

Northeastern Myanmar



From the muddy crawl of the Ayeyarwady River to the rapids rolling down from the Himalaya, and then on to the watery vision of Inle Lake and the switchback roads that carve through mountain passes, revealing hills and rice paddies on the other side, this geographical and culturally diverse landlocked region is a world unto itself.

Large swaths of this territory, extending from Tibet in the north to Thailand in the south, and encompassing Shan, Kachin and Kayah states, remain unexplored by foreigners, as they're officially off limits or simply too demanding to access for many.

For the most part, people live in the valleys formed by the Ayeyarwady and Thanlwin Rivers and their tributaries, which divide Kachin and Shan States down the middle. Because the northeast is home to so many different ethnic groups, including the Bamar, Shan and Kachin, with significant populations of Wa, Padaung, Kokang, Atsi, Jinhaw, Lahsi, Lisu and dozens of smaller minorities, travelling here is special just for the opportunity to socialise with your fellow passengers on those slow-moving boats, buses and trains crawling through the interior of Myanmar.

The best way to visit the multitude of ethnic groups is on foot, and the region abounds with fantastic trekking destinations – Kalaw, Inle Lake, Hsipaw, Namhsan, Kengtung and Putao just for starters.

HIGHLIGHTS

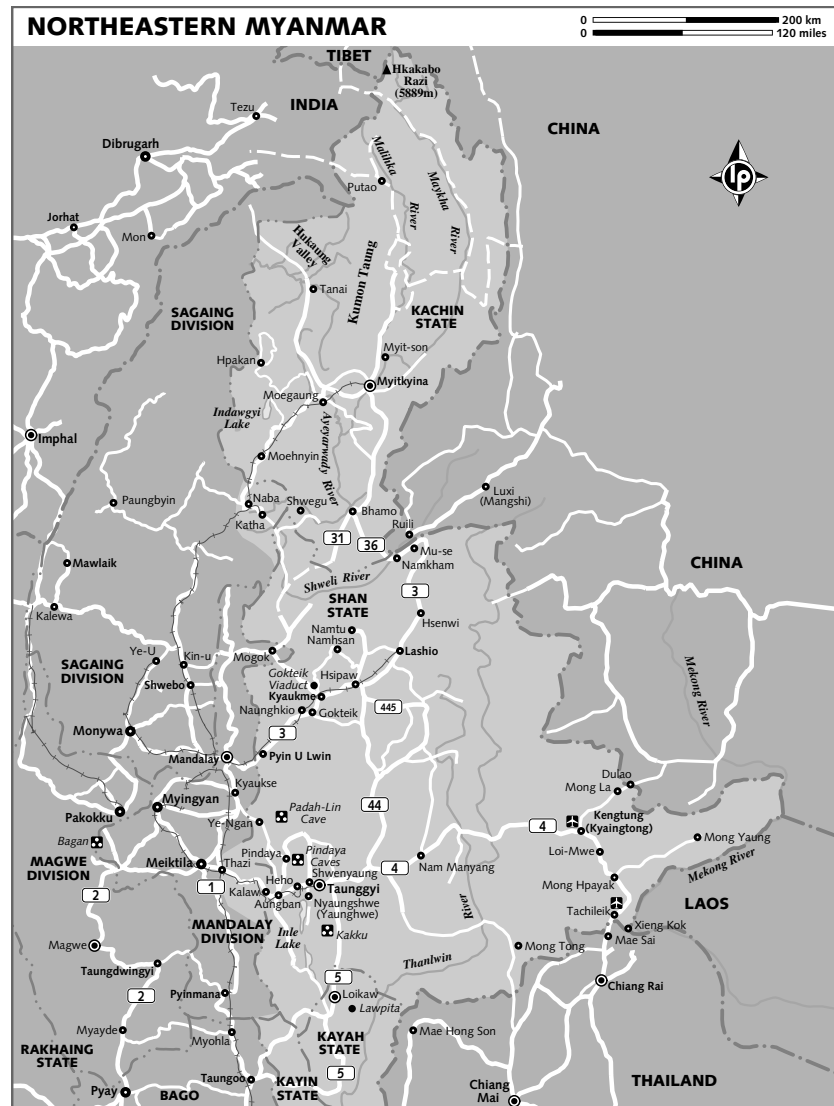
- You can hike around the trekking centre of **Kalaw** (p176) and anywhere else you so desire – anywhere, that is, that's not off limits
- People live, work and sell things around **Inle Lake** (p181), a mountain-framed watery oasis
- Drift down the heart of the north on the **Ayeyarwady River** (p217) as the country glides by
- Overnight stays and morning walks in and around remote villages near **Hsipaw** (p209), **Namhsan** (p213) or even remoter **Kengtung** (p200)
- Charming colonial architecture in cool climes awaits visitors to **Pyin U Lwin** (p204)



CLIMATE

Parts of this region have the most pleasant climate in the country, attested to by the fact that the British built several hill stations in the area so that the colonial authorities could escape from the oppressive heat of the lowlands. Even during the hot season (March to June) daytime temperatures become more

and more bearable the higher up you go; this also makes the region favourable for opium cultivation. In the far north it gets downright cold at night – the snowcapped mountains are a dead giveaway for frigid temperatures. Temperatures can also drop to near zero at night in the highlands around Inle Lake during December and January.



DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Although there is active insurgency from national groups in the region, primarily in southern Shan State, foreigners are generally prevented from visiting these areas.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Most travellers pick only one, or at the most two, of the routes in the northeast because travel in these parts is time intensive. A few areas of the northeast are completely off limits to foreign travellers, including the land route between Taunggyi and Kengtung, all of Kayah State and the southern Shan territory. Most of the towns are linked by both trains and buses, and while the former may be more appealing they are also undoubtedly slower. Many travellers enter the area by flying into Heho, the gateway to the Inle Lake region. Taking a flight is the only way to get to the Kengtung area. Last but certainly not least, the Aeyarwady River cuts down the centre of the entire region and provides a good opportunity to test out Myanmar's local ferry industry.

THAZI TO INLE VIA KALAW

This geographically diverse narrow corridor is probably the most popular tourist route to Mandalay after Bagan. From the air the

topography looks tame and organised, a patchwork of farmland and unspoiled forests, whereas from the road to Kalaw (coming from Thazi or Inle Lake) this Shan State territory is formidably mountainous and rugged. It is perhaps the area in Myanmar in which foreign tourists have the most freedom and flexibility to tailor their itineraries – after all, it's feasible to hike between all the primary destinations. Once you arrive in the area, public transportation is fairly convenient, but extra time is necessary to truly appreciate everything, from the hill-tribe villages to the pastoral highlands and the watery oasis of Inle Lake.

THAZI

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Many visitors begin or end their journey in Shan territory in this rail-junction town about 65km west of the Shan State border in the Mandalay Division. It's little more than a place where people embark or disembark from the train when travelling to/from Bagan or Inle Lake. On the other hand, it's easy to bypass Thazi altogether by travelling on express buses from Bagan to destinations in Shan State and Yangon or simply by flying to Heho.

Sleeping & Eating

Moon-Light Rest House (Thazi–Taunggyi Hwy; r with fan US\$3, s/d with air-con US\$8/15; 🚻) On the top floor of the **Red Star Restaurant** (dishes k700), this is Thazi's only licensed lodging. Both the

restaurant and rest house are run by the friendly Htun family. There are simple rooms with two beds, mosquito nets and shared shower and toilet, and two larger rooms with air-con and attached shower. The dining room downstairs serves good Chinese, Bamar and Indian Muslim food, including fresh yogurt. The proprietors also invite travellers to bathe and rest upstairs while waiting for onward passage, and can arrange bus and train tickets. If you arrive by train and are carrying heavy baggage, it's worth taking a horse cart or hiring a porter, as the rest house is about 1km from the station.

Getting There & Away BUS

The Thazi bus stop is a couple of hundred metres from the train station – just an empty building and a patch of dirt. Buses to Kalaw and Taunggyi cost K2500 (three hours) and K3500 (six hours) respectively; there are usually several departures from 7am to 11am daily.

It's possible to skip Meiktila when travelling between Thazi and Mandalay, but there are more buses to Mandalay that go through Meiktila. The simple solution is to get to Meiktila by pick-up, then wait for a bus to Mandalay (see p289 for information on buses to Mandalay). If you reserve a seat you can wait for a Taunggyi–Mandalay bus to come through Thazi; otherwise, the odds are that there won't be any seats. A pick-up between Meiktila and Thazi costs around K300.

CAR

Pick-ups leave for Kalaw (K2500) regularly throughout the day and into the early evening. It's a windy, steep road, so for those with low comfort thresholds it's worth paying extra to sit in the front. Pick-ups all the way to Shwentyaung – the junction for Nyaungshwe (Yaungshwe) and Inle Lake – and Taunggyi are infrequent.

It's possible to hire taxis in Thazi to take you to Kalaw (US\$30), Nyaungshwe (US\$45) or Bagan (US\$40).

TRAIN

Ordinary-/1st-class seats from Thazi to Yangon cost US\$9/32. There are four evening trains (6pm, 7.15pm, 8.15pm and 9.40pm); the earliest two are express and take 11 hours or more.

The Thazi–Taungoo and Thazi–Mandalay routes both take from five to six hours; ordinary-/1st-class seats cost US\$5/15. Departure times for Taungoo are the same as for Yangon.

Trains go from Thazi to Kalaw at 9am daily and take five hours to inch their way through the mountain passes.

There's a US\$1 fee to use the waiting room at the Thazi train station at night-time, whereas during the day it's free. For information on the train to Shwentyaung, the junction for Inle Lake, see p181.

KALAW

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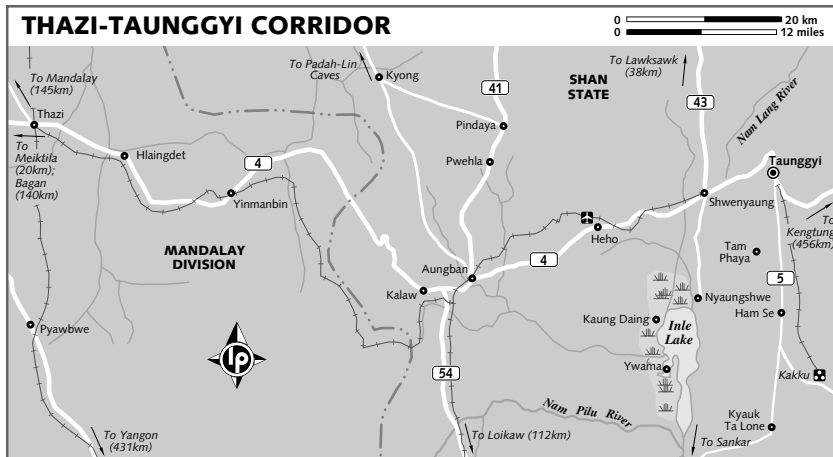
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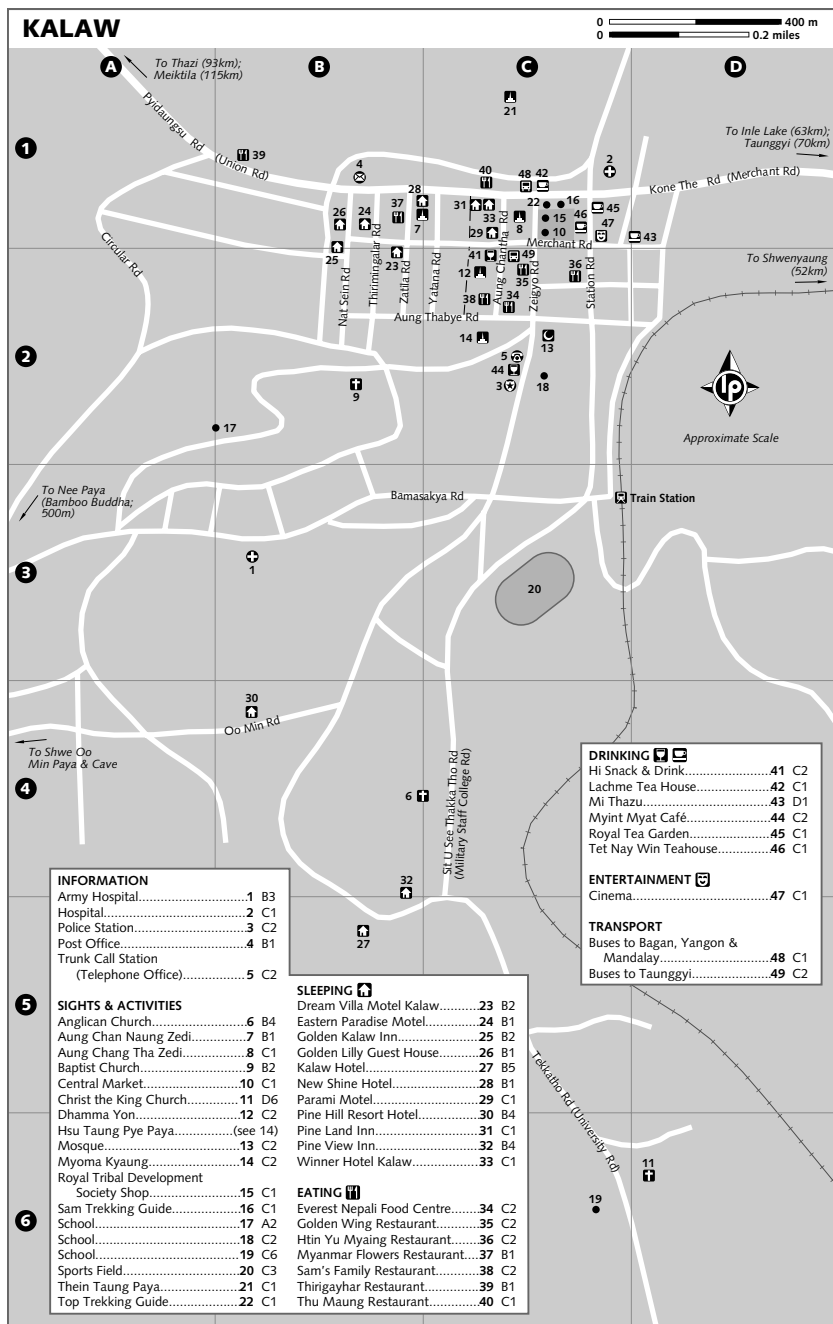
One of the few places in Myanmar to project a backpacker vibe, Kalaw is 70km west of Taunggyi, about halfway between it and Thazi. The town sits high on the western edge of the Shan Plateau, at an altitude of 1320m. Once a popular hill station in British colonial days, Kalaw's population of Shan, Indians, Muslims, Bamar and Nepalis (Gurkhas retired from British military service) rubs shoulders with fatigue-wearing soldiers and foreign tourists drawn by the cool climate and rugged mountain scenery. As recently as the 1970s there were American missionaries teaching in the local schools. Because of the British colonial and missionary heritage, many locals speak English. About 20,000 people live in and around Kalaw.

The size and breadth of the town is deceptive since it sprawls up and over a number of hills – only a portion of it is visible from the market area. A large military base outside the town is an incongruous presence in this sylvan setting of gnarled pines and bamboo groves. The surrounding mountains cater to all tastes and fitness levels, from low-intensity half-day hikes to four- or five-day trips to minority hill-tribe communities. The villages never really feel remote, which isn't necessarily a negative, but you may be surprised by the relatively high level of development. You'll no doubt be shown warm hospitality and offered tea and fruit harvested from the plantations that cover the town's steep slopes.

Sights & Activities

There are a few interesting temples to see in town. Perched on the hill overlooking





The Thazi-Taunggyi road is **Thein Taung Paya**. In the town centre is a glittering stupa (Buddhist religious monument), covered in gold-coloured mosaics, called **Aung Chang Tha Zedi**. Nearby is the dilapidated **Dhamma Yon**, a two-storey temple; it's not particularly interesting in itself, but from upstairs you can get fair views of the town, Dhamma Yanthi Paya (another temple) and the ruins of **Hsu Taung Pye Paya**, now a field of crumbling stupas behind the Dhamma Yon. Just west of town, **Nee Paya** (also called Hnin Paya) features a gold-lacquered bamboo Buddha. It's about 20 minutes away by car. The 300-year-old **Shwe Oo Min Paya and Cave** (☎ 8am-8pm; admission free), containing Buddha statues, is a 30-minute walk southwest of town. The monastery on the grounds is an especially scenic spot.

Less than 1km southeast of the Kalaw Hotel is **Christ the King Church**, a Catholic church under the supervision of Father Paul. (Until he passed away in 2000, Father Angelo Di Meo also supervised the church; he was based in Myanmar from 1931.) A stone grotto built behind the church is reputed to have curative powers. Mass is held daily at 6.30am; and also at 8am and 4pm on Sunday.

Sleeping

Because of its natural appeal to the backpacker set, Kalaw is one of the few places in Myanmar with guesthouses to suit them. There are also several more modern hotels catering to tour groups on or close to the main road, and several more on the outskirts of town. The main road goes by several names, including Union Rd (Pyidaungsu Rd) and Thazi-Taunggyi Hwy. Air-con is superfluous in the cool mountain air. During the low season (May to October) discounts are widely available.

BUDGET

Golden Lilly Guest House (☎ 50108; goldenlilly@myanmar.com.mm; 5/88 Nat Sein Rd; s/d US\$3/6; 📍) Family owned and operated, this guesthouse is the best value in town. It has cosy and warm wood-finished rooms, each with private bathroom. The owner's brother, Robin, is a gentle and knowledgeable guide who can explain the medicinal and nutritional value of every berry, insect and leaf

around. There is Internet access, but server speed is extremely slow.

Golden Kalaw Inn (☎ 50311; 66 Nat Sein Rd; s/d US\$4/6) The two-storey home next to the Golden Lilly is the Golden Kalaw, a friendly hotel offering small, rather worn rooms with a nice 2nd-floor balcony. Eddie, the owner, leads informative treks.

Eastern Paradise Motel (☎ 50087; 5 Thirringahar Rd; s US\$3-15, d US\$6-20) This friendly motel on a quiet street has clean rooms. More expensive rooms have private bathrooms; some have satellite TVs and baths.

Parami Motel (☎ 50027; Merchant Rd; s US\$3-6, d US\$6-10) A block from both the main road and the market, Parami's cheapest rooms are in an attached two-storey annexe. More expensive rooms have private bathrooms, though these aren't especially inviting either.

Pine Land Inn (☎ 50026; Union Rd; r without/with bathroom per person US\$2/3) Without doubt, this is the shabbiest place in town. That said, this two-storey guesthouse right on the main road through Kalaw does have one nice wood-floored room with private bathroom on the 2nd floor. Others with shared bathroom are very basic. The bare concrete entrance serves as both lobby and uninspiring breakfast nook.

MIDRANGE

New Shine Hotel (☎ 50028; newshine@myanmar.com.mm; 21 Union Rd; s US\$18-24, d US\$24-36) These two modern buildings have a mix of rooms – some motel-style, some with more character; some wicker, some tile. All rooms have private bathroom, while more expensive rooms have satellite TV and bathtub as well. There's a nice brick-walled basement breakfast room, too.

Winner Hotel Kalaw (☎ 50025; Union Rd; s/d US\$10/20; 📍) On the main road, the Winner, a three-storey Chinese-style hotel, has clean, no-frills rooms. The top-floor breakfast room has good views of town, and the owner can help organise treks to villages in the area.

Pine View Inn (☎ 50185; Tekkatho Rd; s/d US\$10/15) Overlooking a quiet street outside town, near the Kalaw Hotel, this inn has a row of spacious rooms with hot-water shower, desk and plenty of light. A tasty Bamar or Western breakfast is included, along with a good view.

Dream Villa Motel Kalaw (☎ 50144; 5 Zatlita Rd; s/d US\$20/24, larger s/d US\$30/36) A bit overpriced

TREKKING AROUND KALAW

Whether it's a short day hike or a five-day journey, trekking is the main reason to come to Kalaw. The range of territory open to foreigners seems to be expanding, and local guides are willing to tailor itineraries to particular demands. With that said, certain routes get a fair bit of traffic during the tourist high season and it's not unusual to find yourself following in the well-trodden footsteps of another group.

The plateau near Kalaw is inhabited by people of the Palaung and Pa-O (Black Karen) tribes. Intha, Shan, Taungthu, Taung-yo, Danu, Kayah, Danaw and Bamar people occupy the mountains to the north and east. Development in the form of running water and electricity is coming slowly but sporadically to villages in the area, and living conditions on the whole are not as primitive as some might expect, thanks to UN- and government-sponsored projects. Continued exposure to foreigners walking the mountain footpaths or sleeping in village homes has introduced a small element of the consumer economy in the form of children selling hats, *longyi* (sarong-style lower garments) and bags, most made locally but some imported strictly for the tourist trade.

Quality health care is a concern, but it's better to give small cash gifts to the village health fund rather than handing out medicines. Your guide will know what's appropriate and what's not. Balloons, pencils, paper notebooks and ballpoint pens are also welcome. Usually the *sayadaw* (chief abbot) of the village monastery, or the village head man, handles such donations. Village elders prefer that any gifts intended for children be given to an adult rather than directly to the children, as (like children everywhere) they are sharing challenged. Tribespeople come into town on Kalaw's market day, which comes around every five days.

Several nearby villages, such as Yar Thait and Tayaw, can be visited in half-day or whole-day hikes. By and large the terrain isn't difficult – mostly it's a well-trodden dirt path over gentle slopes. Some guides lead multiday trips; the two- to three-day trip (the duration depends on how much you want to exert yourself) to Inle Lake is easily the most popular. It's become standard to have your heavy baggage transported to a hotel in Nyaungshwe for no extra charge, so you need only carry very little. These trips commonly end in the hot springs near Kaung Daing on the western shore of Inle Lake, before a boat transports the group to Nyaungshwe. Another popular multiday hike is from Kalaw to Pindaya, with car transport back.

Licensed guides in Kalaw generally charge US\$4 to US\$6 for a day hike, and US\$5 to US\$8 per day for overnight treks. The cost generally includes food and lodging. Expect to hike for at least six hours a day and cover about 15km.

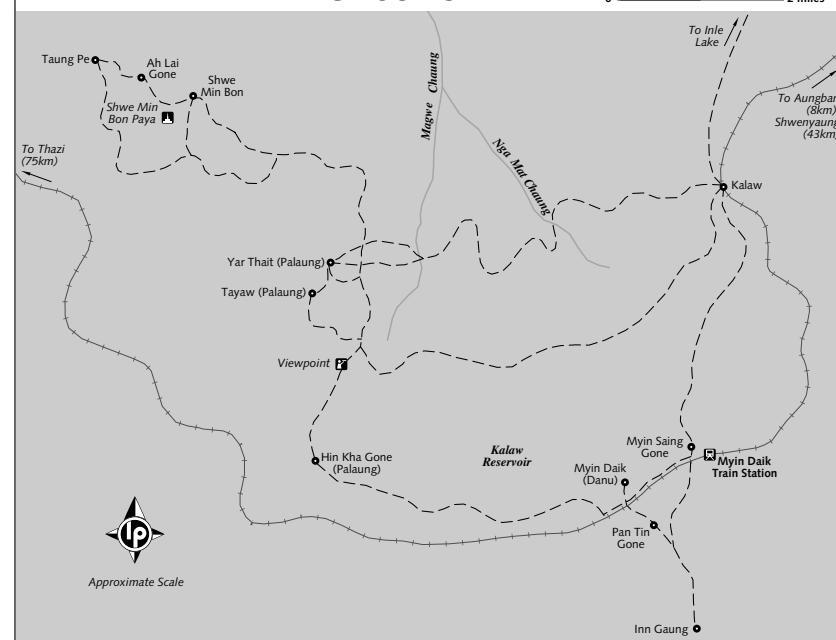
One advantage of overnight treks is that by evening people are back home in the village after spending a day tending the fields. Lodging is usually in long houses and occasionally in *kyaung* (Burmese Buddhist monasteries). Be prepared for the lingering smoke of long-house cooking fires. On the plus side, it keeps mosquitoes to a minimum.

Although it's not part of the public record, perhaps because it's not officially approved, it may be possible to stay overnight at the **Viewpoint**, a guesthouse beside a beautifully scenic spot atop a mountain. Most groups on day hikes stop here for lunch. Owned and operated by a Nepali family, Viewpoint's accommodation is bare bones – no electricity, no running water – but it's extremely peaceful. The owner, Motie, also cooks up fantastic meals (assorted vegetable curries and rice). If you can arrange it, for around K1500 per person per day you get a foam bed with plenty of blankets, and three meals.

All the licensed trekking guides in Kalaw can provide sleeping bags and mosquito nets. Hikers need to be prepared with good shoes and warm clothing for the cool evenings. Trekking goes on year round, but expect muddy conditions during the rainy season (May/June to November).

Staff at many of the hotels (eg Robin from the Golden Lilly, Eddie from the Golden Kalaw Inn) and restaurants (eg the Everest Nepali Food Centre) can act as guides; a good number of Yangon-based travel agencies can also arrange guides. It's quite easy, though, to simply show up in Kalaw and make all the arrangements to leave the next day. Several reliable trekking-guide services operate from small offices along the main road through Kalaw, just north of the market.

KALAW AREA TREKKING ROUTES



for Kalaw, the Dream Villa is nevertheless an attractive building, a few blocks from the main thoroughfare. There's a small, elegant lobby with satellite TV, and the carpeted rooms are maintained with care.

Pine Hill Resort Hotel (☎ 50078; fax 579 640; 151 0o Min Rd; bungalows s/d/tr US\$36/42/67) This resort around 1km from the town centre has 32 bungalow-style wood-panelled rooms with TVs and private bathrooms. The prefabricated look of the place is a bit of a shame, as the location overlooking the surrounding hills is lovely. The hotel restaurant serves very good Bamar and Indian dishes.

Those wishing to avoid any government-owned hotel should bypass the Kalaw Hotel, which is set well behind the town.

Eating

For a town this size, Kalaw has an inordinate number of interesting eating options, some with an Indian or Nepali flavour, and several teashops.

Sam's Family Restaurant (vegetable dishes K500) We were lucky enough to experience Sam's inaugural meal. An assortment of inexpen-

sive and tasty fried-vegetable dishes and standard Chinese and Bamar meat dishes were on offer, though the menu was in an experimental phase. Service was extremely attentive, to the point that an involuntary flinch by one of the diners invariably brought a waiter to the table. Candlelight and white tablecloths gave the place a romantic and elegant vibe.

Thirigayhar Restaurant (Seven Sisters; ☎ 50216; Union Rd; dishes K2000; ☎ till 10pm) The most charming place to eat in Kalaw, this Shan-Chinese-Indian restaurant is in a distinctive cottage on the main road. It serves a few Western dishes, but the soups are especially tasty. It often caters to package-tour groups, which explains the relatively high prices.

Everest Nepali Food Centre (Aung Chantha Rd; dishes K1000) Two blocks from the main road and just across from Sam's, Everest is a favourite as much for its backpacker feel as for its tasty and reasonably priced curries, fresh juices and chapatis. Service tends to be slow, but a book and a shake help pass the time.

Thu Maung Restaurant (Union Rd; dishes K1500) The Thu Maung, in a two-storey building on

the main road, looks more established than other places in town – maybe it's the air of authority given off by its many official-looking patrons. It does an above-average chicken and cashews.

Myanmar Flowers Restaurant (chicken dishes K1500) This restaurant, near the Aung Chang Naung Zedi, four blocks west of the market, has a rock-and-roll flavour inside – well, guitars decorate the walls and there's a small stage – and outdoor seating in good weather. It offers Bamar, Chinese, Indian and Western set menus (K2500), and does excellent spring rolls.

Also recommended are **Htin Yu Myaing (Pineland) Restaurant** (dishes K1000), a block south of the central market, which serves good Chinese and Bamar fare; and the Golden Wing Restaurant, just south of Merchant Rd, which grills up meats for locals.

Drinking

Hi Snack & Drink (☎ till late) Down a bottle of beer with the locals in this narrow little all-wood bar a block west of the market. Impromptu guitar concerts are not uncommon.

Myint Myat Café (Zeigyo Rd) Next to the police station, on the road leading south from town, this café is popular with students and soldiers from the nearby base.

Most teashops in town are Nepali operated, and serve chapati, tea and *raksi* (Nepali-style home-made liquor). Teashops near the market:

Lachme Teahouse (Merchant Rd)

Mi Thazu (Merchant Rd)

Royal Tea Garden (Station Rd)

Tet Nay Win Teahouse (Zeigyo Rd)

Getting There & Away

Daily buses from Yangon to Kalaw (K7000, 15 hours) leave from Yangon's Highway bus terminal. Yangon-bound buses departing from Taunggyi pass through Kalaw in the evening.

Buses for Kalaw (around K2500) leave Thazi in the morning. Taunggyi-bound buses from either Meiktila or Bagan pass through Kalaw, though you may have to pay the full fare to the final destination. Travel time is about three hours.

A bus from Shwenyaung (the junction for Inle Lake) to Kalaw takes three hours and costs K3000. To charter a vehicle to either Thazi or Shwenyaung will cost US\$20

to US\$25. For information on travel to Aungban and Pindaya, see p180.

It's possible to take the train from Thazi or Shwenyaung to Kalaw; it takes around 4½ hours from either. The fare is US\$3. Either way, it's a scenic, if slow, trip. Three trains leave Kalaw for Shwenyaung at 8.30am, 10.45am and 3pm daily.

To return to Yangon, Mandalay or Bagan it's possible to book a seat on one of the Taunggyi express buses with air-con (about K5000 for each destination). There's also the usual Mandalay–Yangon train connection via Thazi (see p366 and p367).

AUNGBAN

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This small highway town is a transport junction for cargo and passengers travelling between Thazi and Taunggyi, north to Pindaya or south to Loikaw, the capital of Kayah State. As such, Aungban's main function is to feed and fuel; among Shan State truck drivers it's also infamous for its brothels. As elsewhere in Myanmar, AIDS is a serious concern.

There is little of substance to the town itself, except when the **market** is held (every five days). For seekers of Buddhist wisdom, the **Taungpulu Meditation Monastery** is a little east of town off the highway.

Getting There & Away

See p180 for information on transport from Pindaya and Kalaw to Aungban. If you're heading east to Nyaungshwe, it's possible to catch one of the many rickety minibuses that pass through Aungban on their way to Taunggyi (K1500).

PINDAYA

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☎ 081

The road north from Aungban to Pindaya passes through a bucolic pastoral setting that's like a Whistler landscape – the perfect middle American or European countryside. You'll pass groups of Myanmar people wearing wide-brimmed sun hats and hunched over rice and potato fields, and the small Pa-O and Danu villages of Pwehla and Ji-Chanzi. Easily visited from Kalaw on a day trip, Pindaya is best known for its Buddha-filled limestone caves, its picturesque Boutalake Lake and one of the

region's more interesting markets, which sells everything from pancake-like snacks to gnarled fish and cooked snakes.

Pindaya itself is a centre for the Burmese-speaking Taung-yo people. The town's symbol is a *pin-gu* (spider). According to legend, seven princesses bathing in the lake took refuge in the caves during a storm, and were imprisoned by a giant spider. Lucky for them, a prince strolling nearby heard their pleas for help, killed the spider and freed them from the cave.

Local handicrafts include Shan paper and parasols made from mulberry bark. There are two **paper- and umbrella-making workshops** a few minutes' drive from the cave entrance. One of these workshops, Nam Cherry, demonstrates the step-by-step process and sells hand-painted umbrellas (US\$1) among other interesting objects. Try your hand at a small **pottery workshop** down a side road near the Pindaya Inle Inn for US\$3.

Day and overnight treks to surrounding Danu, Pa-O, Palaung and Taung-yo villages can be organised at the Golden Cave (p180) or Conqueror Hotel (p180) for about US\$10 per person per day.

Sights

PINDAYA CAVES

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A strange and somewhat kitschy mix of the artificial and natural and the commercial and holy, the **Pindaya Caves**, in a limestone ridge overlooking the lake, are announced for miles around by the templelike structures covering the ramp and lift to the entrance. Once inside it's difficult not to succumb to Buddha fatigue, as over 8000 Buddha images – made from alabaster, teak, marble, brick, lacquer and cement – have been arranged over the centuries to form a sea of serene faces in the labyrinthine cave chambers. Small plaques below most advertise the names and nationalities of the donors.

Some of the smaller side chambers are accessible only on hands and knees, and you may come across people practising meditation. Although many areas within the caves are illuminated by electric lights, take care on the slippery paths. In one corner of the cave stand three 'perspiring Buddhas' – sitting images that stay wet because of condensation in the damp cave.

It's a long walk from the lake to the foot of the cliff containing the caves; if you've chartered a jeep or car from Kalaw or Taunggyi, make sure that you're driven all the way up to the cliff. Travel from town to the foot of the cliffs costs K1000 by horse cart. A 200-step stairway leads to the cave entrance, or you can take the new lift to the entrance for K100.

From a temple complex built along the front of the ridge you can view nearby **Boutalake Lake** and the ruins of **Shwe Oo Min Paya**, a cluster of low stupas just below the ridge.

PADAH-LIN CAVES

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Northwest of Pindaya, near the village of Ye-Ngan, is the most important prehistoric site in Myanmar: the **Padah-Lin Caves** (also known as Badalin, or Badut Hlaing – Chameleon Cave). The interior of one of the caves is decorated with the remains of very old paintings – estimates extend to 11,000 years – of animal and human subjects, not unlike Neolithic cave paintings in Europe. Some visitors reckon that these caves, which were discovered in 1969, are more atmospheric than the heavily toured Pindaya Caves.

To get here you'll have to charter a 4WD from the direction of Mandalay or from southern Shan State. Coming from the south, a visit to the caves can be added to a Pindaya trip from Kalaw or Taunggyi for about an extra K5000 per vehicle. From Ye-Ngan a rough track leads several kilometres southwest to **Yebok** village. The two caves are a little over 1km west of Yebok on a footpath. If coming from Mandalay, take the turn-off 81km south of Mandalay near the town of Kume on the Yangon–Mandalay Hwy. Drive east for around 35km until you reach the Kinda Dam. After a short boat ride to the other side of the dam, you'll approach the caves along a jungle trail.

Festivals & Events

Beginning on the full moon of Tabaung (February/March), Pindaya hosts a colourful **paya pwe** (pagoda festival) at Shwe Oo Min.

Sleeping

There are several nice places to stay in Pindaya, though accommodation in both

Kalaw and Nyaungshwe is less expensive and generally better value.

Golden Cave Hotel (☎ 40227; s US\$15-25, d US\$20-30) Extremely friendly and warm, the Golden Cave's modest reception and breakfast area belies the charm of the wooden rooms in the two-storey annexe. All rooms have private balconies, some with views of the cave entrance. More expensive rooms have a TV and a fridge. This is the best place to arrange treks to nearby villages.

Pindaya Inle Inn (☎ 448 1311, in Yangon ☎ 01-211 226; Mahabandoola Rd; s/d US\$35/40, chalets US\$70; 📺) The first hotel you see when you enter Pindaya from the south, this inn isn't as conveniently located as the other hotels, but its posh brick-and-stone little chalets, with fireplaces, desks, satellite TV and large bathrooms, are delightful. Each has a quaint porch arranged around a small garden. It's owned and operated by Inle Princess Resort on Inle Lake.

Conqueror Hotel (☎ 448 1211, in Yangon ☎ 01-256 623; www.conquerorhotel.com; s/d US\$50/60; 📺) These large bamboo bungalows with satellite TV and private porches are laid out in attractive, landscaped grounds. Some bungalows have cave views. The large pavilion building houses a restaurant serving Chinese and Bamar cuisine. In the Singong Quarter of town, the hotel caters largely to tour groups. Treks can be arranged here.

Myit Phyar Zaw Gji Hotel (in Taunggyi ☎ 22158; 317 Zaytan Quarter; s/d US\$12/20) Conveniently located next to the market, this modern-looking but rather nondescript three-storey hotel has 16 standard rooms with attached hot-water bathroom, and five larger superior rooms with fridge. Some have good views of Boutalake Lake right across the street. The dining room serves mostly Chinese food.

Eating

In addition to the restaurants mentioned below, you can fill up on snacks, both exotic and mundane, in the market.

Just across the street from the market, **Kyan Lite Restaurant** (dishes K1000) has long banquet-style tables and an English menu featuring good Chinese fare. Not far from the market, on the road leading to the cave, is the surprisingly modern Happy Tea House, which has snacks, tea and coffee.

Other restaurants serving inexpensive Bamar and Shan food within a few blocks of

the market are U Aseik, Tip Top Restaurant and Teik Sein Restaurant.

Getting There & Away

From Kalaw it costs K150 to get to Aungban and another K550 to get to Pindaya by public transport. It can be difficult to find buses or pick-ups later in the day, especially between Aungban and Pindaya, so leave early in the morning and allow a whole day for the trip. The first pick-up from Pindaya to Aungban leaves from the market area at 6am. There's one bus per day from Taunggyi to Pindaya (K1500), at noon; the same bus travels in the opposite direction at 8am the next day.

It's much more convenient to hire a car and driver in Kalaw for about US\$15 to US\$20 to make the day trip to Pindaya. You can also hire a car to take you from Kalaw to Pindaya, have it wait for a couple of hours while you take in the caves and have lunch in town, and then continue on to Nyaungshwe and Inle Lake. This should cost about US\$30 or the kyat equivalent for the whole day.

It's also possible to do the trip in the reverse direction or as a long day trip out of Nyaungshwe. The actual road time is about 1½ hours from Kalaw to Pindaya, and three hours or more from Pindaya to Nyaungshwe. Add waiting time (which can be considerable) in Aungban and Shwenyaung if you go by public transport.

HEHO

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The airstrip north of Heho is the gateway for many to the Inle Lake and Kalaw area. About halfway between Aungban and Shwenyaung, which is the junction for the road south to Nyaungshwe and Inle Lake, Heho itself is just another highway town. Air Mandalay, Yangon Airways and Myanmar Airways fly regularly between Yangon, Mandalay and Heho; newcomer Bagan Air offers direct flights from Bagan (p187).

Heho has a dusty **market area** just off the highway that hosts the largest of the five-day markets in the southern area of Shan State.

SHWENYAUNG

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Shwenyaung is the transfer point for those leaving Nyaungshwe to catch a bus to Kalaw, Mandalay, Bagan or Yangon. It's also where most travellers heading to Nyaungshwe must

hop off their Taunggyi-bound bus or pick-up in order to catch a taxi to Nyaungshwe. There's no longer any accommodation in Shwenyaung for foreigners, but then again there's no reason to spend the night here. The Pan Za Lat Teashop, situated right at the Heho-Nyaungshwe-Taunggyi junction, is a convenient place to wait for transport, sip some tea and sort out your next move away from the touts, who'll descend upon you as soon as you alight from the bus.

Getting There & Away

CAR, PICK-UP & TAXI

Taxis ply the 11km road between Shwenyaung and Nyaungshwe (K4000). If it's late – after 6pm – drivers in Shwenyaung charge relatively extortionate prices. It's possible to find a freelancer on a motorcycle for a cheaper rate (though no helmets are provided).

From Nyaungshwe, one option is to wait by the side of the road near the monument just north of the market. Some empty taxis on their way to collect passengers with reservations in Shwenyaung are willing to pick up foreign tourists for only K500 because it's just extra money – they're already going in your direction.

Pick-ups ferry passengers back and forth between Shwenyaung and Nyaungshwe (K300) from 5am to around 4pm, though they leave only when full.

TRAIN

You can get all the way to Shwenyaung by train, but it's time-consuming. From Yangon or Mandalay the programme would be to take one of the Yangon-Mandalay express trains and disembark at Thazi. See p367 for timetable details.

The train from Thazi to Shwenyaung (ordinary/1st class US\$4/9, eight to nine hours) is rather slow, but the route is very picturesque, and having the run of a carriage can be more comfortable than sitting in the back of a cramped pick-up, especially on mountain curves. It's a spectacular journey through the Shan Mountains and local villages, on a partially zigzagging railway line.

A train leaves Thazi at 9am and arrives in Shwenyaung between 5pm and 6pm. Three trains leave Shwenyaung (at 8.30am, 10.30am and 2pm; US\$4) and arrive in Thazi around nine hours later. You can also disembark in Kalaw from any of these trains.

INLE LAKE

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Inle Lake is 22km long, roughly 11km wide, 875m above sea level and a complete mirage. Facts notwithstanding, when you first encounter the lake – its placid flatness in stark contrast to the peaks on either side – it seems like a real-life Atlantis where the plug has been partially pulled and you must hop in a boat to gossip with a neighbour only a few metres away. The lakeshore and lake islands are home to 17 villages on stilts, which are mostly inhabited by the Intha people. The lake doesn't really have a shoreline – you can't walk directly around it. The water gets shallower and the tangled hyacinths and marsh paddies get denser until the obstacle course becomes unnavigable and you reach solid land.

Like the Shan, Mon and Bamar, the Intha are Buddhist; there are around 100 Buddhist *kyaung* around the lake and perhaps 1000 stupas. The Inle style of religious architecture and Buddhist sculpture is strongly Shan-influenced.

The hard-working Intha are famous for propelling their flat-bottomed boats by standing at the stern on one leg and wrapping the other leg around the oar. This strange leg-rowing technique offers relief to the arms – which are also used for rowing – during the long paddles from one end of the lake to another. It also enables the rower to better see the *kyun myaw* (floating islands) and *beda* (water hyacinth). It's sometimes necessary to stand up to plot a path around the obstacles – and to spot fish. Although diesel motors are becoming more and more common, leg rowers, fully aware of their tourist-poster appeal, will immediately switch from conventional rowing to the leg-power method upon sighting a boatload of camera-carrying foreigners.

The entire lake region is contained in the municipal area of Nyaungshwe and supports a population of 130,000 comprising Intha, Shan, Pa-O (Taungthu), Taung-yo, Danu, Kayah, Danaw and Bamar people. The township of the same name sits north of the lake and is accessed by road from Shwenyaung or from the lake via a long, narrow channel. Around 70,000 people live on the shores and islands of the lake.

The industrious villagers inhabiting the lake region support themselves by growing a wide variety of flowers, vegetables and fruit year round. They also grow rice, especially at the northern end of the lake around Nyaungshwe. Many of these crops are cultivated on floating islands, where marsh, soil and water hyacinths have combined to form incredibly fertile solid masses that are staked to the lake bottom with bamboo poles. Among the islands and peninsulas thus formed is a network of canals that provide the main avenues of transportation for the Intha.

Using cone-shaped nets stretched tautly over wood and bamboo frames, Intha fishermen harvest *nga-hpein* (a type of carp) and other kinds of fish. Women in the vil-

lages (especially Ywama and Heya at the southern end of Inle Lake) weave Shan-style shoulder bags and silk *Zinme* (Chiang Mai-style) *longyi* on wooden hand looms. Using raw silk from China, these weavers produce more silk garments than anywhere in the country apart from Amarapura. When they aren't busy fishing or farming, the men of Inle produce silver and brassware as well as pottery and lacquerware.

During January and February the nights and mornings in the lake area are cold, so bring socks and a sweater.

HISTORY & CULTURE

Both culturally and linguistically separate from their Shan neighbours, the Intha are

thought to have migrated to this area from Dawei on the Tanintharyi (Tenasserim) peninsula in southern Myanmar.

According to one story, two brothers from Dawei came to Nyaungshwe in 1359 to serve a Nyaungshwe *sao pha* ('sky lord', a hereditary chieftain of the Shan people). The latter was so pleased with the hard-working demeanour of the Dawei brothers that he asked them to invite 36 more families from Dawei; purportedly, all the Intha around Inle Lake are descended from these migrant families. Another theory says that the Intha migrated from the Mon region in the 18th century to avoid wars between the Thais and the Bamar.

INFORMATION

You pay the compulsory entry fee (US\$3) to enter the Inle Lake zone at **Myanmar Travels & Tours** (MTT; Chaung Rd, Nyaungshwe; ☎ 7am-4pm) or at one of the hotels or guesthouses around town.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

September and October are among the best times of the year to visit Inle Lake. The ceremonial **Phaung Daw Oo** (see p190), in which four golden Buddha images are ferried around the lake in a royal barge, lasts for almost three weeks in late September or early October. It's closely followed by **Thadingyut**, when the Intha and the Shan dress in new clothes and fervently celebrate the end of Waso (Buddhist Lent). They are so religious that it's not unusual for families to spend all of their meagre savings during this one annual event.

NYAUNGSHWE

Laid-back Nyaungshwe's choice accommodation and diverse activities – from leisurely boat rides to strenuous hikes – combine to throw off the itineraries of many travellers who extend their stays here. During the tourist high season, Nyaungshwe (Golden Banyan Tree, also called Yangwhe), which is 3.5km from the northern end of the lake, can seem overrun with foreigners. This isn't necessarily a bad thing for the many locals who profit from their presence. Besides Kalaw, this town is one of the few places in the country to exude a backpacker vibe, evidenced by the number of inexpensive but

comfortable guesthouses and restaurants specialising in spaghetti and pancakes.

Information

Yangon Airways and Air Mandalay have a small office on Yone Gyi Rd, and virtually every guesthouse can help arrange flights and bus tickets. Apart from the options listed below, several hotels offer Internet access to guests.

Century Ticket Retail & Wholesale Centre

(☎ 29061; Yone Gyi Rd) This recommended, friendly place can arrange boating excursions, hikes and trips to other destinations, as well as onward transportation.

Comet Travel & Internet Café

(☎ 29126; inlay comet@myanmar.com.mm; Yone Gyi Rd). An alternative to Century Ticket and also recommended. Has a few computers with reliable Internet connections.

Inle Blooms Global Online Information Bar

(Phaungdaw Seiq Rd; per hr K3000; ☎ 9am-midnight) A veritable oasis for the email starved. There are five computers, a nice coffee shop and occasional Hotmail access.

Myanmar Travels & Tours (MTT; Chaung (Strand) Rd)

The same office that collects tourists' dollars (US\$3) for the lake also provides maps of the area and sometimes the final word regarding flight schedules and fares.

Sights & Activities

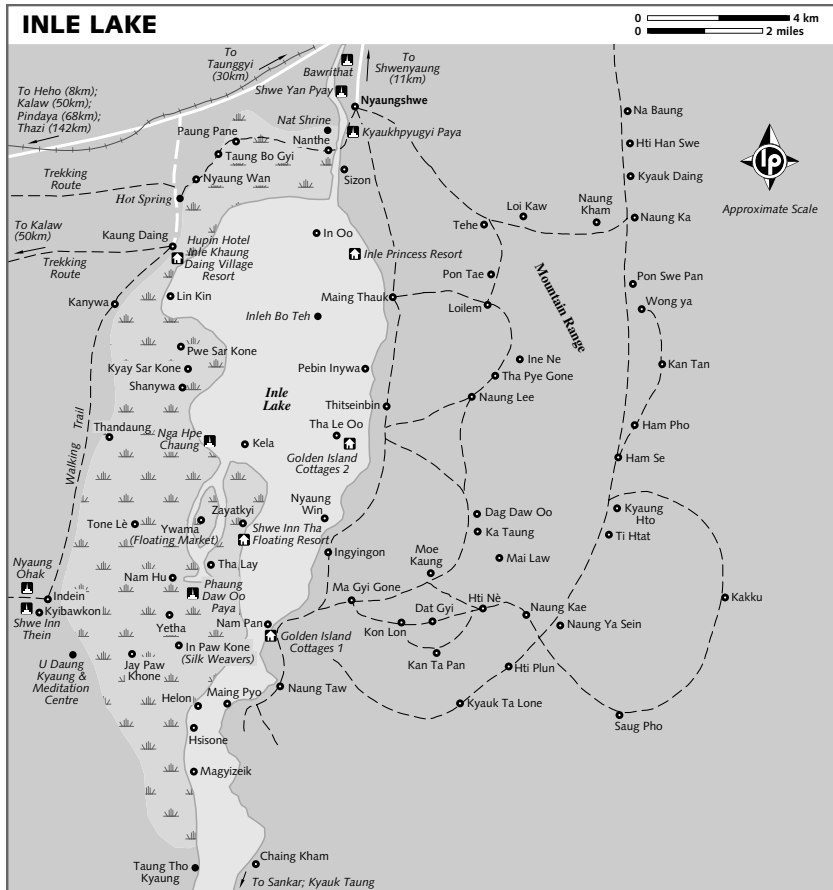
MUSEUM OF SHAN CHIEFS

Housed in a large teak-and-brick mansion in the northeastern part of town, this **museum** (Yaungwhe Haw Museum; Third St; admission US\$2; ☎ 9.30am-3.30pm Tue-Sun) was the *haw* (palace) of the 33rd and last Shan *sao pha*, Sao Shwe Thaik. Thaik, who became the first president of Myanmar in 1948, was imprisoned when Ne Win came to power (see p42) and died in jail. The museum is the best surviving example of a Shan-style palace since the 1991 demolition of the *haw sao pha* (Shan lord's palace) in Kengtung. Many of the rooms contain displays of Shan furniture and royal costumes. Most impressive is the huge teak-floored throne-and-audience hall in the north wing, behind the front building.

SHRINES, MONASTERIES & STUPAS

The oldest temple in town, **Yadana Man Aung Paya**, is worth visiting for its unique step-spired stupa. Look for the 'you will be old' and 'you will be sick' figures in glass cases in one of the shrine buildings.

There are several good-sized monasteries in the central and southeastern parts of town, including **Kan Gyi Kyaung**, **Shwe Gu Kyaung** and





INFORMATION		SRI JAGDISH HINDU TEMPLE		EATING	
Air Mandalay Office	(see 9)	Stupa	23 C1	Aroma Restaurant	45 A2
Bank	1 B1	Stupas	24 B2	Big Drum Restaurant	46 A2
Comet Travel & Internet Cafe	2 B2	Stupas	25 B2	Eden Teashop	47 C1
Golden Island Cottages Office	3 A2	Township Office	26 D2	Full Moon Restaurant	48 A2
Hospital	4 B3	Yadana Man Aung Paya	27 B2	Golden Kite Restaurant	49 C2
Inle Blooms Global		Yangon Kyaung	28 C2	Htoo Htoo Aung Chinese & Shan Food	50 B3
Online Information Bar	5 A3			Hu Pin Restaurant	51 B1
Moe Moe's Boat & Bicycle	6 A3	SLEEPING		La Libellule Restaurant	52 A2
MTT Office	7 A2	Aquarius Inn	29 A3	Miss Nyaungshwe Restaurant	53 A2
Telephone Office	8 B2	Bright Hotel	30 A2	Pancake Kingdom	54 A2
Yangon Airways Office	9 C2	Four Sisters Inn	31 A3	Shanland Restaurant	55 B1
		Gypsy Inn	32 A2	Shwe Inlay Bakery	56 B1
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES		Hu Pin Hotel		Shwe Pye Soe Restaurant	57 B2
Handicrafts	10 A3	Nyaungshwe	33 B1	Smiling Moon Restaurant	58 C2
Hlaing Gu Kyaung	11 C2	Inle Inn	34 D2	Unique Superb Food House	59 C1
Independence Monument	12 A2	Joy Hotel	35 A1		
Kan Gyi Kyaung	13 C2	May Guest House	36 C2	ENTERTAINMENT	
Mingala Market	14 B1	Mingalar Hotel	37 B3	Puppet Theatre	60 C2
Monastery	15 C3	Nanda Wunn Hotel	38 D2		
Monastery	16 B2	Nawng Kham/Little Inn	39 A3	TRANSPORT	
Monument	17 B1	Paradise Hotel & Restaurant	40 C1	Boat Landing	61 A2
Museum of Shan Chiefs	18 D1	Primeose Hotel	41 B3	Boat Landing	62 A2
Nigyon Taungyon Kyaung	19 D3	Remember Inn	42 C1	Bus/Pick-up Stop	63 B1
Shwe Gu Kyaung	20 C2	Teak Wood Guest House	43 A2	Pick-ups to Shwenyaung	64 B1
Shwe Zali Paya	21 A2	Viewpoint Hotel	44 A2	Pick-ups to Taunggyi	65 A2

Yangon Kyaung. On the southeastern outskirts of town, the ruin of an old Shan monastery called **Nigyon Taungyon Kyaung** – originally built by the Nyaungshwe *sao pha* – features a set of slender whitewashed Shan stupas and some very old plinths. The complex has been transformed into a *kammahtan* kyaung (meditation monastery).

Less than 1km north of the town entrance, an old 18th- or 19th-century monastery called **Shwe Yaungshwe Kyaung** features a venerable wooden *thein* (ordination hall) with unique oval windows. A long, rectangular brick-and-stucco *pahto* (shrine) on the premises has Buddha images of various ages inside.

A short walk south of town along the eastern side of the main channel leads to the small but atmospheric ruins of **Kyaukhyuygyi Paya**, next to the Intha village of Nanthe. Surrounded by brick-and-stucco *devas* (celestial beings), *chinthe* (half-lion, half-dragon guardian deities) and stupas is a huge sitting Buddha, said to be 700 years old.

MINGALA MARKET

The main municipal *zei* (market), near the town's northern entrance, is busiest in the morning, when vendors congregate to sell their wares. In addition to mountains of fresh produce, Shan noodles and other local products, there are a few stalls selling pottery and textiles.

BOAT TRIPS

Nyaungshwe is the place where most visitors arrange boat trips around the lake. For more details, see p191.

Sleeping

Many of the budget and midrange guesthouses in Nyaungshwe are family owned and operated. Most offer low-season discounts, but at any time of year most rates are open to negotiation because of the fairly intense competition. All room rates include breakfast. In addition, most hotels and guesthouses act as travel agents. They're able to book bus tickets and flights, and arrange boat trips, hikes and even a traditional Myanmar massage (US\$2 to US\$4 per hour).

Temperatures are mild to cool at night, making air-con unnecessary.

BUDGET

Aquarius Inn (☎ 29352; 2 Phaung Daw Pyan Rd; s/d US\$6/12) The excellent-value Aquarius has several cosy and warm all-wood rooms. In a small compound directly across the street from the Little Inn, it is quiet and friendly and serves an excellent breakfast in its little restaurant. It also has a good collection of foreign-language books on loan for guests.

May Guest House (☎ 29417; 85 Myawady Rd; s/d US\$6/12) Look for the small yellow building opposite Hlaing Gu Kyaung monastery, down a quiet side street. Snug rooms at this guesthouse are squeaky clean and very good value. Each has a hot-water shower and a small veranda. An excellent breakfast is included.

WARNING

It's not unusual for taxi drivers and other self-appointed guides to direct you away from the hotel you request and take you to the hotel where they receive a commission. In order to convince you that they only have your happiness in mind, they'll try some common excuses: the owner died, the hotel closed, it has a new owner and is now dirty etc. Be firm, and whatever you do, check in yourself. Otherwise you'll probably be paying a few extra bucks for commission.

Teakwood Guest House (☎ 29250; teakwoodht@myanmar.com.mm; s/US\$4-10, d/US\$9-20; ☎) This guesthouse three blocks east of the canal has some of the most attractive rooms in the area. The five or so in the new annexe have comfortable beds and wooden furnishings, but the real draw is the bathrooms, which are covered in small stones. Economy rooms in the old building are as basic as they come. There are two open-air lounge and dining areas – one for the old building and another very beautiful teak one for the newer, more expensive rooms. The woman who owns and runs the Teakwood with her family's help is an assertive saleswoman; it's best to shop around in terms of trips offered through here.

Primrose Hotel (☎ 29150; 40 Mingala Rd; s/d US\$10/15) From the outside, this hotel in the southern part of town near the Mong Li Canal appears slightly worn, with a corrugated iron roof and peeling paint, but the interior is a different story. The large all-wood rooms, each with their own private bathroom and porch, are nicer than you'd expect for the money.

Inle Inn (☎ 29016; Yone Gyi Rd; s/d US\$8/12) This inn on the eastern side of town, one of the oldest privately owned inns in the country, is well managed and quiet. Spick-and-span rooms in the bamboo bungalows are first rate. There's a pleasant sitting area in the garden out the back. A Shan dinner and puppet show is available on request.

Viewpoint Hotel (☎ 29062; s/d US\$7/14) This hotel's unique location just over the bridge on the other side of the canal is a mixed blessing. While it's fun to sleep in a bungalow over the water, early-morning boat traffic can be an annoyance. The thatched bamboo bungalows aren't especially well

NORTHEASTERN MYANMAR

NORTHEASTERN MYANMAR

maintained, and the water pressure is unreliable, but after an afternoon on your own small balcony you'll easily forgive these hassles. An excellent breakfast is served on the roof of an attached building, where there are even better views of town.

Bright Hotel (☎ 29137; 53 Phaungdaw Seiq Rd; s/d US\$5/8) Though the rooms at the Bright Hotel are large, the mismatched furniture means it's unlikely to win any awards in interior design. It's a fairly modern house with several wings, one of which contains a large family room that sleeps at least four.

Nawng Kham (Little Inn; ☎ 29195; Phaung Daw Pyan Rd; s/d US\$5/10) Opposite Shwe Zali Paya, this inn has seven basic carpeted rooms arranged around a pleasant garden with atmospheric views of the nearby stupa.

Joy Hotel (☎ 29083; Jetty Rd; s/d US\$5/9) On a narrow, quiet canal west of the market, the Joy Hotel feels pleasantly isolated – at least from the other guesthouses. A small sitting area overlooking the canal makes up for the fairly basic (but clean) rooms. There are cheaper rooms with shared bathroom in the two-storey house. A few of the larger rooms have a hot-water shower and a toilet.

Gypsy Inn (Chaung Rd; s US\$5-8, d US\$10-15) More modern and motel-like than other places in this category, the Gypsy Inn is still good value. A few of the higher-priced rooms have balconies, though proximity to the canal means your morning wake-up call is the obnoxious revving of motorboats.

Remember Inn (☎ 29257; remember@myanmar.com.mm; Third St; s US\$4-10, d US\$8-12; 📍) Popular with backpackers and the taxi drivers who transport them (the Remember seems to have the commission system wired), this inn is not as charming as the competition, though the English-speaking staff can address all travel-related questions and needs. The cheapest bamboo furnished rooms are actually the best value, while the higher-priced concrete rooms in the cavernous 'high-rise' section of the hotel are large but unattractive. There's a restaurant and sitting area with satellite TV. Burmese massage is available for US\$2 per hour. The inn is opposite the Museum of Shan Chiefs.

Four Sisters Inn (☎ 29190; 105 Nan Pan Quarter; s/d US\$7/12) The proprietors here have expanded their restaurant business into a quiet guesthouse between the canal and a large rice paddy, about 1km south of the main village.

Rooms have a fan, a hot-water shower and good beds.

MIDRANGE

Nanda Wunn Hotel (☎ 22540; nandawunn@myanmar.com.mm; 80 Yone Gyi Rd; bungalows s US\$18-20, d US\$20-25; 📍) The Nanda Wunn, a few blocks east of the market in a quiet compound, isn't much pricier than some of the budget accommodation, but the larger, superior bungalows with high ceilings, individual porches and bathrooms with tubs deserve the few extra bucks. Traditional Myanmar massage is available.

Paradise Hotel & Restaurant (☎ 22009; 40 Third St; s US\$22-25, d US\$25-30; 📍) Near the Museum of Shan Chiefs, this hotel in a large compound is popular with French package tourists. Standard rooms in the two-storey motel-like building are not especially good value, but the individual bungalows with wicker furniture and private porches are more appealing. All rooms have hot-water shower, fridge, TV and air-con. The staff is quite helpful with travel and air-ticket arrangements.

Hu Pin Hotel Nyaungshwe (☎ 29291; hupin-hotel@mptmail.net.mm; 66 Kan Tha Quarter; s/d US\$30/36; 📍) A Chinese-style five-storey behemoth (well, for this small village), Hu Pin won't make you feel at home, though it does have large attached air-con rooms with hot-water shower, TV and fridge. The hotel is a block west of Mingala Market. All rates include breakfast at the rooftop restaurant or around the corner at the Hu Pin Restaurant, which is owned by the same group.

Eating

The town seems to be reaching saturation point in terms of pancake and pasta joints,

though these aren't necessarily unwelcome to travellers weary of the usual curry and rice dishes. Interestingly enough, a few places advertise pizzas but don't serve them. Most restaurants that cater to tourists stay open till 9pm or 10pm. Be cautious of newcomers anxious to take advantage of tourists' dollars without providing good standards of hygiene. Several travellers have reported becoming sick after eating improperly washed vegetables.

Mingala Market is a good place to shop for local produce; there are also plenty of Shan *kauq-sweh* (noodle-soup) vendors at the market every morning. Another local delicacy is *maung jeut* (round, flat rice crisps).

Several hotels, including Four Sisters Inn and Teakwood Guest House, have good restaurants open to nonguests.

Unique Superb Food House (3 Myawady Rd; chicken fricassees K2000) Really only a few tables set in a garden around the corner from the Remember Inn, this restaurant has learned to cater to the tourist palate without sacrificing creativity or local flavour. The filet mignon is K2000, the potato curry is K600 and the cream of carrot soup is K500.

Golden Kite Restaurant (Yone Gyi Rd; dishes K1000) This is the reigning king of pasta and pancake joints. Omelettes, fruit shakes and a vegetarian version of its delicious tagliatelle are also on offer. Most of the staff speak excellent English and are quite familiar with foreign travellers' tastes. Tables are set outside on a wraparound porch.

Smiling Moon Restaurant (Yone Gyi Rd; dishes K800) With a similar menu to the Golden Kite just down the street, Smiling Moon has a few tables and is clean and friendly.

Miss Nyaungshwe Restaurant (Phaungdaw Seiq Rd; pastas K1000) The usual Chinese and Bamar curries, plus pancakes and pasta dishes are served here. Miss Nyaungshwe has a nice outdoor patio and a selection of bottled beers.

Aroma Restaurant (Chaung Rd; dishes K800) This modest-looking place along the canal serves savoury Indian meat and vegetable curries. There's another branch in Bagan.

La Libellude (dishes K800) Walk across the bridge and turn left to reach this restaurant just across the canal. La Libellude is an ideal place to sit in the late afternoon and watch canal life float by while enjoying a sandwich, a salad, a shake or delicious apple tart (K600).

Big Drum Restaurant (dishes K800) Made up of a set of thatched A-frame shelters on the western bank of the main canal, this is a friendly place. A Shan dinner of fish curry, bean soup, fried peanuts and rice costs K1000. Chinese food is also available.

Htoo Htoo Aung Chinese & Shan Food (dishes 800) This small A-frame restaurant near the Aquarius Inn has a few tables. Shan specialities are the highlight of the menu.

Hu Pin Restaurant (dishes K1000) The Hu Pin serves very good Chinese food in a modern and clean dining area. The English-language menu is divided into three sections: chicken, fish and pork.

Eden Teashop (☎ 6am-5pm) On the north-eastern corner of the market near an old bridge over the Mong Li Canal, this teashop sells good *nam-bya* (nan-type bread) with bean dip.

Also recommended:
Daw Nyunt Yee Restaurant (dishes K700)
Shanland Restaurant (dishes K700)
Shwe Pye Soe Restaurant (dishes K700)

Getting There & Away

Apart from flying, all the routes to the Inle Lake area are time-consuming, but there are several options that can save you much time and trouble. First of all, there's no need to go to Taunggyi, the main town in the area and the location of the main MTT office. If you simply want to go to the lake you'll save a couple of hours by skipping Taunggyi and transferring in the junction town of Shwenyaung (see p181).

The staging area for most public transport to/from Nyaungshwe is just north of the Hu Pin Hotel, one block west of Mingala Market.

AIR

Air Mandalay (AM), Yangon Airways (YA), Myanma Airways (MA) and Bagan Air (BA) all fly to Heho (the gateway to the Inle Lake region), 30km west of Shwenyaung. From Heho it's a further 11km to Nyaungshwe or 20km to Taunggyi. For some reason the terminal in Heho is completely fenced off, so taxis have to stop down the road, over 100m away, where there are a couple of small restaurants.

AM, BA and YA have daily flights from Yangon to Heho, some via Mandalay. During the high season (November to February),

INLE OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

- **Kakku** Thousands of stupas lined up like plants in a field (p192)
- **Sankar** An ancient wall in a lake far south of Inle (p193)
- **hot springs** You'll need a soak after the bike ride (p189)
- **trek to Kalaw** It beats the bus (p176)
- **Ta-Eh Gu** This cave in the mountains east of the lake is a nice rest stop (p191)

you can count on at least two flights per day from Heho to Yangon and Mandalay with one of these reliable carriers, but during other times of the year service is less regular. The Yangon–Heho fare is US\$105, and the Mandalay–Heho fare is US\$50.

AM, BA and YA fly daily from Heho to Bagan with a stopover in Mandalay. A ticket for this leg costs US\$75.

During the high season AM and YA fly from Heho to Kengtung and Tachileik daily (US\$75).

MA flies from Yangon and Mandalay to Heho as well, but there's no reason to fly with the government-run airline, especially as the other airlines are far superior in terms of reliability and comfort.

The one-hour taxi ride between Heho airport and Nyaungshwe costs K9000 to K15,000. It's more expensive to go from the airport to town, since drivers there know you're at their mercy. The cheaper option is to hike out to the main road and wait for a pick-up or bus to the Shwenyaung junction (K350); from Shwenyaung, another pick-up or bus will eventually go to Nyaungshwe (about K200). If you're continuing to Taunggyi, it's K300. Keep in mind that doing it the cheap way may take half a day.

BUS, PICK-UP & TAXI

By road, most people travel to Inle Lake from Bagan, Mandalay, Thazi or Kalaw. Around January, the trip from the plains over the mountains to Inle Lake can be very cold in an open-truck pick-up – make sure you have some warm clothes.

The initial departure point and final destination of all public transport is Taunggyi, but travellers in Nyaungshwe and Inle need only wait by the side of the road at Shwenyaung junction, 11km north of Nyaungshwe. Buses stop and pick up passengers waiting at the side of the road. Tickets for the destinations listed below should be purchased in advance. Travel agencies and most hotels and guesthouses in Nyaungshwe can help make bus reservations.

Share taxis are quicker and generally not significantly more expensive than a bus if you're travelling in a group of four or more. Any of the following destinations can be arranged through your guesthouse or one of the travel agencies or freelance guides roaming around Nyaungshwe's restaurants.

Bagan

A share taxi from Nyaungshwe to Bagan is more convenient than a bus and only slightly more expensive if you're in a group of four. The entire taxi costs from K50,000 to K60,000 and takes around eight hours.

Shwe Hla Mi and Ye Thu Aunger operate buses from Taunggyi to Bagan (K7000) that leave at 4am. The buses pass by the Shwenyaung junction at around 5am and arrive in Bagan around 12 hours later.

Kalaw, Thazi & Meiktila

To reach Kalaw from Nyaungshwe, catch any Mandalay- or Yangon-bound bus in Shwenyaung (three to four hours). Buses going to Yangon generally also stop in Thazi, and some buses going to Mandalay may stop in Meiktila (a new road now bypasses the town, which makes the situation uncertain).

Mandalay

Buses between Mandalay and the lake area (eight to 12 hours) cost K5000 to K6000, depending on the bus company. Two of the more reliable express companies, Taung Thar Express and Shan Maw Mye, have daily departures for Taunggyi. The former departs Mandalay at 7pm and the latter at 5am.

Several buses pass through Shwenyaung on their way to Mandalay from 6pm to 8pm.

If arranged through guesthouses, share taxis between Nyaungshwe and Mandalay are around K50,000 to K60,000 for the whole taxi and take around eight hours.

Although it's unlikely to be used by buses, a new and shorter route by car leaves the Mandalay–Meiktila road just south of Kyaukse and crosses the hills through Yen Ngan to meet the Aungban–Pindaya road halfway between the two towns.

Taunggyi & Yangon

Pick-ups to Taunggyi leave virtually every half-hour from 6am to 4pm from a small lot two blocks south of the canal. The uphill trip takes one hour and costs K500 for a front seat and K300 for a spot in the crowded back.

A taxi along the same route costs K12,000 or more for a return trip.

Several companies run buses between Yangon and Taunggyi (see p195). Two nightly Yangon-bound buses stop briefly in

Shwenyaung around noon. Eastern State Express charges K7000 per seat and arrives at Yangon's Highway bus terminal 16 to 20 hours later.

Getting Around

Most guesthouses have bicycles for rent, as do a few of the travel agencies and a couple of ramshackle bike-rental shacks around town. Rates are generally K500 per day. It's an excellent way to see the surrounding countryside, including the hot springs near Kaung Daing.

AROUND THE LAKESHORE

To explore the lake, you can hire a boat from just about anyone who has one. The exact price per person or per boat depends on two things: the price of petrol and the distance travelled. An all-day trip around the lake costs less than US\$10. Key sights include the Ywama floating market, Indein and Phuang Daw Oo Paya. See p191 for more information on boat trips.

Sights

KAUNG DAING

ခေါင်းတိုင်

This **Intha village** on the northwestern shore of the lake is known for its soybean cakes and noodles. It's easy to observe the methods used, as just about every other household is involved in this cottage industry. Pottery and weaving can also be seen. Just outside the village are some interesting **Shan temple ruins**.

A little north of Kaung Daing (also spelt Kaungdine) are some **hotsprings** (☉ 7am–5pm) – really little more than a concrete communal bath. *Longyi* are available for rent (K200). Private rooms are also available (US\$2). The water is very hot and said to be cleanest between May and August.

Kaung Daing and the hot springs are a 1½-hour drive from Nyaungshwe around the top of the lake via Shwenyaung on the Heho road, or about 30 minutes across the lake by boat. A boat charter costs K800 (each way) to Kaung Daing, which has a couple of hotels nearby. However, most travellers interested only in the hot springs arrive by bicycle (see above). It's a bumpy and pot-holed 40-minute ride from Nyaungshwe. Cross the small bridge over the canal on the western edge of town and follow the rough,

dirt road until you reach the fork at the top of a steep hill. Turn left here and continue on this hilly paved road the rest of the way. The hot springs will be on your left. Many hikes from Kalaw to Inle end here as well.

INLEH BO TEH

အင်းလယ် မိုလ်တ

The lake is very shallow and clear, so a swim looks inviting, and **Inleh Bo Teh** is a good place to have one. *Inleh* means 'middle of', *bo* means 'officer' or 'official', and *teh* means 'house', so Inleh Bo Teh is literally 'an official's house in the middle of a lake'. It's no longer used as such, but it makes a good place to stop for a mid-lake picnic or swim.

NGA HPE CHAUNG

(JUMPING CAT MONASTERY)

ငါးပယ်ချောင်း

Monks get bored just like the rest of us – meditation only gets you so far. Admittedly, we don't know anything about this, but supporting our theory are the monks at **Nga Hpe Kyaung**, who have trained their much-photographed resident cats to leap through small hoops. (Just north of Ywama, Nga Hpe is a wooden monastery on stilts that was built four years before Mandalay Palace.)

The monks have expressed some frustration with visitors who make cat-jumping demands while they (the monks) are occupied with things such as eating and meditating. Otherwise they seem willing to oblige visitors. But an even better reason to visit is the modest collection of Buddha images in Shan, Tibetan, Bagan and Inwa (Ava) styles. The tall, highly ornate wood-and-mosaic pedestals and cases built for the images are just as impressive as the Buddhas themselves. Many of the original Shan images they once contained have been sold or stolen, so the cases mostly house newer images.

YWAMA

ရွှေမာ

To see Ywama's famous **floating market**, you must calculate the day according to the local five-day market scheme. Sad to say, you must also consider what has happened to this once-interesting local event. On market day, the Ywama floating market is a traffic jam of tourist boats and souvenir hawkers, with a few local farmers trying to sell their vegetables to a few

local buyers. On nonmarket days, it's almost worse because there are only souvenir and tourist boats; of course, the smart vegetable farmers are already at another five-day market. Arriving early won't help: the action is in full swing by 8.30am, and it's downhill from there.

Don't despair – you can enjoy a floating market without fighting the crowds and without adding to the already crazy atmosphere of Ywama. Simply choose any market from the five-day market schedule around Inle. Any guesthouse or hotel in Nyaungshwe will have the current schedule. A secondary five-day circuit rotates among the lake villages of Kaung Daing, Maing Thauk, Nam Pan, Indein and Thandaung.

The approach to Ywama is quite beautiful despite the market scene, and after the morning rush hour (and before the late-afternoon one) it's a lovely place to see. Perched over the lake are several restaurants, good for a midday snack or lunch break, serving Bamar and Chinese food. Regular boats go from Nyaungshwe to Ywama village.

PHAUNG DAW OO PAYA

ဖောင့်တေတီးတုရာ

The main landing at Ywama stands in front of **Phaung Daw Oo Paya**, the holiest religious site in the southern area of Shan State. Five images, four of which are ferried around the lake during the important Phaung Daw Oo festival (see p183), are enshrined in the centre of the building. Beside the channel are the boathouses sheltering the ornate vessels that carry the images on their annual voyage.

Stalls on the ground floor of the shrine and nearby sell brightly coloured cotton Shan shoulder bags, other local crafts and 'antiques'. Silk and cotton fabrics are a local speciality; there are over 200 hand looms in Ywama. A shady *khamauk* (conical bamboo hat) is another popular purchase here.

INDEIN

အင်းတိုင်

A regular convoy of motorised longboats speeding tourists through the winding, maze-like entrance to the village of **Indein** on the western side of the lake detracts somewhat from the Indiana Jones-like atmosphere. Overgrown vegetation slaps against the boat and your head, and dense jungle opens up to

reveal **Nyaung Ohak** (Group of Banyan Trees, or Under the Shade of Banyan Trees), a mouldering complex of shrines and stupas. Even more exotic looking is the stairway lined with hundreds of wooden columns leading up the hill. At the top is **Shwe Inn Thein**, an impressive collection of weather-beaten stupas that, from one perspective, have thankfully escaped restoration. From the hillside there are great views across the lake to the hills in the east and, behind the stupas, of the countryside to the west.

But the very picturesqueness that draws visitors is undermined by the souvenir sellers that travellers must dodge from the moment they step from the boat. The site is practically one long table of tourist kitsch, though some of the lacquerware and silverware is of good quality.

It's a 1000m climb to reach the **U Daung Monastery & Meditation Centre**, just south of Indein.

MAING THAUK

မိုင်းသောက်

On the eastern side of the lake, the village of Maing Thauk is divided into 'land' and 'floating' halves. The 0.5km-long wooden bridge running out to the floating village from the lake's shore was built with voluntary village labour in 2001. Just below the boys' orphanage on the hillside above the village, a few crumbling **gravestones** are all that remain of the colonial-era Fort Steadman. Further up the hill is the Maing Thauk **forest monastery**. The village is within cycling distance from Nyaungshwe; follow the bumpy track running along the foot of the hills that rise up from the lake.

SOUTHERN END OF THE LAKE

On the southwestern side of the lake, a long walkway leads to the poorly restored hill-top complex of stupas at **Thaung Tho Kyaung**. On the lakeside there's a popular **market** site (the market is part of the five-day scheme).

Right at the southern end of the lake, the whole village of **Kyauk Taung** is so devoted to pottery-making that there are pots everywhere. The floating village of **Kyaing Kan East** specialises in weaving robes using threads drawn from the long stems of lotus plants. The lotus robes are specially made for monks, Buddha statues and visiting tourists. They're quite expensive (US\$35 to US\$50

for a shawl) because of their rarity, as lotus plants can only be gathered for six months of the year.

Activities

MOTORBOAT TRIPS

It is *de rigueur* to take at least one **boat trip** on the lake during a visit to Inle. Long, narrow dugout canoes outfitted with enormous lawn-mower engines typically ferry tourists to Phaung Daw Oo Paya (Ywama), Jumping Cat Monastery, Indein, and the floating gardens and souvenir shops. At all these places you'll see Shan shoulder bags, embroidered shirts and *longyi*, tapestries, pottery, jewellery, and all the usual souvenirs.

The lake itself is rich in wildlife, especially waterfowl. All bird life on the lake and in the adjoining wetlands is reportedly protected by law, as Inle Lake has been an official bird sanctuary since 1985. You can see herons, warblers and egrets, which fly in formation over the lake every day about an hour before sunset. However, you won't hear them – or the comments of fellow passengers for that matter – over the thunder of the boat's motor. The front seat is best for those with sensitive eardrums.

Virtually every hotel and guesthouse in Nyaungshwe can arrange motorboat trips. As you might expect, the higher-end hotels charge more. The least expensive trips can be sussed out by simply showing up at the jetty near the MTT office and asking around. The drawback to the cheaper boats found at the pier is the fact that the 'drivers' are less likely to speak English and more likely to ferry you to the standard touristy places where they receive commission. Prices range from K6000 per boat to K6000 per person for the day. Some boats can seat up to 10. You may be asked to pay more depending on your itinerary.

CANOE TRIPS

With all the package tours heading to the southern end of the lake on noisy powerboats nowadays, a quiet **canoe paddle** through the villages along the lake channel has become an attractive alternative. Unfortunately, following the drowning of a foreign visitor after a canoe capsized, nonmotorised canoes ferrying foreign passengers are no longer allowed on the lake. However, several

people in town do shorter canoe trips on the canals branching from the lake and along the Nyaungshwe shore of the lake. Although you won't get to see the more famous lake sights, life along the canals is fascinating and the villagers are friendly. The slow-moving canoes are also better for photography.

One place that can only be visited by canoe is the large **nat shrine** in the middle of a swampy banyan-tree jungle opposite Nanthe village on the main channel. The house-sized wooden shrine sits on stilts and contains a rustic altar.

Canoes aren't subject to the lake entrance fee and can be arranged from the same places as motorboats, including the canal area near the bridge. Rates for two to three people range from a cheap K500 for one hour to K6000 for several hours.

HIKING

Extended walks to the north or south of Nyaungshwe pass among extensive rice paddies dotted with Shan stupa ruins. Trails into the hills east of town lead to Pa-O villages and panoramic views of the lake area. A good and rugged all-day hike is to the monastery **Koun Soun Taungbo** and nearby cave **Ta-Eh Gu**. You pass through two Pa-O villages on the way. Further away are the ruins of Kaku.

Guided day hikes can be arranged at the guesthouses or hotels. Guides typically charge US\$5 a day, which includes a basic lunch of rice and curry. Multiday trips, other than to Inle, are currently not officially encouraged. It's a good idea to bring bottled water on any day hike.

An increasingly popular option is the hike from Inle Lake to Kalaw, though it's more common to do it in the other direction. A typical route includes stops in the following Shan, Intha, Pa-O, Danu and Taung villages: Indein, Nan Yacr, Taung Kha Mauk, Kyauk Su Ti Htain, Put Tu Pauk, Kun Lone, Lay Thar Gone, Pha Yar Phyu, Inn Woon, Myin Ma Hti and Kalaw.

Sleeping

Upmarket places, some quite idyllic, are primarily found on the lake itself or outside Nyaungshwe somewhere near the shore.

All of the hotels built like floating villages on stilts directly over the lake or on the

lakeshore are top end. While they are indeed quite idyllic, single travellers will probably feel somewhat lonely, as it's a long boat ride back to Nyaungshwe, and the fantastic sunsets visible from the eastern shore stir romantic feelings best explored with others.

Reservations are recommended in the high season, and discounts are available online. All of the hotels will arrange pick-ups and return boat trips to/from Nyaungshwe.

Golden Island Cottages I (Nampan) & II (Thale U) (GIC; in Taunggyi ☎ 23136, in Yangon ☎ 01-549 019; www.gicmyanmar.com; s US\$35-60, d US\$40-70; 📍) The equivalent of prime beach-front property, the Golden Island Cottages' location near the village of Nam Pan affords unobstructed views of the lake and surrounding mountains on both sides. The main lodge is connected to the individual hardwood cottages (each with a private balcony) by an elevated walkway, so that every room seems to be its own little island. Newer all-teak rooms are much nicer than the older rooms furnished with bamboo matting. There's a swimming area with a sandy bottom, and the affordable restaurant specialises in Chinese, Pa-O and Shan dishes (sweet-and-sour butterflyfish costs K2000).

Both GICs – 20 rooms near Thale U were opened in 2000 – are run as a Pa-O collective, which means that profits benefit the community. Thale U is quieter as it's closer to the shore and out of earshot of most boats. Both hotels welcome guests with a percussion quartet and cold towels. They also run treks and trips to Kakku and Sankar.

Inle Princess Resort (☎ 29055, in Yangon ☎ 211 226; www.inleprincessresort.com; bungalows US\$160) Easily the most luxurious place on the lake, the Inle Princess is honeymoon material. Extravagant and sophisticated, the individual bungalows have been designed with maximum attention to every detail and a concern for privacy. Colourful pillows, original artwork, pyjamas and flowers are just a few of the touches. Some bungalows have outdoor all-stone showers and baths. More expensive ones have lake views, sun decks and cushioned lounge chairs, while others have garden views.

The spectacular dining room and bar area, with its soaring ceiling, is modelled on a monastery building in Kengtung. The Shan food is expensive but excellent, and cultural shows are put on for big groups.

Royal Orchid Hotel (in Taunggyi ☎ 23182; s US\$25-30, d US\$30-45) Near Kaung Daing on the north-western part of the lake, the Royal Orchid is a quiet and relaxing place about 50m from the lake's bank. It offers 20 spacious bungalow rooms with private facilities and serene views. Rates vary depending on room size and view.

Also recommended:

Hu Pin Hotel Inle Khaung Daing Village Resort (☎ 29291; hupin-hotel@mptmail.net.mm)

Shwe Inn Tha Floating Resort (☎ 22077; www.myanmarinlefloatingresort.com; s/d US\$33/38)

Eating

There are a number of places to eat in the floating village of Ywama, near Phaung Daw Oo Paya. Several restaurants with balconies serve Chinese food and make nice lunch stops on an all-day lake tour.

For a real treat, albeit an expensive one, hire a boat to take you to the Inle Princess Resort for a meal. Choose from Shan, Intha, Thai and European menus (US\$18).

AROUND INLE LAKE

Kakku

ကနု

Kakku (also spelt Kekku or Ketku) is best described as an orchard of stupas. Some 40km south of Taunggyi in a region populated by the Pa-O people, the site is said to contain over 2000 stupas, most of which are only 3m to 4m high, laid out in neat rows. Constructed in a mixture of Pa-O, Shan and Bamar styles, the stupas are made of brick and laterite, and some are covered with ornate stucco motifs. Two larger stupas are also part of the collection; one contains a highly revered Buddha image. No detailed studies have been conducted to determine the age of this site, but a local legend gives it a history dating back to the 3rd century BC, when India's Buddhist emperor Asoka is said to have sent missionaries to the region.

An all-weather road has been built to Kakku, making it easily accessible from Taunggyi. Unfortunately, along with the new road have come concessions to tourists, both foreign and local. The site has been fenced in, and paved walkways have been laid around and through the rows of stupas. The typical dilemma that affects Buddhist ruins throughout Southeast Asia applies here. While foreign visitors are

drawn to these ancient sites to view them in their 'picturesque' ruined state, local Buddhist pilgrims come specifically to acquire religious merit by contributing money to the restoration of the ruins.

Kakku is managed by the same Pa-O collective that owns the Golden Island Cottages at Inle Lake. Before visiting the site, foreign visitors are required to stop at the **GIC office** (Pa-O collective office; ☎ 23136; fax 23970; 65 West Circular Rd, Taunggyi) and pay a US\$3 entrance fee and a US\$5 guide fee. A Pa-O guide from this office will accompany you to the site. While their English isn't always up to par, this arrangement will at least enable the Pa-O to earn some of the tourist dollars that they hope their historic site will attract.

So far there isn't any accommodation in the immediate vicinity. Hlaing Konn Restaurant, a huge restaurant of the type that caters to busloads of package tourists, overlooks the site.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

To visit Kakku you must first hire a car. Foreigners aren't allowed to take public transport to the site, even though a railway line runs from Taunggyi to Kakku. Cars and guides can be hired through hotels in Taunggyi (1½ hours one way) and Nyaungshwe (2½ hours one way). The return trips cost US\$15 and US\$25 respectively, plus US\$5 admission per person (this includes waiting time of a couple of hours at the stupas). The less expensive option is to just show up at the GIC office in Taunggyi and hire a guide from there.

Sankar

စံကတ

This area far south of Inle only opened to foreign tourists in 2003, though hardly any venture here. The trip from Nyaungshwe takes 2½ hours from October to December, and 3½ hours in the dry season. A long, winding canal connects the southernmost tip of Inle with a reservoir near the village of Sankar. Running through the water here is the remnants of an **old irrigation canal**, made of sand and lime over 500 years ago for a settlement ruled by a Shan chief. Locals unfamiliar with the materials and technology used to build the wall explain its origins in a love story involving *nat* (spirit

beings). A monk lives in the old pagoda and monastery, surrounded by lush fields.

Trips to Sankar are arranged in cooperation with the Pa-O collective. Golden Island Cottage (opposite) charges K30,000 for up to five people, plus a permit fee of US\$6.

Taunggyi

တောင်ငူမြို့

☎ 081

Taunggyi feels distant from the tourist-oriented Nyaungshwe, its Chinese influence visible in the architecture and physiognomy of its inhabitants. The town's essence is the main commercial thoroughfare that runs from north to south. It's flanked by tightly packed buildings selling everything from refrigerators to knock-off designer clothing and more mundane electrical supplies.

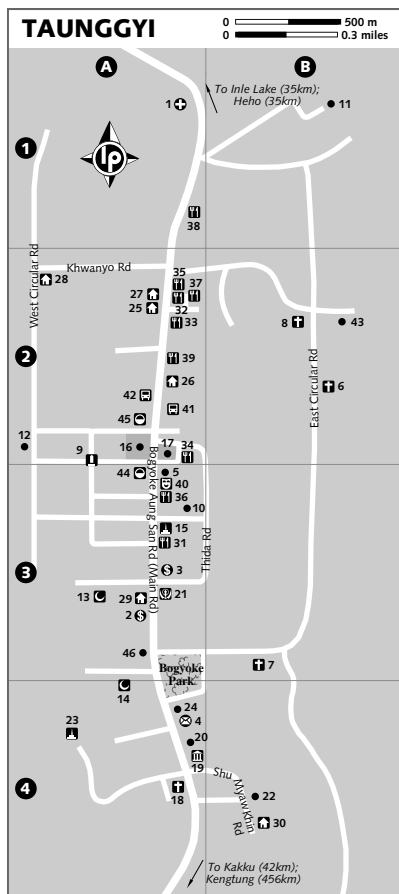
At 1430m, Taunggyi ('Big Hill' in Burmese) provides a cool break from the heat of the plains. There are some pleasant walks if you're in the mood, but basically the town is a growing trade centre for the southwestern area of Shan State. All that remains of the colonial era is an overgrown graveyard, a stone church, a line of cherry trees and a handful of timber cottages, all on the fringes of town.

Taunggyi is the official end of the line for east-bound foreigners in Myanmar – at least for those travelling by road. What lies beyond Taunggyi is a matter of speculation: black-marketeers, ruby miners, insurgent armies or opium and methamphetamine warlords?

Because it functions as a conduit for smuggled goods from Thailand, China and India, and as a base for trips to the Maing Shu (Mong Hsu) gem tract to the east, this is one of Myanmar's most prosperous and enterprising towns. An abundance of black-market consumer goods is displayed in the Taunggyi market, which is at the edge of a Chinese enclave whose residents include many illegal immigrants. The remainder of the population of 100,000 people includes tribespeople, Shan, Bamar, Sikhs, Punjabis and Nepalis. Along Taunggyi's main streets you'll see various temples, mosques and churches.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Taunggyi has an interesting **market area** in the centre of town where you're likely to



INFORMATION	
Hospital.....	1 A1
Mayflower Bank.....	2 A3
Myanmar Economic Bank (MEB).....	3 A3
Post & Telecom Office.....	4 A4
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES	
Asian Light Supermarket.....	5 A3
Baptist Church.....	6 B2
Catholic Church.....	7 B3
Church.....	8 B2
Clock Tower.....	9 A2
Flying Tiger Mashua.....	10 A3
Gem Market.....	11 B1
GIC Office.....	12 A2
Mosque.....	13 A3
Myoe Le Dhamma Yon Paya.....	14 A4
New Market.....	15 A3
Old Market.....	16 A2
St George Anglican Church.....	17 A4
Shan State Cultural Museum.....	18 A4
Shan State Library.....	19 A4
Sikh Temple.....	20 A4
Township Offices.....	21 A3
Yat Taw Me Paya.....	22 B4
YMCA.....	23 A4
24 A4	
SLEEPING	
Khemarat Guest House.....	25 A2
Khemarat Hotel.....	26 A2
Muse Hotel.....	27 A2
Paradise Hotel.....	28 A2
Salween Hotel.....	29 A3
Taunggyi Hotel.....	30 B4
EATING	
Brother Hotel Restaurant.....	31 A3
Coca-Cola Restaurant.....	32 A2
Daw Thwan Shan Noodle Shop.....	33 A2
Htun Restaurant.....	34 A2
Khine Thazin Restaurant.....	35 A2
Lyan Yu Restaurant.....	36 A3
Maw Kham.....	37 A2
Maxim's Chinese Restaurant.....	38 A1
Sein Myanmar Restaurant.....	39 A2
ENTERTAINMENT	
Myoma Cinema.....	40 A3
TRANSPORT	
Buses to Yangon, Mandalay, Bagan.....	41 A2
Eastern State Express Bus.....	42 A2
Myanma Airways.....	43 B2
Taxis & Local Buses, Pick-Ups.....	44 A3
Taxis, Pick-ups to Inle Lake.....	45 A2
Yangon Airways.....	46 A3

rub shoulders with hill-tribe people. There's a daily market, plus one that comes to town every five days. The latter market moves from Taunggyi to Pwehla (on the way to Pindaya), then to Kalaw on the third day, and from there (in turn) to Pindaya, Heho and back to Taunggyi.

There's also a daily **gem market** (☞ noon-4pm) in the northeastern part of town, where jade, rubies and sapphires are bought and sold.

For those interested in the Shan State's cultures, the modest **Shan State Cultural Museum** (admission US\$2; ☞ 9.30am-3.30pm) and **Shan State Library** are worth a visit. Items include local native costumes, religious art, musical instruments, ceramics and weapons. If nothing else, you can begin identifying the

kinds of dress for the 35 different ethnic groups officially recognised in the state. English-speaking lecturers are available at no extra cost to lead visitors around.

The Pa-O have established a **cultural centre** (98 Merchant St) near the market. The small but well-laid-out centre contains musical instruments, including a typical Pa-O accordion, as well as banknotes and traditional costumes.

There's a cheroot factory called **Flying Tiger Mashua** on a sidestreet to the south of the Myoma Cinema. The hand-rolling technique is impressive, and cheroot bundlers are able to get cheroots into bundles of 50 without counting – they judge simply by feel.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

In October/November, to coincide with the full-moon festival of **Tazaungmon** (Tazaungdaing), the city hosts a hot-air (or fire-) balloon festival. It's very popular with Burmese tourists, so it may be easier to find accommodation in Nyaungshwe during this three-day event.

SLEEPING

There really is no reason to spend the night in Taunggyi rather than Nyaungshwe. In terms of quality, value and charm, accommodation in Taunggyi simply can't compete. If you do decide to stay here in November, keep the balloon festival in mind (see above).

Taunggyi Hotel (☎ 21127; Shu Myaw Khin Rd; s/d US\$25/30) Perched on a hillside, this supposedly privatised place sprawls over landscaped grounds near the southern end of town. Spacious rooms come with attached hot-water bathrooms and access to tennis courts. The old Ministry of Hotels & Tourism (MHT)–style bar and restaurant attract a mix of well-heeled businesspeople and military types.

Paradise Hotel (☎ 22009; 157 Khwanyo Rd; standard s/d US\$20/30) This modern, four-storey Chinese-style place has an interior-design scheme that challenges the eye: checkerboard tile floors, wicker chairs and pink curtains. There are also slightly nicer rooms with plush sitting rooms at the end of each floor. Note that there's no lift.

Hotel Empire (☎ 23737; 31 Bogyoke Aung San Rd; s/d US\$15/24) Owned by a Chinese trading company, this place caters to business travellers. It's in a nondescript four-storey building but is more modern than other hotels. Rooms come with 'extras' such as TV and bathtub.

Khemarat Hotel (☎ 22464; 4B Bogyoke Aung San Rd), **Muse Hotel** (☎ 22567; 6 Bogyoke Aung San Rd) and **Salween Hotel** (☎ 22605; 289 Bogyoke Aung San Rd) all have singles/doubles for US\$10/20.

EATING

A row of small food stalls in the market area serves decent Chinese and Shan dishes. Very little English is spoken here. Between the Sikh temple and the cinema on the main road are a number of decent teashops and small eateries that specialise in an extensive variety of pastries and tea snacks.

Khine Thazin (dishes K1000), **Maxim's Chinese Restaurant** (dishes K1000) and **Coca-Cola Restaurant** (dishes K1000) are three of the better restaurants in Taunggyi. They serve Bamar and Chinese cuisine and can be found near one another on Bogyoke Aung San Rd (Main Rd). At Khine Thazin, the best of the bunch, each dish comes with a handful of interesting free side dishes, and the friendly owner ensures that service is conscientious and timely.

Maw Kham (Mawkham St; ☞ to 8pm) This humble abode, next door to the Coca-Cola Restaurant, serves Bamar and Chinese standards, and has a late closing time for Taunggyi. To get there, walk east from the main street and make an immediate left. It's the unmarked wooden building on the right (there's a Burmese sign).

Other recommended restaurants: **Brother Hotel Restaurant** (222 Bogyoke Aung San Rd) A block south of Lyan Yu Restaurant, the Brother Hotel serves decent Chinese meals. **Daw Thwan Shan Noodle Shop** Just across from the Khemarat Guest House, this place does very good noodles.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Daily flights go to Heho from Bagan, Kengtung, Mandalay and Yangon; Heho is 35km west of Taunggyi. See p187 for more details. A taxi from Heho to Taunggyi costs around US\$10 or the kyat equivalent.

Bus, Pick-up & Taxi

Public pick-up trucks from Taunggyi to Inle Lake (front/back seat K500/300, one hour) leave frequently from the area just north of Taunggyi market between 6am and 4pm. A taxi along the same route costs around US\$10 or the kyat equivalent.

There's one bus per day from Taunggyi to Pindaya (K1500), leaving at 2pm and arriving at 5.30pm. This bus generally leaves from the Eastern State Express bus stop on Bogyoke Aung San Rd, where there's a ticket office. There are frequent pick-ups to Pindaya from the Shwenyaung junction, starting at 6am.

Buses heading to Mandalay (K5000 to K6000, eight hours) depart from just north of the market.

Several buses for Yangon (K7000, 16 to 20 hours) depart at around 6pm from the area just north of the market.

KENG TUNG & BORDER AREAS

ကျိုင်းတုံ နှင့် နယ်စပ်ဒေသ

084

Because Kengtung is only accessible by air from within Myanmar, this mountainous region bordering China, Laos and Thailand attracts fewer visitors than it otherwise would. Those who do shell out for the airfare are more likely to be on group tours, while others cross overland from Thailand. If in future domestic airfares drop or foreigners are allowed to reach the area by road from Taunggyi, Kengtung will probably become a standard stop for overland travellers, rivaling Kalaw and Inle. However, it's the very remoteness of it that makes this mountain valley, dotted with far-flung minority hill-tribe villages, attractive to travellers.

Although Kengtung lies about midway between the Thanlwin and Mekong River valleys, it is more or less cut off from the former by a series of north-south mountain ranges. Hence, culturally, the area has more affinity with the nearby cultures of the Mekong - Laos, Xishuangbanna (southeastern Yunnan Province, China) and northern Thailand - than with the Shan and Bamar cultures west of the Thanlwin. Indeed, culturally Kengtung feels more like some long-forgotten corner of northern Thailand than a part of Myanmar.

KENG TUNG (KYAINGTONG)

ကျိုင်းတုံ

084

Kengtung appears more planned than the average medium-sized Myanmar town. There's a less ad-hoc feel and more uniformity of design. This organisation, coupled with a pleasant sense of isolation and the picturesque mountain backdrop, sees Kengtung hit the rare Myanmar trifecta. Tucked away in the far east of Shan State - 456km northeast of Taunggyi, 163km north of the border town of Tachileik (opposite Mae Sai, Thailand) and 1200m above sea level - Kengtung is the sleepy but historic centre for the state's Khün culture, surrounded by Wa, Shan, Akha and Lahu villages. Built around a small lake, and dotted with ageing Buddhist temples and a few examples of British

colonial architecture, Kengtung is probably the most scenic town in Shan State. It's a good base for trips to ethnic-minority villages.

About 80% of the township's population of 180,000 people is Khün; roughly 15% is Shan-Chinese and the remainder is a mix of other ethnicities, such as Lahu. About half of the population is Buddhist, and another 17% is Christian - American missionaries were quite active here, as their imposing churches attest. The rest of the population belongs to various spirit cults.

Kengtung is also a strategic stronghold of the Myanmar government amid the shifting seas of Shan and Wa insurgency and the illicit drug trade. Its position is doubly strategic, as the area is a crossroads with outlets in four countries - Myanmar, China, Thailand and Laos. As such, it's a linchpin in the country's defence. Some human-rights groups claim that over 125,000 Wa were resettled from the north to the south between 1992 and 2002. It's reported that the United Wa State Army has 20,000 troops and enjoys good relations with the Chinese government in Beijing.

Information

Sunflower Travel & Tours (☎ 21833) Just over a block east of the central market.

Yangon Airways (☎ 22300; 36 Zaytangyi Rd; ✈ 9am-5pm) Near the Mausoleum of the Khün Princes.

Sights & Activities

When the British settled into Kengtung, they centred the town on a large natural lake. Decaying colonial-style buildings, taken over by the Myanmar government or by squatters, are reminiscent of British colonial provincial architecture found elsewhere in Myanmar and India.

The lake in the centre of town, **Naung Tung** (*naung* is the Shan word for 'small lake'), is a popular spot for morning and evening strolls.

The **central market** draws people from all over the Kengtung district, including a variety of hill-tribe people. Fresh produce and household goods are the market's main emphases, but some handicrafts are also available. Look for a handful of stalls that specialise in supplying Akha women with the silver coins, buttons and seed beads that they use to decorate their colourful clothing.

KENG TUNG (KYAINGTONG)

0 500 m
0 0.3 miles

↑ To Hot Springs (11km); Mong Yang (100km)

↑ To Naung Kham Lake (30km)

↑ To Mong La (90km)

↑ To Airport (3km)

↑ To Taunggyi (456km)

↑ To Pha Yang Gate (50m)

↑ To Loi-mwe (32km); Mong Hypayak Taley; Tachileik (163km)

INFORMATION	
Fax & Telegram Office.....1 B3	Sports Field.....23 B3
Hospital.....2 D3	Tai Khun Silverworks.....24 C3
Immigration Office.....3 B2	Town Hall.....25 C3
Police Station.....4 B3	Wat Asok.....26 B3
Regional Offices.....5 C3	Wat Chiang Ing (Keng Ing).....27 B2
Sunflower Travel & Tours.....6 C3	Wat Chiang Jan (Keng Sar).....28 C3
	Wat Chiang Khom (Keng Khom).....29 B3
	Wat Chiang Ying (Keng Yun).....30 C2
	Wat Ho Kat.....31 C3
	Wat Ho Kong.....32 C3
	Wat In.....33 C2
	Wat Jom Mai.....34 D3
	Wat Jong Kham (Zom Kham).....35 C2
	Wat Kae Min.....36 C2
	Wat Mahabodhi Vipassana (Kamathan Kyaung).....37 A4
	Wat Naung Kham.....38 D2
	Wat Noi Naw.....39 B2
	Wat Pha Jao Lung (Maha Myat Muni).....40 C3
	Mausoleum of the Khün Princes.....16 C3
	Wat Pha Kaew.....41 C3
	Wat Pha That Jom Mon.....42 C4
	Naung Pha Gate.....18 B1
	Wat Si Naw.....43 B4
	Paleng Gate.....19 C3
	Wat Tuya.....44 B4
	Pottery Works.....20 C1
	Wat Yang Kon.....45 C1
	Roman Catholic Mission.....21 A3
	Water Buffalo Market.....46 A3
	St Mary's Convent.....22 B3
	Yang Kham Gate.....47 A3
	Yat Thaw Mu.....48 B3

SLEEPING	
Barami Motel.....49 C3	Harry's Trekking House.....50 B1
Hsam Yawt Guest House.....51 C3	Kyaing Tong Hotel.....52 B2
New Sam Yweat Guest House.....53 D2	Noi Yee Hotel.....54 B2
Princess Hotel.....55 C3	Private Hotel.....56 D2
Shen Tie Hotel.....57 C2	

EATING	
Golden Banyan Restaurant.....58 C3	Lao Tien Lu Restaurant.....59 C3
Lok Thar Restaurant.....60 C3	Mingalar Restaurant.....61 D2
Quickly Café.....62 D2	Seik Tie Kye Restaurant.....63 C2

TRANSPORT	
Buses to Tachileik.....64 A3	Buses to Taunggyi.....65 A3
Myanma Airways.....66 B3	Pick-Ups to Mong La.....67 C3
Yangon Airways.....68 C3	

A **water-buffalo market** is held twice a week in an empty dirt lot west of town, just off the road leading to Taunggyi. It's interesting to observe groups of men huddled around these large beasts, grilling their owners as if they were dealing with used-car dealers. Water buffalo cost from US\$200 to US\$500 each – shipping is not included.

On the road leading towards Taunggyi, the British-era **Roman Catholic Mission** (RCM) and the 12-year-old **Immaculate Heart Cathedral** are still thriving on a hillside where the original town was founded 1000 years ago. Visitors are welcome. The mission cares for nearly 100 orphaned boys, many from Shan State hill tribes.

MONASTERIES & TEMPLES

Kengtung's many well-kept monasteries – called wats rather than *kyaung* by the Khün – reflect Shan, Siamese, Burmese and Chinese influences.

The most impressive is **Wat Jong Kham** (Zom Kham), which features a tall gilded stupa topped by a gold *hti* (pinnacle of a stupa) inlaid with silver, rubies, diamonds, sapphires and jade, and hung with tiny gold bells. Legend says that Wat Jong Kham dates back to a visit by Gautama Buddha and that the stupa contains six strands of his hair. Most likely the site dates back to the 13th-century Chiang Mai migration. The temple has been substantially renovated and regilded since then. Wat Jong Kham is north of the town centre.

Right in the centre of town are a couple of busy and visually striking 19th-century temples, **Wat Pha Jao Lung** (Maha Myat Muni) and **Wat Ho Kong**. Aficionados of rare Buddha images will have a field day at **Wat In**, named after the Hindu god Indra. Behind the altar of the principal sanctuary is a must-see collection of wooden Buddha images. Wat In is on a hill overlooking the lake.

Construction on **Yat Thaw Mu**, the commanding-looking standing Buddha that points out over Naung Tung lake, was completed in 2002.

On a hill to the south of town, **Wat Pha That Jom Mon** features an older wood-and-plaster sanctuary with good tinwork. The surrounding hillside provides good views of the town below.

One of the great sights in Kengtung was to be once the large **Haw Sao Pha Kengtung**,

considered the most outstanding example of Shan-style palace architecture in Myanmar. The stucco-and-teak structure combined Buddhist temple-style pavilions and Islamic-looking domes. Despite protests to preserve the building, the Myanmar government demolished the palace in 1991 to make way for the unsightly Kyaing Tong Hotel. All that's left of the old palace are the walls and a sentinel tower on the hotel's perimeter. To get an idea of what the old palace domes looked like, check out the **Mausoleum of the Khün Princes**, opposite Wat Chiang Jan. The compound is walled in and visitors are not allowed inside, but you can get a good view from the monastery on the other side of the road.

Sleeping

Most hotels offer an airport pick-up service if you make reservations. Rooms are scarce during the Chinese New Year festivities at the beginning of February and during the mid-April Water Festival.

BUDGET

Harry's Trekking House (☎ 21418; 132 Mai Yang Rd, Kanaburoy Village; r US\$3-15) At the northern end of town, 500m north of Naung Pha Gate, this backpacker-oriented hotel is owned by Harry, an English-speaking Kengtung native who spent many years as a trekking guide in Chiang Mai. A newly built modern annexe has eight immaculate rooms with private bathroom and great views of the surrounding countryside from the rooftop. There are also basic small wooden bungalows, and larger rooms with porches for three to four people. Hot water is hit or miss. For insomniacs there's a daily early-morning market (5am to 8am) on the road right in front of Harry's. Cheaper rooms don't include breakfast. Harry can arrange all manner of trips to surrounding villages.

New Sam Yweat Guest House (☎ 21643; Airport Rd; s/d US\$7/14) Directly opposite Seik Tie Kye Restaurant, this guesthouse looks somewhat neglected. The bamboo bungalows look extremely nice from the outside but are basic inside, though the bathrooms are nice and modern.

Noi Yee Hotel (☎ 21144; 5 Myaing Young Rd; s/d US\$5/10) A former royal residence, the Noi Yee has seen better days. The rooms are a tad grubby, but the façade at least has some

character, and there's a pleasant courtyard out front.

Shein Tip Hotel (☎ 22208; Airport Rd; s/d US\$7/14) Across the street from Naung Kham lake, Shein Tip is a large green building set back from the road. Loads of potted plants at the entrance disguise the fact that inside the hotel are bare-bones concrete rooms, frequented by truck drivers. Some rooms have squat toilets, while others have Western-style toilets.

MIDRANGE

Princess Hotel (☎ 21319; fax 21159; s US\$20-25, d US\$28-35; ☎) This three-storey place, just south of Paleng Gate, was once probably the most comfortable in town; today its rooms are fading, though they have satellite TV, air-con, fridge and phone. Like most modern hotels in this part of Myanmar, the amenities come at a price – this place is quite lacking in atmosphere.

Private Hotel (☎ 21438; www.ktprivatehotel.com; 5 Airport Rd; s/d US\$30/35) Another hotel on the way in from the airport, the Private Hotel is popular with package tourists. There are seven cottages in the garden, and double rooms have tiled floors, windows and small verandas.

Travellers who wish to avoid government-owned hotels should bypass the Kyaing Tong Hotel.

Eating

Seik Tie Kye Restaurant (Best Choice; ☎ 21387; Airport Rd; dishes K1200; ☎ 11am-10pm) The English translation is not an empty boast – Seik Tie Kye is the best restaurant in Kengtung. On offer are hotpots and other Chinese and Thai dishes. The chicken with bean-curd hotpot (K6000) is very good and enough for three or four. Seik Tie Kye also has good ice cream. Service is super attentive. Big groups should order dishes at least an hour in advance.

Mingalar Restaurant (Naung Kham Rd) Heading out of town via Airport Rd, take the right immediately after Naung Kham lake to find this restaurant specialising in Shan cuisine. Meals are served in small private bungalows. The grilled fish (K2000) is enough for two.

Lok Thar Restaurant (chicken & pork dishes K1000) For hefty servings of Chinese and Thai food, try Lok Thar, a banquet-style place with a very spacious 2nd floor. The spicy Thai-style soup is enough for two.

Lao Tien Lu Restaurant (Law Tin Lu) This is the longest-running and most reliable Chinese restaurant in town – it's a branch of one owned by the same family in Thailand's Chiang Khong. It's a simple, open-sided restaurant with good southern Chinese food.

Golden Banyan Restaurant (Shwe Nyaung Bin, Ton Pho Thong) Kengtung's second-most-popular Chinese restaurant is near Wat Chiang Jan (Keng San). Its main feature is the outdoor tables beneath a huge banyan tree. The food is only fair, but the atmosphere makes up for it.

Quickly Café (Airport Rd) This modern student hang-out serves up coffee, tea, snacks, pop music and movie-star posters.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Air Mandalay (AM) and Yangon Airways (YA) fly between Kengtung and Tachileik (US\$30 with YA; US\$41 with AM), Mandalay (both airlines US\$92) and Yangon (both airlines US\$138). AM flies this circuit twice a week on Monday and Wednesday. YA flies five days a week.

BUS & PICK-UP

The 456km road between Kengtung and Taunggyi is off limits to foreigners. At the moment only citizens of Myanmar are permitted to use this road, and they travel in convoys. Officials claim robbery and continued fighting between the Yangon government and the Shan and Pa-O insurgents make the Kengtung–Taunggyi journey too hazardous to risk. However, since both the Shan under Khün Sa and the Pa-O have signed reconciliation agreements with the government, the continued cultivation of opium and the production of methamphetamine in some areas seem more likely reasons to keep foreigners away.

Mae Sai/Tachileik

If you're coming to Kengtung from Thailand through Mae Sai (see p203), you'll find that the Myanmar government and local tour agents and drivers have conspired to make it difficult for travellers to ride the Tachileik–Kengtung bus at local prices. Arranging a ride to Kengtung must be done through an agent. This can be accomplished at the small tourist office next to the immigration checkpoint at the border crossing

or at the bus station, where a line of agent's offices is located. Either way, you will have to complete a form that the driver will show on demand at one of the five roadblocks set up between Tachileik and Kengtung.

Foreign passengers are asked to pay in Thai baht or US dollars and are charged US\$6 for a seat on the bus, US\$14 for a back seat in a Toyota Corolla 'van', or US\$17 for the front seat. The trip takes around three to four hours over a recently paved road through scenes of some of the worst deforestation in Southeast Asia, as well as numerous Akha, Wa and Shan villages. Along the way the main rest stops are **Talay**, a small town with interesting Shan temples and an army post, and the village of **Mong Hpayak**, the most popular food stop.

Leaving Kengtung for Tachileik is generally easier to arrange and less expensive. Toyota pick-ups leave when full from 5am to noon (K7500 per person). Buses leave when full from 6am to noon and cost K4000 per person.

Mong La

For information, see opposite.

Getting Around

Kengtung has a small fleet of motorcycle taxis – the drivers wear numbered coloured vests – that charge around K200 for a ride within town and K300 for longer rides, such as from Harry's Trekking House to the town centre.

A car or motorcycle taxi from the airport costs around K500. Some hotels might hire out motorcycles – an exhilarating way to explore the town and surroundings. Note that helmets may not be on offer.

AROUND KENG TUNG Villages

Visiting nearby villages, where most of the residents still lead very traditional lives but are warm and welcoming to visitors, is a highlight of any trip to Kengtung. Trips to nearby Lahu (Musoe), Akha (Kaw), Akhu (from Yunnan Province in China), Eng, Palaung, Shan, and Wa villages are permitted in the company of a guide. Guides can be arranged at most of Kengtung's hotels for around US\$25 per person per day; this price also generally includes transport in a 4WD (rates drop substantially per person

for groups of three or more). Overnight stays in villages are not officially permitted, though several travellers report having done so. Because most of the more interesting villages are far outside town at the end of rough dirt roads, hiking directly to them is not feasible even if you somehow knew where to find them. A few are within cycling distance.

A trip with a vehicle is thus the way to go, even if costs are substantially higher than to other places in Shan territory such as Kalaw and Inle. The villages here are less exposed to foreigners, though there's a real unevenness to the level of development between villages only a few minutes apart. One Akha village, for example, may have running water and even limited electricity, while an Eng village within shouting distance has neither. Ask your guide whether certain goods such as medicines are appropriate gifts.

Hot Springs

West of town on the road to Tachileik is a large public hot-springs **spa complex** (r small/large K300/600; ☎ 3-8pm). The bathhouses themselves are small, narrow rooms with bathtubs and a spigot to control the volume of water. Shampoo, soap and small towels are available for sale, so this is a great spot to clean up if you're staying at one of the cold-water guesthouses in town. It's also a nice way to wind down after a long day off-roading in a four-wheel drive. Vendors on the grounds sell noodles and other snacks, so you could easily spend an entire afternoon here. The spa is busiest at weekends. A taxi from town costs around K500 each way, and drivers are willing to wait.

Loi-mwe လိုမြေ

Although it lies a little outside the permitted radius, no-one seems to care if you visit Loi-mwe, 33km southeast of Kengtung. At over 1600m, this hill station features a number of old **colonial buildings** and over a century-old Catholic **church**. The main attraction, though, is the scenery on the ascent to Loi-mwe, which passes through forests, terraced rice fields and a lake. You'll have to hire a car or motorcycle, as there doesn't seem to be any regular public transport between Kengtung and Loi-mwe.

MONG LA

မိုင်းလာ

About 85km north of Kengtung lies the border district of Mong La (or Mengla, as it's sometimes spelt). Although Mong La is mainly a Thai Lü district, in a deal worked out with the Myanmar military it's controlled by ethnic Wa, who once fought against Yangon troops but now enjoy peaceful relations with the government. Myanmar appears willing to relinquish sovereignty if it means adding cash – cold, hard yuan (Y) from Chinese casino tourism – to the government coffers.

Mong La is entirely Chinese, from the modern oversized buildings to the currency used; hardly any Burmese is spoken, which makes sense since hardly any Myanmar people live here. Seventeen daily flights from other parts of China arrive at the airport not far away on the Chinese side of the border, ferrying tourists who come to peruse Mong La's well-known wildlife market and to gamble in the district's casinos. One of the largest and plushiest is the **Oriental Hotel & Casino**, a big pink complex visible from almost anywhere in the city. Inside are the usual Chinese and Western games of chance – the setup is that typically seen in Macau and on cruise ships in the South China Sea.

The casinos look grand and impressive from far away, but upon closer inspection the dirty carpets and chipped paint make them seem more like buildings Beijing forgot. The hivelike activity, the swarms of workers wearing spiffy uniforms on the streets during a shift change at the casinos, the buzz and clink of yuan being wagered at the gaming tables – it all produces an uncanny sense of a displaced land overlooked by time and national boundaries.

The casino parking lots hold more late-model private cars than you're likely to see in all of Myanmar. The broad main thoroughfare, of the kind suited as much to military parades as to local traffic, divides the town. The casinos and market are on one side, while most of the housing and small shops are on the other. There are also plenty of karaoke venues, discos (including a thriving gay and transvestite scene) and other staples of modern Chinese entertainment life.

During 1997 a **Drug Eradication Museum** was opened by U Sai Lin, a local Wa/Chinese

turned establishment figure and head of the Eastern Shan State Army (ESSA), who declared – to widespread disbelief – that the area around Mong La was henceforth to be an 'opium-free zone'. This may be somewhat accurate, as opium has been replaced by methamphetamine as the region's most lucrative illicit drug. Poppy plants are on display in the museum garden.

Many of the paya in Mong La have been built in the past 10 years as part of the efforts of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) to convert the border areas to Buddhism.

Sleeping & Eating

There are several modern hotels spread out along the main road, none accustomed to dealing with non-Chinese or English-speaking tourists. Rooms at the Bai Lai Hotel and Paradise Hotel are good value at Y60. You can also stay with the district headman in his Thai Lü-style house for around Y30 – a more interesting experience, though difficult to arrange.

Kaw Hlaing Restaurant, on the road that loops above the main thoroughfare, has a menu in English. On offer are basic chicken, pork, rice and noodle dishes.

Getting There & Away

To go to Mong La from Kengtung you must register at the Kengtung immigration office. The staff at Harry's Trekking House (see p198) can help independent travellers accomplish this. You must first arrange a seat in one of the Toyota pick-ups (K5000 to K6500) that idle around in the lot behind the Wat Chiang Jan and Kyi Lin Star Guest House. The driver will then accompany you to the immigration office, where officials will comb through files of important-looking carbon-copy documents, one of which contains information about you. More information is then added by large and ancient typewriters (and the long wait for the process to be completed may cause you to entertain *Bourne Supremacy*-like fantasies about the potential of these typewriters as aids in an escape attempt). Your driver will then be handed a copy of a document that will later be used to admit you to Myanmar (hey, it's the way it works). It's probably best to let the driver hold on to this, since he bears responsibility for your safe conveyance. At some point in

this process, visit the Kengtung market to change kyat or dollars to yuan.

There are two checkpoints on the road from Kengtung to Mong La. The second, not far from Mong La, requires you to pay a Y36 (US\$5) entrance fee. There's one final hoop to jump through. You must register – which involves more signatures and several rubber stamps to another carbon copy – at the Mong La immigration office. This is nothing more than a desk (staffed by a man who's often in pyjamas, regardless of the time of day) in a small, nondescript house on a muddy side street that's impossible to find on your own. The entire journey from the Kengtung immigration office to the Mong La immigration office takes anywhere from three to four hours, going up and over mountain switchback roads and passing through breathtaking scenery and several isolated villages.

The procedure is repeated in the opposite direction, minus the entrance fee. You're expected to hand one of the documents to the Kengtung immigration office upon your return, but if you're pressed for time or simply want to avoid the hassle it seems possible to skip this step.

The obvious question is: can you cross the border from Mong La into Daluo, China? So far the only third-country nationals that have been able to cross here have done so in 'caravans' – with off-road aficionados who pay the Chinese and Myanmar governments large sums for permission to cross here.

TACHILEIK

တချီလိတ်

☎ 084

Most travellers who come to Myanmar from Mae Sai in Thailand head straight for

Kengtung to the north rather than linger here, but it's possible to arrange a one-day pass to visit Tachileik from Thailand. Besides shopping for Shan handicrafts (about the same price as on the Thai side – everyone accepts baht) and eating Shan/Bamar food, there's little to do in Tachileik. Most of the 3000 or so people who cross the bridge to Tachileik daily are Thais who shop for dried mushrooms, herbal medicines, cigarettes and other cheap imports from China. A steady trickle of VIPs from Thailand crosses the border to gamble at the large Golden Triangle Casino outside town on the Mekong River.

Sleeping

If crossing the border into Thailand is an option, you'll find the accommodation there better in every respect. All hotels in Tachileik accept both US dollars and Thai baht (B).

Dream Flower Hotel (☎ 21318; Padommar Rd; r US\$5/200B) Just south of the main intersection in town, this hotel has clean, if somewhat noisy, rooms with attached bathroom.

The **Mya Shwe Ye Hotel** (☎ 51792; 3/52 Mya Shwe Ye St; r US\$18/600B; ☹) and the **Kanne Hotel** (r 200-800B) have decent rooms.

The Golden Triangle Hotel, on a hill overlooking the town, is probably the most comfortable place in Tachileik but is government owned.

In Mae Sai, on the Thailand side of the border, the Mae Sai Guesthouse on the river is recommended.

Getting There & Away

Yangon Airways and Myanma Airways stop in Tachileik as part of their daily route to/from Kengtung, Heho, Mandalay and Yangon. For details of road travel to/from Kengtung, see p199.

CROSSING THE BORDER TO LAOS

About 19km northeast of Tachileik on the Tachileik–Kengtung road, a smaller road branches off from the Nam Manyang road and heads east-southeast to the Mekong River, the border between Laos and Myanmar. At the small town here, Wan Pasak, you can get a boat across the river to Xieng Kok in Laos. From Xieng Kok there's a road northeast from Muang Sing, which connects with roads to Luang Nam Tha and Udomxai. You *might* be permitted to cross into Laos here if you already possess a valid Lao visa. Then again, you might not! Much depends on the local political situation, obviously, as well as the mood of local officials. It's not a legal international border crossing, yet plenty of Burmese and Lao do use it. Sooner or later, however, this could become an official crossing for all nationalities. The one thing that does seem certain is that you cannot enter Myanmar from Laos at this border. Then again...

KAYAH STATE

At the time of research, travel to Kayah State for foreigners was still not permitted, and there was no prospect of the situation changing anytime in the near future. This small state is wedged between Shan State to the north and west, Karen State to the west and south, and Thailand to the east. Eight ethnic groups reside in this mountainous region, including the Taungthu, Padaung, Yinbaw, Bre, and Kayah, who form the majority.

Until the early 1990s, Kayah rebel groups controlled much of the eastern half of the state. The Myanmar government has concentrated on securing the capital, Loikaw, and the very important hydroelectric plant at nearby Lawpita. A ceasefire agreement allowed the government to build a railway between Aungban and Loikaw. Fighting continues, though; as late as November 2004 there were reports of a government military offensive in the area and thousands of Karenni families fleeing for the Thai border.

BORDER CROSSING

At the time of research the Mae Sai–Tachileik border was open except for a few days during the October 2004 coup. In general you can expect to be able to cross here – although, as with much else in Myanmar, this is dependent on the shifting political and security situation.

The Mae Sai–Tachileik border is usually open from 6am to 6pm on weekdays (be aware that Thailand time is half an hour ahead of Myanmar time), and from 6am to 9pm on weekends and holidays. The early closing time on weekdays can be a problem if you're driving from Kengtung, given the unpredictability of road travel in Myanmar.

Myanmar to Thailand

In general, travellers report not having difficulties crossing from Myanmar to Thailand. However, if you have an expired Myanmar visa you'll probably not be allowed to cross. On the whole, travel agents and certainly government officials will tell you the border is either not open in this direction or that in order to cross you must make arrangements through a travel agent and pay through the nose. Unless the political and security situation changes, which it always can, this is simply incorrect.

You can get a 30-day Thai visa at Mae Sai on arrival, or you can arrive at the border with a 60-day Thai visa arranged in Yangon. When you exit, officials will fill out a bit of paperwork and make three copies of your passport (10B). The paperwork takes about half an hour. On the Thai side there will be long line of day-trippers if you cross after 3pm. The entire border-crossing process takes approximately an hour.

Thailand to Myanmar

A day pass from Thailand to Tachileik costs US\$5, which you pay to Myanmar immigration officials at the border crossing. If you hold a day pass you're restricted to a radius of 5km. There's a very cursory customs check on the Thai side. Upon your return, Thai officials will stamp your passport with another 30-day visa.

You can also enter Myanmar from Tachileik on a 14-day pass (150B, US\$10), which you can get at the border, but this only permits you to go to Kengtung and Mong La (on the Chinese border).

If you want to enter at Tachileik and go on to Inle Lake, Mandalay, Yangon, Bagan and so on, you'll need to arrange the visa in Bangkok prior to your trip and then fly west from Tachileik or Kengtung. If you enter with a Foreign Independent Traveller (FIT) visa, you get a 28-day entry-permit stamp and can travel around Myanmar exactly as if you'd flown in. A word of caution: travellers report being turned away at the border if their Myanmar visa was obtained online.

PYIN U LWIN TO LASHIO

The road from Mandalay to Lashio is a ribbon of hairpin bends crisscrossing the Shan Plateau and passing through Pyin U Lwin before descending into the Gokteik Gorge, the railway viaduct visible in the distance. The market towns between Gokteik and Lashio, only pit stops for trucks plying the main China–Myanmar trade route, are gems for travellers wishing to get off the beaten track. Those interested in more than

the glittering pagodas that exist everywhere in Myanmar will discover cool mountain settlements – architectural mishmashes of bygone eras and more contemporary utilitarian Myanmar structures – and the striking mountain scenery that rises up beyond them.

PYIN U LWIN

မြင်းဦးလွင်

☎ 085

Few places in Myanmar evoke the vibe of the British colonial era such as the hill-town resort of Pyin U Lwin. In the cool foothills here (elevation 1050m), 69km east of Mandalay, stately colonial-era buildings on the town's main street house Nepali tea houses or sweater shops, and country cottages sit on grassy plots outside town. Some old homes, like the famous Candacraig (immortalised in Paul Theroux's *The Great Railway Bazaar*, which makes a stop here) are now government-run hotels. Trotting through it all are pony-led colourful miniature wagons that look like replicas from the Wells Fargo days of the American West. More importantly, it's about 6°C or 7°C cooler than in Mandalay.

Much of the town's populace is decked out in various fatigues – including camouflaged tennis shoes – but not *everyone* is military. Many shops cater to the clothing needs of the cadets at the nearby Defence Services Academy.

Peak season in Pyin U Lwin (particularly for domestic travellers) coincides with the hottest months elsewhere: March, April and May.

History

Originally a small Shan Danu village, Pyin U Lwin was renamed Maymyo (May-town) in 1887 after British Colonel May, of the 5th Bengal Infantry, who was stationed here. From 1896 Pyin U Lwin was a British hill station, and during those colonial days an influx of south Asians moved here. Today more than 5000 Nepalis and 10,000 Indians live in the town.

Information

Shwe Htay Internet (per min K25; ☎ 8am-9pm) Get online at this small shop opposite the share-taxi stand. International calls (about K1250 per minute) can be made here too.

Sights

NATIONAL KANDAWGYI GARDENS

အမျိုးသားကန်ငှက်ကြီးဥယျာဉ်

Run by the Woodland Group (a Singaporean joint venture), this formerly government-run 176-hectare **garden** (☎ 22130; admission K2000, camera/video fee K200/K1000; ☎ 8am-5pm) features the rich life of 482 species of local and foreign trees (including the ginkgo tree, which is extinct elsewhere) and 250 species of orchids from around Myanmar. British botanists began building the garden in 1915.

Admission to the garden includes use of the inviting L-shaped **pool** near the entrance. View-hounds can walk up to a new **Nan Myint Tower**, where you can climb 10 flights of stairs, or take an air-conditioned lift for K1000. There's a small stupa on a picturesque islet on the central lake, and elevated forest walks. The garden is popular with picnicking families on weekends and holidays. A couple of teashops serve snacks and drinks.

CHINESE TEMPLE

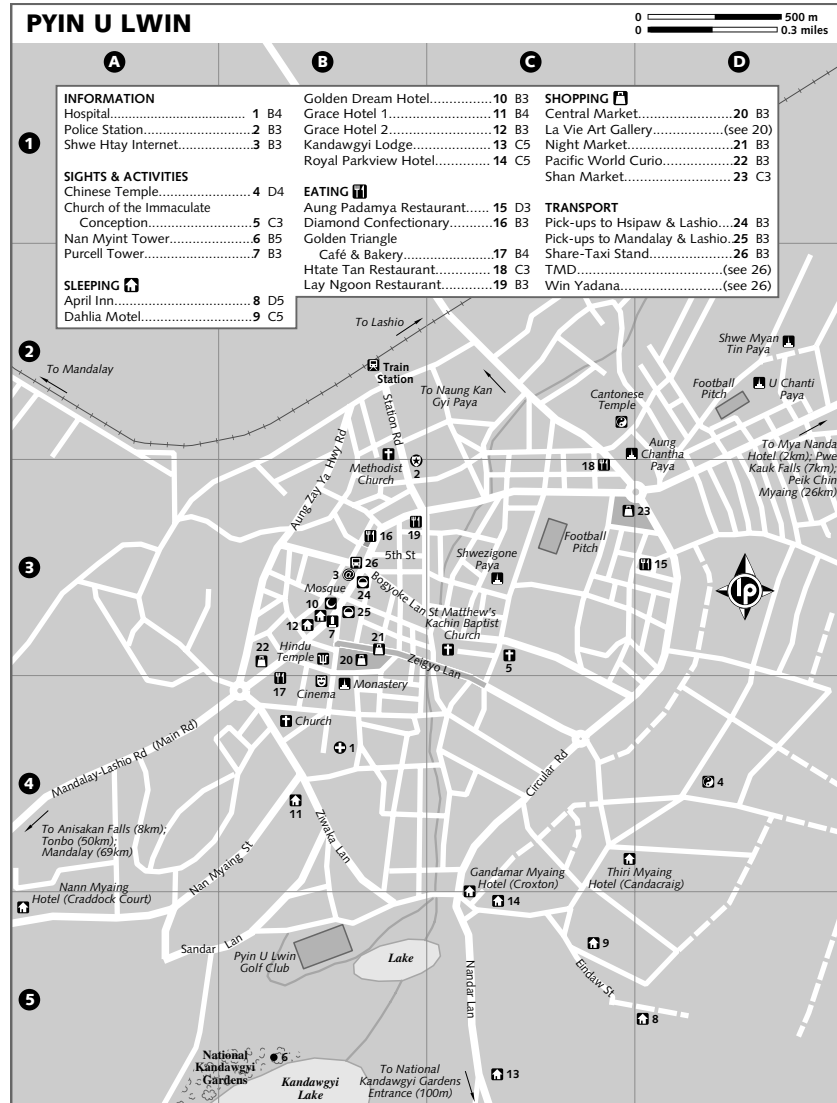
Built by Yunnanese immigrants, the colourful **Chinese temple** is unlike other Buddhist sites you'll see in Myanmar. It's home to an orphanage and nursing home within the compound. The shoe-friendly grounds include a six-storey tower with seating areas that are frequently used as hang-out spots for betel-nut chewers, studying teens and couples. Some Chinese-script students study calligraphy here.

PURCELL TOWER

On the main road in the town centre, the **Purcell Tower** was a present from Queen Victoria, who offered an identical tower to Cape Town, South Africa. Another version of the story has it that the clock was made in 1934 and paid for by a Mr Purcell, a resident of Mandalay who was descended from Armenian traders. What's known for sure is that the tower's chime still copies Big Ben, playing 16 notes before the hour.

Activities

On the southern edge of town, the **Pyin U Lwin Golf Club** (green fee incl clubs & shoes US\$15; ☎ 7am-dusk) is a fairly well-maintained 18-hole course. It hosts the annual Water Festival Golf Cup in April (see p340).



Sleeping

Few of the hotels in the town centre are licensed to accommodate foreigners. The most relaxing options – many are midrange hotels – are to be found south and southwest of town along rolling roads lined by trees often covered in bright-yellow and red blossoms.

IN TOWN

Rooms in town tend to be basic cheapies. All rates include breakfast. Most rooms don't have a fan.

Grace Hotel 1 (☎ 21230; 114A Nan Myaing Rd; s/d US\$5/10) A couple of blocks south of the main strip, this hotel has a garden out the front and more character than the others. The

state of the basic rooms (which have private bathroom) may depend on the smoking habits of the previous occupants.

Golden Dream Hotel (☎ 21302; 42/43 Mandalay-Lashio Rd; s without/private bathroom US\$3/4, d US\$8/6) Run by a pleasant Indian family, this 1st-floor hotel above a sweater shop has old but clean rooms. Those with shared bathroom have a desk and those with private bathroom are at the back; all come with a fan.

Grace Hotel 2 (☎ 22081; 46/48 Mandalay-Lashio Rd; s without/private bathroom US\$4/5, d US\$10/8) Grace's second location is friendly but a little musty. Rooms at the front have a balcony. Rooms include two low beds and a small desk. All showers have hot water.

OUTSIDE TOWN – BUDGET

Dahlia Motel (☎ 22255; 09-20 44153; s US\$5-12, d US\$10-18) This traveller-oriented motel, run by an outgoing 'rock-and-roll Muslim' (ie 'drinks beer, eats pork sometimes') is an excellent choice. Its cheapest rooms, in the older wing, have TV and private bathroom; the bigger rooms in the newer wing have bigger TVs and shiny tiled floors. The staff can lead day treks to Shan villages (US\$8). To get to the hotel, take the first right after Royal Parkview and then turn left at the next fork.

April Inn (☎ 21918; 51F Eindaw St; s/d US\$8/16) Over 1km from the ring road, April Inn features six bungalows, each with private bathroom, TV, twin beds and a porch for your breakfast. By day the only noise comes from farmers' hoes in the coffee plot; by night you may hear some wailing from the karaoke bar (but it winds down before midnight). Insects happen. If you're biking, it's easy to get lost after dark. (Take a right at the fork by the Dahlia Motel, then watch for a sign on the left after 200m or so.)

OUTSIDE TOWN – MIDRANGE

Royal Parkview Hotel (☎ 22647; standard s/d US\$25/30, superiors US\$30, d US\$35; ☎ ☎) For those looking for comfort, the Royal is a heck of a deal. These 20 stylish wood-floor rooms are set on lush grounds, just outside the ring road, and sometimes fill up in advance. Cheaper rooms have no air-con and a shower instead of a bathtub. There's a small restaurant.

Kandawgyi Lodge (☎ 21839, in Yangon ☎ 01-202071; fax 22497; www.woodlandgroups.com; Nandar Rd; bungalows s/d US\$40/50, ste s/d US\$50/60) Opened in 2002, this classy retro Singapore joint

venture includes suites in a converted 1921 English lodge and new bungalows in the garden outside. All accommodation faces Kandawgyi lake, and guests get free entry to the nearby National Kandawgyi Gardens. Putting peace first, there are no TVs or phones in the rooms.

Mya Nan Dar Hotel (☎ 21922; s/d US\$15/20) Towards Lashio, about 2km northeast of town, this hotel has good rooms with balcony, TV, desk, fan, carpeted floors and private bathroom with hot water. The area is nice, but it's not equal to the south of town for atmosphere.

Those keen on avoiding government-run hotels should bypass these (otherwise gorgeous) places converted from old British homes: the Thiri Myaing Hotel (Candacraig), the Gandamar Myaing Hotel (Croxtan) and the Nan Myaing Hotel (Craddock Court).

Eating

Many hotels have restaurants that nonguests can enjoy. There are many very basic Chinese restaurants on the side streets north and south of Mandalay-Lashio Rd around the clock tower.

Golden Triangle Café & Bakery (☎ 24288; Mandalay-Lashio Rd; sandwiches & pizzas K1400-1800; ☎ 7am-10pm) It's not your average day in Myanmar when you find this place. This lovely café, run by an American, occupies a grand building, and has wicker seats on the covered deck and a French-style bakery inside. A real cup of espresso is K400.

Aung Padamyia Restaurant (dishes K800; ☎ 11am-8pm) Nestled into a neighbourhood a couple of blocks south of the Shan market, this simple Indian restaurant serves chicken, mutton, fish and veggie curries that come with poppadom and rice. Staff might show off photos taken at Candacraig.

Lay Ngoon Restaurant (4 Mandalay-Lashio Rd; dishes K1200-2200; ☎ 8am-9pm) Known all over town as being too expensive, the basic, nearly dingy Lay Ngoon nevertheless fills its tables and wooden booths nightly with local families. The food is definitely good, but it's priced as advertised.

Htate Tan Restaurant (No 50, 11A Rd) Locals rush here (a block north of the traffic circle by the Shan market) for excellent Shan food.

For after-dark snacks and noodles, the night market (along Zeigyo Lán, north of the central market) gets going at dusk.

Several snack shops sell Indian goodies, but the best is near the taxi stand. The **Diamond Confectionary** (Mandalay-Lashio Rd; ☎ 6am-9pm) serves coconut and, despite its sugary name, mutton puffs (K70) among other snacks.

Shopping

ART & ANTIQUES

Pacific World Curio (75 Mandalay-Lashio Rd; ☎ 7.30am-5.30pm) The aisles of this excellent handicrafts and antique shop – open for nearly four decades – spill over with Shan wooden masks, *kalaga* (embroidered tapestries), marionettes, old British clocks, lacquerware and other objects.

La Vie Art Gallery (No 7-8, AM Block, Central Market; ☎ 9am-5pm) Run by English-speaking artist Muu Muu, this tiny gallery, which faces the street on the south side of the market, hangs modern renderings of Myanmar scenes.

LOCAL PRODUCTS

Pyin U Lwin's temperate climate aids the growth of many vegetables and flowers. Strawberry fields in the hills around the town have made strawberry jam a big local product. Strawberry season runs from February to April. You'll often see flower stalls on the roads outside town.

At the central market you can get local jam (about K250), plus a sweet strawberry wine (K800) and grape wine (K600). One vendor explained the jam-making process: 'clean strawberries, mix in an equal amount of sugar, heat for two hours, store for 18 months, sell jam'.

Owing to the cool nights here, sweaters are another popular locally made product. You'll find them hanging outside stores on Mandalay-Lashio Rd. Organic coffee made in the nearby hills at the Golden Triangle Café & Bakery (opposite) is also available; a 200g box of beans or grounds costs K1700.

The smaller Shan market, on the northeast edge of town, is busiest in the morning.

Getting There & Away

At the time of research, there were plans to build an airport near Pyin U Lwin.

BUS

Pyin U Lwin has no bus station and an irregular bus service. It's difficult, but perhaps possible, to hail a bus going between Mandalay and Hsipaw; ask at your hotel.

PICK-UP & TAXI

By far the easiest way to/from Mandalay or Hsipaw is by share taxi. There's a small share-taxi stand on Mandalay-Lashio Rd, north of the main strip. **TMD** (☎ 21090), on the stand's west side, handles taxis to Mandalay (K3500, two hours); **Win Yadana** (☎ 22490), on the east, sends them to Hsipaw (K4500, three hours) and Lashio (K5000, four hours). It's K500 extra for the front seat. Share taxis tend to run from 7am to 2pm or 3pm. Hiring the whole taxi is about K20,000.

White pick-ups wait near the Purcell Tower along the Mandalay-Lashio Rd, going when full to Mandalay (K1000, 2½ hours). Pick-ups going to both Hsipaw (K2000) and Lashio (K3500) leave at 6am only from the banyan tree, opposite the share-taxi stand.

TRAIN

At the time of research, the little red-brick **train station** (☎ 22021) was sending slow trains daily to Mandalay at 5am and 4pm (ordinary/1st class US\$2/4, four hours), and one north to Hsipaw (US\$2/4, six hours) at 8.30am. The stretch between Pyin U Lwin and Hsipaw takes in areas the road misses and is particularly beautiful.

Trains frequently run late. There are a few food stalls outside the station.

Getting Around

Hotels can arrange bike rental for K1000 or K2000 per day. Pyin U Lwin's horse-led wagons are another popular means of getting about; a sample fare between the centre and Kandawgyi Gardens is K1500 to K2000. A taxi from the centre to a hotel outside town is about K1000 or K1500.

AROUND PYIN U LWIN

Most of Pyin U Lwin's natural attractions are outside town. Most can be reached by a combination of public transport and hiking, though many visitors prefer to hire a share taxi (and possibly a guide) in Pyin U Lwin. Ask at your hotel, the Golden Triangle Café & Bakery (opposite) or Pacific World Curio (left).

Anisakan Falls

အနီနီဆင်းရဲ: ရေတံခွန်

Although a fairly long and steep walk is required to get to the tall, lovely **falls** (admission free), the hike there is worth it. At the village

of Anisakan, about 9km south of Pyin U Lwin on the road to Mandalay, turn right at the train station, continue about 600m to the railway crossing, then turn left on a dirt road and continue for about 800m to a fork, where you again take a left turn. After about 500m you reach a parking area from where you continue on foot. It's a 45-minute descent through a river gorge to reach the falls, which consist of five sections; the third is particularly impressive.

Mandalay-bound pick-ups around the market and main road in Pyin U Lwin regularly go to Anisakan village for K300 per person. You should allow at least half a day for the whole trip. It's possible to ride a bicycle there, but the ride back is more up than down. A taxi from Pyin U Lwin costs about K8000 to K10,000; a taxi with guide is K15,000.

Pwe Kauk Falls

ပွေးကောက်ရေတံခွန်

Called Hampshire Falls in British times, **Pwe Kauk Falls** (admission free) are about 8km northeast of town, off the road to Hsipaw. Although the falls themselves aren't that spectacular, they make a very pleasant picnic spot. During or just after the rainy season, you can swim in the upper reaches, but not at the bottom, where the undertow can be dangerous.

Facing the falls is the now-famous **Aung Htu Kan Tha**, a shrine housing a Buddha that fell here off a Buddha-laden China-bound truck in April 1997. After the Buddha couldn't be hauled back on, the driver (conveniently!) claimed that the night before he had dreamt that one of the Buddhas didn't want to leave Myanmar.

Three **Shan villages** – Mogyopyit, Yechando and Ye Ngeye – can be visited on the way to Pwe Kauk Falls. Alternatively, from Pwe Kauk you can go on a one-hour hike to **U Naung Gu**, a natural cave containing several Buddhas that is used by local meditators. You can ask around at Pwe Kauk for a local guide to the cave.

Pick-ups bound for Hsipaw and Lashio only head this way at 6am from Pyin U Lwin. It's possible to hire a share taxi and continue on to Peik Chin Myaing for about K8000. Cycling is another option, as the shrine of the fallen Buddha is reached on a fairly level road.

To visit the Shan villages, you can sometimes hire a bullock cart in Pwe Kauk. The Dahlia Motel in Pyin U Lwin (p206) arranges guided day trips.

Gokteik Viaduct

ဂုတ်ထိပ်တံတား

The unusual **Gokteik railway viaduct** is 55km northeast of Pyin U Lwin, en route to Lashio. When, on behalf of the British, the Pennsylvania Steel Co built the Gokteik Bridge over the deep Gokteik Gorge in 1903 in only nine months, it was the second-highest railway bridge in the world. A British insurance policy expired years ago, but while it was in effect the Myanmar government didn't service the viaduct much; however, the bridge has recently been renovated. It's the oldest and longest modern railway bridge in Myanmar, and its age shows: trains slow to a crawl when crossing the viaduct in order to avoid putting undue stress on the structure.

If you go by train, get off at the station before the bridge to get the best view.

While the area immediately around the bridge is safe, don't go wandering around – land mines have reputedly been planted in some areas to fend off insurgents who might want to destroy the span. You'll only have a few minutes before you must get back on the train if you're continuing on to Hsipaw or Lashio. The military supposedly forbids photo-taking from the bridge, but everybody seems to do it. The same applies for photography from the train when it approaches the bridge. Whether you're allowed to or not seems to depend entirely on the presence of a military officer in your train car – and if the military officer is motivated enough to enforce the ban.

KYAUKME

ကျောက်မဲ

Kyaukme sees a trickle of trail-blazing travellers with a do-it-yourself attitude. They're looking to avoid the social scene in popular Hsipaw, rub shoulders with locals, and explore the surrounding mountains and villages. There are several cigar- and paper-making 'factories' in and around this compact town.

Although there are no government prohibitions about foreigners trekking in this area, the lack of sanctioned guides and official information means the activity is frowned upon or at least discouraged. This makes it hard to guarantee anything before arriving in Kyaukme, but it also means there are more options and greater flexibility in arranging an itinerary. Two intrepid travellers report having rented motorbikes from locals and exploring the mountainous region for two weeks. At the A Yone Oo Guest House (below) ask for U Aung Gyi, a local English teacher/guide who can help organise trips to remote, little-visited villages in the region. Only 11km from Kyaukme is Lwe Sar, where the Palaung still live a traditional way of life. On the way to Lwe Sar is a beautiful lake called Naung Phe.

Besides the clean and comfortable **A Yone Oo Guest House** (☎ 082-40183; Shwe Phi Oo Rd; s/d with shared bathroom K4500/6000, with private bathroom K7500/12,000), there were no other facilities catering to foreigners at research time, though several locals harbour some vague tourism-related ambitions.

The young, hip and karaoke-inclined of Kyaukme – not really a large group – may

be found at a large colonial-style mansion by the train tracks just outside town (the sign says 'Weddings & Reception Restaurant'). This place, known by locals as Dog's Mansion, has private modern karaoke rooms (K4000 per hour) and a restaurant-bar with live music on some weekend nights. There are plans to convert parts of the building into a hotel.

From Mandalay there are early-morning buses from around 5am to 6am (K2000, six hours) that go to Kyaukme. If you get a Hsipaw-bound bus you can also ask to be let off here. Alternatively, you can hire a share taxi in Mandalay for roughly the same price that you would pay to go all the way to Hsipaw (K6000 per person). From Kyaukme to Mandalay there are several buses (K3000, five hours) that leave when full early in the morning. Note that fares are generally more expensive coming from Mandalay.

Pick-ups leave regularly for Hsipaw (K200) until around 4pm; a taxi will cost K10,000.

HSPAW

သီပေါ

☎ 082

The outside world feels very far away in Hsipaw (Thibaw in Burmese). With its dramatic sunsets, quaint small-town air and narrow footpaths snaking through rice paddies, travellers often get stuck here, their itineraries thrown out of whack after they arrive intending only to spend a day or two. Days are happily confined to the short distance that separates Mr Charles's guesthouse from Mr Food's restaurant, Mr Book's bookshop and Mr Donald (the nephew of the last Shan prince), and are occupied by walks to the river or out of town to one of the payas perched on a hillside. Some travellers generate theories to explain how Hsipaw maintains its bucolic atmosphere as if it were a puzzle to decipher. Hsipaw was once the centre of a small Shan State of its own, and its residents look on the groups of foreigners shuffling around town with friendly smiles.

Sights & Activities

A **haw sao pha** (Shan palace; suggested donation US\$1; ☎ after 4pm), known as *sawbwa haw* in Burmese, still stands at the northern end of Hsipaw. Built in 1924, the charming building is European in design – a Shan-style palace

TOP FIVE TREKKING AREAS IN NORTHEASTERN MYANMAR

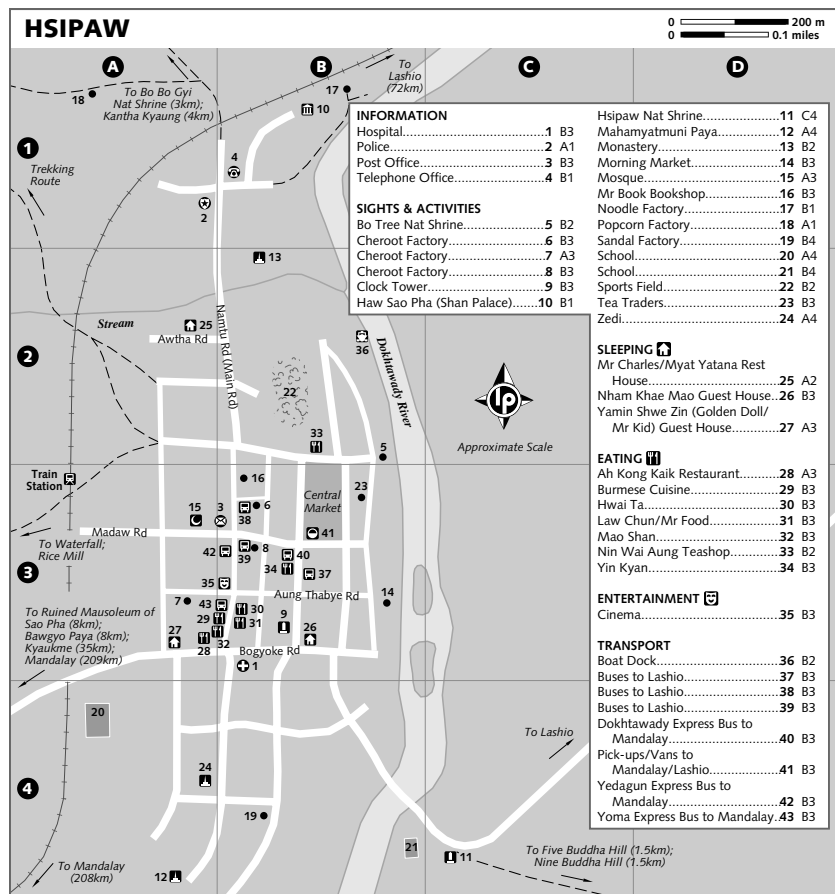
Kalaw (p176) The granddaddy as far as popularity. Most hikes are fun, allowed and not too demanding. Pindaya and Inle Lake make for good overnight destinations.

Putao (p224) If you have the money and the time, go mountaineering in the remote Himalaya just north of Putao – need we say more?

Namhsan (p213), **Kyaukme** (opposite) & **Hsipaw** (opposite) These three towns, listed with the most beautiful and remote first, are starting points for day trips or longer stays in surrounding villages.

Inle Lake (p181) Besides the trip to Kalaw, there are other destinations closer to Inle in the mountains on either shore.

Kengtung area (p200) Get out of your 4WD and see hill-tribe villages on foot.



that was located nearby didn't survive WWII bombing. The last *sao pha* was arrested during the military takeover of 1962 and hasn't been heard from since. This story about vanquished royalty is the topic of *Twilight over Burma: My Life as a Shan Princess*, a memoir by Austrian-American Inge Sargent, who was the popular Mahadevi (*sao pha's* wife) of Hsipaw from the 1950s until the takeover. The prince's niece and nephew take care of the palace and welcome foreign visitors, many of whom rave about being entranced by the nephew's monologue about his family's life story. It's best to go with very modest expectations, though (especially if the nephew isn't there), since the palace is a residence, not a museum. This

means that access to the interior is restricted to a room off the side entrance, which holds only a few photos and a number of books for sale. Visits are allowed after 4pm. The *haw sao pha* is about a 15-minute walk from the centre of town past the old town jail.

One of the busiest religious sites in Hsipaw is **Mahamyatmuni Paya** at the southern outskirts of town. A shrine in the compound contains a large Buddha image inspired by its Mandalay namesake, Mahamuni Paya (p234).

Eight kilometres southwest of town, off Mandalay-Lashio Rd, is the Shan-style **Bawgyo Paya**. This is the most revered paya in northern Shan State – equivalent to Inle Lake's Phaung Daw Oo Paya (see p190). It

is said that the *sagawa* hardwood tree growing by the paya bends over at the top in deference to the paya. The place lost some of its charm following renovations in 1995, during which the building was redecorated to look less Shan and more Bamar, but its situation by the river still gives it some appeal.

On a hill to the left, just as you enter the city limits of Hsipaw from Bawgyo, is the overgrown and ruined mausoleum of the *sao pha* of Hsipaw.

Hsipaw's large **central market** is best in the morning, when Shan and other tribal people from nearby villages come to trade. The Dokhtawady River (also called the Myitnge or Nanthu), just east of the market, is cool and clear.

To catch a great sunset in Hsipaw, walk to either Five Buddha Hill or Nine Buddha Hill. First cross the bridge on the Lashio road, and walk about 200m. Look for a path on your right that leads 1.5km to both small hills.

Also worth checking out are looms for weaving shoulder bags, several small cheroot factories and a 'popcorn factory' that employs an alarmingly explosive technique to make the snack. East of the market are a handful of merchants' shophouses that trade in tea grown in the surrounding mountains.

Visit the hospitable and well-informed bookseller Ko Zaw Tun (known as **Mr Book** to many travellers) at his bookshop on Nanthu Rd (Main Rd) for reliable advice on Hsipaw and the surrounding area. He also gives out hand-drawn maps to Shan villages that you can hike to from town. If you visit during the hot season, Mr Book can arrange for you to go tubing down the river. Near Mr Book's bookshop is the local National

WARNING

Strange but true: a few shady characters in Hsipaw have been known to use the pretext of a local festival to milk foreigners out of dollars. Unsuspecting tourists are asked to pay cash (around US\$10) up front for private transport to the village hosting the interesting bash. After a long, fruitless drive they're commonly told that they arrived too late or had the dates mixed up and are returned to Hsipaw festival-free for the night.

League for Democracy office, curiously lit up with ostentatious red lights.

Most days at about 8am, Mr Charles (see below) leads a three-hour 'morning excursion' to a village or nearby waterfall. In the high season, half-day boat trips (the cost depends on the number of people), including a visit to a *kyaung*, are also offered to guests. Overnight trips, and train and taxi trips north or south, can be easily organised at Mr Charles Guest House.

Festivals & Events

One of the oldest and largest Shan festivals, the **Bawgyo Paya Pwe**, is held in nearby Bawgyo from the moon's 10th waxing day to the first day after the full moon of Tabauung (February/March). The Bawgyo *pwe* still draws a large encampment of traders and festivalgoers who pay tribute to the old Shan ways. *Zat pwe* – a costumed dance-drama based on Jataka (stories of the Buddha's past lives) – is performed nightly. Before dawn on the day of the full moon, hundreds of Palaung pilgrims come from all around to offer rice to the images.

Sleeping

Mr Charles Guest House (Myat Yatana Rest House; ☎ 80105; fax 80407; 105 Awtha St; r without bathroom K3000, s/d with shared bathroom US\$3/6, with bathroom US\$6/15) For foreign travellers, for better or worse, Mr Charles has become synonymous with Hsipaw. A 2nd-floor balcony, perfect for an afternoon tea or evening beer, contributes to the laid-back social and friendly vibe that's not often found in Myanmar. Mr Charles is just off the main road at the northern end of town in a small compound that includes a new and old annex to the original home. Because of noise from other guests, it can be difficult to sleep in the cheapest rooms on the 2nd floor in the original home. The nicest rooms are in the new annex.

Nam Khae Mao Guest House (☎ 80088; nkmao@myanmar.com.mm; 134 Bogyoke Rd; r with shared bathroom US\$3, s/d with private bathroom US\$7/10) Mouldy, crumbling and in need of a paint job, Nam Khae Mao is nevertheless friendly. A reminder that you are just east of the clock tower occurs every hour from 7am to 6pm.

Yamin Shwe Zin (Golden Doll/Mr Kid) Guest House (in Hsipaw ☎ 66; Bogyoke Rd; s/d with bathroom K2500/3500) West of the clock tower, this

place has spartan, fairly depressing rooms. Though the family is hospitable, this place should be a last resort.

Eating

Burmese Cuisine (Namtu Rd; dishes K300; ☺ lunch & dinner) One of the best places to try authentic Burmese cuisine is this small shop opposite Law Chun (Mr Food). Look for a row of pots, a red sign announcing (appropriately enough) 'Burmese Cuisine' and a list of the curries served. Not all curries are available every night, but chicken, fish and pork are stand-bys. The vegetable curries, especially the pumpkin, are equally good. When the power goes out, which is frequently, candles make things quite romantic. There are two or three family-style tables.

Law Chun (Mr Food; Namtu Rd) Part of the 'Mr' wave sweeping through Hsipaw, Law Chun (or Mr Food) is swamped with foreign travellers during the high season. Convenient and well lit, it has satellite TV and, importantly for many, an English-language menu with rice, curry and noodle dishes.

Hwai Ta (Namtu Rd) Next door to Law Chun, this place serves similar rice, curry and noodle dishes. Fresh fish is also available.

Yin Kyan (☺ lunch) A few doors south of the market and around the corner from the Dokhtawady bus stop, this excellent small Shan eatery has the best noodles in town. There's no English menu.

Mao Shan (Namtu Rd; ☺ breakfast & lunch) This tasty noodle shop is across the street from and a few metres south of the Law Chun restaurant.

Ah Kong Kaik restaurant (Mandalay-Lashio Rd) On the road into Hsipaw from Mandalay, this place serves decent Shan and Chinese fare, and is a favourite of truck drivers who ply the Mandalay-Lashio Rd. You can spot the restaurant by the trucks parked along the road.

There are several tea and snack shops in town – look around the northern and southern sides of the market. The rustic Nin Wai Aung Teashop (no English sign), just opposite the northern side of the market and next to a big orange-coloured building, opens very early and has a good selection of snacks. Teashops on the southern side of the market tend to stay open late – until 11pm or so.

Until mid-afternoon there's good and cheap food to be had in the market if you're

willing to poke around and look for it. One stall just inside the northern entrance belongs to the very friendly Aung Kyaw, nicknamed Mr Bean. It offers a variety of nutritious and tasty bean salads.

Getting There & Away

BUS

The scouting report for the quality of the three bus lines that service Hsipaw is not encouraging. Locals express disdain for Yedagun Express; Yoma Express buses look good on the outside but break down frequently; and Dokhtawady Express buses are uncomfortable but don't need repairs as often as the others. Buses leave Mandalay at around 5.30am (K2300). Five or six buses go from Hsipaw to Mandalay daily at about 6am (K2300). All of the buses stop in Kyaukme.

The price of a ticket from Hsipaw to Pyin U Lwin is K2300, the same as a ticket all the way to Mandalay. Buses for Lashio (K600, two hours), which is 72km to the northeast, depart daily opposite the market, a block west of the Dokhtawady Express stop.

Vans and pick-ups to Pyin U Lwin and Lashio are usually parked alongside the market on Madaw Rd, across from the Dokhtawady Express stop.

See p244 for information on other public vehicles to Lashio, all of which make stops in Hsipaw.

TAXI

The most convenient way to travel between Hsipaw and Mandalay is by share taxi. It's very simple to arrange one and to find partners at Mr Charles (see p211; K6000 per person, 3½ hours). Drivers tend to try to break speed records for dilapidated taxis. It's generally more expensive coming from Mandalay (K10,000 per person, 4½ hours).

Stand out on Bogyoke Rd near the clock tower to flag down a share taxi to Lashio (per person K3000). Most are coming from Mandalay, Pyin U Lwin or Kyaukme and are already full, so the wait can be long. The same goes for taxis to Kyaukme in the other direction (the whole taxi costs K10,000).

TRAIN

The Mandalay-Lashio train (ordinary/1st class US\$3/6) departs from Mandalay at 4am and arrives in Hsipaw at 3.30pm (with luck). To guarantee a seat, tickets should be

purchased at least a day ahead at the Mandalay train station between 6am and 4pm. The same train leaves Hsipaw at about 4pm, arriving in Lashio at 7.30pm. The price of a ticket for this leg is US\$2/4 for ordinary/1st class.

Trains also leave Hsipaw at 9.30am daily and arrive in Mandalay at around 8pm. Because of the more civilised departure time, it makes much more sense to take the train back from Hsipaw to Mandalay and get to Hsipaw from Mandalay by some other means.

Getting Around

Bicycles are available for rent at Mr Charles (see p211). Rates are about K500 for the day. Most places are within easy walking distance. The only public transport around town is trishaws, which cost around K200 for a ride from the market to the Shan Palace.

NAMHSAN

နမ့်ဆန်

A few pioneering sorts have made it from Hsipaw as far as Namhsan, and all return raving about the area's stunning beauty, which is grander and more picturesque than points further south. The region deserves its nickname as the Switzerland of Myanmar.

Namhsan was the capital of the former Shan state of Tawngpeng. It clings to a 1600m-high narrow ridge, surrounded by valleys and mountains that rise to 2000m. Most of the inhabitants are Shwe (Golden) Palaung and make a living from tea, although opium poppies are never far away. In Namhsan and nearby Payagyi, there are a number of **tea factories** where tea is roasted, boiled or pickled. The tea harvest runs from April to August and, during the monsoon, overloaded trucks heading for Mandalay are a particular hazard, sometimes blocking the road for hours or days.

The 80km journey from Hsipaw, on a road barely maintained since colonial times, takes at least six hours; if it's blocked by trucks the journey can take days. The road passes through the lowland Shan villages of Konzaleik, Mo-te and Mali before crossing a bridge over the Dokhtawady River and climbing to **Panglong** (Big Village), a dull market town at the junction with the road to the lead, silver, zinc and gold mines at **Namtu**, 43km away. The road then descends to the river again at the small village of **Li-lu**,

where there are a few teashops and an army checkpoint, before skirting the mountain-side through tea plantations that run all the way to Namhsan.

A cobbled track leads up behind the town, past typical wooden carved houses that cling to the steep hillside, to a couple of paya, a monastery and the green, shady reservoir that supplies Namhsan with water. It is possible to make day and overnight treks to Shan and Palaung villages nearby.

If you attempt to come up here in December or January, consider buying a jacket or thick blanket in Hsipaw before you set out. Once the sun goes down the temperature drops like a stone.

Sleeping & Eating

Namhsan has no guesthouses, but Daw May Saw Nu and U Shwe Tun put foreigners up for US\$1 a night. Daw May Saw Nu's house has four beds, and the owner also runs treks for US\$5 a day for two people. U Shwe Tun's house is before a fork in the main road; a sign in front advertises DVDs for sale, but unfortunately there's no sign in English. Breakfast is not included in the price, but very good food is available. Guests sleep on the floor, and blankets and pillows are provided.

Several Chinese restaurants are found along the narrow main street. Like the rest of the town, they close early (about 9pm). There are a limited number of noodle stalls for breakfast.

Getting There & Away

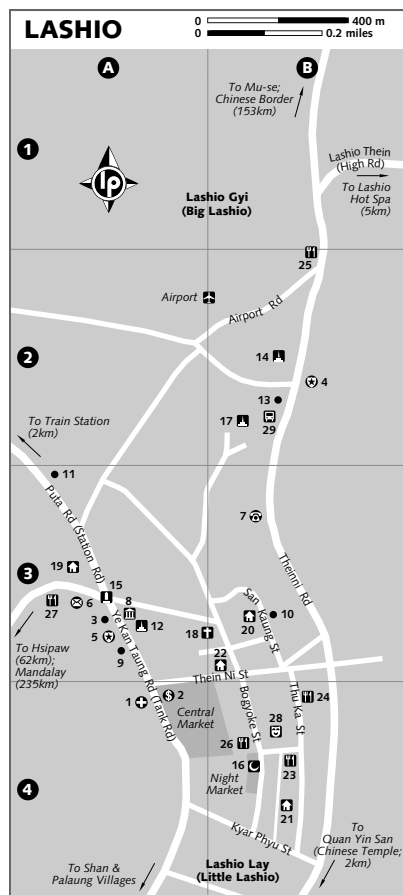
Trucks and buses leave Hsipaw and return from Namhsan (K3000, 6½ hours) when the number of passengers and amount of cargo warrant a run. Check with Ko Zaw Tun (Mr Book; see p211) in Hsipaw to find out where the truck or bus is parked while waiting for passengers. Breakdowns are common, so you may be better off trying to hire a pick-up in Hsipaw (K30,000). The old road from Namhsan to Kyaukme is not passable by car.

LASHIO

လာရှီ

☎ 082

This township of mostly Shan-Chinese and Chinese inhabitants isn't as pleasant or traveller-friendly as Hsipaw. Consequently,



INFORMATION	
Hospital.....	1 A4
Inwa Bank.....	2 A4
May Day Bookstall.....	3 A3
Police Station.....	4 B2
Police Station.....	5 A3
Post Office.....	6 A3
Telephone Office.....	7 B3
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES	
City Hall.....	8 A3
Fire Station.....	9 A3
High School.....	10 B3
Lashio Degree College.....	11 A3
Mahamyatmuni Paya.....	12 A3
Mansu Market.....	13 B2
Mansu Paya.....	14 B2
Monument.....	15 A3
Mosque.....	16 B4
Sasana 2500-Year Paya.....	17 B2
Union First Baptist Church.....	18 A3
SLEEPING	
Lashio Motel.....	19 A3
New Asia Hotel.....	20 B3
Thi Da Aye Hotel.....	21 B4
Ya Htaik Hotel.....	22 B3
EATING	
Jupiter Restaurant.....	23 B4
Lashio Restaurant.....	24 B4
Shwe La Win Restaurant.....	25 B2
Sun Moon Café.....	26 B4
Teashops.....	27 A3
ENTERTAINMENT	
Cinema.....	28 B4
TRANSPORT	
Bus Station.....	29 B2

Although the government of Myanmar allows foreigners to travel from China to Lashio with permits obtained at the consulate in Kunming (China), it doesn't sanction travel in the opposite direction (see p222).

Lashio is in a mountain basin at an altitude of 855m – clouds may form and deliver rain at almost any time of the year. It is divided into two main districts: Lashio Lay (Little Lashio) and Lashio Gyi (Big Lashio), connected by Theinni Rd. Lashio Lay is the newer and bigger of the two districts.

Sights & Activities

There's a large **central market** in central Lashio. It's not especially colourful or exotic, but it's quite modern and orderly. The smaller **Mansu Market** (Theinni/Hsenwi Rd), focusing on fresh produce and foodstuffs, is closer to Lashio Gyi. If you want to see people from various ethnic groups participating, you're better off in Hsipaw or Kengtung.

More interesting than any of the Buddhist shrines in town is the large and busy **Quan Yin San Temple**, 2km away in Lashio Lay. Built around 40 years ago, it's the main

Chinese temple in Lashio and possibly the largest in Myanmar.

Mansu Paya stands between Lashio Lay and Lashio Gyi on a hill on the western side of Theinni Rd, and is said to be over 250 years old. More impressive is the nearby **Sasana 2500-Year (Pyi Lon Chantha) Paya**, reportedly built by the last Shan *sao pha* in the area, Sao Hon Phan. One of the shrines in the paya complex contains a Bagan-era Buddha image. A second stupa of similar name, **New Pyi Lon Chantha Paya**, sits on Mya Kantha Hill in the northern part of town and offers good views of the city. The latter stupa is also known as Kyaw Hein's Paya

because the famous Burmese film actor of the same name paid for its construction. The newly built **Mahamyatmuni Paya**, next to City Hall, is quite colourful from the street but looks less interesting the closer you get to it.

Sleeping

The Chinese-style accommodation in Lashio isn't especially welcoming. Unless you're breaking up a trip on your way to the Chinese border, the choice of hotels doesn't really encourage an overnight stay. Breakfast is not included at any of the following places.

BURMA ROAD

The so-called Burma Rd – actually a network of three major routes – came about during WWII, when Japanese invasion forces closed in on Myanmar from the north via China, and from the south via Thailand. In what was known as the China-Burma-India (CBI) Theatre, Allied supplies for the ground war fought in Lower Burma were easily flown or shipped in from India. Supplying the China front, however, required dangerous flights over the 'Hump', a series of high Himalayan peaks that separate Myanmar and China.

Over 1000 airmen died flying this route, prompting the Allies to look for a new way to supply Chiang Kai-shek's nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) army, who were fighting the Japanese in western China. The Yunnanese built the original Burma road from Kunming to Wanting, China, between 1937 and 1939. They then laid an extension into Myanmar from Wanting to Lashio in 1940, for a total length of 1200km. Early in the war, this Lashio-Kunming route served as the main supply line for the KMT, but as Japanese pressure from the south increased, the Allies looked for an alternative route from India.

American General Joseph 'Vinegar Joe' Stillwell proposed the construction of an all-weather, two-lane road from India to China via northern Myanmar. The plan was to link up not with the original Lashio-Kunming route, but with a rough dry-weather track developed by the Chinese between Bhamo in southern Kachin State and Yunchang in Yunnan Province, China. British Army engineers, using a trail created by war refugees fleeing to India from northern Burma, began building the 800km Ledo Rd from Ledo, Assam (India), to the Bhamo terminus of the Bhamo road in 1942. Although the engineers originally had 5000 labourers at their disposal, progress was slow and work was abandoned in May 1942.

A huge contingent of American engineers took over in November 1942; they assembled 35,000 Burmese, Indian, British and Chinese troops to tackle the enormous task of cutting through thick jungle, upgrading the Bhamo track, and spanning 10 major rivers and 155 secondary streams between Ledo and Wanting. So many men were lost along the way that the builders sardonically dubbed the route the 'man-a-mile road'.

Completed in May 1945, the Ledo road – also known as Stillwell Rd – was maintained until a year later, when all Allied units were withdrawn from the CBI theatre. The Myitkyina Bridge, which spanned the Ayeyarwady River south of Myitkyina and was the longest pontoon bridge in the world, was deemed an obstacle to river traffic and was dismantled in 1947. One of the chief post-war effects of the Bhamo-Myanmar road network was the opening up of the Kachin State remains of the Ledo road, which quickly fell into disuse.

The main Lashio-Kunming route, though in poor condition nowadays, sees much traffic as a major smuggling route to China for opium, heroin, gems, jade and teak. In the reverse direction, traders bring finished goods, such as auto parts, pharmaceuticals, processed foods, clothing and homewares.

Lashio is more popular as a day trip or as a stopover on the way to/from the Chinese border.

At the southern end of the infamous Burma Road, Lashio was once off limits to foreigners because of its proximity to China (and the hated Chinese communists) as well as ethnic insurgent territory. Since the 1950s, the town has been flanked by the Shan State Army (SSA) to the west and south, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) to the north, and the Wa fighters of the Burmese Communist Party (BCP) to the east. Fragile truces with most of these groups since 1989, along with a tremendous boost in trade with China, have prompted the government to open Lashio to foreign visitors.

Ya Htaik Hotel (☎ 22655; Bogyoke Rd; s/d with shared bathroom US\$5/10, with private bathroom US\$15/25) A four-storey Chinese-style place, Ya Htaik has spartan but clean rooms. Shared bathrooms have squat toilets; larger rooms with private bathrooms are preferable.

New Asia Hotel (☎ 23622; San Khaung Rd; r with shared bathroom US\$8, with private bathroom US\$5/10) Northeast of the central market, this modern four-storey place has simple rooms with attached bathroom as well as a few dark rooms with shared bathroom.

Thi Da Aye Hotel (☎ 22165; 218 Thiri Rd; s/d US\$5/15) Here the basement singles with squat toilets are grotty, while the all-concrete upstairs doubles are a cut above (but that's not saying much). Some rooms face a mosque, where the call to prayer begins at 4am.

The sprawling Lashio Motel, at the intersection of Mandalay–Lashio and Station Rds, is government owned.

Eating

There are several Shan restaurants, large and small, near the central market on Ye Kan Taung Rd (Tank Rd), and a row of good teashops west of the post office. In the evenings a night market sets up on the road leading south from the southeastern corner of the market.

Sun Moon Café (Bogyoke St) On the 2nd floor of a building near the mosque in the centre of town is this hip café with a small menu including excellent chicken dumplings (K\$500) and fried chicken and rice (K\$1000). It may not sound like much, but the relatively luxurious décor – glass tables, cushioned chairs, fans, pop music – turn the Sun Moon into a Shangri-la on a hot day.

A block east of the market, the **Lashio Restaurant** (Thu Ka St) is reliable for good Bamar and Chinese food, while the **Jupiter Restaurant** (dishes K\$800) on the corner southeast of the cinema, does Chinese food as well as several different types of satay.

There are fewer restaurants in Lashio Gyi, but **Shwe La Win Restaurant** (Airport Rd) is very good for Chinese and Shan dishes.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Although Lashio has an airport and Myanma Airways allegedly flies there once a week from Mandalay (US\$45), you're better off taking the train.

BUS

From Mandalay there are buses to Lashio (around K\$3500, eight hours) that operate from the central/main bus centre near the corner of 26th and 82nd Sts. Buses operated by five different companies depart daily between 4am and 6am. Buy tickets at least one day ahead to get a seat.

Buses from Lashio to Mandalay leave at 6am. To break up the trip, it's a good idea to schedule at least a day's stopover in Pyin U Lwin or Hsipaw along the way. The main bus station in Lashio is on Theinni Rd south of Mansu Paya and near Mansu Market.

TRAIN

Since the Mandalay–Lashio Rd has been upgraded, travelling by bus is much faster (and cheaper) than the train. As usual, though, the train is the better alternative for those who are interested in beautiful scenery and a chance to meet the locals. The No 131 Up leaves Mandalay at 4.45am and arrives in Lashio around 7pm – when it's not delayed by track conditions (late arrivals aren't unusual). The Lashio train for Mandalay departs at 5am, and is very cold in the wee hours of the morning during the cool season. Along the way you'll crawl across the famous Gokteik Viaduct (p208) and wind around four monumental switchbacks.

The Mandalay to Lashio fare is US\$6 for ordinary class and US\$12 for a seat in the only 1st-class coach on the train. From Pyin U Lwin the fare is US\$10 in 1st class. (Officially, ordinary class isn't available to foreigners, but if 1st class is full, it's worth asking. At a pinch, you can just board the train and wait for the ticket collector to come by.)

Tickets for this route can be bought one to seven days ahead, and they sell out very quickly. In Lashio the train station is 3km northwest of the centre of Lashio Lay.

VAN & CAR

Small air-conditioned vans (Toyota Super-roads) travel from Mandalay to Lashio (K\$8000/6000 for seat at the front/back); these deliver their passengers to the door, but they fill up fast. You can also hire your own car and driver in Mandalay to make the one-way trip for about US\$40. Inquire at the Nylon Hotel or the Royal Guest

House in Mandalay. As usual, rates vary according to the price of petrol.

The road entrances to Lashio from Mandalay and from Mu-se, on the border with China, are supposed to close at 6pm. In practice, though, there seems to be plenty of night-time travel in both directions.

If you want to leave town via the northern entrance (towards Mu-se), you must have a permit from the regional military headquarters. Taxi drivers or staff at the New Asia Hotel (opposite) and the government-owned Lashio Motel, at the intersection of the Mandalay–Lashio and Station Rds in Lashio, can sometimes help to arrange these.

MYITKYINA TO KATHA

A boat trip down the Ayeyarwady, past the narrow gorges where the jungle creeps up to the water's edge, through slow-moving expanses where everything seems to stand still and sandbanks threaten to beach the boat, is a chance to witness the lethargic pageantry of river life. Old men and young children excitedly hail the arrival of the ferry as they quickly heft sacks of goods, while *longyi*-clad women wade into the water to sell delicacies from plates confidently perched on their heads, as if the muddy waters were the town square. More than this, though, the trip north is an opportunity to socialise with Myanmar people on the long boat and train rides, where regular stops are occasions to share food and get to know others on the same journey.

MYITKYINA

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☎ 074

If you don't fly, it takes patience and endurance to get to Myitkyina, but it's the journey that makes it worthwhile. Myitkyina itself, the seat of Myanmar government offices for the region and for official Kachin ethnic organisations, is mainly appealing as the starting point for trips to Kachin villages in the area. Only a handful of foreign visitors venture here, so it's likely you'll receive lots of friendly attention.

The town is set in a flat valley that is extremely hot in the dry season and very rainy during the monsoon.

Information

Snowland Tours (☎ 23498; snowland@mptmail;

☎ Mon-Sat) Near the market area, this is the only travel agency in town and can help with flights and custom-designed tours in the area.

YMCA (☎ 23010; mka-ymca@myanmar.com.mm; 12 Myothis Rd) Unreliable Internet access.

Sights & Activities

Herds of motorcycle taxis and trishaws congregate around the train tracks near the YMCA and the large bustling market.

Hsu Taung Pye Zedidaw is a pretty, gilded 'wish-fulfilling' stupa on the banks of the Ayeyarwady River. The larger **Andawshin Paya** boasts a silver-plated stupa said to contain tooth relics and a Buddha footprint; there are a couple of adjacent monasteries. Other religious structures of interest include the **Sri Saraswati Gurkha Hindu Temple**, the **Ja-me Mosque** and a Taoist-Buddhist **Chinese temple**.

Most of the Kachin people living in and around Myitkyina have been strongly influenced by missionaries, and there are around 15 churches in town; most are Baptist, but a few Methodist and Catholic ones are sprinkled in. About 14km north is **Praying Mountain**, a sacred site for Kachin and Lisu Baptists and the location of a Bible school and seminary. The town is also home to a small Nepali community.

Only a handful of visitors have visited the **Kachin State Cultural Museum** (Youngyi Rd; admission US\$2; ☎ 10am–3pm Tue–Sun) since it was built in 1994. On display is the usual collection of costumes, and Kachin and Shan artefacts such as pipes, baskets, fishing nets, looms and musical instruments. Most labels are in Burmese. The museum is approximately 3km from the centre of town.

MYIT-SON

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Myit-son, 43km north of Myitkyina, at the confluence of the Mayhka and Malihka Rivers, is located at the beginning of the great Ayeyarwady River. The Chinese-owned Nanthida Hotel overlooks the water. The return taxi fare from Myitkyina is anywhere from K\$8000 to K\$30,000, depending on your negotiating skills. It's about an hour each way over a very rough road. Some three-wheel drivers will make the trip for less, but this is not recommended, because of the poor road condition.

Another spot formerly off limits is the jade-mining centre of **Hpakon**, 148km west of Myitkyina. Permission is required and can usually be arranged by hotels in Myitkyina; however, the total cost of US\$300, including the fee for the two required military escorts, is prohibitive to many. Southwest of Kamaing is the huge and serene **Indawgyi Lake**, home to 120 bird species including the Myanmar peacock and surrounded by 30 rarely visited villages. To reach the lake from Myitkyina, take a morning train to the village of Hopin (US\$4, four hours). From here pick-ups make the 42km trip to the lakeside village of **Lonton** (K2000, two hours), which has a guesthouse.

Festivals & Events

On **Kachin State Day** (10 January) a major *manao* (also spelt *manau* or *manaw*; the important festivals held periodically to placate or pay homage to the Jinghpaw *nat*) in Myitkyina draws Kachin groups from all over the state and beyond.

A typical *manao* involves the sacrifice of 29 cows and/or buffaloes, one for each of the 28 Jinghpaw *nat* plus one dedicated to all of them. Participants dance, play music and drink *churu* (rice beer).

Sleeping

Aye Chan Tha Inn (☎ 23109; 53 Sipinthayar Rd; s/d US\$8/15; 🚿) Lit up like a casino at night, the Aye Chan Tha is easily the best value in town. The hotel is quite modern and immaculately kept, and rooms are attractive and have satellite TVs. Reviews of the owner are less glowing, though – don't rely on him for travel advice, as he's likely to dismiss any unconventional ideas.

YMCA (☎ 23010; mka-ymca@myanmar.com.mm; 12 Myothit Rd; s/d with shared bathroom US\$5/6, with private bathroom US\$7/12; 🚿 📺) There's no doubt that this is the most traveller friendly and savvy place to stay in Myitkyina. Rooms at the Y have mismatched furniture and erratic water pressure. There was an ant problem in some corners of our room, but the mattresses were comfortable, and the help and information available overrode other concerns. Breakfast is not included.

Xing Xian Hotel (☎ 22281; xingxianhotel@mptmail.net.mm; 127 Shan Su; s/d US\$20/30; 🚿) Only a few blocks from the market and river front, this four-storey behemoth (for Myitkyina

at least) opened in 2001. The slightly musty rooms have air-con, hot water and TV, and the friendly staff speaks English.

Pan Tsun Hotel (☎ 22748; fax 22749; s/d US\$15/20; 🚿) Rooms in the Pan Tsun, a four-storey place behind the YMCA, have seen better days. Some are quite small, and the carpet is showing wear and tear. Nevertheless, the staff are professional, and rooms do have amenities, including air-con, attached hot-water bathroom, satellite TV, fridge and international direct dialling (IDD) phone.

Supra Hotel (☎ 25051; zyaw@cybertech.net.mm; 11 Thida Aye Quarter; s/d US\$30/35) This hotel, 8km outside town and owned and operated by a former Kachin official, is a favourite of government types and business people. The spacious rooms, with frazzled carpets and peeling paint, aren't especially good value; however, each concrete bungalow has a small porch, and there's a great deck space overlooking the river.

Eating

Bamboo Field Restaurant (☎ 23227; 313 Union St; fish dishes K3000) A short walk from the Aye Chan Tha Inn, Bamboo Fields is a more 'developed' restaurant than one might expect to find here. Young government-connected types and the occasional foreign businessman eat and drink while taking in either noncompetitive modelling contests or competitive fashion shows where the only costume change involves a different-coloured boa. The white-shirted waiters are attentive. The menu includes barbecued meat and fish, and there's a wide selection of spirits and beers.

Riverview Restaurant (☎ 23780; fish & prawn dishes K2000) As you might expect, this restaurant affords fantastic views, so while the quality of the food is secondary, the standard Bamar and Chinese dishes are satisfying enough. Maybe a beer is all the nutrition needed – after all, sitting and looking for hours aren't demanding activities.

A short walk from the YMCA and opposite a church, **Shamie Restaurant** (curries K900), makes ordering one of their delicious curries easy with helpful photos on the wall. **Kashmir Restaurant** (curries K900) also does Indian curries and is around the corner, closer to the YMCA.

Seikdaichya, one of the best eateries, doesn't look like much but serves quite

reasonable food. Malihku Restaurant and Palay Kyawi Kan Thaya are Kachin restaurants (serving steamed and barbecued fish) along the river just north of town.

Getting There & Away

You can reach Myitkyina by air, boat, bus, share taxi or train. However, there are drawbacks to each method of travel, and the town's inaccessibility, combined with the limited number of sights, mean that few visitors bother.

AIR

Bagan Air flies to Myitkyina from Yangon on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. Myanna Airways (MA) has a flight from Mandalay to Myitkyina (US\$70 one way). It's possible to continue to Putao (US\$90 return) but prior permission, more easily pursued in Yangon, is needed. On Wednesday, MA makes the flight from Yangon to Myitkyina via Bhamo (US\$180 one way). The 25-minute flight from Bhamo to Myitkyina costs US\$35. MA often doesn't fly according to a strict schedule, especially during the rainy season, and tickets are difficult to obtain. There is an MA office in town, but its opening hours are irregular.

BOAT

Large three-deck passenger ferries don't travel north of Bhamo, because the river is too shallow to navigate safely.

Foreigners are supposedly barred from taking one of the long, narrow 'fast' boats that leave every morning for the seven-hour trip from Myitkyina to Bhamo (K8000) – apparently safety is the issue. This restriction may be lifted in the future but, if it's still in place when you visit, a Myanmar guide can help secure permission. It's been reported that single travellers, or two to three travellers at the most, may be able to pay a small gratuity to the ticket seller and boat captain for their 'permission'. Groups of foreigners boarding the boat would attract too much attention, so you may be asked to keep a low profile while still in the Myitkyina jetty. Once you depart, it's quite a comfortable and enjoyable journey. There's a large, open space in the front of the boat where you can spread out along with groups of locals and their picnics.

PICK-UP & TAXI

The 188km road between Bhamo and Myitkyina, which runs parallel to the China–Myanmar border, is passable in all weather. Strictly speaking, you're not supposed to travel to/from Myitkyina by road, but in practice it's quite another story. Several pick-ups leave from in front of the YMCA at 8.30am every day. Some drivers are reluctant to take foreigners, if only because it takes even more time to pass through the five or so army checkpoints, which are primarily in place to prevent smuggling. To speed up the formalities, it makes sense to make five copies of your passport and visa to leave at each checkpoint along the way. This also helps convince drivers that you are clued in.

Some travellers report that it's possible to hire a share taxi all the way between Bhamo and Mandalay (K100,000 for six people, 20 hours).

There are no regular public-transport services along the road between Mogok and Myitkyina, as road conditions are quite bad between Mogok and Bhamo.

TRAIN

Government trains leave Mandalay at 1.40pm and 5.45pm daily, and are supposed to arrive in Myitkyina 24 hours later. In practice it often takes longer – up to 40 hours – due to the poor condition of the rail bed. Derailments have occurred in the past, a few resulting in deaths. The fare for sleeper/upper class is US\$40/27. Tickets should be purchased at least three days in advance, especially if you want to book a sleeper. See p244 for information on buying tickets in Mandalay. Two semiprivate companies run somewhat better trains to Myitkyina on certain days of the week; ask for details at a travel agency or your guesthouse. The problem is that these services use the same track, and are therefore subject to the same delays.

Upper-class seating runs the gamut from fairly widely spaced, comfortable, thickly cushioned seats that recline all the way back to straight-backed wooden benches with very thin cushions. If comfort is a concern – and it should be on such a long trip – the only sure way to know what you're getting is to go with a guide, a Myanmar friend or a member of staff from a guesthouse to look over the trains and cars in person and select what you want. Otherwise, it's pot luck.

It gets fairly cold at night, so bring warm clothes and a blanket. Attendants hire out bamboo mats for sleeping on that can be placed under the seats or in the aisle. A restaurant car cooks good rice and curry dishes; attendants can also bring the food to your seat. In addition, every stop is a culinary adventure, with some stops long enough for you to disembark and sit down with whatever you find.

All caveats aside, it's a wonderful opportunity to meet Myanmar people, have real and sustained conversations and maybe even play a game of chess or two.

Getting Around

A number of repair shops, including one directly behind the YMCA (p218), will hire out motorcycles (per day K6000) to foreigners. Don't think about going too far, as the quality of the bikes is generally fairly poor. However, it's a very fun way to get around town and see the surrounding countryside. The YMCA will also hire out bicycles for K200 per day.

Covered motorised three-wheelers in Myitkyina (called *thonbecars* – *thon* is three and *bee* is wheel) are everywhere. Taxis are available from the airport and opposite the market for trips further afield (such as to Indawgyi Lake). The average cost of a bicycle trishaw around town is K200 during the day and K500 in the evening.

BHAMO

မန္တလေးမြို့
☎ 074

For many, Bhamo (*ba-maw*), 186km south of Myitkyina, is the starting point for a cruise down the mighty Ayeyarwady River to Mandalay. The town itself deserves more attention, though, as it's leafier and more charming than Myitkyina, and blessed with quality accommodation.

The bustling **daily market** draws Lisu, Kachin and Shan participants from the surrounding countryside, though there's little to see in the way of traditional costumes. A portion of the old city walls of **Sampanago**, an old Shan kingdom, can be seen around 3km north of town – though the ride out there by horse cart is of more interest than the overgrown pile of rubble. To get there, tell the horse-cart driver to go to Bhamo Myo Haung (Old City of Bhamo). **Theindawgyi**

Paya, in the town centre, features an older stupa.

Sein Win, who speaks English, can be found by asking for him at the Friendship Hotel (below). He is a jack of all trades. In addition to having built a helicopter (apparently inspired by the James Bond films) that he is more than willing to show visitors, Sein Win takes foreigners on day trips to Kachin villages in the area and to an elephant camp if given notice. It's up to you to decide what his services are worth, but the standard rate seems to be anywhere from US\$10 to US\$30 per person depending on the number of people in the group.

The Three Star Bookshop sells the *Myanmar Times*.

Sleeping & Eating

Friendship Hotel (☎ 50095; yonekyi@baganmail.net.mm; r with fan & shared bathroom US\$5, s/d with private bathroom US\$15/25; ♿) The largest building in Bhamo, the five-storey Friendship Hotel is a comforting surprise, especially if you arrive here by boat. Everything is modern and spick-and-span. The more expensive rooms have air-con, phone with IDD service, TV, fridge, minibar, and complimentary tea and coffee. Breakfast is served in the very cosy bar and restaurant below street level. The staff here, and especially the manager, Moe Naing, are extremely helpful and can book boat trips and flights for you. Ask for a map of Bhamo.

Grand Hotel (☎ 50317; Post Office Rd; s/d US\$10/15; ♿) Less grand-looking inside than outside, this hotel is nevertheless a very decent second option. The hallways are rather cavernous and the rooms are large, with Chinese-style décor and 'extras' such as slippers.

Heaven Tea Shop (dim sum K220; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This place offers a refreshing change of pace from the usual fare found in this part of the country. Don't be fooled by the sign out the front advertising natural spring water of the same name. Heaven serves a delicious selection of chicken, pork and seafood dim sum in a pleasant outdoor setting.

Shamie Restaurant (curries K1000) Just a few doors down from Heaven, the Shamie does good Indian curries.

Sein Sein Restaurant, Crown Restaurant and Nanthida Restaurant serve Chinese food. Yamona Tea Shop is a Hindu-run place

on the main drag with good samosas and a satellite TV tuned in to a Hindi channel.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Myanma Airways flies between Bhamo and Mandalay (US\$50, one hour) on Monday and Friday. This flight originates in Yangon – the fare all the way from Yangon to Bhamo via Mandalay is US\$130. It then continues to Myitkyina (US\$40 from Bhamo). Return flights to Mandalay and Yangon leave Bhamo at around 2pm.

BOAT

Large ferries ply the Ayeyarwady River between Mandalay and Bhamo (lower deck/upper deck/cabin US\$9/24/54) on Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday. When the water level is at its optimum, the upriver journey takes 1½ days (about the same as the downriver journey), but when the river's low it can take as long as 2½ days. See p223 for more details. Compared to lower deck, the enclosed upper-deck class is smaller and has fewer people.

The scenery along the upper reaches of the Ayeyarwady is very fine, especially north of Shwegu, where the riverbanks are lush with bamboo and other flora and the boat passes through steep rock gorges.

The government's Inland Water Transport office (where you can buy tickets for the boat) in Bhamo is opposite the roundabout near Tat Twin Kyaung (a military monastery). Alternatively, simply ask for help at either of the hotels.

If you want to stop overnight in Katha before continuing by ferry to Mandalay, it's worth taking one of the smaller, 'fast' long boats from Bhamo (ordinary/1st class K3500/10,000), which take anywhere from five to seven hours, depending on the number of times the boat gets stuck on sandbars. A 1st-class ticket will probably get you a seat in the pilot house, while ordinary class means you get a rather cramped seat on a wooden or metal bench. Bring your own food and water. If travelling all the way from Bhamo to Mandalay by boat, it's worth taking the 'fast' boat from Bhamo to Katha and then the large ferry from Katha to Mandalay. Both afford good opportunities to meet and befriend the locals.

Getting Around

Horse carts to Bhamo Myo Haung (the old city) can be hired anywhere in town and cost about K400 per person for the return trip. Bhamo is small enough to visit on foot.

MU-SE & NAMHKAM VALLEY

မူဆလ် / နှစ်ခမ်း: ချိုင့်ဝှမ်း

The Shweli River (called Ruili River on the Chinese side) forms the border between Myanmar's Shan State and China's Yunnan Province at Mu-se. Although it extends all the way to Lashio (and to some degree beyond), the Chinese influence is of course stronger here than elsewhere in Shan State. You're not likely to be allowed to visit Mu-se from Myanmar. However, people on escorted package tours entering from China have received permission to enter Myanmar at Mu-se and travel south to Lashio.

Mu-se's once sleepy frontier-town atmosphere has been swept away by the bustling border trade with China. The town's electricity is supplied by China, so the power cuts common around Myanmar are unheard of here. Chinese tourists flock to Mu-se to shop, keeping the moneychangers busy.

Trucks from Myanmar cross to China with dried fish, rattan, fresh beans and fruit. On the return trip from China, the same trucks carry electrical goods, spare parts, cement and other building components. Smuggled goods include teak, cigarettes and alcohol.

The territory surrounding Mu-se is one of the primary pipelines for opium and heroin smuggling from Shan State to Yunnan Province, and from there to Hong Kong. East of Mu-se, along the border, there are reportedly several major heroin refineries, as well as methamphetamine labs. This area to the east is strictly off limits to foreigners.

Cut by the Shweli River, the verdant **Namhkam Valley**, southwest of Mu-se, is a beautiful patchwork of bamboo and rice paddies. Most of the people living off the land in this area are Shan and other Thai ethnic groups. The town of Namhkam is renowned as the WWII-era location of Dr Gordon Seagrave's American Medical Center. Doctor Seagrave renounced his associations with the American Baptist Mission in order to offer medical service free of Christian proselytisation; people from all over the northern frontier states emerged

from his medical centre trained as doctors and nurses.

Sleeping & Eating

Muse Hotel (s/d US\$10/15; ☎) This is the most popular place to stay. Rooms in the privatised 40-room Muse have attached hot-water bathrooms and air-con but are noisy and a tad grubby.

There are cheaper places to stay that may or may not accept foreigners, including the Yan Yan Guest House, Tokyo Motel and Lucky Hotel.

If you're lucky enough to get permission to visit Namhkam, you'll find cheap but rustic accommodation at the Cherry Guest House, Yadana Theingi Guest House and Friendship Guest House.

Getting There & Away

From Mu-se it's four or five hours by pick-up or car along the famed Burma Road to Lashio, a distance of 176km. With the increased traffic between Mu-se and Mandalay, the road to Lashio has lined up with businesses catering to truck drivers. Pick-ups (K1500 per person) start at about 6am in either direction – but be warned: they're impossibly packed with people and cargo, and are very uncomfortable. Share taxis with air-con are available for K3000 per person. It's possible to arrange lifts in private cars, but any driver who agrees to take you will want some money for fuel, plus a little extra.

KATHA

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Compared with Myitkyina to the north and Bhamo to the east, Katha is more peaceful and pleasant, partly because of its relative

inaccessibility. What activity there is picks up during ferry arrivals and departures and is mostly centred on the riverside road – an excellent place to absorb the rhythm of small-town Myanmar riverine life. Katha is easily explored by foot but doesn't see many foreign visitors, so you may receive celebrity-level attention. Located roughly halfway up to Myitkyina, Katha's population is a mix of Bamar, Kachin and Chin, plus a small Nepal minority.

Sights

Katha has a little-known distinction. Eric Blair (known to the world by his pen name, George Orwell) was posted here from December 1926 to June 1927 as a colonial police officer, and Katha was the setting for his novel *Burmese Days*. Most of the sites mentioned in Orwell's novel, which is highly critical of the British colonial system, are still there, including the police station, the huge walled jail, and the old hospital where the writer spent some time recuperating from dengue and befriended an Indian doctor named Krishnaswami (Dr Veraswami in the novel).

Most interestingly, the old **British Club**, around which much of the novel revolves, is now the headquarters for an agricultural coop. The club library and billiard table are long gone, but the tennis court is, surprisingly, still in use and the easiest way to find the former club. Ask any local for directions to the tennis court – just mimic an overhead serve – and then follow the path beside it to the wooden building directly behind it.

Monks from the large **monastery** on one end of Strand Rd welcome foreigners to

participate in their rather heated but fun impromptu football games in the afternoon.

Sleeping & Eating

Katha gets few foreign visitors, and the rustic accommodation reflects this. The town's two hotels are on Strand Rd, near the ferry embarkation point. Breakfast is not included.

Ayeyarwady Guest House (☎ 25140; Strand Rd; r K3000) Of the two guesthouses that accept foreigners in Katha, the Ayeyarwady is the better choice. Upstairs rooms fronting the road have views of the river, but this means that noise is an issue. A shower and squat toilets are inside.

Annawah Guest House (☎ 25146; Strand Rd; s/d K2000/4000) Be sure to take one of the upstairs rooms here. Though they are mere wooden cubicles, like others on the 1st floor, they do at least get some ventilation. A shower and squat toilets are out the back.

Katha has a lively night market with several makeshift noodle joints where you just grab a seat on the bench and point to what you want. Myint Myint Restaurant, near the fire station, on a road parallel to Strand Rd, has very good Burmese curries. Sein Restaurant does the best Chinese food in town.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

The most enjoyable way to reach Katha is by passenger ferry on the Ayeyarwady River from Mandalay or Bhamo. The large three-storey Chinese ferry takes around 24 hours to Mandalay (a little more going upriver). It costs US\$7 for deck class (no chairs are provided; you must bring a mat and camp on the lower deck, which is not recommended in winter, when temperatures can dip below freezing) and US\$42 for a bed in a two-person cabin. Each cabin has two beds, a washbasin, a fan and a reading light. The toilet and bathrooms are towards the rear, but passengers in cabin class are given keys to their own facilities (a boon, given that deck-class facilities tend to get fouled rather quickly). The deck below has a kitchen serving noodles, soups and curry dishes. Snacks are also sold. Ferries ply the river three times a week (but note that the days they run aren't set in stone).

The ferry from Bhamo takes eight hours or more to reach Katha. Between Bhamo

and Katha the fares are US\$4/28 for lower-deck/cabin class. The scenery along this stretch is quite spectacular, especially north of Shwegu, when the boat passes through a steep gorge, and gibbons can be heard calling from the thick jungle. Pods of rare Irrawaddy dolphins are sometimes spotted north of Katha when the river is low. The Inland Water Transport office in Katha is opposite the jetty. Staff there can arrange passage with little notice, though to be on the safe side it's better to arrange a ticket in Mandalay or Bhamo.

BUS

Though a rarely explored option, bus travel between Mandalay and Katha is possible. Golden Lion Express (K3500, 12 hours) leaves at noon from the bus station, a five-minute walk from the jetty. Another company, Aunglentaw Express, leaves from the village of Palweshwe, directly opposite Katha on the other side of the river. Small boats can be hired for the short crossing to Palweshwe. This route is closed during the rainy season.

TRAIN

Trains from Mandalay or Myitkyina go to Katha and make a stop at Naba, approximately 25km west of Katha. A railway spur goes from Naba to Katha, but there's only one train a day and it leaves at 5.30am (K100, one hour). Trains from Katha to Naba leave at 1pm and 5pm. Most people opt instead to take a truck between the two towns, which is more convenient. Trucks wait at the Naba station to take passengers to Katha (K300, one hour) whenever a train arrives from Mandalay or Myitkyina. Trucks from Katha to Naba leave at 2.30pm.

Government trains from Mandalay to Naba (1st/upper class US\$12/18) on their way to Myitkyina leave daily at 1.50pm and 5.45pm. The trip takes about 12 hours (if you're lucky). Trains leave Naba for Mandalay at 4.50pm and 8.20pm; the earlier express train is recommended. Foreigners are not allowed in the lower-class cars but, unless you're some kind of masochist, you wouldn't want to ride them anyway – they're little better than cattle cars.

Privately run trains operated by the Mehka Mandalay company depart Mandalay on Wednesday and Sunday at 4.40pm.

MYANMAR-CHINA BORDER

A bridge over the Shweli River links the two countries. At the time of writing it was not possible to cross the border from Myanmar into China, but it was possible to cross from China into Myanmar – if you've brought the proper paperwork from Kunming. A travel agency in the **Kunming Camelia Hotel** (☎ 0871-317 6609; 154 East Dong Feng Rd, Kunming) can make the requisite arrangements. The Laotian Consulate happens to be on the same floor. For Y1300 (US\$140) the people at the Kunming Camelia will organise everything you need upon reaching Ruili on the Chinese side of the border, where a government-approved guide from Myanmar will walk you through the day-long paperwork maze. From Kunming, Ruili can be reached by air (50 minutes) or by bus (24 hours). On the Myanmar side, the guide helps change money and coordinates passage by taxi all the way to Lashio or Hsipaw. There are at least three police checkpoints along this road. Note that you cannot travel in the opposite direction (ie from Lashio up to Mu-se).

Upper-class seats are US\$25. The Malikha Mandalay company runs trains on Monday and Friday, and the fare and departure times are the same. These tickets can be bought at the Mandalay train station at windows Nos 7 and 8. These private trains depart from Myitkyina for Naba (en route to Mandalay) on Saturday, Tuesday and Thursday.

THE FAR NORTH

One of the least visited regions on earth, the far north of Myanmar is undoubtedly appealing to the adventurous traveller. In a frontier area, with an intact ecosystem, old-growth forest and alpine meadows, Putao and the surrounding area lie above the tropic of Cancer. This zone is characterised by subtropical conditions up to 2000m, temperate rainforest from 2000m to 3000m and subalpine snow forest that becomes alpine scrub above 3000m. The highlands north of Putao are considered one of the most pristine Himalayan environments in Asia and could become a major ecotourism destination if made accessible to foreigners. The locals often refer to the surrounding peaks as the 'ice mountains'.

One of the smallest ethnic groups north of Putao is the Tawon, the only known Asian pygmy group, who are hunters. They don't have words for emotional states, but – thanks to enterprising missionaries – they can cite passages from the Bible as an argument for domesticating beasts. Other tribes living in the highlands north of Putao are the Rawang, Drung, Daru, Nung and Tibetans.

The minor gold mining in the region is not significant enough for the government to get involved; however, there are also ruby mines, which were given up by the Kachin as part of their peace treaty with the junta in Yangon. Because much of the north is suboptimal in terms of agriculture, it's been largely free of political conflict and violence. However, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), which has offices in Myitkyina, still operates in the Hukuang Valley, where they wear uniforms and carry weapons (KIA in Myitkyina goes without either). The Naga, still feared because of their reputation as head-hunters, live in the valley and along the Indian border, where low-level insurgency

against the Myanmar and Indian governments continues.

PUTAO

ပူတာအို

At an elevation of 402m above sea level, Putao is small and picturesque. During the late British colonial era, a military post called Fort Hertz was based in Putao. By the end of WWII most Westerners used this name instead of Putao – it still appears on some older maps. Most of the population of around 10,000 are Kachin and Lisu, followed by Bamar, Shan and various other smaller tribal groups. The Lisu are proficient hunters – for trade, not sustenance. In an attempt to stop the decimation of rare and endangered species, conservationists have focused on efforts to provide people in the area with the equally rare but vital mineral of salt. Previously, traders from China (who were interested in animal parts for medicines and aphrodisiacs) were the only source of this mineral, which is so easily taken for granted yet so necessary for survival.

Information

Around 300 to 400 foreigners visited the Putao area in 2003–04. The best time to visit is from October to April, when daytime temperatures are quite pleasant and nights are cold but rarely freezing.

Official permission granted by MTT is necessary to visit Putao. This can be arranged with the assistance of a travel agent or with Myanma Airways directly in Yangon only and can take from two to three weeks to obtain. The cost of a permit starts at US\$35.

Sights & Activities

As might be expected for an area so close to multiple remote borders, the army has a strong presence (and an apparently unquenchable passion for golf, evidenced by its nine-hole course near the military camp). Bamboo and wooden handicrafts and medicines made from local plants are on sale at the **Myoma Market** in town. A popular post-Sunday morning mass activity is watching videos at a market teashop. Next to the **Mahamuni Paya** is a chime bell made from the propeller of a wrecked WWII aircraft.

Multiple footpaths lead out of town, perfect for a **short day hike** or as the starting

point for week-long to month-long **treks**. The latter are demanding and cannot be undertaken on the spur of the moment: permission, supplies, camping gear, guides and maybe even porters need to be arranged. If you do jump through the bureaucratic hoops and pay the sometimes exorbitant fees, your efforts will be rewarded. The geography and scenery are truly fantastic. Trails pass through isolated villages, and bamboo bridges cross sparkling, pristine rivers. The cost for a typical 11-day trip, including airfare from Yangon, guides, porters, food and sleeping equipment, is US\$1100.

Hkakabo Razi stands 5889m high and is snowcapped year round. After forking out US\$40,000 to the government for the privilege of climbing the mountain, and after two failed attempts, Takeshi Ozaki of Japan and U Nama Johnson of Myanmar reached the summit in 1996. A protected reserve around Hkakabo Razi was established the same year by the government in response to the tireless efforts of the New York-based Wildlife Conservation Society, headed by Alan Rabinowitz, author of the very moving and fascinating memoir *Beyond the Last Village* (p72). Only a handful of foreigners have made the 35-day trek from Putao to **Tahaungdam**, the last village before Hkakabo Razi; it's an additional nine days to base camp. Satellite peaks in adjoining massifs include **Namni-Lka** (4664m) in the Adung Valley and **Diphuk-Ha** (4360m) in the Seingku Valley. **Phongun Razi** (3500m) is a 10- to 11-day trip from Putao; the summit of it affords views of India to the west. Along with hundreds of butterfly species, the Himalayan black bear, the red panda and the red goral (small goat antelope) have been observed in the region.

Rabinowitz also worked to create the **Hukuang Valley tiger-conservation area**, which, at 8400 sq km, is larger than all the Indian tiger reserves put together. It's also home to at least 50 rare animal and bird species, such as the clouded leopard and marbled cats and the leaf deer. Cameras were installed throughout the valley in 2002 to record the animals' movements and numbers.

Ultimate Descents (www.ultimatedescents.com), a subsidiary of Ayeyarwaddy Expeditions hopes to pioneer **rafting** and **kayaking** trips

on the Nam Lang River and the more challenging Mayhka River (see p333). One German travel company has even mentioned plans to offer skiing vacations in the mountains here. A word of caution before signing up: the thrills don't come cheap.

Tours

Travel agencies in Yangon specialising in trips to the north:

Lisu & Ayeyarwaddy Expeditions (☎ 01-652 809; thelisu@myanmar.com.mm; Suite 03-06, Sedona Hotel)

The same adventurous and enterprising people who run Balloons over Bagan (see p268).

Myanmar Himalaya Trekking & Culture Travels & Tours Co (☎ 01-227 978; www.myanmar-explore.com; Room 212, Summit Parkview Hotel)

Woodland Travel & Tour (☎ 01-202 071; www.woodlandgroups.com; 7 FJV Commercial Centre, Botataung Rd)

Sleeping & Eating

A number of travel agencies run trips to Putao and arrange sleeping accommodation for guests in either the government-owned Rest House, which we don't recommend, or more likely in camp sites. At the time of research, Ayeyarwaddy Expeditions (above) was in the process of constructing a luxury lodge called the Lisu perched above the Nam Lang River. Plans indicate that, in addition to a main lodge with two fireplaces, the individual bungalows (designed like traditional homes) will be centred on an open fireplace. Accommodation will be part of an all-inclusive package arranged through the travel agency.

The town has one Chinese restaurant, Khamsuko, near Myoma Market.

Getting There & Away

Foreigners are not allowed to travel to Putao by road. Even with permission, the narrow, unsurfaced 356km road is passable only in dry weather. Permission from the MTT must be sought to fly here.

Myanma Airways (MA) flies from Yangon to Putao (US\$210 one way, four hours) via Mandalay and Myitkyina on Monday, Friday and Sunday, and from Yangon to Putao via Myitkyina on Wednesday and Saturday. Bear in mind that the schedule may change every six months or so. The Myitkyina to Putao leg is US\$90 return.

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