

# Southeastern Myanmar



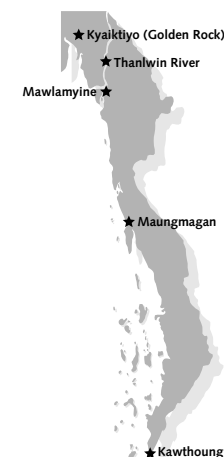
Apart from the world-famous Golden Rock, southeastern Myanmar – a long, narrow isthmus bordering the Andaman Sea that resembles the string of a kite – is virtually unknown, at least in part because of continued tension between government troops and armed opposition groups in some areas. Both sides have laid antipersonnel mines, often near villages, along the lengthy and mountainous porous border with Thailand.

However, the northern part of this region including the pilgrimage site of Kyaiktiyo (Golden Rock), the countryside around leafy, decrepit Mawlamyine and the village of Hpa-an make for an interesting natural loop, unhindered by the restrictions further south. The boat trip between Mawlamyine and Hpa-an is a real treat. The southern no-go zones, combined with the usual poor transport infrastructure mean that foreign visitors rarely journey down to the border town of Kawthoung, the southernmost point in Myanmar.

In Kawthoung, though, there are a few long stretches of white-sand beaches and hundreds of unexplored islands of the Mergui Archipelago that rival those in southern Thailand in terms of sheer beauty. In fact, most of the handful of travel companies permitted by the government to navigate the watery maze of the archipelago is based in Thailand, though the Myanmar government has begun to eye the region with eagerness for its tourism potential. After all Dawei, another southern city that foreigners are allowed in, is only a few hours' drive from Bangkok.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- The views from the gravity-defying marvel of **Kyaiktiyo (Golden Rock)** (p149) are enough to inspire a religious conversion
- A vast archipelago where few foreigners have gone before lies beyond **Kawthoung** (p167) – try your luck island hopping
- Floating up the Thanlwin River on the **Mawlamyine–Hpa-an ferry** (p157) promises some rays and picturesque scenery
- The **Win Sein Taw Ya** (p158), one of the worlds largest Buddhas, is relaxing in the countryside outside of Mawlamyine
- **Maungmagan** (p163) is a long, almost deserted beach near Dawei



**CLIMATE**

Mon State in the north of the region has a longer rainy season (June to November) than other parts of the country; the cool season is December and January.

Similar to southern Thailand, in Tanintharyi Division to the south, it rains for about nine to 10 months a year, with a dry period only occurring during December to April.

**DANGERS & ANNOYANCES**

Foreigners are generally restricted from travelling by road south of Thanbyuzayat. The government attributes road attacks in this area to Mon or Kayin (Karen) insurgents, but the attacks don't discriminate between government and private vehicles, and the motive always seems to be robbery. Regardless of claims on either side, it's very unclear whether these assaults are politically motivated or whether the robbers are simple bandits. For political reasons, though, the government tends to lump both kinds of attacks together as 'insurgent activity'.

**GETTING THERE & AWAY**

From a foreign traveller's perspective there are really two parts to southeastern Myanmar: the first is the northern part that includes Kyaiktiyo, Hpa-an, Mawlamyine and a few places a little further south. All of these destinations are accessible by a combination of boat, bus, car and train with no more than the usual number of hassles of travelling in Myanmar, which is to say a lot.

The second part to the region – covering Dawei, Myeik, Kawthoung and the archipelago of islands off the coast – are a different story. Each form of overland transport cannot be used by foreigners. Therefore, to reach any of these places from within Myanmar, at some point you will have to fly and you will have to fly Myanma Airways (MA). It's possible to travel south from Dawei to Kawthoung or north from Kawthoung to Dawei by boat. At first glance, Kawthoung might seem like a convenient entryway to the country from Thailand, but again it requires a flight to reach Yangon. Boat and flight fares in the south add up quickly, making it the most expensive part of the country to travel in.

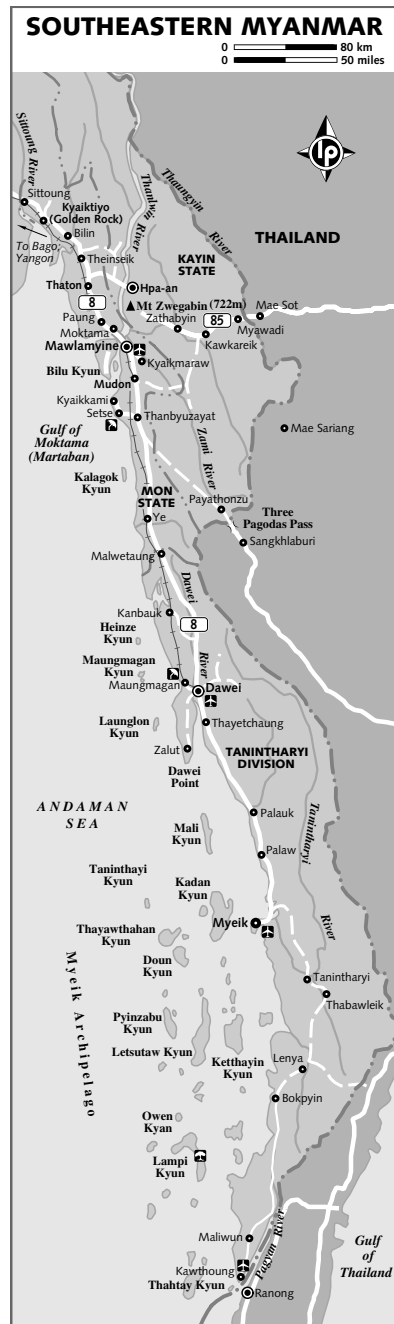
**MON STATE**

မွန်ပြည်နယ်

The homeland of the Mon ethnic group wraps around the east coast of the Gulf of Mottama (Martaban) from the mouth of the Sittoung (Sittang) River to the northern end of Tanintharyi Yoma (Tenasserim Range). Once native to a broad region stretching from southern Myanmar to Cambodia, the Mon have been absorbed – sometimes willingly, sometimes unwillingly – by the more powerful Bamar and Thai cultures in Myanmar and Thailand over the last 1000 years or so. The absorption has been so effective that their own history and culture have received little attention by scholars, even though vestiges of the Mon culture and language clearly survive in both countries.

Though no-one knows for sure, the Mon may be descended from a group of Indian immigrants from Kalinga, an ancient kingdom overlapping the boundaries of the modern Indian states of Orissa and Andhra Pradesh. They are responsible for much of the early maintenance and transmission of Theravada Buddhism in mainland Southeast Asia even though Sri Lankan monks may have initially introduced the Tripitaka (the 'three baskets'; the classic Buddhist scriptures) and ordination lineage. In the case of Myanmar, the Bagan kingdom forcefully captured these elements, while in Thailand it was the peaceful interest of King Rama IV that led to the growth of Mon-styled Buddhism.

Since 1949 the eastern hills of the state (as well as mountains further south in Tanintharyi Division) have been a refuge for the New Mon State Party (NMSP) and its tactical arm, the Mon National Liberation Front (MNLF), whose objective has been self-rule for Mon State. In addition to harassing the Myanmar government, the Mon have occasionally fought the Kayin over control of the remote border crossings along the Thai border. With growing government influence along this section of border – and following a string of Kayin defeats – the situation has cooled. In 1995 the NMSP signed a ceasefire with the Myanmar government. Still, as late as December 2004 there were reports of continuing fighting, instances of forced labour and harassment



of Mon villagers; the result being that villagers from the southern Ye area have migrated across the border to Thailand as much in search of work to support their families.

**KYAIKTIYO (GOLDEN ROCK)**

ကျိုက်တီးရိုက်

☎ 035

The sublime balancing boulder stupa called **Kyaiktiyo (Golden Rock)**, is a major pilgrimage site for Burmese Buddhists and tourists alike. A visit shouldn't be undertaken lightly as a day trip, which in theory could involve a taxi, long-distance bus, truck, human porters and your own foot power, but it's well worth the hassles – as much for the inspiring views from the top as for the gravity-defying boulder itself. The man-made plaza around the Golden Rock is the typical Myanmar mix of religious iconography and commercial development, monks and laypeople meditating in front of golden Buddha statues while several metres away rosary beads and toy wooden rifles are for sale. All but the fittest will probably have to take a breather at one of the drink stands clinging to the cliffsides on the road from the truck stop to the stupa area.

The small stupa, just 7.3m high, sits atop the Golden Rock, a massive, gold-leafed boulder delicately balanced on the edge of a cliff at the top of Mt Kyaikto. Like Shwedagon Paya in Yangon or Mahamuni Paya in Mandalay, the Kyaiktiyo stupa is one of the most sacred Buddhist sites in Myanmar.

Legend states that the boulder maintains its precarious balance due to a precisely placed Buddha hair in the stupa. Apparently King Tissa received the Buddha hair in the 11th century from a hermit who had secreted the hair in his own topknot. The hermit instructed the king to search for a boulder whose shape resembled the hermit's head, and then enshrine the hair in a stupa on top. The king, who inherited supernatural powers as a result of his birth to a *zawgyi* (an accomplished alchemist) father and *naga* (dragon serpent) princess, found the rock at the bottom of the sea. Upon its miraculous arrival on the mountain top, the boat used to transport the rock then turned to stone. This stone can be seen approximately 300m from the main boulder – it's known as the Kyaukthanban (Stone Boat Stupa).

The atmosphere surrounding Kyaiktiyo during the height of the pilgrimage season (from November to March) is charged with magic and devotion, especially when the glistening boulder is bathed in the purple, sometimes misty, light of dawn. Pilgrims chant, light candles and meditate all through the night. Men are permitted to walk along a short causeway and over a bridge spanning a chasm to the boulder and affix gold-leaf squares on the rock's surface.

A new terrace allows devotees to view the boulder from below. There are several other stupas and shrines scattered on the ridge at the top of Mt Kyaikto, though none is as impressive as Kyaiktiyo. The intercon-

necting trails, however, sometimes lead to unexpected views of the valleys below.

Further behind the pagoda plaza area, down a stairway, there is a Potemkin village of restaurants, souvenir shops and guest-houses for Burmese.

### Orientation & Information

Too many towns with similar-sounding names make orientation confusing. Kyaiktiyo is the least important. This is the town along the highway between Bago and points further south. There is no reason to get out here or to stay here. Buses turn off the highway and end their journeys in Kinpun at the base of the mountain, about 9km from the

### THE REAL DEAL ON THE ROCK

A trip to the Golden Rock requires planning, enormous patience, endurance and strong legs. There is a US\$6 entrance fee, payable at the **tourist office** (☎ 6am-6pm) at Yatetaung or at the checkpoint near the top, before the Kyaiktiyo Hotel. By the way, your ticket is valid for 30 days, so you may visit again without paying the government another US\$6.

In theory it is possible to reach the rock from Yangon, or Bago or elsewhere without ever setting one foot in front of the other: bus to truck to sedan chair and repeat in the other direction. But isn't the whole point of a pilgrimage, for aesthetic, intellectual or religious reasons, at least in part about the effort to get there? We're not advocating masochism, only that at some point you're likely to want to walk up or down part of the way and the walking parts are very steep. Walking sticks are for sale but whether unaided or armed, it's an aerobic workout. Take breaks and drink lots of fluids.

These warnings aside, there are two ways to the rock from the base camp in Kinpun. The first is to hike all the way there. This is approximately 11km and takes between four to six hours. The trail begins past the bazaar of souvenir shops in Kinpun and there are numerous 'rest camps' along the way where weary pilgrims can snack and rehydrate. Not many people, even the true devotees, choose to hike all the way up and back. The way down takes from three to four hours and should not be attempted in the dark even with a torch; it's too easy to stumble.

The second way to the rock, which most people do both ways, is to ride one of the large trucks (*lain-ka*) up the winding road to the Yatetaung Bus Terminal, the end point for all vehicle traffic. No cars, taxis, pick-ups, or buses are allowed. The trucks' beds are lined with wooden slats for benches (K500) and seat 35 or so people. Five or so are allowed in the much more comfortable front seats (per person K1000) but these are usually reserved in advance by groups or families. As an individual traveller it's difficult to secure a front seat, while a group of five has a better chance. Regardless, you could be in for a wait of an hour or more as trucks don't leave until they are completely packed to the brim. Some tour groups reserve entire trucks for K16,000. The ride to the top is 45 minutes or so and usually includes a stop around halfway up to allow trucks coming from the opposite direction to pass. The first truck in the morning is at 6am and the last truck down is around 7pm, though you should try to be at the Yatetaung Bus Terminal earlier to avoid the risk of being stranded for the night.

From the terminal, nothing more than a dirt lot surrounded by snack and souvenir shops, it takes 45 minutes to an hour to hike up the remaining steep, paved switchback path. For those with royal fantasies or simply the aged or injured might want to be carried the rest of the way in a sedan chair (US\$5 to US\$7 one way), a canvas litter held aloft by four perspiring Burmese men. Walking or reclining, you pass through an array of vendors along the way to the stupa area at the top.

highway and Kyaiktiyo. Kinpun is where most of the accommodation for foreigners is – besides a few hotels near the top of the mountain itself – and the starting point for trips up the mountain to Kyaiktiyo Paya (Golden Rock).

There is no Internet access anywhere in the area at the moment.

### Hiking

Several hikes originate from the Yatetaung Bus Terminal, which means that unless you choose to stay at the Golden Rock Hotel – which provides information to nonguests – you have to make your way here (see opposite). It's around a 45-minute climb to the top of **Ya-The Mountain**, a 30-minute walk down to **Mo-Baw waterfall** and a 1½-hour walk to the **Sa-ma-taung paya** and **kyaung** (monastery).

### Sleeping

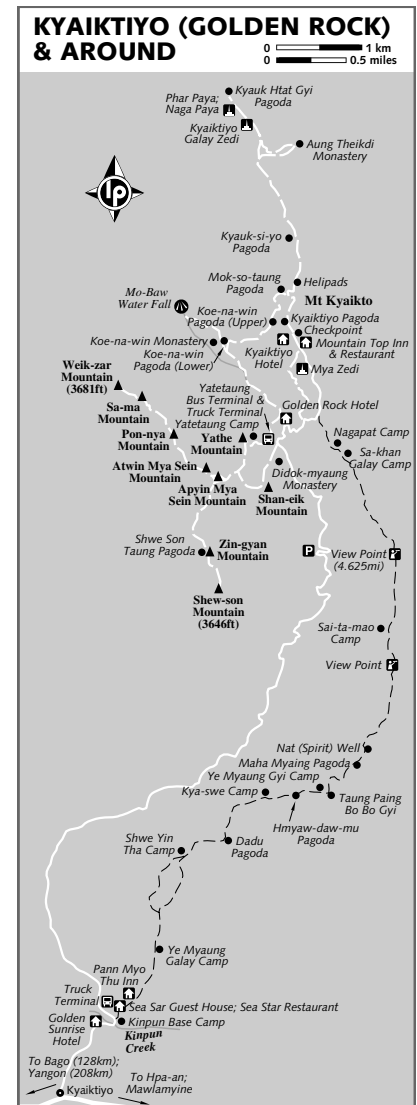
Although the Golden Rock can be visited as a day trip from Bago and in theory Yangon, this isn't recommended; the advantage of staying near the shrine is that you can catch sunset and sunrise – the most magical times for viewing the boulder shrine. Foreigners aren't permitted to stay in one of the many *zayat* (rest shelters) for pilgrims at the top, nor are they permitted to camp in wooded areas on the mountain.

In the town of Kyaiktiyo along the main road from Bago there are several guest-houses, none of them very appealing, and there really is no reason to stay here rather than Kinpun.

### MOUNTAIN

**Golden Rock Hotel** (in Yangon ☎ 01-502 479; grtt@goldenrock.com.mm; s US\$38-45, d US\$45-60; meals US\$4-12; 🍽️) Even though it's still a 40-minute walk to the top, the Golden Rock Hotel, just a few minutes up from the Yatetaung Bus Terminal, is in an exceptionally beautiful spot, surrounded by lush vegetation and a sparkling mountain stream. Rooms in the combo concrete and stone buildings are spotless and cosy. The restaurant has set menus and there's an attached balcony with spectacular views. Massages for your weary pilgrim bones are available.

**Mountain Top Inn & Restaurant** (in Yangon ☎ 01-502 479; s/d US\$38/45) The one advantage the Mountain Top has over the Golden Rock, and it is potentially a big one, is location:



the mountaintop. Some of the rooms in this inn, just before the foreigners' registration office for the paya open out directly to mountain vistas. Rooms themselves have private bathrooms and are small and basic. Spa and massage services are offered.

Travellers keen to avoid government-owned hotels should stay well clear of the

Kyaiktiyo Hotel, along the ridge at the top of Mt Kyaikto.

#### KINPUN

**Sea Sar Guest House** (s US\$3-10, d US\$6-20; 🏠) You'll no doubt be approached by touts from Sea Sar upon arrival, but they should be trusted; this guesthouse is the best value in town. Its prime asset is the spacious compound edged with large, shady trees. Small bungalows with private bathrooms, some concrete and some wooden, have private porches. A few along one side are very nice and large; the bathrooms themselves can sleep four. The cheapest rooms are austere cubicles. Staff here can provide advice on the rock.

**Pann Myo Thu Inn** (s US\$3-6, d US\$6-12; 🏠) A close second behind the Sea Sar, the rooms at this inn are tightly packed and the lack of elbow-room feels slightly claustrophobic. With that said, the midpriced rooms with large wood floors and furniture and air-con are especially good value. The most expensive rooms aren't as nice, designed more with the tastes of local visitors who prefer concrete and a more 'modern' look, while the cheapest rooms are tiny and porous in terms of noise.

**Golden Sunrise Hotel** (in Yangon ☎ 01-701 027; gsunrise@myanmar.com.mm; s/d US\$20/25; 🏠) A few minutes' walk outside the centre of Kinpun village in the direction of the highway, the Golden Sunrise is the most upmarket choice in town. There are eight bamboo bungalows with private verandas, situated around a garden. The rooms have hot water and TV.

#### Eating

Because Kinpun is the starting point for this popular Myanmar site, there are a number of good Chinese and Bamar restaurants up and down the town's main street including the following:

**Sea Sar Restaurant** (dishes K800)

**Mya Yeik Nyo** (noodles with chicken K1000).

In addition to the food stalls at the Kinpun base camp and all along the footpaths, there is a veritable food court of restaurants at the summit past the shrines and plaza area, down the steps where there are also loads of souvenir shops and guesthouses for Burmese.

#### Getting There & Away

For individual travellers, Bago makes a better starting point for road trips to Kyaiktiyo than Yangon, as hotel staff members there are adept at arranging inexpensive alternatives. A guide and driver to Kyaiktiyo can be hired through any of the central Bago hotels for around US\$25. The same tour booked in Yangon costs US\$80.

#### BUS & PICK-UP

Big air-conditioned buses that go straight from Yangon to Kinpun (K2500, 4½ hours) leave from Yangon's Aung Mingalar (Highway) Bus Terminal every 30 minutes or so from 7am to 1pm; other air-conditioned buses leave from Pansodan St in Yangon in the evening for the same price. Buses from Kyaiktiyo to Yangon leave regularly from 7am to 1.30pm. Because the last bus of the day returns to Yangon so early, it's virtually impossible to see the Golden Rock in one day on public transport from the capital.

There are large buses (K1700) and pickups from Kyaiktiyo to Bago (K1000, three hours).

Small pickups leave from Kinpun to Hpa-An and Mawlamyine (front/back seat K2500/1500, five hours) from 6am to 1pm. On the way to Mawlamyine there's not much shade on the road in parts, which means it gets extremely hot. The front seat is well worth the extra kyat.

#### TRAIN

A direct train from Bago to Kyaiktiyo (US\$7) leaves daily at 4.30am, supposedly arriving three hours later, though many travellers report the trip can take six hours or more. The train from Mottama (Martaban) arrives in Kyaiktiyo around 5pm, sometimes later if the train is delayed.

#### THATON

သထုံ

Long before the rise of Bagan, Thaton was an important centre for a Mon kingdom that stretched from the Ayeyarwady River delta to similar river deltas in Thailand, and possibly as far east as Cambodia. Early on, Thaton may have been known as Suvannabhumi, the 'Golden Land' – legend says Asoka, the great Indian Buddhist emperor, sent a mission here in the 3rd century BC. Later it was called Dvaravati when

it reached its dynastic peak between the 6th and 10th centuries AD. Shin Aran, a monk from Thaton, carried Theravada Buddhism north to the Burmese kingdom of Bagan, and in 1057 Thaton was conquered by King Anawrahta of Bagan.

Today Thaton sits on the main road and rail line that stretches from Bago to Mottama. Little of ancient Thaton is visible, as the modern town has been built over the old sites. The town's core is a leafy place, lining each side of the highway with colonial mansions and thatched-roof homes. A few older stupas dot the hillsides surrounding the town and a picturesque canal network irrigates rice paddies and fruit orchards.

#### MOTTAMA (MARTABAN)

မုတ္တမ

The recent completion of a two-lane bridge over the Thanlwin River connecting the nondescript town of Mottama with Mawlamyine makes the double-decker passenger ferries obsolete except for the most devoted boat enthusiast. Despite the expected decrease in ridership, ferries are still scheduled to leave the Mottama landing every half hour from 7.15am to 6.45pm. The foreigner fare is US\$1 and the trip takes 20 to 30 minutes, depending on the tides. If you don't feel like waiting, there's a much faster 25-seat outboard across the river for K200, or you can always charter a boat across the river for about K3000 to K5000.

Less frequent vehicle ferries from Mottama to Mawlamyine depart depending on the tides; the last boat leaves just before sunset and the crossing takes about 30 minutes.

See p157 for details on bus and rail transport to Mottama.

#### MAWLAMYINE (MOULMEIN)

မော်လမြိုင်

☎ 057 / pop 300,000

The impression one has of Mawlamyine from Mottama, on the other side of the Thanlwin River, is of a big, busy city. But wander the streetlight-free streets after sunset and it seems quaint and startlingly undeveloped, especially for the country's third-largest city. Completed only in 2004, a 3km bridge over the Thanlwin River – the longest in Myanmar – brings this leafy, tropical town, 45km from the sea, closer to the north.

With a ridge of stupa-capped hills on one side and the sea on the other, the stage is set for an attractive urban setting. Unfortunately, though, an unsightly row of modern Chinese-style buildings along the waterfront and a general air of decay – though this may seem atmospheric to colonial architecture buffs – makes the city seem neglected and forgotten. But it's this very melancholy, so evident in the ornate and decrepit mosques that captivate visitors. One was George Orwell (author of *Burmese Days*), who was stationed here for a time in the 1920s during his service with the Indian Imperial Police.

Mawlamyine (some maps may show it as Mawlamyaing) served as the capital of British Burma from 1827 to 1852, during which time it developed as a major teak port. A great deal of coastal shipping still goes on, although Patheingyi and Yangon have superseded it as Myanmar's most important ports. The city is composed roughly of 75% Mon or some mixture of Mon, plus Kayin, Bamar, Indian, Chinese and other ethnic groups. A look around the old Christian cemetery gives a hint of how cosmopolitan Mawlamyine was during the 18th and 19th centuries.

#### Information

A police station is located over the road from the government jetties. The post office is a couple of blocks further inland.

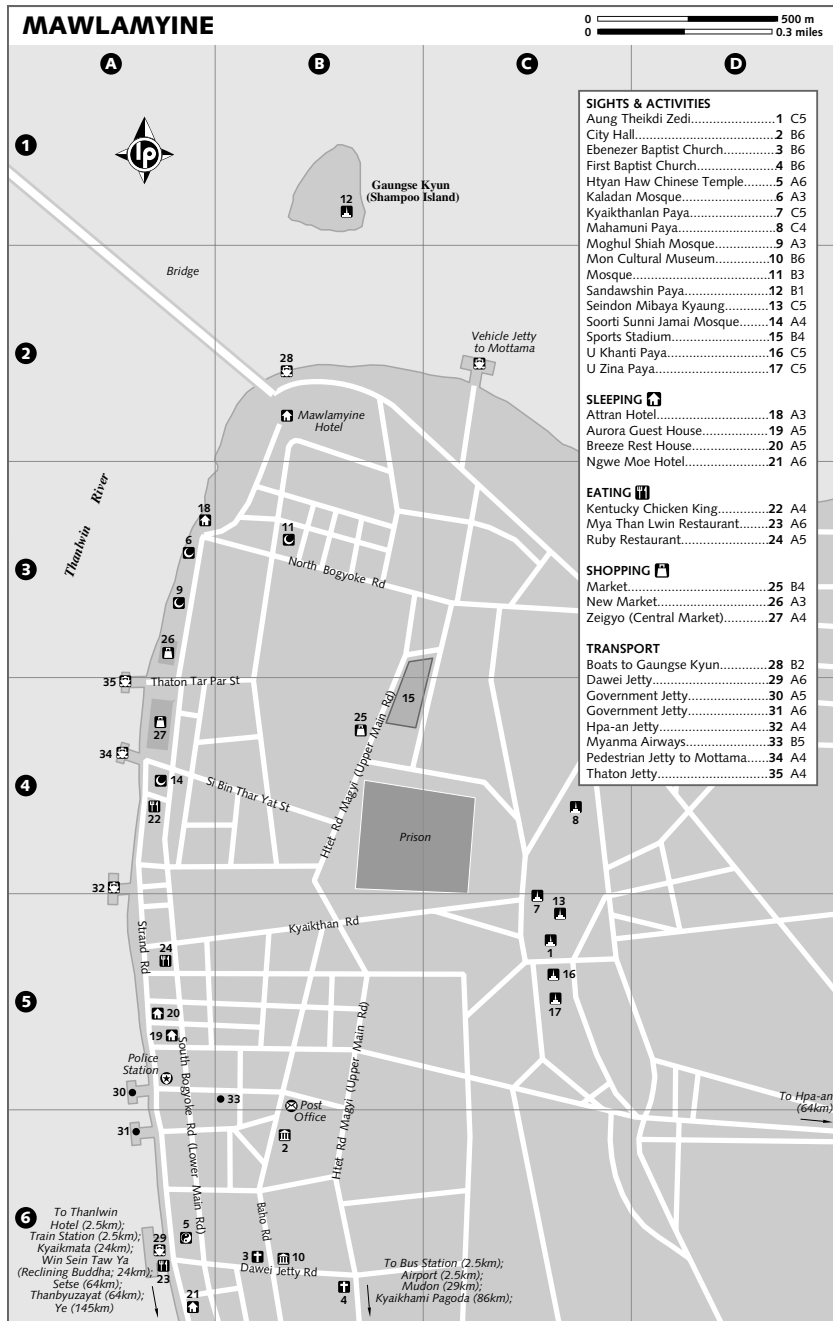
#### Sights & Activities MON CULTURAL MUSEUM

မွန်ယဉ်ကျေးမှုပြတိုက်

This two-storey museum (cnr Baho Rd – formerly Dalhousie St – & Dawei Jetty Rd; admission US\$2) at the northeastern corner is dedicated to the Mon history of the region. Exhibits are displayed downstairs, while upstairs are reading rooms and toilets.

The museum's modest collection includes stelae with Mon inscriptions, 100-year-old wooden sculptures depicting old age and sickness (used as *dhamma*-teaching devices in monasteries), ceramics, silver betel boxes, royal funerary urns, Mon musical instruments and wooden Buddha altars.

In front of the museum is a British cannon dated 1826, plus a huge Burmese gong. Some labels are printed in English though most are in Burmese only.



## RELIGIOUS MONUMENTS

In the city's east, a hilly north-south ridge is topped with five separate monasteries and shrines. At the northern end is **Mahamuni Paya**, the largest temple complex in Mawlamyine. It's built in the typical Mon style with covered brick walkways linking various square shrine buildings. The main image is a replica of its namesake in Mandalay (see p234) – without the thick gold leaf. Another difference is that women may enter the main Buddha chamber here. In the outer cloister several well-executed paintings depict local scenes from the 1920s and 1930s.

Farther south along the ridge stands **Kyaikthanlan Paya**, the city's tallest and most visible stupa. It was probably here that Rudyard Kipling's poetic 'Burma girl' was 'a-settin...' in the opening lines of *Mandalay*: 'By the old Moulmein Pagoda, lookin' lazy at the sea...' (never mind that it's actually the Thanlwin River that's visible from the paya – poetic licence). For a small donation you can take a lift to the main platform surrounding the 40m stupa, which offers fine views over the city and harbour. You can also see the plains to the east towards Kyaikmaraw and the coconut tree-shrouded islands in the mouth of the Thanlwin River.

Below Kyaikthanlan is the 100-year-old **Seindon Mibaya Kyaung**, a monastery where King Mindon Min's queen, Seindon, sought refuge after Myanmar's last monarch, King Thibaw Min, took power. On the next rise south stands the isolated silver-and-gold-plated **Aung Theikdi Zedi**.

Farther south, on the western side of the ridge, a view looks out over the city and is a favoured spot for watching sunsets and catching evening sea breezes. Just beyond the viewpoint stands **U Khanti Paya**, built to commemorate the hermit of Mandalay Hill fame; supposedly U Khanti spent some time on this hill as well. It's a rustic, airy sort of place centred around a large Buddha image. Various bells and gongs are suspended by ropes from the steel supports of the sanctuary's ceiling.

**U Zina Paya**, on the southern spur of the ridge, was named after a former monk who dreamt of finding gems at this spot, then dug them up and used the proceeds to build a temple on the site. One of the shrine buildings contains a very curvy, sensual-looking reclining Buddha topped with a

blinking electric halo; a second recliner in the same room has blinking lights all over its body.

In the centre of town towards the waterfront, on South Bogyoke Rd, are three mosques built during the colonial era when many Indians arrived to work for the British. Since the Indian exodus of the 1970s Muslim congregations have declined substantially, but the survival of these grand old buildings makes a walk here a fleeting exercise in nostalgia.

The most impressive building, **Kaladan Mosque**, is a green-and-turquoise structure designed by Sunni Muslims in the elaborate 'wedding-cake style' similar to that seen in Penang or Kuala Lumpur. Further south, on the same side of the street, is the smaller **Moghul Shiah Mosque**, a Shiite place of worship painted blue with austere Moorish arches. A couple of blocks further, south of the central market, the Sunni **Soorti Sunni Jamai Mosque** fills a similar space but presents a more brilliant turquoise-and-white facade.

Just up from Dawei jetty, on the eastern side of Strand Rd, the small but colourful **Htyan Haw** Chinese temple serves the local Chinese community. Of historic interest is the sturdy brick **First Baptist Church**, also known as the Judson Church, on the corner of Htet Lan Magyi and Dawei Jetty Rd; this was Myanmar's first Baptist church.

## MARKETS

Mawlamyine's **zeigyo** (central market) is a rambling area on the western side of South Bogyoke Rd, just north of the main pedestrian jetty for Mottama. This market specialises in dry goods, from inexpensive clothes to house wares. Much of the merchandise includes items that have 'fallen off the boat' on the way from Singapore to Yangon, such as untaxed cigarettes and liquor.

A block north on the same side of the street is the **New Market**, a large shed built as 'People's Market No 2' during Myanmar's socialist era. Fresh fruits, vegetables and meats are the attraction here.

A variety of street vendors set up shop along both sides of South Bogyoke Rd in the area of these two markets. The entire district is busiest in the early morning from 7am to 8am; by 9am business is considerably slower.

**GAUNGSE KYUN (SHAMPOO ISLAND)**

ခေါင်းဆေးကျွန်း

This picturesque little isle off Mawlamyine's northwestern end is so named because, during the Ava period, the yearly royal hair-washing ceremony customarily used water taken from a spring on the island.

You can hire a boat out to the island from in front of the Mawlamyine Hotel for K1000. Other than just walking around the nine acres and soaking up the ambience, you can visit **Sandawshin Paya**, a whitewash-and-silver *zedi* (stupa) said to contain hair relics, and a nearby Buddhist meditation centre. Among other islands in the river, there is the largest one – **Bilu Kyun** (Ogre Island).

**Sleeping**

Most of the accommodation is only a short trishaw ride from the central market and ferry landing.

**BUDGET**

**Breeze Rest House** (Lay Hnyin Tha, ☎ 21450; 6 Strand Rd; s US\$4-8, d US\$8-15; 🍽️) The rooms aren't much but the Breeze, an attractive, blue colonial-style villa on Strand Rd is the best value in Mawlamyine. A 2nd-floor balcony with a river view is itself worth the price of admission. Yin Maung, the friendly owner, speaks English and is a wealth of information about the area. The cheapest rooms are nothing more than small windowless cubicles with shared bathroom. More expensive rooms that sleep up to three are quite spacious and have a large, modern bathroom with air-con.

**Aurora Guest House** (☎ 22785; 277 Lower Main Rd; s US\$4-10, d US\$8-20) Not as friendly or suited to foreign travellers, nevertheless the Aurora is the only other budget option. Around the corner from the Breeze, the lobby to this guesthouse is up a steep flight of stairs. The rooms are small and slightly musty – be sure to ask for one with a window – and the carpet needs a wash. More expensive rooms have private bathroom and air-con; others only have a fan and shared bathroom. Breakfast is not included.

**MIDRANGE**

**Thanlwin Hotel** (☎ 21976; South Bogyoke Rd; s US\$15-20, d US\$20-30; 🍽️) A colonial-era place that must have been quite smart in its day, the Thanlwin has rested on its laurels, which

are many: wide stairways, open verandas, high ceilings, tile floors. Unfortunately, the atmospherics are at the expense of comfort and cleanliness. Furniture is mismatched and in need of repair, some rooms have private bathroom, others are shared and resemble a high-school locker room.

**Ngwe Moe Hotel** (☎ 24703; Strand Rd; s/d US\$27/36; 🍽️) The only place in Mawlamyine to look and act like a standard hotel – this isn't necessarily a good thing – the three-storey Ngwe Moe on Strand Rd is frequented by groups, more locals than foreigners, and the rooms have the standard amenities: air-con, IDD phone, fridge and satellite TVs.

**Attran Hotel** (☎ 25764; attran@baganmail.net.mm; s/d US\$25/35; 🍽️) The large suites at the Attran, replete with wicker-furnished sitting room and satellite TV, are the most comfortable rooms in Mawlamyine. The hotel, a large compound directly on the river with lots of concrete, is a bunch of old, yellow bungalows in need of a paint job. Standard rooms with private bathrooms are nice, though not really good value. The hotel restaurant, on a deck by the river and lit up at night, is a nice place to eat.

Travellers keen to avoid government-owned hotels should stay clear of the Mawlamyine Hotel, in the northwestern corner of the city.

**Eating**

For a city of this size, the eating options are scarce. The Attran Hotel and Ngwe Moe Hotel have restaurants that serve lunch and dinner. Your best bet is to walk from the Breeze Rest House south along Strand Rd.

**Mya Than Lwin Restaurant** (Dawei jetty, Strand Rd; fish K2000) This restaurant, in what appears to be a former warehouse, is now a popular restaurant, hang-out and place for a cool bottle of beer. There's an extensive menu with soups, pork, chicken, fish, eel and prawns. For the lobster roast, order a day in advance.

**Kentucky Chicken King** (115 Strand Rd; chicken burgers K350) Like its more famous American namesake KFC, the little KCK, only a block from the central market, specialises in juicy fried poultry (two pieces of fried chicken cost K1100).

**Ruby Restaurant** (Lower Main Road; dishes K1000) This restaurant, a short walk from the Breeze Rest House, is bare-bones decoration- and

menu-wise. Basic Bamar and Chinese rice and curry dishes are served here.

**Chan Thar Restaurant** (Strand Rd; dishes K1000) It is another place that serves fish.

**Getting There & Away****AIR**

**Myanmar Airways** (☎ 21500; Thit Tor Yon St; 🕒 9am-4pm) has once-weekly flights to/from Yangon that also connect with Myeik and Kawthoung. At the time of research these flights left Mawlamyine for Myeik (US\$75) at 2pm on Wednesday but it's not uncommon for both the days and times to change. For some reason these flights weren't stopping in Dawei, so you have to go back to Yangon to fly to Dawei. The airport, a small, warehouselike structure, is 5km south of the city centre. Even though it's a domestic flight, you will have to go through immigration and customs.

**BOAT**

Double-decker ferries leave from the Hpa-an jetty in Mawlamyine at noon every other day for the trip up the Thanlwin River to Hpa-an on the river's eastern bank (US\$2, five hours). It's worth a trip to Hpa-an if only because this dirt-cheap riverboat cruise passes through stunning scenery of limestone mountains and sugarcane fields – definitely more scenic than the Mandalay–Bagan boat trip. It's not usually crowded and there are a few sunchairs, perfect front-row seats for the river show. Bring your own food and drinks.

There are two main jetties on the Mawlamyine side for ferries to/from Mottama: the vehicle jetty at the northern end of town and the pedestrian jetty just south of the central market off Strand Rd (see p153 for details on the ferries).

Further south are two jetties reserved for government boats only, followed by the larger Dawei jetty for boats to Dawei and Myeik (Mergui). It's quite difficult for foreigners to arrange passage on any of these boats. If you want to try your luck, it may pay to inquire in Yangon at the office of **Myanmar Five Star Line** (MFSL; Map p98; in Yangon ☎ 01-295 279).

**BUS & PICK-UP**

Before the two-lane bridge over the Thanlwin River was completed, coming from

Yangon involved either taking a smaller, less comfortable bus to Mottama and then crossing by ferry or taking the larger, more comfortable buses from Yangon that took several hours longer because they had to go via Hpa-an. Now several overnight buses, including BTT buses leave Yangon for Mawlamyine (K3000, six to seven hours) in the evening. The ferry transfer is unnecessary and you can avoid the longer route through Hpa-an if you choose. Tickets should be reserved in advance; however, you can hop on near the central market rather than the bus station, a few kilometres outside town.

Pick-ups to Hpa-an leave from around the central market every hour from 8am to 3pm (K300, two hours).

Mawlamyine's main bus station for south-bound buses or pick-ups is at the southern end of town off the road to Ye, where public vehicles go to Thanbyzayay, Kyaikkami, Setse, Dawei, or Payathonzu on the Thai border (opposite Three Pagodas Pass). The Thai border at Payathonzu is closed.

To proceed south by road into Tanintharyi Division you'll need luck, divine intervention and/or an official permit. At the time of research there were as many opinions regarding this subject as there are teashops in Yangon. The overwhelming consensus, however, is that it's probably not possible and possibly not desirable due to the risk of robbery. This author was refused when trying to purchase a ticket at the Mawlamyine bus station.

**TRAIN**

Two express trains run from Yangon to Mottama at 7am and 10pm daily. Both trains make brief stops in Bago and Thaton. When the trains are running on time the trip takes nine hours – slower than the bus. Still, the scenery from the train is, as usual, much more engaging. Foreigner price for an upper-class seat is US\$17. Tickets can be purchased at the train station.

In the reverse direction, one train leaves Mottama at 7pm and is scheduled to arrive in Yangon at 4.30am; another leaves at 10am and arrives in Yangon at 6pm. In Mawlamyine tickets may be purchased one day in advance at the Northern Railway Booking Office, which stands between Strand Rd and South Bogyoke Rd, just north of the Hpa-an jetty.

A separate southern railway line begins at the southern end of the city and terminates at Ye. From Ye, another local train continues to Dawei. Foreigners have not been allowed to travel on these rail lines for some time, due to a lack of security further south. With the military presence surrounding a gas pipeline near Dawei, this situation is unlikely to change soon.

### Getting Around

Motorised *thoun bein* (three-wheelers) are the main form of public transport around the city. The highest concentration is on South Bogyoke Rd in front of the *zeigyo*. Because there are relatively few foreign visitors, local transport costs are low and the rates are probably not far off from what locals actually pay. The going rate is K200 for a short hop within the centre of town and as much as K500 for a ride up the ridge to Kyaikthanlan. You can also rent bicycles from one of the hotels.

### AROUND MAWLAMYINE

Only 14km south of Mawlamyine is the **Pa-Auk-Taw-Ya Monastery**; at 400 acres it's one of the largest meditation centres in Myanmar. Foreigners can visit for the night or several days; sleeping and eating is gratis, meditation may be paid for by the sweat of your brow, but courses can be quite expensive (see p335). Buses (K100, 30 minutes) from Mawlamyine's central market pass by the road junction to the monastery from where it's a short walk.

Just off the road between Mawlamyine and Mudon is **Yadana Taung** where local Buddhists have only recently finished constructing **Win Sein Taw Ya**, a huge reclining Buddha measuring around 170m in length, making it one of the largest such images in the world. Many other stupas and standing Buddhas dot the area, affording wonderful panoramas of both the sculptures and countryside. Nearby is **Kyauktalon Taung**, a flat-topped limestone crag crowned with stupas. On the opposite side of the road is a similar but smaller outcropping surmounted by a Hindu temple. Pick-ups from Mawlamyine's market (K300) take 45 minutes to the junction for the road to Win Sein Taw Ya. It's another K100 for a horse-cart ride to the Buddha itself. There's an interesting line-up of monk statues on the road.

**Mudon**, 29km south of the city, is an area of verdant mountains home to deer, snakes and other wild forest species – 'jungle food' for restaurants in Mudon. The town is also known for cotton weaving. Pick-ups from Mawlamyine's market (K300) take around 45 minutes.

Just north of Mudon is a turn-off east to **Azin Dam**, a water-storage and flood-control facility that's also used to irrigate local rubber plantations. A tidy recreation area at **Kandawgyi** – a lake formed by the dam – is a favourite picnic spot; bring your own snacks or rely on the vendors who gather here on weekends and holidays. At the northern end of the lake stands the gilded stupa of **Kandawgyi Paya**.

### Kyaikmaraw

ကျိုက်မာရ

This small, charming town, site of an impressive temple, 24km southeast of Mawlamyine is accessible via a sealed road. For the most part, Kyaikmaraw is considered a pacified area, although insurgents or bandits have been known to rob rubber plantations along the road to Mawlamyine.

Hugging the banks of the Ataran River, a branch of the Thanlwin River, the town consists of mostly wooden homes with thatched-palm or corrugated metal roofs.

### SIGHTS

#### Kyaikmaraw Paya

The pride of the town is this temple built by Queen Shin Saw Pu in 1455 in the late Mon regional style. Among the temple's many outstanding features are multicoloured glass windows set in the outside walls of the main sanctuary, an inner colonnade decorated in mirrored tiles, and beautiful ceramic tile floors. Painted reliefs appear on the exterior of several auxiliary buildings.

Covered brick **walkways** lead up to and around the main square sanctuary in typical 15th-century Mon style. The huge main Buddha image sits in a 'European pose', with the legs hanging down as if sitting on a chair rather than in the much more common cross-legged manner. A number of smaller cross-legged Buddhas surround the main image, and behind it are two reclining Buddhas, one with eyes open, one with eyes closed. Another impressive feature is the carved and painted wooden ceiling.

A side room to the inner sanctuary contains sculptures depicting the Buddha in various stages of illness and death – other than the traditional *parinibbana* reclining posture, these are unusual motifs for Buddhist temples. Two images show the Buddha lying on his back with hands folded on his abdomen; another depicts an ill Buddha stooping over slightly with one hand clasped to his chest, the other hand against the wall as his disciples reach out to assist him.

Next to the main sanctuary is a small **museum** with Buddha images, donated by the faithful, on the upper floor; other artefacts from the area are on the lower floor. Some of these objects are more than 500 years old.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Two kinds of trucks frequently ply the Kyaikmaraw road from Mawlamyine: green Chevy trucks with wooden door panels and wooden passenger compartments (K200, 45 minutes), and smaller, white Japanese pickups (K300, 30 minutes). Lined with toddy palms and rubber plantations, the road passes through eight villages before ending at the riverbank in Kyaikmaraw.

### Thanbyuzayat

သံဗြူဇာတ်

South of Mudon, little traffic is seen and the hills to the east are more densely forested. Thanbyuzayat (Tin Shelter), 64km south of Mawlamyine, was the western terminus

of the infamous Burma–Siam Railway, dubbed the 'Death Railway' by the over 16,000 Allied prisoners of war (POWs) and Asian coolies who were forced by the Japanese military to build it. It was here that the Japanese broke into Myanmar after marching over the rugged mountain range separating British Burma from Tak in Thailand via Three Pagodas Pass.

A clock tower in the centre of Thanbyuzayat stands at a road junction; the road south leads to Ye while the road west goes to Kyaikkami and Setse. About 1.5km south of the clock tower, a locomotive and piece of track commemorating the Burma–Siam Railway are on display. A kilometre west of the clock tower towards Kyaikkami, on the southern side of the road, lies the **Thanbyuzayat War Cemetery**, which contains 3771 graves of Allied POWs who died building the railway. Most of those buried were British, but there are also markers for American, Dutch and Australian soldiers. The site is maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Thanbyuzayat is easily reached by public pick-up (K600, two hours) from the Mawlamyine central market area; there are six departures, all before noon. As there is no legal lodging in Thanbyuzayat, start early so you can catch the last pick-up back to Mawlamyine at around 4pm.

### THE DEATH RAILWAY

The strategic objective of the Burma–Siam Railway' was to secure an alternative supply route for the Japanese conquest of Myanmar and other Asian countries to the west. Construction on the railway began on 16 September 1942 at existing terminals in Thanbyuzayat and Nong Pladuk, Thailand. At the time, Japanese engineers estimated that it would take five years to link Thailand and Burma by rail, but the Japanese army forced the POWs to complete the 415km, 1m-gauge railway, of which roughly two-thirds ran through Thailand, in 16 months. Much of the railway was built in difficult terrain that required high bridges and deep mountain cuttings. The rails were finally joined 37km south of the town of Payathonzu (Three Pagodas Pass); a Japanese brothel train inaugurated the line. The railway was in use for 20 months before the Allies bombed it in 1945.

An estimated 16,000 POWs died as a result of brutal treatment by their captors, a story chronicled by Pierre Boulle's book *Bridge on the River Kwai* and popularised by a movie based on the book. The notorious bridge itself still stands in Kanchanaburi, Thailand. Only one POW is known to have escaped, a Briton who took refuge among pro-British Kayin guerrillas.

Although the statistics of the number of POWs who died during the Japanese occupation are horrifying, the figures for the labourers, many from Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia, are even worse. It is thought that 90,000 to 100,000 coolies died in the area.

## Kyaikkami

ကျိုက္ခမီ

Located 9km northwest of Thanbyuzayat, Kyaikkami was a small coastal resort and missionary centre known as Amherst during the British era. Adoniram Judson (1788–1850), an American missionary and linguist who has practically attained sainthood among Burmese Baptists, was sailing to India with his wife when their ship was blown off course, forcing them to land at Kyaikkami. Judson stayed on and established his first mission here; the original site is now a Catholic school on a small lane off the main road.

Among other accomplishments, Judson developed the first Burmese–English dictionary in 1849 and was the first person to translate the Bible into Burmese. He was imprisoned along with his wife by the Burmese during the first Anglo-Burmese war and served as the official translator to the Burmese court during the negotiations of the treaty that ended the war. Judson died in 1850 and was buried at sea, but the grave of his wife, Anne Judson, who died soon after their release from prison in 1826, can still be seen in Kyaikkami, about 200m off the main road near the school.

However, the main focus of Kyaikkami is **Yele Paya**, a metal-roofed Buddhist shrine complex perched over the sea and reached via a long two-level causeway; the lower level is submerged during high tide. Along with 11 Buddha hair relics, the shrine chamber beneath Yele Paya reportedly contains a Buddha image that supposedly floated here on a raft from Sri Lanka in ancient times (see Thiho-shin Phondaw-pyi on p132 for more details on this legend). A display of 21 Mandalay-style Buddha statues sits over the spot where the Sinhalese image is supposedly buried.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

During the early half of the day there are occasional pick-ups to Kyaikkami from Thanbyuzayat for K150 per person. You can also charter a taxi in Mawlamyine for around K4000. From Mawlamyine it's takes approximately 2½ hours to get here.

## Setse

ဝဲတဲ

This low-key Gulf of Martaban beach lies about halfway between Kyaikkami and

Thanbyuzayat. Setse is a very wide, brown-sand beach that tends towards tidal flats when the shallow surf-line recedes at low tide. The beach is lined by waving casuarina trees and has been a popular spot for outings since colonial times.

You can stay at the privately owned **Ngwe Moe Guesthouse** (s/d US\$10/18). It's on the beach, along with several bungalows for Burmese citizens. Rooms are basic and electricity is scarce. A few modest restaurants offer fresh seafood.

For direct pick-up transport to Setse from Mawlamyine – read at least one long stop in Kyaikkami – tickets (K300, 2½ hours) should be reserved a day in advance. Buses run south but you may have to change once in Thanbyuzayat and once in Kyaikkami.

## KAYIN STATE

ကရင်ပြည်နယ်

Many districts in Kayin State and Tanintharyi Division (which both share borders with Thailand) are very much off-limits to foreign visitors travelling from Yangon, but things are changing. Kayin State, homeland to around a million Kayin, has probably received more foreign visitors who have crossed over – unofficially – from Thailand than from any other place. Many international volunteers have ventured into the frontier area to assist with refugee concerns.

Ever since Myanmar attained independence from the British in 1948, the Kayin have been embroiled in a fight for autonomy. The main insurgent body, the Karen National Union (KNU), controls much of the northern and eastern parts of the state, although recent Yangon military victories have left the KNU and its military component, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), without a permanent headquarters. A split between Christian and Buddhist factions has also weakened the KNU, which had become the de facto centre of the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB), an alliance of a dozen rebel groups fighting for regional autonomy. The KNU headquarters was also the seat of the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB), a 'parallel government' established by a group of National League for Democracy (NLD) members who won

parliamentary seats in the ill-fated May 1990 national elections, but were denied office by the military. Much of the state remains a potential battleground as sporadic fighting between Burmese troops and the KNLA continues.

## HPA-AN

ဟားအံ

Hpa-an is a small but busy commercial centre that, in itself, doesn't necessarily warrant a trip. However, the beautiful river cruise between here and Mawlamyine and a few off-the-beaten-track excursions make it worth the while of the intrepid traveller. Away from the jetty, which is crowded with trucks and motorcycles, it still has something of the village atmosphere; farmers come to town in their horse carts, or trishaws stacked with baskets or mats to sell in the market. The townspeople are a mixture of Mon, Bamar and Muslim. Burmese is the primary language, but Kayin is spoken by many. The mosque seems to be the town hub and there are numerous teashops around town, along with pick-ups to Thaton and on to Kyaiktiyo.

You can reach Hpa-an, capital of Kayin State, by road from Yangon across a bridge over the Thanlwin River, west of the town, or by river ferry from Mawlamyine. Another new bridge across the Gyaing River at Zathabyin, east of Mawlamyine, links Hpa-an with Mawlamyine by road. The trip by car takes an hour.

From Hpa-an a rutted, unsurfaced road heads 143km southeast to Myawadi, a town controlled by the Tatmadaw (armed forces) on the western bank of the Thaungyin River (known as Moei River to the Thais) opposite the northern Thai town of Mae Sot. A large number of Kayin refugees fleeing KNLA–Tatmadaw battles are encamped on the Thai side of the border in this area.

### Sights & Activities

There are several interesting excursions from Hpa-an and while all are accessible by public transport, it requires some long waits and unreliable connections. It's best to try to hire a motorbike, with or without a driver, for US\$10 or so from one of the guesthouses.

Hpa-an is famous among Burmese for the Buddhist village at **Thamanyat Kuang** and

where the highly respected monk U Winaya, whose solid support of democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi is well known throughout Myanmar, resided. U Winaya passed away several years ago. Thamanyat monastery is about 40km southeast of Hpa-an, and there is a daily flow of small buses to this busy religious site. The bus fare from Hpa-an is K220.

Eleven kilometres south of Hpa-an is **Mt Zwegabin**, which is both a sacred and tall mountain; the best kind. At 722m high it affords panoramic views of the surrounding countryside from the summit. To get to the mountain, take a pick-up in the direction of Thamanya and get off at the Zwegabin junction; it's a 15-minute walk from here through a village to the base of the mountain on the west side past thousands of identical Buddha statues lined up in row after row. The path up isn't exactly picturesque – it's nothing more than hundreds and hundreds of concrete steps, but once up the top, the two-hour effort is rewarded. If you arrive before noon at the small monastery at the top you can take advantage of a complimentary lunch (rice, orange and tea) and the 11am monkey feeding – different primates, different menus. It's possible to overnight here, which means you can also appreciate the fantastic sunsets. The descent down the east side of the mountain takes around 45 minutes, and from the bottom it's another 3km to the main road from where you can catch a pick-up back to town. Hiring your own transport – someone to drop you off on one side and pick you up on the other – makes everything run smoother.

Bring a good torch to explore **Saddar Cave**. It's a good 10- to 15-minute journey through the cave to the other side, which exits onto a lake.

Thousands of miniature clay and stone carved Buddhas covered in gold and bronze line the walls of **Kawgun Cave**, near Kawgun village. If those weren't enough, **Yathappyan Cave** has more Buddha statues though not as many as Kawgun.

Cross a long footbridge to get to the **Water Lake Monastery**, built in the middle of an artificial lake, from where there are good views of the surrounding countryside, obscured only by the birds and butterflies fluttering nearby.



## Sleeping & Eating

After the leisurely boat ride up from Mawlamyine, the choice of accommodation in Hpa-an is a disappointment. There are only two places that accept foreigners; neither offers breakfast.

**Soe Brothers Guesthouse** (☎ 058-21372; 46 Thitsa Rd; s/d US\$4/6) Rooms here have some character and more importantly windows, though no mosquito nets and a shared bathroom. The staff can help with excursions and can provide a map of the town and surrounding area.

**Parami Hotel** (r per person US\$5, with bathroom & TV US\$22) Just around the corner from Soe Brothers, the Parami's rooms are smaller though they do have mosquito nets. There are a few rooms with a private bathroom and the staff members here are helpful and friendly as well.

There's a nameless but good teahouse next to the Soe Brothers Guesthouse that also serves fresh food including tasty fried potato and onion fritters. Near the guesthouses, Lucky Restaurant has beer on tap and is deservedly popular.

The following eating options are also near the guesthouses:

**Khit-Thit Restaurant** (New Age Restaurant)

**San Ma Tu Restaurant** (Bogyoke St) A good place for vegetarians.

## Getting There & Away

### BOAT

See p157 for information on the double-decker ferries that travel the scenic route between Hpa-an and Mawlamyine. Boats leave Hpa-an at 7am every other day (US\$2, two hours).

### BUS & PICK-UP

Buses to Hpa-an (K2000), run by the Shwe Chin The company, depart from Yangon's Aung Mingalar (Highway) Bus Terminal at 8pm and arrive at about 7am. From Hpa-an buses to Yangon leave every evening at 6pm and take from 10 to 11 hours. Buses and pick-ups to Mawlamyine (K300, two hours) leave every hour from 8am to 3pm. Pick-ups from Hpa-an to Kyaiktiyo (K800 for front seat) depart from the front of the green mosque. Pick-ups to/from Thaton cost about K500. Buses depart from near the Parami Hotel at about 6pm for Kyaiktiyo and Bago.

# TANINTHARYI (TENASSERIM) DIVISION

တနင်္သာရီတိုင်း

Known to the outside world as Tenasserim until 1989, Tanintharyi has a long history of trade with India (especially Coromandel) and the Middle East. Because it's joined with Thailand to a relatively slender length of land separating the Andaman Sea/Indian Ocean from the Gulf of Thailand, this trade link included Siam and other nations east of Myanmar's eastern mountain ranges. Routes through Dawei and Myeik were especially important, and for many years, before the arrival of the British in the late 19th century, the Siamese either controlled the state or received annual tributes from its inhabitants.

Most of the people living in the division are of Bamar ethnicity, although splitting hairs one can easily identify Dawei and Myeik subgroups of the Bamar who enjoy their own dialect, cuisine and so on. Large numbers of Mon also live in the division, and in or near the larger towns you'll find Kayin (often Christian) and Indian (often Muslim) residents, as well as Thais and the sea gypsies or Salons who inhabit the islands of the coast. Pearl farms on islands in the area, established by the Ministry of Mines were expected to produce more than 200,000 pearls in 2004.

## DAWEI (TAVOY)

တားဝယ်

☎ 036

Despite the presence of a university, Dawei is still a sleepy, tropical seaside town. Only recently connected to the rest of Myanmar by road and rail, it's still only accessible to foreigners by air, so hardly any tourists visit. Areas to the west and north of town are planted in rice, while to the east lie patches of jungle. Some of the architecture in town is quite impressive, with many old wooden houses, more modest thatched-roofed bungalows and a few colonial-style brick-and-stucco mansions. Throw in a few Eastern-bloc aesthetic touches and you have an interesting architectural mix.

Tall, slender sugar palms, coco palms, banana and other fruit trees, along with lots of

hanging orchids, are interspersed throughout – it's a very green town due to the abundant annual rain that falls on the southern half of Tanintharyi Division. In spite of its remote location – or perhaps because of it – Dawei has become a significant Burmese Buddhist centre.

Hundreds of Tanintharyi Division residents fled to Thailand rather than work on the 100 mile-long (160km) Ye to Dawei railway completed for the most part in 1998. According to Amnesty International, refugees reported conditions approaching those described in chronicles of the Japanese army's 'Death Railway' though the government asserts the work was done by army personnel.

Dawei is also near the starting point of the massive 700km Yadana gas pipeline, which carries natural gas from fields in the Gulf of Mottama to Ratchaburi Province in Thailand. About 400km of its length runs through Mon State and Tanintharyi Division, the remainder through Thailand. Reportedly, the Myanmar government relocated villages originally in the pipeline's path with little or no compensation for the villagers. There have also been charges that forced labour was used in building the pipeline. Because of the pipeline's perceived strategic importance, there is a fairly heavy military presence around Dawei.

Also because of its proximity to Bangkok, only a few hours by road, there's talk of developing the beaches around Dawei, which some claim rival Ngwe Saung and Ngapali in the west of the country, for foreign tourism. However, as long as the area remains politically unstable this won't happen.

## Sights & Activities

### THEINWA KYAUNG (PAYAGYI)

သိမ်ကျောင်း (ဘုရားကြီး)

The main Buddhist monastery in town, usually referred to simply as Payagyi (Big Pagoda), contains a complex of sizeable Mon-style *vihara* (glittering cubes of reflective mosaics filled with gilded Buddhas).

The best time to visit Theinwa Kyaung is in the early evening, just after sunset, when hordes of local residents come to make offerings and to meditate for an hour or two. To find it, head northwest along Yodaya Rd, past the Royal Guest House on your right, until you come to a large fork in the

road. Bear right at the fork, follow the road another 200m and you'll come to the paya on your right.

### SHWETHALYAUNG DAW MU

ရွှေသာလျောင်း တော်မူ

Completed in 1931, one of the largest reclining Buddhas in the country – 74m long, 21m high – is at the edge of town (about 5km from the central Strand Rd market).

### SHINMOKHTI PAYA

ရှင်မုတ္တီးဘုရား

About 5km beyond Shwethalyaung Daw Mu on the same road, this paya is the most sacred of local religious monuments. Reportedly constructed in 1438, it's one of four shrines in the country housing a Sinhalese Buddha image supposedly made with a composite of cement and pieces of the original Bodhi Tree. During religious festivals this is one of the liveliest spots in the district.

### KAREN BAPTIST CHURCH

The American Baptists had a long and active history in Dawei, beginning in 1828. The Karen Baptist Church, founded by an American evangelist in 1957, is still in use in the Shan Malei Swe Quarter; foreign visitors are welcome.

### BEACHES & ISLANDS

Few foreigners have been permitted to visit the coastal areas around Dawei, so details are still sketchy. The best local beach, **Maungmagan** (also spelt Maungmakan), is around 18km west of Dawei via a narrow, winding, patched blacktop road over a high ridge and through rubber plantations. A very wide sand beach stretches 8km to 10km along a large, pretty bay. Near the road a few outdoor vendors offer snacks and beverages in the shade of casuarina trees and palms. On weekends and holidays this end of the beach draws a crowd, but if you walk 500m or so up the beach you're likely to have it all to yourself, save for the occasional fisherman.

The surf at Maungmagan is fairly tame, even during the southwest monsoon, and the water is very clean, better than around Myeik, so it's a good beach for swimming.

Opposite Maungmagan is a collection of three pretty island groups that were named the Middle Moscos Islands by the British – they are now known as **Maungmagan, Hienze**

and **Launglon** (or collectively as the Maungmagan Islands). Due to a natural profusion of wild boar, barking deer, sambar and swiftlets (sea swallows), these islands are part of a marine sanctuary, originally established by the British in 1927.

Local taxi trucks from the Strand Rd market go to the beach at Maungmagan or to Zalut for about K800 and K1500 per person.

### Festivals & Events

During the annual **Thingyan** festival in April, Dawei's male residents don huge, 4m bamboo-frame effigies and dance down the streets to the beat of the *kalakodaun*, an Indian long drum.

### Sleeping & Eating

Most visitors to Dawei come on business – traders involved in oil, marine products, rubber, wolfram, tin or cashews – so the guesthouses are not used to tourists.

**Ekari Guest House** (☎ 21980, 21780; 52 Ye Yeiqtha Rd; r US\$10-25) This is a two-storey wooden guesthouse in a relatively quiet neighbourhood. It's the cleanest place in town. The more expensive rooms have private bathrooms. Electricity is available only in the early evening.

**Royal Guest House** (Yodaya Rd; r per person US\$10) The Royal is located in a corner of one of the main four-way intersections in the centre of town. Rooms are not well-kept compared to Ekari and street noise is a factor when trying to sleep.

**Taungoo Rest House** (☎ 21951; r US\$10) Right across the street from the Royal is another big, two-storey colonial building. There is a café downstairs serving inexpensive Bamar-Muslim food.

**Tharaphu Hotel** (r US\$10) A similar option to the Taungoo.

Along Yodaya Rd, one of the main thoroughfares through town, are several small rice- and teashops. **Supereye** (Strand Rd) offers an extensive English-language menu of Chinese and Bamar cuisine, much of it seafood-based. The food is good, if a little expensive by Myanmar standards.

### Getting There & Away

#### AIR

Yangon Airways (YA) and the government-owned Myanma Airways (MA) field three

direct flights per week from Yangon to Dawei costing US\$70 per person. The flight time is one hour and 10 minutes.

Flights with YA continue to Myeik and Kawthoung before turning around and hitting the same three stops on the way back to Yangon. The YA fare is US\$50 between Myeik and Dawei and the ride takes less than an hour. Between Dawei and Kawthoung the fare is US\$70.

#### BOAT

MFSL sails between Yangon, Dawei, Myeik and Kawthoung several times a month, but travel is slow and there is no fixed schedule. It takes two days and two nights between Yangon and Dawei, and possibly up to a week in the rainy season.

**Fortune Express** (☎ 51718) and **HiFi Express** (☎ 51500) run daily trips to/from Myeik (US\$20, 6½ hours). If Fortune leaves one day, HiFi leaves the next; both depart at around 4am. For some more information see p168.

#### BUS

Various private bus companies now operate buses from Yangon's Highway bus terminal all the way to Dawei, although foreign travellers aren't usually allowed to take the bus. At the time of writing, flying was the only sure way to get to Dawei from Yangon. If you were allowed to take a bus from Yangon to Dawei, the trip would take about 17 hours. The situation may change so it's always a good idea to ask at the bus station or consult a travel agent in Yangon.

### MYEIK (MERGUI)



☎ 021

Myeik doesn't receive many foreign visitors; rightly so as there's not much of interest. Those who do venture here by boat or plane, though, will attract loads of friendly attention. Until recently Myeik – which sits on a peninsula that juts out into the Andaman Sea – was a fairly picturesque coastal city with a wide range of architectural styles lining the streets. Increased cash flow due to the export of seafood to Thailand caused a miniboom in building during the 1990s, and many old buildings were replaced by modern ones. Then in 2001, a large portion of the remaining old architecture was razed

by fire; the rebuilding effort has largely sacrificed style for utility.

The British occupied the region following the First Anglo-Burmese War in 1826, so that along with Sittwe, Myeik became one of the first cities in Myanmar to become part of British India. The Japanese invaded in 1941, but by 1945 Myeik was back in British hands, until independence was achieved in 1948.

### Sights & Activities

The city's most venerated Buddhist temple, **Theindawgyi Paya**, sits on a ridge overlooking the city and harbour. A tall gilded stupa stands on a broad platform with excellent views of the city below and islands in the distance.

**Pataw Padet Island**, a five-minute boat ride (per person K1000) from the harbour, is named after two prominent hills at either end of the island. Several religious buildings, stupas and sculptures have been constructed on the island. A large, hollow reclining 66m-long Buddha, **Atula Shwethalyaung**, lies at the foot of rocky, jungle-covered Padet Hill to the south. Unusually, it's a hollow cement form with an interior walkway lined with comic-strip-like Jataka (stories of the Buddha's past lives) scenes as yet unfinished.

The **harbourfront** is worth a stroll to watch stevedores loading and offloading cargo from ships big and small.

Not far from Theindawgyi Paya there's a **Muslim quarter** with two mosques and lots of teashops. There are seven other mosques in the city.

Near the harbour, **Sibinthaya Zei** (Municipal Market; ☎ 6am-5pm Mon-Sat, closed holidays), is a very large and colourful collection of enclosed stalls covering a city block.

#### ISLANDS

Boats to the nearby islands of the Mergui Archipelago can in theory be chartered for US\$60 per day from Myeik's harbour. However, the water around Myeik is less clear than the water around Kawthoung and there are no reputable travel agencies in Myeik either to facilitate a trip. If interested in the visiting this offshore wonderland, it makes sense to travel from Kawthoung (see p167) or to arrange a trip from Ranong or Phuket in Thailand (p333).

### Sleeping

Accommodation in Myeik represents some of the worst value in the country. The few foreigners who make it here are generally business travellers and so there are only a few overpriced hotels and guesthouses with no character.

**Dolphin Hotel** (☎ 41523; 139 Kanphay Rd; s/d US\$25/40) Owned as a joint venture with the Myanmar Fisheries Industry, the modern Dolphin is easily the nicest place in town though staff members aren't especially friendly or helpful. Rooms in this two-storey building are dark wood with modern and clean bathrooms. It's on the road from the airport into town.

**Pale Mon Hotel** (☎ 41841; s/d US\$20/30; ☺) Down the road from the airport and adjacent to the Myeik Golf Club, the Pale Mon has large, poorly furnished plain rooms, with intermittent air-con, TVs with two channels, and private bathrooms with cold-water showers. The basic breakfast makes the rooms, in comparison, seem luxurious.

**Ban Gaba Guest House** (r US\$10) Near the jetty south of the market, this two-storey place has bare, concrete rooms. There's a balcony on the 2nd floor.

Other similar low-quality places charging around US\$10 per room are the Ahyoneo Guest House, Seikantha Hotel and Shwekanenari Guest House.

Travellers who wish to avoid Myanmar's government-owned hotels should stay clear of the Annawa Guest House, high on a ridge near Theindawgyi Paya.

### Eating

Seafood is abundant and inexpensive. One local speciality is *kat gyi kai* (scissor-cut noodles): wheat noodles that have been cut into short strips and stir-fried with seafood and various spices. It's a delicious meal, usually eaten for breakfast or lunch.

**Meik Set** (U Myat Lay Rd, Kan Paya Quarter; ☎ 6am-5pm) An old wood-and-thatch teashop and restaurant with a dirt floor, this is one of the best places to try *kat gyi kai*. Other treats available here include *k'auk hnyin kin* (sticky rice steamed with coconut milk in little banana-leaf packets).

**Sakura Food & Drinks** (U Myat Lay Rd, Kan Paya Quarter; chicken dishes K2500) On the same street as Meik Set, Sakura has an extensive menu, though relatively pricey, of Southeast Asian

seafood dishes, Thai soups, burgers, omelettes and sandwiches. It's very popular with locals.

**Shwe Mon Family Restaurant** (☎ 7am-8pm) For traditional Bamar cuisine with local flair, try this place near the waterfront in the Seik Nge Quarter.

**Point Restaurant** (☎ 7am-9pm) On the same street as the Shwe Mon, closer to the harbour, this restaurant is not a bad place to down a beer or two and eat appetisers.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

In Myeik, the **YA representative** (☎ 21160; 115 Bogyoke Rd) has an office near Sibinthaya Zei (Municipal Market).

**Myanma Airways** (U Myat Lay Rd) flies from Yangon to Myeik daily for US\$100 (one hour and 10 minutes). There are three flights a week between Mawlamyine and Myeik, and Myeik and Kawthoung that cost US\$70 for each leg. The MA office is next door to Sakura Food & Drinks.

### BOAT

Both **Fortune Express** (☎ 51718) and **HiFi Express** (☎ 51500) have trips at 11am daily to Dawei (US\$20, 6½ hours) and at 8am daily to Kawthoung (US\$25, 6½ hours). For more details see p168.

MFSL sails, on average, twice a month between Yangon, Dawei, Myeik and Kawthoung, but travel is very slow and tickets hard to get.

### BUS & PICK-UPS

There are daily buses and pick-ups from Dawei, 249km north, but it's highly unlikely foreigners will be permitted to travel by bus to Myeik. Foreigners are similarly prohibited from travelling by road south to Kawthoung, though at the time of research road work was proceeding apace to link the two towns.

## KAWTHOUNG

ကော့ထွာင်း

If coming here from within Myanmar, you're likely to be startled by the wacky sight of foreigners in bathing shorts and bikinis, day-trippers on visa runs from Ranong, Thailand. Travelling between the two countries at this point in time feels like teleporting 50 years. At the southernmost tip of main-

land Myanmar – 800km from Yangon and 2000km from the country's northern tip – Kawthoung is only separated from Thailand by a broad estuary in the Pagyan River.

The main business in town is trade with Thailand, followed by fishing, rubber and cashews. Among the Burmese, Kawthoung is best known for producing some of the country's outstanding kickboxers. Most Kawthoung residents are bilingual in Thai and Burmese. Many residents born and raised in Kawthoung, especially members of the large Muslim community, also speak Pashu, a dialect that mixes the Thai, Malay and Burmese languages.

A few enterprising businesses hope to use Kawthoung as a base for boat trips to the hundreds of islands in the nearby Mergui archipelago. Although it's not far north of the region of Thailand devastated by the December 2004 tsunami, Kawthoung came away relatively unscathed; that is except for the tragic death of 20 people who were washed away after they gathered on a bridge to watch the wave come in. Any downturn in tourism to southern Thailand will undoubtedly impact on Kawthoung.

## Sights & Activities

Kawthoung's bustling **waterfront** is lined with teashops, moneychangers and shops selling Thai construction materials. Touts stroll up and down the pier area, arranging boat charters to Thailand for visitors and traders. Along one side of the harbour lies **Cape Bayinnaung** (Victoria Point) named after King Bayinnaung, a Bamar monarch who invaded Thailand several times between 1548 and 1569. A bronze statue of Bayinnaung outfitted in full battle gear and brandishing a sword pointed at Thailand – not exactly a welcoming sight for visiting Thais – stands at the crest of a hill on the cape.

At the top of the hill overlooking the harbour is the **Pyi Taw Aye Paya**. Unlike many other temples, you can walk inside and under the main stupa originally built in 1949 to a height of only 5m; it was later raised to its current stature of 21m. There are eight meditation niches that represent the eight days of the Buddhist week, and 14 Buddha images representing the styles seen in other Asian countries. A banyan tree brought from Sri Lanka provides the only shade.

About 5km north of town, the fishing village of **Thirimyaing Lan** is known for its hill-top Third Mile Pagoda, with good sea and island views. Thirimyaing Lan also boasts good local seafood restaurants along its waterfront. Another 11km on is **Paker Beach**, reportedly the best nearby mainland beach.

Locals cool off in the waters flowing from the surrounding mountains at the **Ma Li Won rock pools**. To reach this bathing site involves a 38km drive through the beautiful Ma Li Won Valley north of Kawthoung, dotted with plantations of sugar cane, palm oil, betel and cashew nut, rubber and coconuts.

## MERGUI (MYEIK) ARCHIPELAGO

မြိတ်ကျွန်းစု

Far beyond the value of any local product – rubber, marine products or swiftlets' nests – is the Mergui Archipelago's huge, almost completely untapped potential in the beach-going and ecotourism market. The locals say there are over 4000 islands in the archipelago, though British surveyors recognised only 804. Most are uninhabited, though a few are home to 'sea gypsies', a nomadic seafaring people who sail from island to island, stopping off to repair their boats or fishing nets. Known as *Salon* to the Burmese, *chao náam* to the Thais, *orang laut* or *orang basin* to the Malays and *Moken* or *Maw Ken* (sea-drowned) among themselves, this may have been the first ethnic group to have lived in what is today Myanmar. With stones tied to their waists as ballast, Moken divers can reportedly descend to a depth of 60m while breathing through an air hose held above the water's surface.

There's an ongoing dolphin research program in the islands, though tourists aren't allowed to visit. The government is building a bridge between Palau Ton Ton Island and the mainland. During low tide it's possible to swim or kayak into an enormous cave on Kyet Mauk Island where you see reef fish and snakes. On Lon Khuat Island, over 80 people live farming birds' nests from inside a huge cavern; a hole in the top of the cave lets in some sunlight, making for a breathtaking scene.

A **sea-gypsy festival** is held during the second week of February at Ma-Kyon-Galet village on a small island near Lampi.

There is no regular transport to any of these islands, except to the closest ones,

and boat charters are expensive. However, Moby Dick offers boat trips to Sa Lon and Palau Ton Ton Island (per person US\$32 including lunch).

Opposite Kawthoung's harbourfront the southernmost island in the Mergui Archipelago, **Mwedaw Kyun**, is mounted by two gilded *zedi*.

## LAMPI KYUN

Further offshore, Lampi Kyun, possibly one of the least disturbed island habitats in Southeast Asia, has been designated as a national park. Extending about 90km long and 8km wide, this rugged landmass features a forested, mountainous interior and two year-round rivers that flow into the sea from the island's western shore. Wildlife on the island includes white-bellied sea eagles, Brahminy kites, parakeets, hornbills, gibbons, crab-eating macaques, flying lemurs, civets, tigers, leopard cats, boar, barking deer, sea otters, crocodiles and fruit bats. Some naturalists speculate that the interior of Lampi might harbour hitherto-undiscovered animal species, or species thought to be extinct elsewhere in Southeast Asia, such as the Sumatran rhinoceros or kouprey. A few Phuket-based tour companies operate hiking and river excursions on Lampi – see p333 for a list of outfitters.

## Tours

**Moby Dick Tours** (in Yangon ☎ 01-441 0129, 01-202 064; www.mobydick-myanmar.com) This full-service travel agency is in an office attached to the restaurant of the same name on the jetty (see p168). Moby Dick rents bicycles, arranges overnight boat trips to offshore islands, day trips to the Malewon Valley, and importantly can assist with immigration matters. Showers are available for 20B.

**MT&K Tourism** (in Yangon ☎ 01-663 161; www.traveltomyanmar.com; 19 Yodaya Lane, Yangon) The MT&K company runs seven-day sea-kayaking trips out of Kawthoung.

## Sleeping

There are only three places in Kawthoung approved to accept foreigners, and none are especially good value. Note that Thai baht, kyat and US dollars are readily accepted. The electricity supply can be erratic.

**Kawthoung Motel** (☎ 51046; cnr Bogyoke Rd & Bosonpat St; r 800B; 📶) A 500m or so uphill

walk from the jetty, the four-storey Kawthoung Motel is the classier of the slim lot. Simple, comfortable, carpeted, double rooms have private cold-water shower and satellite TV. Breakfast in the attached nightclub is rudimentary.

**Honey Bear Hotel** (☎ 21352; r 800B; 📶) This hulking four-storey building takes up a good deal of the waterfront about 150m from the main jetty. Rooms are only passable, not especially uplifting, and the noisy generator can be a nuisance.

**Tanintharyi Guest House** (☎ 51784; Garden St; r K400; 📶) You get what you pay for at the Tanintharyi, the least expensive of Kawthoung accommodation options. On a street off Bogyoke Rd, an uphill walk from the jetty, this guesthouse has several large if bare all-concrete rooms with private bathroom. Less expensive rooms have fans.

**Andaman Club Resort** (in Ranong ☎ 077-830 463, in Bangkok ☎ 026-798 389; www.andamanclub.com; r US\$125-450) On nearby 700-hectare Thahtay Kyun, is a huge five-star hotel complex that sports a casino, duty-free shops and a Jack Nicklaus-designed 18-hole golf course. You can catch a five-minute boat ride out to the island from the jetty in Kawthoung for 200B.

## Eating

There are several teashops and restaurants along the waterfront and the block directly behind the Moby Dick Restaurant.

**Moby Dick Restaurant** (in Yangon ☎ 01-441 0129; Strand Rd; dishes 50B; 🕒 10am-11pm) Dominating the waterfront skyline, looking more like an ancient temple than a modern restaurant and travel agency, the Moby Dick rightfully draws in travellers who are in Myanmar for only a few minutes and locals relaxing with a cold beer. There's a few outdoor tables plus a bunch inside the modern and attractive dining room. The menu includes Thai, Chinese, Bamar and a good selection of seafood; the prawns are especially good.

**Smile Restaurant** (☎ 51691; Bogyoke Rd) This Chinese-run place is up the hill from the jetty near Kawthoung Motel. An English-language menu offers several seafood dishes, including a delicious crab curry.

**Li Li Flower Restaurant** (Bogyoke Rd) Attached to the Honey Bear Hotel is a place with air-con that serves Thai, Bamar and Chinese food along with well-chilled beer.

## Shopping

A huge **duty-free market**, built in a pseudo-Bamar style in 1997, sits right next to Kawthoung's harbour.

Just under the hill are **Super Market Cherry** (☎ 51067; 253 Pagoda Rd) and **Acme Fabric Centre** (AFC; ☎ 21193; 252 Pagoda Rd), two good shops to pick up high-quality handicrafts and lacquerware, though prices are higher than in Yangon.

## Getting There & Away & Around

It is now legal to travel between Dawei and Kawthoung by plane or boat, or between Yangon and Kawthoung by plane. Road travel to Kawthoung, though, is forbidden.

## AIR

Flights between Yangon and Kawthoung cost US\$145 on MA. All flights stop in Myeik and some in Mawlamyine as well. It's not unusual for flights to be cancelled because of bad weather. The airport is 11km from town.

## BICYCLE

Moby Dick rents bicycles for 50B per hour.

## BOAT

Both **Fortune Express** (☎ 51718) and **HiFi Express** (☎ 51500) run daily trips to/from Myeik (US\$25, 6½ hours). If Fortune leaves one day, HiFi leaves the next. From the outside the long and sleek boats appear very comfortable but, unfortunately, like most transport options in Myanmar the maximum seating capacity is used only as a suggested minimum. If you're only one or two you may be offered a spot in the pilot house. Otherwise you'll have to cram yourself into the packed cabin. Movies and videos are played throughout the journey. Bring your own food and water. Boats leave Kawthoung around 5.30am.

MFSL sails, on average, twice a month between Yangon, Dawei, Myeik and Kawthoung, but travel is very slow and unreliable. The boats carry up to 400 passengers and take a minimum of two days to reach Kawthoung from Yangon (cabin US\$150).

## BUS

In 1993 the government began constructing a new Myeik-Kawthoung road that passes through Tanintharyi and Bokpyin. The

## KAWTHOUNG BORDER CROSSING

This is an open border. Boats to Kawthoung (250B, 40 minutes) from Thailand leave the Saphan Pla pier in Ranong almost 10km away regularly from around 8am till 6pm. After getting your passport stamped by Thai immigration, board one of the boats near the immigration office and you'll be taken to the Myanmar immigration office. At this point you must inform immigration authorities whether you're a day visitor – in which case you must pay a fee of US\$5 for a permit. Apparently, this 'day pass' actually allows you to stay a total of two nights and three days in Myanmar, although most 'visitors' spend only a few minutes to an hour before heading back to Thailand with a new Thai visa. If you have a valid Myanmar visa in your passport (e-visas aren't recognized at this border), you'll be permitted to stay up to 28 days.

It's slightly more complicated if leaving Myanmar from Kawthoung. If you did not originally enter the country from Kawthoung and have not arranged a permit through a travel agency or immigration officials in Yangon, odds are you'll be asked to pay a visit to the local Myanmar Travels & Tours (MTT) office and pay a US\$25 fee. Apparently approval can only be granted with the Yangon office's permission, so expect the process to take 24 hours, requiring an overnight stay.

Ironically, if you have an expired visa authorities are even less enthusiastic about facilitating your speedy departure. The staff at Moby Dick Tours can help but the process is a headache involving multiple trips to the MTT office, a fee of US\$35, a complete itinerary of your travel in the country, and a signed statement attesting to the fact you are a tourist and not a political agitator.

Boats from Kawthoung can be hired for 150B from around 6am to 4.30pm, the time the Myanmar immigration office at the jetty closes.

486km road passes through some beautiful scenery, including over 300 rivers and streams. The first 60 or so kilometres of this road north from Kawthoung is possibly the best road you'll find in all of Myanmar and passes palm, rubber, cashew and durian plantations.

Buses run between Kawthoung and Myeik, but while road conditions are improving, robbery is not uncommon, hence foreigners are unlikely to be permitted to travel this route. At the time of research there was one bus every Tuesday (US\$10, eight hours) that left Kawthoung for Myeik.

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