You can buy same-day tickets for any of the departures or most hotels can arrange bookings for you. Be prepared to ask around, though there are usually enough ticket touts around to help you out and take their small commission.

Generally uncomfortable Thi Ha and Shwe Min Than minibuses ply the route from Pathein to Chaungtha Beach (K2500, 2½ hours, 58km); departures are 7am, 11am and 1pm from Pathein’s bus station on Yadayagone St. Ask your guesthouse if it’s possible to book a seat on the more comfortable Yangon–Chaungtha buses (see p138). You’ll be asked to pay the full fare but it’s worth it. This author experienced one of the most miserable bus rides of his miserable bus

ride–full life here; because of sacks of rice and vegetables piled on the floor there was no room for his legs to go except up to his chin for the entire 2½ hours.

Shwe Min Than buses take around 1½ hours to travel the 46km from Pathein to Ngwe Saung (K2500); departures are at 7am, 9am, 11am, 1pm and 3pm from Yadayagone St as well.

### TAXI

Share taxis for up to four people can be arranged from your hotel in Pathein for Chaungtha (K30,000), Ngapali (K100,000), Ngwe Saung (K30,000) and also Yangon (K40,000).

## AROUND PATHEIN

Horseshoe-shaped **Inye Lake**, 70km northeast of the city near the village of Kyonpyaw, is a favourite weekend picnic spot. Local fishermen sell fresh fish from the lake.

If you follow the Pathein River south till it empties into the Andaman Sea you’ll reach **Mawdin Point** (Mawdinsoun), the site of a famous festival during the lunar month of Tabodwe (February/March). On the sea side of the cape, at its point, is a sandy beach and the revered stupa of **Mawdin Paya**.

During the Mawdin Point festival there are special boats running from Pathein daily. Other times, boats go only once a week or so, leaving the main Pathein jetty around 6am and arriving at 2pm. Be aware that there’s no lodging licensed for foreigners at Mawdin, so this is strictly a trip for risk-takers. During the festival more guesthouses are open, which makes it the best time of year to attempt a trip.

There are some **elephant camps** in the area, providing visitors with an opportunity to see these pachyderms go about their daily work routine. The best places to organise a visit to one are at the hotels in Ngwe Saung or Chaungtha.

## CHAUNGTHA BEACH

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☎ 042

A trip to Chaungtha Beach, 40km west of Pathein on the Bay of Bengal, is a chance to experience what the Myanmar middle class does on vacation. The beach gets especially crowded on holiday weekends when local tourists are ferried in by the busload. No

matter what the time of year, beach activity is at its height in the afternoon when children take their first horse ride, freelance photographers comb the beach on the lookout for their next shoot, fully clothed families wade into the water en masse, teenage girls stroll hand in hand, and elaborate picnics are staged only to be broken up by the path of a wayward football from one of the many impromptu games.

As Western beaches go, the sand and water aren’t as pristine as nearby Ngwe Saung or Ngapali. At low tide the very wide beach has a touch of the ‘muddy delta’ look – though there is a gorgeous long, white-sand beach only a 15-minute walk north of town, where you’re likely to have the entire expanse to yourself save for the rare local or other foreigners scouting for privacy and a little shade. The village of Chaungtha itself is a few blocks of guesthouses, restaurants and souvenir shops selling T-shirts. There is a post office.

Most Chaungtha residents fish, or farm coconuts for a living; a couple of families also make furniture using rattan collected in nearby jungles. Many villagers speak the Rakhaing dialect.

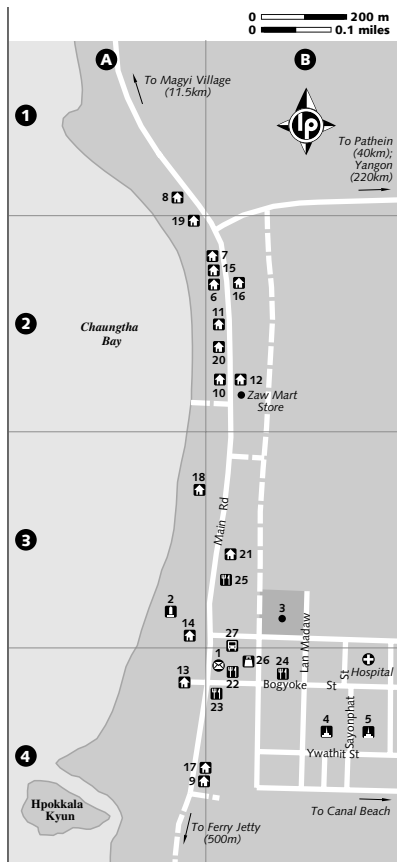
## Sights & Activities

The village **market** is most active from 6am to 9am. East of the main village area is a mangrove swamp and a canal beach with a wooden jetty. On the canal side of the peninsula are rickety stilted structures used by the villagers for drying fish.

### BOATING TRIPS

Offshore lies a modest coral reef with decent **snorkelling** except during the rainy season, when water clarity is poor. Snorkelling trips for up to six people cost K30,000 and can be booked through hotels. Several hotels can also rent the gear for K1000; there are a few small reefs in the waters to the north.

**Whitesand Island** can be explored in a day trip from Chaungtha Beach. A boat (K3000 one way, one hour) leaves for the island at 8am daily, returning at 5pm. There’s good swimming and snorkelling around the island, as well as a stall selling cold drinks and snacks, but there’s only three trees for shade. For more information, ask at any of the hotels or guesthouses in Chaungtha,



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accommodation. Few people from the interior visit during the southwest monsoon season, and traditionally all but a few hotels close down from 15 May to 15 September; those that remain open discount room rates. Because of a hotel building boom in recent years there's not much room left for further development. At the time of research there was talk of a new telephone system being installed in Chaungtha, so all the numbers listed may change in the near future.

### BUDGET

**Shwe Hin Tha Hotel** (☎ 24098, in Yangon ☎ 01-650 588; s US\$5-18, d US\$10-25; 🏠) The only beachfront hotel with budget prices, this is a popular backpacker choice. There are a number of friendly and eager English-speaking staff members, and more importantly it's located on the quiet end of the beach. The cheapest rooms are small blue wooden bungalows with private porches looking out onto the hotel courtyard. Larger, more expensive rooms have ocean views. There is a small library with foreign-language books. Kyaw Kgi (George) is a knowledgeable and friendly guide (george05@mail2world.com) or at the hotel. Shwe Hin Tha is the first hotel you pass coming from Patheingyi.

Several budget places set back from the beach are worth a look.

**Win Villa** (s/d US\$3/6) The clean but basic rooms in this attractive teak home are good value. The Win has a balcony on the 2nd floor, but there is no hot water. Breakfast is included.

Other options include **Mariner's Lodge** (s/d US\$5/10), with no-frills, hotel-style rooms; and the strange large, blue A-frame **Happy World** (s/d US\$5/10), with basic clean rooms but no hot water.

Not other budget-level guesthouses are clustered around the village. Among the cleanest and friendliest are **Discovery Inn** (s/d US\$3/6) and **Mayko Guest House** (s/d US\$5/10). Rooms at both come with a fan and private bathroom and have Western-style toilets. The Discovery Inn has four thatched bamboo bungalows.

### MIDRANGE

**Chaungtha Oo Beach Hotel** (☎ 22888, in Yangon ☎ 01-254 708; r US\$25-35; 🏠) Popular with UN and foreign-embassy staff, this hotel at the quiet northernmost end of the beach has large, bright blue-and-green chalets, each with delightful private porches. The more expensive rooms have hot water, and the complimentary breakfast is served in a pleasant all-wood wraparound porch.

**Grand Hotel Chaungtha Beach Resort** (☎ 23001; s US\$18-25, d US\$20-30; 🏠) It has nice, clean, well-kept rooms, modern bathrooms with bathtubs, private porches, all-white bungalows, attractive grounds and a restaurant on the beach. The more expensive rooms have seaside views.

**Golden Beach Hotel** (☎ 24126; r US\$10-25; 🏠) The big, bright beachside bungalows come with individual back and front porches, and comfortable, modern bathrooms. A pool is set in the middle of the attractive grounds. Cheaper rooms with fans are across the street in the new annexe. Some are US\$6 during the low season. There's a good Chinese restaurant attached.

**Linn Thit Sar Hotel** (☎ 22802; s US\$10-20, d US\$15-30; 🏠) It's unfortunate there's not more privacy on this part of the beach because the rooms at the Linn Thit Sar are clean and attractive. The more expensive rooms have air-con.

**Ambo Resort Hotel** (☎ 22903; s US\$18-20, d US\$20-25; 🏠) The Ambo doesn't especially

distinguish itself from its rivals, with similarly uninspiring bungalow rooms. More expensive ones have air-con. The waterfront restaurant serves some Thai dishes and is a perfect place to catch a sunset.

**Lai Lai Chaungtha Beach Hotel** (☎ 22587; lailai beach@lailaihotel.com.mm; s/d US\$18/25; 🏠) One of the oldest hotels in Chaungtha, this place is now a little frayed around the edges. Standard rooms have a fan and private bathroom. Superior rooms come with air-con, fridge and TV.

Other recommendations:

**A Yar Oo Resort Hotel** (☎ 24880; s US\$7-15, d US\$14-20; 🏠) Rooms here are not in the best condition. Higher priced rooms have air-con.

**See Seim Hotel** (☎ 22909; r US\$22) A sprawling place right on the beach with clean, bungalow-style rooms with fan and private bathroom. The rooms are a little gloomy. The hotel's restaurant is quite good.

**Thiri Chaungtha Beach Resort Hotel** (in Yangon ☎ 01-578 649; s/d US\$20/25; 🏠) Rambling place popular with Myanmar people.

### TOP END

**Hotel Max Chaungtha Beach** (☎ 24966; www.hotelmaxchaungthabeach.com; r US\$70-100; 🏠) This luxury resort appears somewhat out of place next to its more modest neighbours. The Max opened in 2003 directly across from the village. There's a long driveway to the portico entrance that reveals large red-roofed villas and landscaped grounds. Facilities include tennis courts, minigolf, billiards, massage parlour and spa. There's an excellent restaurant with nightly buffet dinners served outside.

### Eating

Most hotels and guesthouses also have small restaurants; the Shwe Hin Tha's is particularly pleasant. **William Restaurant** (dishes K1000), which does Bamar and Chinese cuisine – has two locations, one on the main road and the other in the village. The main street of the village is lined with seafood restaurants. Most offer mains of good freshly caught seafood – lobster, clams, scallops, prawns, and fish – for around K800 to K2000: Pearl Restaurant and Chaungtha Sea Food Restaurant are especially recommended.

There are also a few teashops along this strip, one of which opens early in the morning and serves decent *hsi t'amin* (turmeric-coloured sticky rice topped with sesame

or contact **U Tin Ohn** (☎ 24880), the island's Chaungtha-based manager.

Several hotels, including the Shwe Hin Tha (ask for Nay Min), can arrange fishing trips and provide all the necessary equipment for K20,000 to K30,000.

Ferry services to nearby villages along the canal are still available from the canal jetty.

### OTHER ACTIVITIES

You can rent canoes for about K700 a half-day, or bicycles for about K300 per hour or K500 a day, at hotels and guesthouses.

### Sleeping

Of all the beach destinations in Myanmar, Chaungtha offers the most affordable

seeds and shredded coconut) and other Bamar tea snacks.

## Getting There & Away & Around BICYCLE

Some hotels rent bicycles for K300 per hour.

## BOAT

The only way to get to Ngwe Saung Beach without first going through Pathein is to hire a boat in Chaungtha. This can be arranged with your hotel or simply by showing up at the pier, however the latter method is difficult without some ability to speak Burmese. The trip costs K25,000 for the entire boat and takes around 1½ hours.

## BUS

The rough 36km road between Chaungtha and Pathein can be traversed in two hours by private car; public minibuses and pickups usually take about 2½ hours. Several companies plan to run larger, nicer and more modern buses between the two towns in the near future. A new suspension bridge over the Pathein River does away with the previous ferry-crossing hassles and accompanying US\$5 fare between Pathein and Chaungtha or Ngwe Saung beaches. Parts of the road to Chaungtha are unsealed. The road passes through nearly-barren scrubland before crossing the U Do Chaung by bridge, and after that climbs forested hills to an elevation of around 300m. This area is said to be inhabited by elephants, monkeys and leopards; at one point you'll pass through a lush forest reserve. From there, the road descends into an area of coconut groves and rice paddies. Over half the villages passed along the way are Kayin.

For transport info on getting to Chaungtha from Pathein see p134. Uncomfortable minibuses leave from Chaungtha Beach for Pathein (K2500, 2½ hours) at 7am, 11am and 1pm from the bus station in the village.

Comfortable large air-conditioned buses (Shwe Pyi Lwin is the best company) leave from Chaungtha Beach for Yangon at 7am (K5000 to K6000, six to seven hours). Coming from Yangon, buses leave from Hlaing Thar Yar bus station to Chaungtha leaving several times daily in the morning until lunchtime.

It's theoretically possible to travel north via the town of Gwa all the way to Ngapali

without first having to go through Yangon and Pyay. It's apparently a demanding three-day journey on very local minibuses.

## TAXI

Share taxis for up to four people to Pathein (K30,000) and Yangon (K70,000) can be arranged with your hotel's assistance.

## NGWE SAUNG

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This beautiful white-sand beach, also known as Silver Beach, facing the Bay of Bengal is in the early stages of being developed and marketed as a rival destination to Ngapali further north. Several top-end bungalow-style resorts are already firmly established and several more are in the works, and few accommodation options cater for people on small budgets or local vacationers. The beach stretches much longer and is more pristine than nearby Chaungtha Beach. The village itself now sits roughly halfway along the length of the 14.5km stretch of coastline – the government ordered it moved lock, stock and barrel about 100m.

Several of the resorts can arrange day trips to an elephant camp halfway between Ngwe Saung and Pathein.

## Sleeping

Several luxurious resorts were in some stage of construction at the time of research. Continued progress for some seems to depend on the not-unimportant variable of having customers. The devastating 2004 tsunami was felt here, and despite the very minimal damage business appears to have been badly affected. There's no lack of space for further development but the government seems committed to controlling the pace, size and nature of the resorts – mostly top-end. The road gets progressively worse the further south one travels from the village to the point where only 4WD vehicles can safely navigate through the rough and sandy patches. Be aware that some hotels are located on this stretch of road. The phone system here is unreliable so it's recommended to contact the Yangon number if there is one.

## MIDRANGE

**Golden Sea Resort** (in Yangon ☎ 01-241 747; s/d US\$15/20) This is the cheapest place to stay in Ngwe Saung at the moment. The rooms in

the Golden Sea's small wooden bungalows are simply furnished. A basic breakfast is included.

**Yamonnar Oo Resort** (in Yangon ☎ 01-726 413; s/d US\$25/35) Not really a resort, the Yamonnar Oo has a few green wooden bungalows. The rooms are unadorned but clean.

**Silver View Beach Resort** (in Yangon ☎ 01-512 681 ext 318; s/d US\$20/25; 🏠) Rather than being rustically charming like others in this price category, the Silver View Beach is motel-like, and not especially suited to the beach. The rooms are relatively more modern, but the grounds are crowded with a decaying children's jungle gym.

**Yuzana Resort** (in Yangon ☎ 01-581 100; r US\$25-50; 🏠) Because of its size it's hard for the Yuzana to not feel abandoned. This hotel, the first built at the beach in 2000, has a large, hangarlike reception area and 133 rooms in low-slung buildings spread out in a large compound. It has a large terrace restaurant with good seafood.

## TOP END

**Treasure Beach Resort** (in Yangon ☎ 01-501 565; www.myanmar-treasurebeach.com; cottages US\$85-100; mains US\$8; 🏠 📺 📺) The nicest of all the resorts and occupying the best location just one minute's walk from the village, the Treasure Beach is also one of the oldest. It's very well managed, the grounds are meticulously manicured and the spacious bungalows have satellite TVs and porches ideal for sunset viewing. Reminiscent of a private, high-end Balinese resort, the Treasure Beach is sophisticatedly laid back. The restaurant serves reasonably priced European and Bamar meals. The breakfast buffet (part of the price) includes hard-to-find cereal and French toast.

**Palm Beach Resort** (in Yangon ☎ 01-581 100; www.thepalmbeachresort.com; r US\$60-80; mains US\$13; 🏠 📺) The beautiful, long and narrow central building at the upmarket Palm Beach, south of the village, leads to an infinity pool perched over the beach. The grounds here are unexpectedly unkempt. Its restaurant has an interesting but expensive menu. The hotel is closed from May to late October.

**Sunny Paradise Resort** (in Yangon ☎ 01-546 002; www.sunnyparadise.net; s US\$55-80, d US\$65-105; 🏠 📺 📺) This upscale resort north of the village is a compound of several buildings

including a few posh bungalow suites. All the rooms are classy and cosy, a mix of teak, bamboo and modern amenities. Palm trees tower over the manicured grounds and there's a large marble reception area.

## Eating

You'll have to generally rely on your hotel's cooking because most of the accommodation, apart from the Treasure Beach Resort, is too far from the village to make eating at one of the several restaurants there convenient. In the village, the See Sar Restaurant and Charlie Restaurant have English menus and serve seafood (K2000) and some standard Bamar and Chinese dishes.

## Getting There & Away & Around

See p134 for details on possible flights from Yangon and Heho to Pathein with transport links to Ngwe Saung.

Buses going from Yangon to Ngwe Saung (K5000, five hours) leave from the Hlaing Thar Yar bus terminal, west of the Yangon River and a 45-minute to one-hour taxi ride from the city centre. There are several departures from around 7am to 2pm.

Minibuses from Pathein (K2500, two hours) stop first at the intersection between the beginning of the village and the Treasure Beach Resort. If staying further south the bus should be able to drop you at your resort; conversely, you should be able to catch the bus leaving Ngwe Saung (7am, 9am, 11am, 1pm and 3pm) by waiting by the side of the road. If you're staying north of the village you'll have to hire transport or walk.

The upmarket resorts such as the Treasure Beach and Palm Beach offer van services to customers from either Pathein (1½ hours) or Yangon (four hours) – but the vans don't come cheap. Share taxis can be arranged for Ngwe Saung from Pathein (K30,000) and Yangon (K70,000).

There is no way to get to Ngwe Saung by road from Chaungtha without first going through Pathein. If coming by boat from Chaungtha (K25,000 for entire boat, 1½ hours) ask to be dropped off as close to your hotel as possible, though this is dependent on the tide and water depth at each location.

There are a few trishaws available to carry you short distances.

# NORTH OF YANGON

## TAUKKYAN

တောက်ကြံ့

On the road to Bago, beyond Yangon's airport at Mingaladon, you reach Taukkyan, where the road to Pyay forks off to the northwest, while the Bago and Mandalay road continues on to the northeast. Shortly beyond the junction is the huge **Taukkyan War Cemetery** with the graves of 6374 Allied soldiers who died in the Burma and Assam campaigns of WWII. There is also a memorial bearing the names of the almost 27,000 soldiers who died with no known grave. Maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, the cemetery is beautifully landscaped.

You can get to Taukkyan on a No 9 bus from Yangon or aboard any Bago-bound bus from either the Aung Mingalar Bus (Highway) Terminal or the Tha-khin Mya Pan-gyan Gate terminal (see p90).

## BAGO (PEGU)

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☎ 052 / pop 48,000

The logical first stop after leaving Yangon, Bago feels like an amusement park of fascinating Buddhist religious sites. It's very easy to do a day trip to Bago from Yangon, but shuttling from one site to the other makes it difficult to do any of them any justice. It's best to take your time and spend the night, although there's a lack of quality accommodation here. An early start to visit the sites is probably the best idea, as Bago can get very hot around noon.

Bago is only about 80km from Yangon, yet is just far enough off the beaten track to avoid many tourists. The town is like a clogged artery because the highway that passes through; buses slow to disgorge their passengers, and motorcycle and trishaw touts competing for your attention.

There is a very basic email service, Sitthugyi Email Centre, east of the river.

## History

Bago was reputedly founded in AD 573 by two Mon princes from Thaton, who saw a female swan standing on the back of a male swan on an island in a huge lake. Taking this to be an auspicious omen, they founded

## THE HAMSA

In deference to legend, the symbol for Bago is a female *hamsa* (*hintha* or *hantha* in Burmese; a mythological bird) standing on the back of a male *hamsa*. At a deeper level, the symbol honours the compassion of the male *hamsa* in providing a place for the female to stand in the middle of a lake with only one island. Hence, the men of Bago are said to be more chivalrous than men from other Burmese areas. In popular Burmese culture, however, men joke that they dare not marry a woman from Bago for fear of being henpecked!

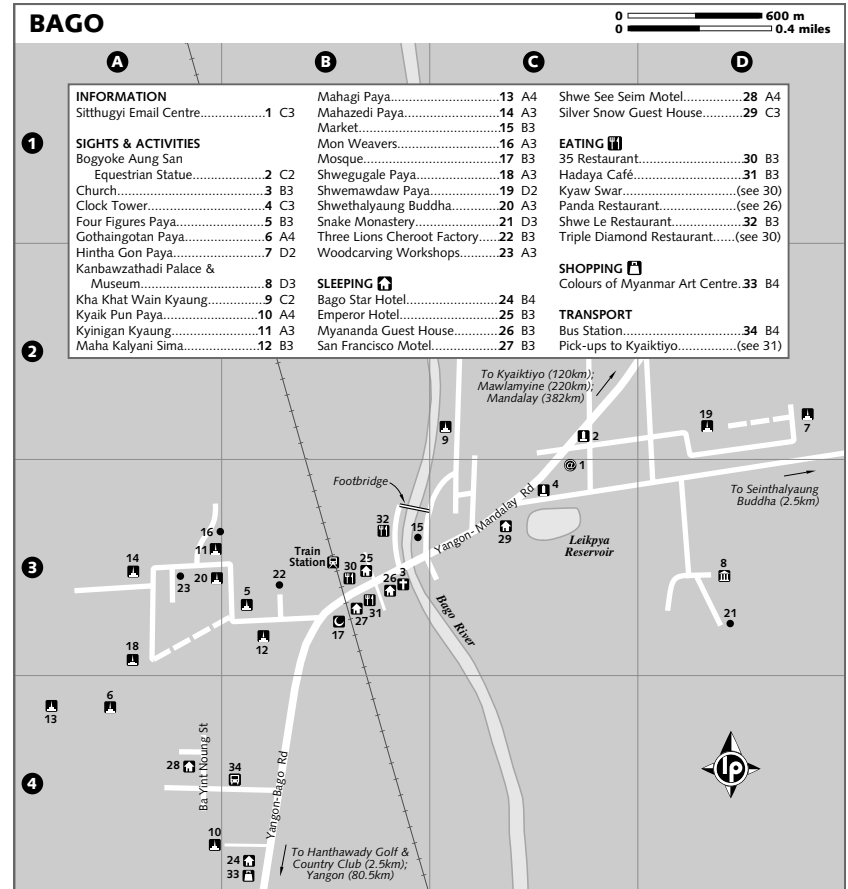
a royal capital called Hanthawady (from the Pali-Sanskrit 'Hamsavati', meaning the Kingdom of the Swan) at the edge of the lake. During the later Mon dynastic periods (1287–1539), Hanthawady became the centre of the Mon kingdom of Ramanadesa, which consisted of all southern Myanmar.

The Bamar took over in 1539 when King Tabinshwehti annexed Bago to his Taungoo kingdom. The city was frequently mentioned by early European visitors – who knew it as Pegu – as an important seaport. In 1740 the Mon, after a period of submission to Taungoo, re-established Bago as their capital, but in 1757 King Alaungpaya sacked and utterly destroyed the city. King Bodawpaya, who ruled from 1782 to 1819, rebuilt it to some extent, but when the river changed its course the city was cut off from the sea and lost its importance as a seaport. It never again reached its previous grandeur.

## Sights & Activities

Several of the major sites have ticket counters where foreigners are asked to pay a US\$10 admission fee. One ticket is good for entrance to the Shwethalyaung Buddha, Shwemawdaw Paya, Kanbawzathadi Palace & Museum, Mahazedi Paya and Kyaik Pun Paya. All other sites are free or staff request visitors to make a nominal donation. We are not recommending this, but several travellers report not being asked to pay admission when visiting certain sites in the late afternoon. Most sites have a separate nominal camera and video fee. They are open from early in the morning to late in the afternoon.

## BAGO



Bago is upping the ante in the race for bigger and longer Buddhas. A 60m to 70m one is in the works scheduled to be completed sometime in 2006. Whether complete or still eerily surrounded by scaffolding, you can find it in a clearing next to the Myethalayaung (Emerald Reclining) Buddha.

Mr Han, a knowledgeable guide who speaks excellent English, can be found at the Myananda Guest House (see p144) or contacted at sitthugyi@myanmar.com.mm.

## SHWETHALYAUNG BUDDHA

ရွှေဘလောက်ဘုရား

This reclining Buddha is so big that from looking up from the bottom steps it's impossible to determine exactly what's ahead

of you. The golden slab you see is only the torso. Measuring 55m long and 16m high, the Shwethalyaung is a good 9m longer than the reclining Buddha at Wat Pho in Bangkok, but still 19m short of the Buddha in Dawei (see p163). You'll find the Shwethalyaung to the west of the Yangon-Bago road, only a little more than 1km to the Yangon side of the train station. A sign on the platform in front of the image gives the measurements of each body part; the little finger alone extends 3.05m.

The Shwethalyaung is reputed to be one of the most lifelike of all reclining Buddhas. The Burmese say the image represents Buddha in a 'relaxing' mode – instead of *parinibbana* (death) – since the eyes are

AROUND YANGON

AROUND YANGON



wide open and the feet lie slightly splayed rather than parallel.

The sturdy iron shed that houses the image may look rough and ready, but it's spacious and airy and gives you a far better view than offered by the cramped cells that house most reclining Buddhas. The walkway up to the platform is crowded with souvenir and handicraft stalls.

Originally built of brick and stucco in 994 by the Mon King Migadepa II, the Shwethalyaung was allowed to deteriorate and was then restored several times before the destruction of Bago in 1757. The town was so completely ravaged that the huge Buddha was totally lost and overgrown by jungle. It was not found until the British era of the 1880s when an Indian contractor, digging in a large earth mound for fill to be used in the construction of the railway line, rediscovered the image. Restoration began in 1881 and the present iron and steel *tazaung* (shrine building), a product of a Calcutta engineering company, was completed in 1903. The 1930s saw another flurry of renovation activity, as a mosaic was added to the great pillow on which the Buddha's head rests, and Italian marble was laid along the platform.

Near the huge head of the image stands a **statue of Lokanat** (Lokanatha or Avalokitesvara), a Mahayana Buddhist deity borrowed by Burmese Buddhism. Behind the reclining Buddha image is a set of huge painted reliefs depicting the legend of the founding of the image. The price of admission is worth it.

A Japanese war cemetery, **Kyinigan Kyaung**, can be seen on the grounds of a monastery just north of Shwethalyaung.

#### SHWEMAWDAW PAYA

ရွှေမာစောဘုရား

Shwemawdaw Paya stands northeast of the train station. You can't miss the stupa, as its height of 114m dominates the town. The Shwemawdaw is said to be over 1000 years old and was originally built by the Mon to a height of 23m to enshrine two hairs of the Buddha. In 825 it was raised to 25m and then to 27m in 840. In 982 a sacred tooth was added to the collection; in 1385 another tooth was added and the stupa was rebuilt to a towering 84m. In 1492, the year Columbus sailed the Atlantic, a wind blew

over the *hti* (umbrella-like pinnacle) and a new one was raised.

King Bodawpaya, in the reconstruction of Bago after the ravages of Alaungpaya, rebuilt the stupa to 91m in 1796, but from that point it has had a rather chequered career. A new *hti* was added in 1882, but a major earthquake in 1912 brought it down. The stupa was repaired, but in 1917 another major quake again brought the *hti* down and caused serious damage. Again it was repaired, but in 1930 the biggest quake of them all completely levelled the stupa and for the next 20 years only the huge earth mound of the base remained.

Reconstruction of the Shwemawdaw Paya commenced in 1952 and was completed in 1954, when it reached its present height. The glittering golden top of the stupa reaches 14m higher than the Shwedagon in Yangon. At the northeastern corner of the stupa, a huge section of the *hti* toppled by the 1917 earthquake has been mounted into the structure of the stupa. It is a sobering reminder of the power of such geological disturbances.

Like the Shwedagon in Yangon, the stupa is reached by a covered walkway lined with stalls – some with interesting collections of antique bits and pieces. Along the sides of the walkway a collection of rather faded and dusty paintings illustrates the terrible effects of the 1930 earthquake and shows the subsequent rebuilding of this mighty stupa.

#### KANBAWZATHADI PALACE & MUSEUM

ကမ္ဘောဇသာဒီ / နန်းတော်နှင့်ပြတိုက်

Recently, the original site of Hanthawady, which surrounded a former Mon palace, was excavated just south of the huge Shwemawdaw Paya. Walled in the Mon style, the square city measured 1.8km along each side and had 20 gates. The palace compound in the centre, known as Kanbawzathadi, housed King Bayinnaung from 1553 (or 1566 according to some sources) to 1599 and covered 82 hectares. About 26 hectares of this area have been excavated. Bayinnaung, the brother-in-law of a Taungoo king, moved to Bago after conquering an older Mon principality called Oktha-myo, which is east of the Hanthawady site.

Only the palace's brick foundations are visible today. Everything else is being built

anew, as at the Mandalay Palace, including the king's apartment and audience hall. Among other copied marvels, the original audience hall featured a seven-level roof, two levels higher than Mandalay Palace, and was topped with solid gold tiles. The government is keen to make the site into a showpiece of sorts, as King Bayinnaung ruled during an era when Burmese domains reached their furthest in Southeast Asia. The nearby Mon site of Oktha-myo, meanwhile, is all but ignored.

The small, well-stocked, octagon-shaped museum displays Mon, Siamese and Bagan-style Buddhas; clay tobacco pipes; glazed tiles and pots; bronze weights and scales; pieces of the original teak stockade; and weaponry.

#### HINTHA GON PAYA

ဟင်္သာကုန်းဘုရား

Located behind the Shwemawdaw, this **shrine** (admission free) has good views over Bago from the roofed platform on the hilltop. According to legend, this was the one point rising from the sea when the mythological bird (the *hintha* or *hamsa*) landed here. A statue of the bird, looking rather like the figures on opium weights, tops the hill. The stupa was built by U Khanti, the hermit monk who was also the architect of Mandalay Hill. You can walk to it by taking the steps down the other side of the Shwemawdaw from the main entrance.

#### KYAİK PUN PAYA

ကျိုက်ပွန်ဘုရား

There's something uncannily impressive about these four seated Buddhas with regal gazes that seem to see all, about 1.5km out of Bago just off the Yangon road. Built in 1476 by King Dhammazedi, it consists of four 30m-high sitting Buddhas placed back-to-back around a huge, square pillar. According to legend, four Mon sisters were connected with the construction of the Buddhas; it was said that if any of them should marry, one of the Buddhas would collapse. One of the four Buddhas disintegrated in the 1930 earthquake, leaving only a brick outline. It has since been fully restored.

En route to the Kyaik Pun Paya, you can detour to the picturesque **Gaung-Say-Kyan Paya**, reached by crossing a wooden bridge over a small lake.

#### MAHA KALYANI SIMA (MAHA KALYANI THEIN)

မဟာကလျာဏီသိင်္ဂ

This 'Sacred Hall of Ordination' was originally constructed in 1476 by Dhammazedi, the famous alchemist king and son of Queen Shinsawpu. It stands beside the road en route from the train station to the Shwethalyaung. It was the first of 397 similar *sima* (ordination halls) he built around the country, copying plans brought back from Sri Lanka. Philip De Brito, the renegade Portuguese adventurer, burnt it down in 1599 during his period of plunder, and during the sacking of Bago in 1757 it was destroyed once again.

Subsequently, it suffered from fires or quakes on a number of occasions before being levelled by the disastrous 1930 quake. As with the Shwemawdaw, reconstruction was completed in 1954. Next to the hall are 10 large tablets with inscriptions in Pali and Mon. The hall itself features rows of tented arches around the outside, with an impressive separate cloister and marble floors inside. Niches along the inside upper walls contain 28 standing Buddha images.

Across the road from the Maha Kalyani Sima, by the corner, is a curious monument, the **Four Figures Paya**, with four Buddha figures standing back to back, in somewhat similar fashion to the four seated Buddhas at the Kyaik Pun on the outskirts of town. An adjacent open hallway has a small reclining Buddha image, thronged by followers, and some macabre paintings of wrongdoers being tortured in the afterlife.

#### MAHAZEDI PAYA

မဟာဇေတီဘုရား

Continuing beyond Shwethalyaung Paya brings you to the Mahazedi (Great Stupa) Paya. Originally constructed in 1560 by King Bayinnaung, it was destroyed during the 1757 sacking of Bago. An attempt to rebuild it in 1860 was unsuccessful and the great earthquake of 1930 comprehensively levelled it, after which it remained a ruin. This current reconstruction was only completed in 1982. Stairways lead up the outside of the stupa, and from the top there are fine views over the surrounding area. Note the model stupa by the entrance.

The Mahazedi originally had a Buddha tooth, at one time thought to be the actual

Buddha tooth of Kandy, Sri Lanka. After Bago was conquered in 1539, the tooth was later moved to Taungoo and then to Sagaing near Mandalay. Together with a begging bowl supposed to have been used by the Buddha, it remains in the Kaunghmudaw Paya (p254), near Sagaing, to this day.

Women are not allowed to climb to the top of the stupa.

### SHWEGUGALE PAYA

ရွှေဂူတလေးဘုရား

A little beyond the Mahazedi, this zedi has a dark *gu* (tunnel) around the circumference of the cylindrical superstructure. The monument dates to 1494 and the reign of King Byinnya Yan. Inside are 64 seated Buddha figures. From here you can take a short cut back to the corner in the road, just before the Shwethalyaung.

### OTHER ATTRACTIONS

North of the main town centre, near the eastern bank of the river, is one of the three largest monasteries in the country, **Kha Khat Wain Kyaung**. Watching the long line of monks and novices file out of the monastery in the early morning for their daily round of alms is quite a sight. Busloads of tourists visit the monks at lunchtime at 10.30am. You're free to wander around the eating hall but we recommend that you be cognisant of the kind of atmosphere created by groups of foreigners snapping photos of the monks like caged animals in a zoo while they eat their meal in silence.

A short distance further south from the Kanbawzathadi Palace & Museum is the **Snake Monastery**, where you'll find a former head of a monastery in Hsipaw who has since been reincarnated in the form of a 115-year-old boa constrictor. Apparently this snake told its owner up north the exact address where he needed to go in Bago in order to complete the construction of a stupa begun in a previous life. People from all over come to pay homage to the snake on weekends and during Buddhist Lent. Every 10 days it eats 5kg of chickens. There's a **zedi** nearby on a small hilltop that's great for watching sunsets.

Many Bago women work in local cheroot factories – there are around 15 large ones, and many smaller ones. The **Three Lions cheroot factory** is a little north of the

road to Shwethalyaung, off the main avenue through town; the proprietors don't mind receiving visitors. Further west, towards Mahazedi Paya, you can visit a **woodcarving workshop**.

### Festivals & Events

On the full moon of the Burmese lunar month of Tagu (March/April) the **Shwemawdaw Paya festival** attracts huge crowds of worshippers and merrymakers.

### Sleeping

The quality of accommodation reflects the fact that many travellers visit Bago only for the day. Most options are on the busy main road between the railway line and the river near the place where buses to and from Yangon stop, so rooms towards the back of these hotels are quieter. Electricity is generally available only from the evening to early morning. Cheaper rooms only have fans.

**Bago Star Hotel** (☎ 23766; 11-13 Kyaikpon Pagoda Rd; s/d US\$24/30; 🏠 🚶 🚲) The Star, the nicest and most expensive hotel in Bago, is located just off the highway on the same road as the Kyaik Pun Paya. Almost all the hotel is built from Myanmar wood. Accommodation is in wooden bungalows that have hot-water showers. Generators keep the air-con humming. The pool, while not especially smart, does the job in the searing heat. A nice, large restaurant is attached. Discounts are available.

**Myananda Guest House** (☎ 22275; 10 Main Rd; r US\$4-10; 🏠 🚶 🚲) This is the best budget choice; it's small and friendly and on the main road a few doors towards the river from the Hadaya Café (see opposite). Economy rooms have fan, shared bathroom and toilet. One triple room has air-con, fridge, TV and attached cold-water bathroom. Plans were in the works to add a few more rooms and a breakfast area on the sun-drenched top floors. English-speaking Mr Han, a knowledgeable guide, can be found here.

**Emperor Hotel** (☎ 23024; Main Rd; r US\$3-7; 🏠 🚶 🚲) The Emperor looks modern and nice from the outside, decked out in reflective glass and potted plants, but this six-storey hotel is a different story inside. Standard rooms, some with Asian-style toilet and bath, tend to be dank and with peeling paint jobs. Touts from here are generally more aggressive than others in town.

**San Francisco Motel** (☎ 22265; Main Rd; s/d US\$5/8; 🏠 🚶 🚲) Further southwest near the railway crossing, this motel has single and double rooms both with shared or private toilet. Double rooms in the new wing (west) are cleaner and brighter looking.

**Silver Snow Guest House** (s US\$5-15, d US\$10-20) This guesthouse is across the Bago River, near the reservoir and clock tower. It has clean economy rooms, as well as rooms with private bathroom. There is no air-con, but all rooms have a fan and a mosquito net upon request.

**Shwe See Seim Motel** (☎ 22118; 354 Ba Yint Nong St; s/d US\$24/30; 🏠 🚶 🚲) The Shwe See Seim is a nine-room place near the bus station that is slightly fancier than all but the Bago Star. Bungalow units and regular rooms cost the same. There is a small and fairly dirty pool.

Travellers keen to avoid government-owned hotels should bypass the Shwewatun Hotel, out towards the Shwemawdaw Paya.

### Eating

**Panda Restaurant** (dishes K800; 🏠 🚶 🚲) Just west of the river, the Panda offers a good, medium-priced, standard Chinese menu.

**Shwe Le Restaurant** (chicken dishes K1100) This is a clean and quiet gem half a block north of the main road, just west of the river. The menu features Shan, Indian and Malaysian curries.

**35 Restaurant** (dishes K1000; 🏠 🚶 🚲) A friendly but shabby place a few doors west of the Emperor Hotel, this is a popular eatery and not a hotel. The menu is a combination of Bamar, Chinese, Indian and European; the food is cheap and good, and the menu includes 'goat fighting balls' (goat testicles), prepared in a number of ways.

Opposite the Emperor Hotel, the Hadaya Café is a popular teashop with a nice selection of pastries, and good-quality tea and coffee.

Two more restaurants serving good Bamar and Chinese are the Triple Diamond Restaurant and Kyaw Swar.

### Shopping

Northwest of the Kyinigan Kyaung, a settlement of Mon weavers uses handlooms to produce cotton *longyi* (sarong-style garments) and other textiles.

Next door to the Bago Star Hotel is the **Colours of Myanmar Art Centre** (🕒 8am-5.30pm),

which sells paintings by local artists at inexpensive prices.

### Getting There & Away

You can get to Bago by either rail or road; in either case the trip takes about 2½ hours. By road, the route to Bago follows the Mandalay road to Taukkyan, about 30km from the capital, where the Pyay road branches off. From here to Bago the country is much more open and the traffic somewhat lighter.

### BUS

Wait outside the Myananda Guest House for buses passing through Bago.

### Southeastern Myanmar

Pick-ups to Kyaiktiyo depart from in front of Hadaya Café (K500, five hours). Buses to Kyaiktiyo leave throughout the day from near the Emperor Hotel, and cost around K800 to K1000 one way. Buy a ticket on the bus rather than from the ticket booth next to the Emperor Hotel, which charges an inflated K1500 or so.

Several buses pass through Bago from 8am to 9am on their way to Hpa-an (K2500, five hours).

Until the bridge over the river was recently completed, to reach Mawlamyine by bus you had to go through Hpa-an or transfer to the ferry at Mottama. At the time of research, the bridge wasn't open for use; however, in the future the schedule will likely be similar to that for Mottama. A few buses pass through Bago for Mottama at 8am and then at 9pm (K3000, nine hours).

### Taungoo & Inle Lake

Several buses pass through Bago from 5pm to 6.30pm on their way to Kalaw (K6000, 12 hours).

Air-con buses from Bago to Nyaungshwe (K2000) leave at around 1.30pm from near the Myananda Guest House and Emperor Hotel. The trip takes about 16 hours – unfortunately, this means arriving in Inle Lake at around 4.30am. It's worth noting that this bus trip can get quite chilly, and some warm clothing or a blanket is recommended.

For Taungoo, make reservations on any of the northbound buses, including those heading to Nyaungshwe (Inle Lake), Kalaw and Mandalay. You will have to pay the full fare of K5500 (4½ hours).

**Mandalay**

Most of the private bus companies running air-conditioned express buses between Yangon and Mandalay stop in Bago. While they usually won't sell tickets for the short distance between Yangon and Bago, you can book tickets from Bago onward to Mandalay – for the full Yangon–Mandalay fare (around K5000). The Mandalay buses usually arrive in Bago by 7pm; inquire at the Bago bus station or the travel desk in the lobby of the Emperor Hotel.

**Yangon**

Buses from Yangon (K500 to K1000) operate approximately hourly from 5am or 6am and depart from the Aung Mingalar (Highway) bus terminal (p86) north of the airport. GEC Bus Company and Taung Hta Ban Company both make the two-hour trip in relative comfort. Pick-ups and smaller buses (K300, front seat K500) depart from the Tha-khin Mya Pan-gyan Gate terminal on Strand Rd near the Western Park Restaurant in Yangon, but they can often take as long as four hours as they stop and start so often. Avoid travelling on Sunday, however, when Bago is a very popular excursion from Yangon and the buses get very crowded.

**TAXI**

A more expensive but more convenient alternative is to hire a taxi from Yangon. A taxi between Yangon and Bago should cost about US\$15 to US\$20 each way, with a bit of bargaining – and has the additional advantage of giving you transport from place to place once you get to Bago. One-way taxis back from Bago to Yangon can be had for as low as K8000. To hire a taxi in Bago, enquire at any Bago hotel.

Some drivers may feel that getting you to Bago and back, and to the two big attractions – the Shwemawdaw and the Shwethalyaung – is quite enough for one day. Don't accept excuses that other sites are 'too far off the road', are down tracks 'only fit for bullock carts' or are simply 'closed'. Choose a driver with reasonable English-language skills in Yangon.

If you hire a taxi in Bago, be sure that your driver agrees to drop you in Yangon at your hotel.

A guide and driver to Mt Kyaikto (for the Kyaiktiyo (Golden Rock) stupa; p149) can be hired through any of the central Bago hotels for around US\$25 return. The same tour booked in Yangon costs US\$80.

**TRAIN**

It is possible to visit Bago by breaking the Yangon to Mandalay train journey here. During the high season (November to February), it is wiser to do this coming down from Mandalay rather than going up from Yangon, because of the difficulties of getting a seat from Bago to Mandalay; from Bago to Yangon you could easily stand, or wait for another train or change to the bus.

Trains from Yangon come through Bago for Mandalay at 6.50pm and 9pm (ordinary/1st class US\$11/29, 14 hours). It's possible to take either of these trains to Taungoo (ordinary/1st class US\$4/8, four hours).

From Yangon, there are about six trains a day from around 6am to 8pm (ordinary/1st class in express train US\$2/5). Trains leave Bago for Yangon (ordinary/1st class US\$2/5, two hours) at 5am and 8am.

Southbound trains come through Bago on their way to Kyaiktiyo (ordinary/1st class US\$3/6, four hours) and Mottama (the stop for Mawlamyine) at 6am and 8.45am (ordinary/1st class US\$6/14, eight hours). These are not express trains and, as usual, the buses are faster.

**Getting Around**

Trishaw is the main form of local transport in Bago. A one-way trip in the central area should cost no more than K300. If you're going further afield – say from Shwethalyaung Buddha, at one end of town, to Shwemawdaw Paya, at the other – you might as well hire a trishaw for the day (about K2500 to K3000). Horse carts are another option (K4000 to K5000 for a day). It's also possible to rent a motorcycle for the day (K7000), a much more liberating and convenient way of travelling between all of Bago's far-flung sites. Ask at your guesthouse.

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