



# Western Myanmar

Stretching 600km head to toe, slender Rakhaing (Arakan) State makes up the bulk of this enigmatic area of Myanmar that boasts both the country's finest midrange beach resort and the biggest ancient city apart from Bagan. Just inland are the way-remote, restricted-to-travellers areas of Chin State where locals are more linked with the peoples and traditions of neighbouring Bangladesh than with those of Myanmar. The whole area is cut off from the Ayeyarwady River and central plain of Myanmar by the impressive Rakhaing Yoma (Arakan Mountain Range), meaning limited road connections are rather adventurous to navigate. Historically, locals here have, unsurprisingly, looked more to the sea than inland to the Myanmar people. And it still feels a little that way.

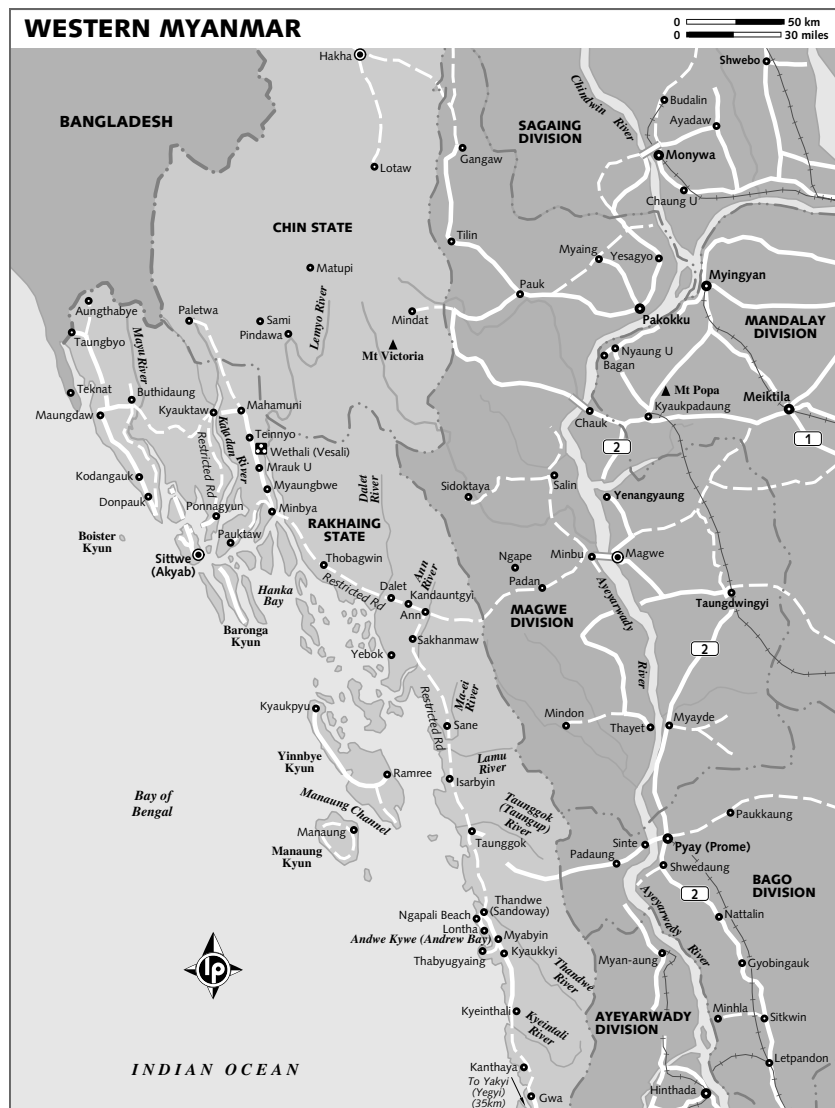
In Ngapali Beach increasing numbers of travellers are flying in to plop onto a quiet patch of the 3km stretch of palm-backed sand on the turquoise Bay of Bengal. Further north, reached via the port town of Sittwe, Mrauk U is the country's second-most-impressive archaeological site after Bagan. Here angular hillocks are dotted with half-a-millennium-old temples amid a sprawling thatched-hut village.

The Rakhaing people add a different slant to any Myanmar trip. Conversations are often more direct and open than elsewhere, and are usually peppered with endearing, ever-proud (sometimes exaggerated) claims of how their ancestors instilled the language and Buddhist religion in Myanmar. And then there's the food – just-caught squid or tiger prawns, plus spicier curries and noodles – which is just better than most of the food around the country.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- **Ngapali Beach** (p314) is Myanmar's best sun spot – a 3km palm-backed white-sand stretch facing the Bay of Bengal
- The food! Extra spice in the same ol' curries puts **Ngapali's fresh seafood** (p316) among Myanmar's tastiest meals
- The ancient Rakhaing capital of **Mrauk U** (p322) rewards equally as a peaceful village (with cool ruins) and a remarkable temple-filled site
- The **Mahamuni Paya** (p328) is the original site of the Mahamuni Buddha (now, er, in Mandalay)
- **Chin State** (p328) teems with birds, mountain climbs and traditional cultures – only parts of it have been opened up to foreigners





## PEOPLE

### The Rakhaing

Much of western Myanmar is home to the fascinating Rakhaing ethnic group, which is in itself a controversial topic – are the Rakhaing actually Bamar (Burmans) with Indian blood, Indians with Bamar characteristics or a separate race (as is claimed

by the Rohingya insurgents)? Although the first inhabitants of the region were a dark-skinned Negrito tribe known as the Bilu, later migrants from the eastern Indian subcontinent developed the first Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms in Myanmar before the first Christian millennium. These kingdoms flourished before the invasion of the

Tibeto-Burmans from the north and east in the 9th and 18th centuries. The current inhabitants of the state may thus be mixed descendants of all three groups: Bilu, Bengali and Bamar.

The Rakhaing proudly speak ‘Arakan’, a language they claim birthed Bamar (and is certainly related). Supposedly, the study of ‘Arakan script’ has been made illegal by a government keen to stress a Bamar line.

## The Rohingya

The Burmese government denies the existence of a Rohingya minority, a group of around one million people who distinguish themselves from the Rakhaing majority by their Islamic faith. Many Rakhaing Muslims – Rohingya as they prefer to be called – have fled to neighbouring Bangladesh and India to escape Bamar persecution. In recent years some have taken up arms, though there are no reports of skirmishes with the government. Reportedly the Rohingya must apply for permission to travel – even to visit the next village. In the past couple of decades about half a million Rohingya fled to Bangladesh, though by the mid-1990s half that many were repatriated to Myanmar following agreements between Yangon (Rangoon) and Dhaka.

## The Chin

In hilly and sparsely populated Chin State, the people and culture exhibit a mixture of native, Bengali and Indian influences similar to that found among the Rakhaing, with a much lower Burman presence. As in Rakhaing State, there have been clear governmental efforts in recent years to promote Burmese culture at the expense of Chin culture, and many Chin have fled west to Bangladesh and India.

Of Tibeto-Burman ancestry, the Chin people call themselves Zo-mi or Lai-mi (both terms mean ‘mountain people’), and share a culture, food and language with the Zo of the adjacent state of Mizoram in India. Outsiders name the different subgroups around the state according to the district in which they live, eg Tidam Chin, Falam Chin and Haka Chin.

Traditionally the Chin practise *swidden* (slash-and-burn) agriculture. They are also skilled hunters, and animal sacrifice plays a role in important animistic ceremonies.

Currently, Chin State has the largest proportion of animists of any state in Myanmar, but the Zo culture is fast disappearing in the face of Christian and Buddhist missionary influences. Some Chin follow the Pau Chin Hau religion, which is based on the worship of a deity called Pasiang and named after Pau China Hau, a spiritual leader from the Tidam District, who lived from 1859 to 1948. Hau also devised the written Chin language and is at least partly responsible for resurgent Chin nationalism.

The more traditional Zo or Chin groups live in the south near the Chin-Rakhaing border. Chin Christians from the north have bombarded the area with a project called Chin Christianity in One Century (CCOC), the goal of which is to convert all Chin to the ‘one true faith’. The government, on the other hand, has its own Buddhist missions in the area and is pushing against both the animists and the Christians in a battle for the Chin soul.

The Chin National Front, a nonviolent nationalist movement active on both sides of the India-Myanmar border, would like to create a sovereign ‘Chinland’ to be divided into the states of East Zoram (the current Chin State in Myanmar), West Zoram (part of southeastern Bangladesh plus Tripura in India), Central Zoram (the state of Mizoram in India) and North Zoram (Manipur in India). Rumours of activity spread during the research of this book in late 2004. This was a unified area before the British came along.

## CLIMATE

Those wishing to dodge the heat or rains outside the high season (about October to March) will find that downpours or jellyfish will discourage much fun at Ngapali Beach. Sittwe and Mrauk U receive more rain than most of the country – about 500cm per year. Sudden rainstorms during the monsoon (mid-May to mid-September) are dangerous if travelling by boat to Mrauk U, or between Sittwe and Taunggok. But rains do bring surfable waves to Ngapali Beach. Cyclones and tropical storms tend to occur just before and after the rainy season.

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Malaria precautions should be taken during monsoon season. Seven people were killed

when their boat was hit by a chance storm in late 2004, while heading from Sittwe to Mrauk U (see p322 for details).

## GETTING THERE & AROUND

Thandwe (Sandoway) is the major access point for visitors headed to Ngapali Beach. Most arrive by air from Yangon. Two long bus routes from Yangon go to Thandwe too, one via Pyay (Prome), and the other via Gwa. See p318 for more details.

Sittwe is the necessary access point to Mrauk U. It's possible to reach it by plane from Thandwe or Yangon (p321), or by boat from Taunggyok, near Thandwe (p318). Note that a Myanmar Airways flight from Thandwe to Sittwe crashed in January 1998, killing several passengers.

The overland routes that link up north and south Rakhaing State are all closed to foreigners.

## SOUTHERN RAKHAING

This part of slender Rakhaing State boasts some of Myanmar's best beaches and, unsurprisingly, sees most of the visitors who do make it to the region. It's the only part of the state with bus connections, in addition to air.

### NGAPALI BEACH

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Myanmar's most popular beach destination features a 3km palm-backed stretch of (for the time being) pretty quiet, pretty empty white-sand public beach. Named, some say, by a wayward Italian thinking of his Naples home, Ngapali has about 10 bungalow hotels, with traditional fishing villages in the area. Local life still shares the sand with (mostly European) foreign guests, as occasional ox carts meander by sunbathers.

Historically isolated – the bus trip here still remains the monster trip of Myanmar's most popular desolations – the nearby Thandwe airport has triggered a more midrange crowd streaming in. At research time, five new hotel projects (some joint ventures) were under way (these are listed on the map), and one-time cheapie guest-houses have scrubbed their rooms clean and upped their prices.

No topless or nude bathing is allowed. Surfing is possible during monsoon season (mid-May through to mid-September), when malaria precautions should be taken. Most hotels stay open all year, but it's quiet from April to October.

The December 2004 tsunami essentially had no impact here. The earthquake was felt, but the area suffered no injuries or damage, as only a very subtle change in the tide was noticed.

### Orientation

Ngapali Beach is a 3km stretch paralleled by an unnamed road, with hotels spread along its curve. Ngapali village is about 2km north. Most visitors arrive at the Thandwe airport, which is actually closer to Ngapali, about 5km north of Ngapali Beach.

### Information

Services are limited. A hotel is your best bet for help for traveller's info, money exchange or to locate medical help.

### INTERNET & TELEPHONE

Ngapali's limited Internet access can usually be accessed at several hotels; nonguests can get online at the Silver Beach Hotel (p316) and the Ngapali Beach Hotel (p316) for about K4000 per hour.

The government telephone centre (in Ngapali village) charges US\$5 for overseas calls. There are phone centres in the beach area at **Ngapali Beach Hotel** (per min US\$7) and **Silver Beach Hotel** (per min to North America/UK & Australia US\$5/4) The Silver Beach's phone stand is outside the hotel.

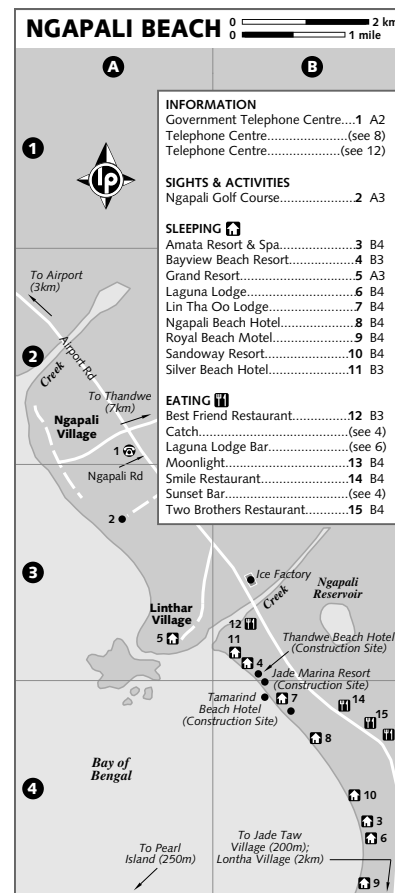
### Sights

#### FISHING VILLAGES

With a bicycle you can tour several of the **fishing villages**. Just north of Ngapali Beach are the small villages of **Linthar** and (further north, at the turnoff to Thandwe) **Ngapali**. South of the hotels, and easily reached barefoot by the beach, is the more interesting village of **Jade Taw**, where you'll see fish drying on bamboo mats.

Even further south is the bigger village of **Lontha** and an inlet of the same name, backed by a sweeping curve of mangrove and sand facing south. It's prettiest at high tide.

On a bayside hill east of Lontha is a modest white **stupa** with coloured bulbs attached



to it. It's worth seeing for its glorious panoramic views – and for the adventure to reach it. To get there, turn left at the town junction (near the market and where Thandwe-bound pick-ups await their turn). The road parallels the boat-filled bay and quickly degenerates into a path too sandy and rocky to ride on; if on a bike, leave it with a local or walk it. About five minutes or so after passing a rickety bridge, you reach the hill steps. It's about a 15-minute walk up the hill to the stupa.

### Activities

Four-hour **snorkelling trips** (4-5 people incl boat, mask & snorkel US\$12-15) usually go at 7am or 8am to catch the clearest water. Most trips take in a few spots around (private) 'Pearl

Island' off the south end of the beach. Coral's not super – there are some towering cones to swim around – but there's plenty of bright red and blue fish to follow. About anyone you ask can help arrange a trip.

Another boat trip most hotels arrange is to **Pirate Beach** (US\$17 to US\$20), a full-day trip to an isolated beach an hour south; trips should include a BBQ lunch here. It's not an island, but it can't be reached by land (easily), so it feels like one.

**Ngapali Golf Course** (green fee US\$5) is a nine-hole course a couple of kilometres north of the beach. Hire clubs are available.

### Sleeping

Rooms over US\$100 are included in the Top End section. Accommodation is open all year unless otherwise noted. A couple of former cheapies have been knocked down to make way for new resorts. At budget or midrange hotels, electricity runs from 6pm to midnight (usually) unless you spring for rooms with generators.

### BUDGET

**Grand Resort** (s/d US\$6/10) Facing Ngapali Beach from a rocky stretch of beach at the north end, the rather rough Grand Resort is not the most desirable budget sleep in Myanmar (and calling it a 'resort' is a real stretch), but it gets you on the water cheaply. A sign in Lontha village, north of the beach, leads a few hundred metres south from the main road. Its four rooms have concrete floors, mattresses on the floor, a rickety fan that runs for a few hours, and an OK bathroom attached.

### MIDRANGE

**Lin Thar Oo Lodge** (☎ 42333, in Yangon ☎ 01-229 928; www.lintharoo-ngapali.com; s US\$15-30, d US\$20-35; 🚽) This 300m strip of 42 bungalows towards the northern end of the bay has a long, shaded deck outside and a great scene. Superior bungalows have air con, hot water and satellite TV; standards come with cold water and no TV. Electricity runs from 1pm to 3pm and from 5pm to 10pm or so. This used to be a golden cheapie; rates have risen, though room conditions (clean and simple, but showing some wear) haven't always gone up with the hike (yet).

**Royal Beach Motel** (☎ 42411, in Yangon ☎ 01-243 880; royalngapali@myanmar.com.mm; r US\$15-40; 🚽)

An excellent midranger on the beach's south end (just before the fishing village starts), the Royal has five price ranges for rooms in its super-comfy, shady and more compact complex. All rooms have wood floors and mosquito nets, and include breakfast alfresco in the restaurant bar. A small forest of palms separates the rooms from the beach. The two highest priced rooms (US\$35 and US\$40) come with 24-hour power and air con. Staff members bring buckets of hot water if you don't want your shower cold.

**Laguna Lodge** (☎ 43122, in Yangon ☎ 01-501 123; r US\$45-70) Ngapali's smallest accommodation is this quiet, small bungalow with four rooms upstairs; the two US\$70 rooms (and probably the only worthwhile options) face the water, with big, creaking wood floors and shared balcony. It's open from mid-October to May.

**Silver Beach Hotel** (in Yangon ☎ 01-381 898; sbh01@goldenbrothers.com.mm; bungalow s US\$55-85, d US\$65-95; ☎ ☎) At the beach's north end, the Silver's stylish bungalows have mini-bar, satellite TV and hot shower. The lobby has a small library and Internet (per hour K4000), which is often out. The private bungalows, opened in 2003, are a few notches up in comfort, with back patios facing the water, hardwood floors and art details on the walls. The duplex bungalows include front patio and are set around a lawn.

## TOP END

These hotels are designed to compete as 'international resorts' with the best in Thailand. Most need to be booked way in advance. At least five new ones were in the works at research time; see the map for locations.

**Bayview Beach Resort** (☎ 20188, in Yangon ☎ 01-504 471; www.bayview-myanmar.com; r US\$155, in the rainy season US\$60; ☎ ☎ ☎) This luxurious German-Burmese joint venture occupies a nice trip of beach, with a rare beach bar, a spa, a shop and a restaurant. Swankish bungalows are filled mostly with package tourists (many Germans and Austrians); you'll need to reserve by April for a room in winter. Garden-view bungalows have doubles and triples; beachfront ones are doubles only. Activities include windsurfing, kayaking and catamaraning.

**Sandoway Resort** (☎ 42244, in Yangon ☎ 01-296 987; www.sandowayresort.com; cottages s US\$170-260, d US\$180-270, villas s US\$260-330, d US\$270-340; ☎ ☎)

Lushly shaded in palms, with evocative walkways leading past gardens and ponds, this Italian-Burmese joint venture is one part villa, one part cottage 'resort'. Cottages are two storeys, with rich dark woods, airy loft beds with resting area, and a view over the water. Bathrooms have clear roofs. Two-floor villas follow the same plan, but are a couple of notches more luxurious. Rates from 22 December to 15 January rise by up to US\$90, and fall by as much as US\$50 in October, April and May. The new swimming pool and library should be ready before you arrive. The restaurant has an Italian chef.

**Amata Resort & Spa** (☎ 42177, in Yangon ☎ 01-542 535; www.amataresort.com; r US\$120, ste US\$140, cabanas cottage/sea-view US\$180/420; ☎ ☎ ☎) This swish complex of two-storey cabanas (the cottage is a steal compared to the sea-view cost) is reached by a long open-air hallway and pool sandwiched between the bar and beach. Rooms are on the ground floor (suite above) in the complex away from the water.

**Ngapali Beach Hotel** (☎ 42200, in Yangon ☎ 01-211 888; www.ngapalihotel.com; r US\$100-160; ☎ ☎) This former government-run hotel (leased to private operators since 1999) has nice bungalows with back patios facing one of Ngapali's longest (and calmest) stretches. But comfort-wise it's a bit out of its league compared to the others.

## Eating & Drinking

Cheap, fresh and plentiful, Ngapali's seafood ranks easily amongst Myanmar's best dining. The long lights that line the western horizon offshore at dusk much of the year aren't India's skyline but fishing boats with bright bulbs that are used to attract squid. Unsurprisingly, Ngapali restaurants cook a particularly mean squid, best when dunked in a spiced ginger-and-garlic sauce.

The government technically restricts bars (and therefore the sale of alcohol) on beach areas. Hotels, all of which have restaurants, often keep the drinks tucked away from the water.

## MAIN ROAD RESTAURANTS

A dozen take-your-pick open-air restaurants line the main road, with clusters grouped around most hotels. Each offers practically identical menus (posted in English) with practically identical prices. A

dish of crab, squid or barracuda runs about K2000, barbecued tiger prawn is K3500, and lobster is K9000 and up.

**Moonlight** (Ngapali Rd; ☎ 7.30am-10pm Oct-Apr) There's no prices on the menu, but the friendly English-speaking manager brings the Yangon hotel experience to a simple deck restaurant (rimmed by wagon wheels). Its barbecue squid (K2000) may be Ngapali's tastiest. Squid comes flattened as 'fillets' – not diced up – and barbecued.

Other very good choices:

**Best Friend Restaurant** (Ngapali Rd) One of a pack of eateries at the beach's north end.

**Smile Restaurant** (Ngapali Rd) Outside Ngapali Beach Restaurant.

**Two Brothers Restaurant** (Ngapali Rd) Outside Amata Resort & Spa.

The islet at the southern end of the beach has a small café you can wade to for tea, beer and potato chips; there's good shade at midday.

## HOTEL RESTAURANTS

Only hotel restaurants provide beachside eating. Most hotels have kitchens open to all. Here are a few.

**Bayview Beach Resort** (☎ 20188) This place has two restaurants. The Sunset Bar has US\$5 pizzas, noodle dishes and burgers. Happy hour runs from 6pm to 7pm (beers US\$1, cocktails US\$2). Its main restaurant, the Catch, serves seafood from US\$8 to US\$22.

**Amata Resort & Spa Restaurant** (☎ 7-10am, 11am-2pm & 6.30-10.30pm; pizzas & pastas US\$8-12, specialties US\$14-20) This hotel restaurant overlooks the pool and beach. On offer are a juicy beef tenderloin for US\$17, a big ice-cream assortment (US\$5) and real espresso (US\$3).

**Laguna Lodge Bar** (☎ 43122) Here you can get cocktails and fruit juices (including a rare carrot juice for K1000) on the sand.

## Getting There & Away

See p318 for information on buses and flight info to/from this region. Buses to Yangon, Pyaw and Gwa offer pick-up service at Ngapali Beach hotels. See p318 for information on the nearby boat service.

## Getting Around

A pick-up from Thandwe to Ngapali Beach and on to Linthar village (K200, one hour) runs frequently. Catch one in either direction

on the main road. Bicycles can be rented from most hotels for about K2000 per day.

## THANDWE

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Though it plays a tertiary fiddle to Ngapali in terms of travel appeal, 'Thandwe' (aka Sandoway or Thantwe) is what your air- or bus-ticket stub will read. Located about 10km inland to the northeast of Ngapali Beach, Thandwe is home to some 50,000 residents (30% of which are Muslim) and nicely fills a hilly valley with its low-key streets.

Thandwe has been a key Rakhaing centre for many centuries. When the British stationed a garrison here around the turn of the 20th century, they twisted the name into Sandoway.

## Sights

### THE MARKET & AROUND

Housed in a former British jail in the centre of town, the **Thandwe market** is where a handful of guests from upscale beach resorts on day trips go seeking a 'real deal market'. It is kinda real deal actually. Vendors sell medicinal herbs, clothes, textiles, some souvenirs, hardware and free-market consumer goods.

On its northern side, the Point is a friendly **art gallery** and **teashop** that hosted some free language courses for locals until it was shut down by the government in 2004; ask to see if things have changed if you want to volunteer.

Across the street on the north side is the **Suni Mosque**, Thandwe's largest of five.

### HILL PAGODAS

Three golden (and rhyming) **stupas** stand on hilltops at four points around Thandwe. None are spectacular in themselves, but each offers excellent viewpoints of the town's tin roofs peeking out of a sea of palms and hills leading in east and west. It's worth visiting at least one.

The tallest, **Nandaw Paya**, 1.5km west of the market, was supposedly erected in 761 by King Minbra to enshrine a piece of a rib of the Buddha. The long shrine facing the stupa to the south houses some nice wood-carving reliefs of Buddha's life. Most visitors skip the overgrown steps up and walk up the hill-encircling road that starts on the hill's northeast side.

Just east of town, right across a small river about 1km from the market, the **Sandaw Paya** was supposedly built in 784 by Rakhaing king Minyokin to house a Buddha hair, and was rebuilt by the Burmese in 1876.

Across the river north (past the bus station and east on a stone road about 2km from the market), the **Andaw Paya** is the lowest, but has revealing looks at the river's fork from the hills east. It claims to house a Buddha molar relic and dates from 763.

You can get a trishaw to take you to all three for K2000 or so.

### Sleeping & Eating

Thandwe has no licensed places to stay. You can find some noodles around the market, and a couple of rice-'n'-curry restaurants on sidestreets a block north and south.

### Getting There & Away

#### AIR

**Thandwe airport** (☎ 42611) is closer to Ngapali village, about 3km north of the crossroads between Ngapali Beach, Thandwe and the airport. Hotel buses meet planes offering free transport to Ngapali Beach, reservations or not.

Yangon Airways (YA), Air Bagan and Air Mandalay (AM) serve Yangon (US\$72 to US\$80) daily, with several flights each week to Sittwe (US\$64 to US\$70). Flights to Heho (US\$110) or Nyaung U (US\$121) often go via Yangon. The connections run daily from October to April.

Government-run Myanmar Airways (MA) goes to Sittwe on Tuesday (US\$50) and Yangon (US\$65) daily.

#### BOAT

See Taunggok (right) for info on the boat service to Sittwe.

#### BUS

Only the heartiest travellers travel to/from here by bus. There are now two routes to/from Yangon: over mountains via Pyay, and a smoother way along the coast via Gwa. Both services leave at 3pm from the bus station in Thandwe, about 1km north of the market (just before the river). A ticket for either is K4500.

The 17- or 18-hour route between Thandwe and Yangon via Pyay (K4500, about 12 hours), run by **Aung Thit Sar** (☎ 43499), has

the reputation of being the hardest, bounciest, most stomach-churning trip in Myanmar; one traveller from Switzerland said, 'It was worse than training camp for the Swiss army.' One local complained about bags of dried fish filling the aisles and floors on a supposedly 'cargo-free bus' and left it: 'My daughter will vomit all night.' Some buses hand out vomit bags.

The roughest part, between Taunggok and Pyay, winds mercilessly in the Arakan Mountains at night, when most passengers close up the windows for the cold keeping the fish stench contained. But, really, it's not that bad. On the cargo bus, we found seats one to three (on the front row) and five (second row, with no seat before it) particularly good to keep an eye on the road. Also, a hearty dose of garlic beforehand seems to help neutralise the fish odour.

If you don't want to take the trip to Pyay at night, you can take a pick-up or bus to Taunggok, spend the night, and grab a morning bus to Pyay.

**Ye Aung Lan** (☎ 43500) sends buses to Yangon (K4500, about 17 or 18 hours) via Gwa. You can stop off at Kanthaya beach (K3000, six to seven hours).

#### PICK-UP

Pick-ups leave every 90 minutes from 6am to 6pm for Taunggok (K800/1200 in back/front seat, four or five hours) from a small station a couple of hundred metres north of the bus station (across the river).

### KANTHAYA

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This small Rakhaing coastal town, 130km south of Thandwe and 26km north of Gwa, is a struggling attempt at a new beach resort. Its isolation has meant few people make it here, and the beach doesn't have the reputation of Ngapali's. There are a couple of plain guesthouses that accept foreigners, if you're looking to break the journey between Thandwe and Yangon using the Gwa route.

### TAUNGGOK

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This surprisingly hopping lil' town 80km or so north of Thandwe is a stopping-off point for travellers between Pyay and Thandwe by bus, or for catching a boat to Sittwe.

If you're staying overnight, the **Royal Guest House** (☎ 043-61088; s/d K3000/6000) has clean basic rooms with private bathroom a couple of blocks from the bus station.

Fast boats leave from the Taunggok docks to Sittwe (US\$40, eight hours) on Monday, Wednesday and Saturday. Several buses leave for Pyay (K2500) around 4am and 7.30pm daily.

## NORTHERN RAKHAING

This area, brushing against the Bangladesh border, can be reached only by air or boat.

### SITTWE

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☎ 43 / pop 200,000

Propped impressively where the wide tidal Kaladan River mouth kisses the Bay of Bengal, Sittwe (also called Sittway) may sound like a quaint spot for water-watching strolls. For most visitors, it's just a hurry-and-leave transfer point for visitors heading to Mrauk U (p322). The fish market, friendly folk and

spicy dishes can easily fill the half-a-day you need on either side of a Mrauk U trip. The population is about 30% Muslim.

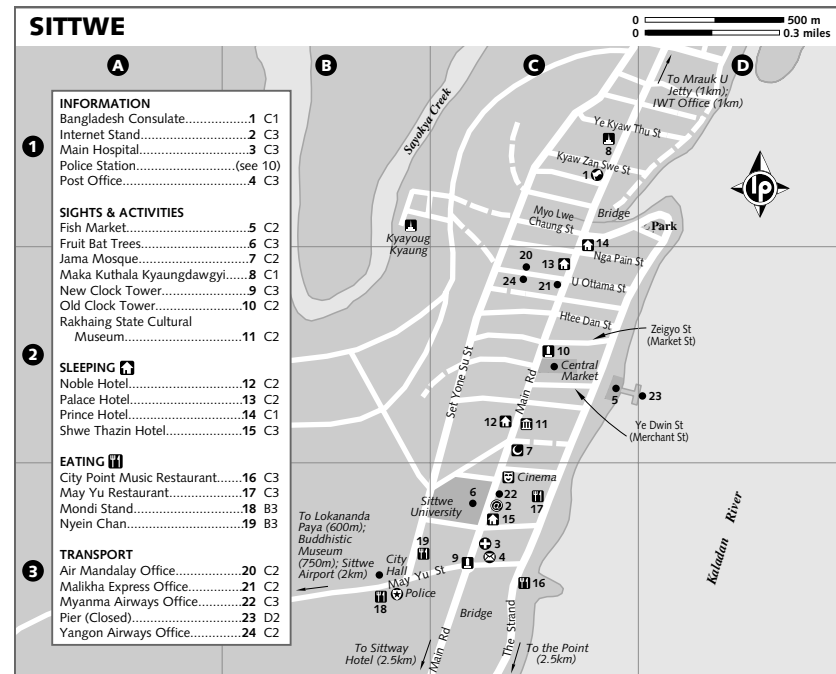
A port town of note for a couple of hundred years, and inhabited for a couple of thousand, Sittwe boomed when the British moved the Rakhaing capital here from Mrauk U in the early 19th century. Incoming wealth from cargo trade with Calcutta fuelled the construction of some fine colonial mansions, but much of the grace was lost under heavy WWII raids.

### Orientation & Information

Most of Sittwe's action runs along the almost north-south Main Rd, which parallels the Kaladan River. The airport is about 2.5km southwest of the centre; the main boat jetty is about 1km north.

The main hospital and post office are near the new clock tower, south of the centre (where you'll find the old steel clock tower, erected by the Dutch in the 18th century).

Internet is slow and expensive in Sittwe. At research time, there was a lone **Internet stand** (Main Rd; per hr K4500; ☎ 8am-9pm); it's



cheaper at the Noble Hotel or Shwe Thazin Hotel (opposite).

Outside the generator-run midrange hotels, electricity runs generally from 6pm to 11pm only.

## Sights

### WATERFRONT

Busy with to-and-fro boats, the Sittwe waterfront is not as grubby as many port towns can be. The riverside Strand leads about 2km south to a smashing location called the **Point** (admission K50, per bicycle K50), where you can sip on a beer or fresh coconut as the sun sets over the Bay of Bengal. An extortionate fee is tolled for cameras (K1000), digital cameras (K2000) and video cameras (K3000). Just west is a grey-brown sand **beach** that has a tricky undertow, where a few (often drunk) swimmers lose their lives each year.

The morning **fish market** kicks off around 6am and is worth popping by before your boat or plane leaves. On the stone pier, thousands of fresh fish are splashed on the stone pier, where fishers sell baskets full for US\$3 or US\$4.

### RAKHAING STATE CULTURAL MUSEUM

The government-run **Rakhaing State Cultural Museum** (Main Rd; admission US\$2; ☎ 10am-4pm Tue-Sat) is worth a look for its two floors of Rakhaing cultural goodies. On the ground floor, diagrams, artefacts and signs in English detail how the Rakhaing started their civilisation here around 3000 BC and about Buddha's purported visit in 554 BC. There's an imaginative rendering of Mrauk U in full steam that looks more Jules Verne, with housed archways connecting hilltops.

Upstairs are displays on local customs (eg models showing off some of the 64 Mrauk U royal hairstyles), festivals (including the *ra hta pwe*, a three-day tug of war) and watercolour drawings detailing key moves you may need if you ever undergo a game of traditional Rakhaing wrestling.

### BUDDHIST MUSEUMS

A life's work by Sittwe monk Bhaddanta Wannita, who spent 49 years collecting old coins and Buddha images from monasteries to protect them from thieves, has resulted (seemingly) in a little tug-of-war between his former monastery and a government-opened museum.

His former monastery, the **Maka Kuthala Kyaungdawgyi** (Large Monastery of Great Merit; Main Rd; admission free), is housed in (of all things) a grand, century-old British colonial mansion north of the centre. The modest museum upstairs contains cases of 'Union of Burma' notes, Buddhas and votives and coins from the Mrauk U and other ancient periods, plus a full case of more recent golf trophies.

A less satisfying collection, borrowed from some of Wannita's collection apparently, is at the **Buddhist Museum** (Baw Dhi St; admission free), an official-looking building made by the government in 1992. Inside are dozens of small ancient Buddha images and votive tablets.

The big pagoda between the museum and the centre is the **Lokananda Paya**, put up by General Than Shwe himself in 1997. On Saturday, soldiers shuffle to scrub clean the giant walkway around it. Just north is a small ordination hall, which houses the **Sachamuni image**, a 1.5m bronze Buddha pock-marked with mini-Buddhas. Apparently the image was found by Mrauk U fishers in recent years – previously thrown in the river to 'escape British destruction', one local said. It was housed at the Bandoola Monastery in Mrauk U (p326) until the government moved it here in 1997. It's (unrealistically) claimed to date from 24 BC.

### OTHER SIGHTS

In the centre of town, an old steel **clock tower**, topped with a weathervane, was erected by the Dutch in the 18th century. As a countersymbol of Myanmar nationalism, in 1991 the government built the more ornate (and working) clock tower, south on Main Rd. Hundreds of **fruit bats** slumber during the day in the trees around Sittwe University, then head off at dusk to island hop across the river.

Next to the Rakhaing State Cultural Museum, the **Jama Mosque** (1859) is easily Sittwe's most impressive building.

### Sleeping BUDGET

Both shoestring options could use a little more love. Electricity runs from 6pm to 11pm unless otherwise noted.

**Palace Hotel** (☎ 21657; Main Rd; s/d US\$5/10) Barebone and rather rundown, the Palace

has basic rooms with concrete floors, thin-mattress beds with mosquito net, and cold-water showers. It doesn't smell bad though. There's no breakfast. Electricity pumps life into *either* a fan or a fluorescent light bulb.

**Prince Hotel** (☎ 21395, in Yangon ☎ 01-286 701; www.mraukuprincehotel.com; Main Rd; s US\$5-15, d US\$10-20; ☎ ☎) It's another run-down guesthouse but a bit more traveller-focused, the Prince has some dingy rooms with shared bathroom on the ground floor, and bigger rooms (with low ceilings) on the top two floors. The most expensive one has air-con from 7pm to 11pm (it's an extra K1500 per hour to keep the generator running). Breakfast is served on a small 'veranda' or on the shaded patio. Ask to see a few rooms before choosing one.

### MIDRANGE

These more comfy options include round-the-clock generators.

**Noble Hotel** (☎ 23558; 45 Main Rd; noble@myanmar.com.mm; s/d US\$25/35; ☎ ☎) This newcomer sits in the centre across from the Rakhaing State Cultural Museum. Rooms are small, but clean and quite modern – with satellite TV, minibar and hot-water shower. Staff members help you get online (per hr K3000) or on a bike.

**Shwe Thazin Hotel** (☎ 23579; stz@myanmar.com.mm; 250 Main Rd; s/d US\$30/35; ☎ ☎) This new hotel offers the same amenities as the Noble, but with a super 7th-floor lookout deck (Sittwe's highest point, actually), good for glimpses of those fruit bats across Main Rd. Internet is K2500 per hour.

At research time, the Sittway Hotel, west of the Point, was still government run.

### Eating

The same old curries and rice dishes come with extra spice in Rakhaing State. Ask for local specialties at any restaurant and you'll usually get the tastiest stuff.

**Nyein Chan** (dishes K1000-2000; ☎ 6am-10pm) This friendly family Chinese/Burmese restaurant is one along a strip of Sittwe's most appealing eateries a few blocks inland from the new clock tower. One local specialty is the super Rakhaing-style curry soup packed with prawns (15 at last count) and spiced with chilli and ginger. Staff dutifully put on Myanmar national news at 9pm, but sometimes keep on the live audio feed of US pro wrestling.

**City Point Music Restaurant** (Strand; most dishes K1000-2000; ☎ 7am-11pm) The nicest restaurant on the river, City Point has a big grass lawn on the bank and a nightly one-guy music show. It's got a good location, but spray up before eating at dusk as mosquitos swarm.

*Mondi* is the Rakhaing-style fish noodle soup downed by locals for breakfast. (One local passionately explained its difference with the ubiquitous Burmese noodle soup: 'Mohinga has peanuts, *mondi* has chillis!') Sittwe's best – many claim – is served at the small **mondi stand** (bowl K150; ☎ 6am-6pm) facing the city hall on the road to the airport.

In the centre, you'll find a few basic restaurants on Main Rd. On the Strand, May Yu Restaurant is good for Chinese food (and beer).

### Getting There & Away

Overland routes between Sittwe and Yangon (as well as to Mrauk U) are presently closed to foreigners.

### AIR

Sittwe's airport is about 2.5km southwest of the centre. Taxis and trishaw drivers await flights.

In peak season (between October and April), daily flights go to/from Yangon and (at research time) there were flights five days a week to/from Thandwe.

### SPREADING THE COMMISSIONS

At research time a lone licensed guide was essentially running a monopoly on all independent travellers' commissions (paid behind the scenes from taxis, hotels, boats companies, airline offices and trishaw drivers you pay for) in Sittwe and Mrauk U. Many travellers have enjoyed his service – and he seems a nice, capable (if a little pushy) fellow.

But if you want more than one person to cash in on you, don't tell the first English-speaker you meet at the jetty or airport where you're staying. At the airport, avoid the extortionate US\$3 taxi ride 2km to the centre and walk 100m outside the airport gates and get a trishaw (about K1000). You could always ask to go to the Rakhaing State Culture Museum, then walk to your place alone. Drastic, but it might work.

**Air Mandalay** (☎ 21638; 🕒 9am-5pm) and **Yangon Airways** (☎ 24102; 🕒 9am-5pm) sell tickets for flights to Yangon (US\$105 one way) and to Thandwe (US\$75).

A bit cheaper, government-run **Myanmar Airways** (☎ 23157; Main Rd; 🕒 9am-5pm) has flights to Yangon (US\$90) and a Tuesday flight to Thandwe (US\$50).

## BOAT

### To Mrauk U

The only way to/from Mrauk U for foreigners, presently, is by boat. There are three speeds to go by.

Government-run Inland Water Transport (IWT) has an office 100m west of the Mrauk U jetty, though there's no need to buy tickets in advance. The two-level ferry chugs up the Kaladan River to Mrauk U (US\$4, six to seven hours) on Thursday, Saturday, Monday and/or Tuesday. It can be quite pleasant upstairs on a deckchair (K300) in good weather; there's a stall serving basic food.

On days it doesn't run, at least one 'private boat' (US\$10, four to five hours) leave at 7am and often at 2.30pm. Often these can be arranged any day. Many are small open-air boats with folding seats and a quicker motor than the IWT ferry.

**Nawarat Shwe Pyi Thar** (☎ 23159) runs a 'fast boat' (US\$20, three hours), leaving Sittwe at 2.30pm. These are enclosed 32-seater boats with small windows.

### To Taunggok & Baronga Islands

**Malikha Express** (☎ 23441; Main Rd; 🕒 9am-5pm) sells tickets for the fast boat (enclosed with windows) for Taunggok (US\$40, eight hours), which departs on Monday, Thursday and

Saturday. See Taunggok (p318) for schedule times to Sittwe.

The pier that ran boats to Taunggok and the nearby Baronga Islands, near the fish market, was destroyed by a storm during the 2004 rainy season. It's possible services will resume from there at some point in the future. Boats for Taunggok were leaving from the Mrauk U jetty at research time.

## Getting Around

Petrol is more expensive in Sittwe, evident in the US\$3 shared taxi fare to/from the airport. Trishaws await most planes (outside the airport gate) and all boats, and should cost K1000 or less to get anywhere. You can rent a bicycle from some hotels for about K3000 per day.

## MRAUK U

မြောက်ဦး

☎ 043

Simply the journey to the ancient Rakhaing capital of Mrauk U (Myohaung) – 65km by boat from Sittwe on an increasingly narrow waterway – gives a sense of time and place to this lovely area in the foothills of the Chin Mountains. Once in Mrauk U, its 150 or so temples stand atop, under and between rounded hillocks so curved and perfect they look like they're from a child's drawing.

For those who've visited Bagan, Mrauk U (roughly pronounced m'yawk-oo) is at once smaller – in temple size and scope – but more alive in the sense that thatched hut villages perforate the site, with refuse fires adding a smoky haze at dusk, as shepherds lead their animals home. Curiously, locals call out 'bye bye' and wave.

The town is intersected by several *chaung* (canals), the main source of transport and water. Much daily activity seems to be taken up with water trips. Instead of the usual clay pots or rectangular oil cans, Mrauk U residents carry shiny aluminium water pots (imported from India) on their hips.

Since 1996, the government has funded a massive restoration of Mrauk U. So far 37 temples have been restored of 145 planned. Not all visitors (or residents) share equal enthusiasm for how they look. One-time cracked stupas now look as if they're made of potters' clay.

One of the most interesting times to visit Mrauk U is during the huge weeklong *paya*

*pwe* (pagoda festival) held near Dukkanthein Paya (p325) in mid-May.

Some harmless characters are likely to find you to say 'hi'. There's a 'literature man' who makes a point to chat with all foreigners, and another guy who likes to murmur in various languages in your presence.

## History

Mrauk U served as the last great Rakhaing capital for 354 years from 1430 to 1784. In its heyday, it served as a free port trading with the Middle East, Asia, Holland, Portugal and Spain. A Dutch bloke who visited in the 16th century called it one of the richest cities in Asia, comparable to London or Amsterdam. The remains of a European quarter called Daingri Kan can still be seen just southwest of town.

The Mrauk U dynasty was much feared by the peoples of the Indian subcontinent and central Myanmar. Mrauk U kings even hired some Japanese samurai as bodyguards against assassination. At Mrauk U's peak, King Minbin (1531–53) created a naval fleet of some 10,000 war boats that dominated the Bay of Bengal and Gulf of Martaban. Many of Mrauk U's finest temples (Shitthaung, Dukkanthein, Lemyethna and Shwedaung) were built during his reign.

Mrauk U was a successor to two earlier kingdoms in the area: Dhanyawady (c 1st to 6th centuries AD) and Wethali (3rd to 10th centuries), the remains of which are still visible to the north. All three kingdoms blended elements of Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism with Hinduism and Islam. In the late 18th century, the Konbaung dynasty asserted its power over the region and Mrauk U was integrated into the Bamar kingdoms centred around Mandalay.

After the First Anglo-Burmese War of 1824–26, the British Raj annexed Rakhaing and set up its administrative headquarters in Sittwe, thus turning Mrauk U into a political backwater virtually overnight. The Burmese name gradually changed to Myohaung (Old City), though the Rakhaing continued to call the town Mrauk U.

## Orientation

Temples and town mingle together over a 7-sq-km or so area. The boat jetty is 1km south of the market and main strip of town; just east is the central Palace Site.

The temples are grouped in relation to the central Palace Site: the North Group is home to the most popular temples, the remote East Group has the finest engravings at Kothaung, and the South Group the highest point.

## Information

Foreigners must pay a once-only US\$10 fee to visit Mrauk U and any of its 157 known monuments. Attendants at several temples (irritatingly) light up old details with fluorescent lights and expect a K1000 'donation'; both fees should be paid at the Shittaung Paya (p324).

It may be possible to visit Chin state from here (see p329).

There are a couple of useful books on Rakhaing history and Mrauk U, but at research time you needed to buy them beforehand from Bagan Books in Yangon (p87). Tun Shwe Khine's *A Guide to Mrauk U* (1993) is more artful and better organised, but U Shwe Zan's *The Golden Mrauk U: An Ancient Capital of Rakhine* (1997) has more detail and is considered by some to be more accurate.

**Group Star Co-Op Ltd** (per hr K5000; 🕒 9am-5pm) offers Mrauk U's lone Internet connection.

## Sights

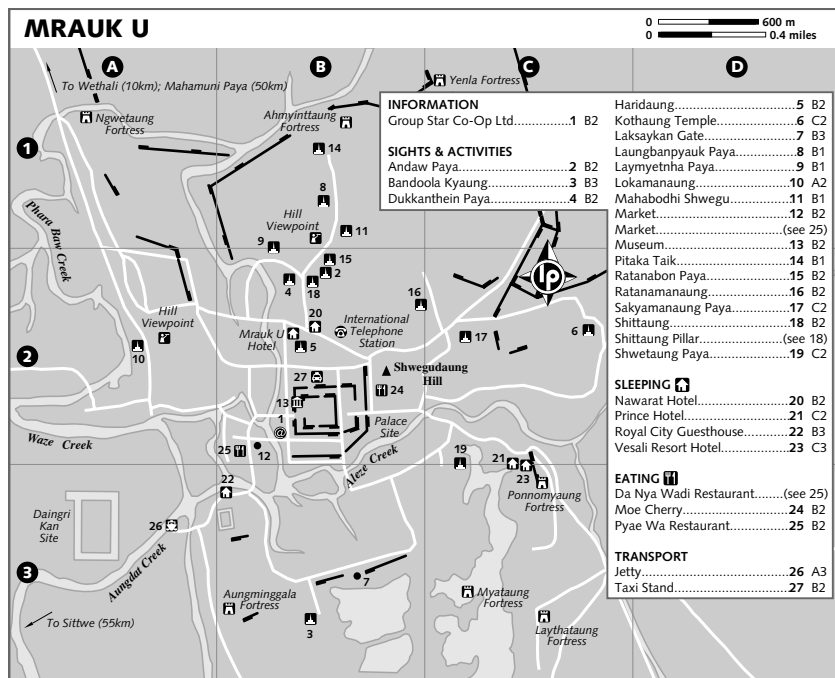
### PALACE SITE & AROUND

Just east of the main strip of Mrauk U village, the onetime **royal palace** of Mrauk U now is mostly crumbling walls (though the outer walls still stand 3.5m high) and gateways of sandstone blocks. It's a good place to get your bearings – with Harिताung just north, golden Shwetaung on the hill to the southeast.

According to the legend, King Minbun's astrologers advised a move here in 1429 after the palace at Launggret had been invaded by 'poisonous snakes and evil birds'. His representatives witnessed some strange things at this spot – an old guy playing a flute pointed to a cat-chasing rat and then a snake-biting frog – apparently suggesting its soil as being worthy of a king. Construction began in 1430 (though some sources say it didn't start until 1553); the palace layout is roughly based on the Mahamuni Paya (p328) to the north. In the centre of the site is a hole dug that served as an escape tunnel to Shittaung Paya.

## BOAT TRAGEDY

In November 2004, five Italian tourists and two locals were killed on a fast boat just outside Mrauk U when a cyclone overturned the boat. The boat had left Sittwe at 2.30pm and was struck after dark. Such storms in winter are very, very rare. Some locals suggested, however, the government ferry is 'bigger and safer' as it's less likely to overturn. Certainly the daytime trip offers higher visibility in case of an accident.



Just inside the western walls, the Department of Archaeology's **museum** (admission free; 11am-3pm Mon-Fri) includes a few rooms with some good pieces culled from area sites for safe-keeping. Included are Buddha images, inscribed stone slabs (a 15th-century one features ancient Arabic writing), reliefs with some original colour intact, cannons, Wethali-era coins and a helpful model of the Mrauk U site. Old photos on the walls include a before-restoration shot of Ratanabon's (opposite) crack. It's worth poring over the Shittaung pillar replica (see right), which is far easier to make out than the deteriorated original. Items are signed in English.

Off the road just north of the Palace walls, steps lead up to hilltop **Haridaung Paya** (built around 1750), a small white paya with particularly good westward views.

#### NORTH GROUP

For many, this area is the pick of the litter for Mrauk U, with all sites within walking distance. There are a couple of food stalls and a gift shop below the Shittaung.

#### Shittaung

The usual starting point is at Mrauk U's most complex **temple**, the Shittaung (Sit-taung in Burmese). King Minbin, the most powerful of Rakhaing's kings, built it in 1535. It's a frenzy of stupas of various sizes; some 26 surround a central stupa. Shittaung means 'Shrine of the 80,000 Images', a reference to the number of holy images inside (the actual tally is more like 84,000, though some have since been stolen). Thick walls, with windows and nooks, surround the two-tiered structure. A recent (exhaustive) restoration has sadly left much of the exterior looking more like moulding clay than an ancient ruin.

Outside the southwest entrance stairway, and inside a locked mint-green building, is the much-studied **Shittaung Pillar**, a 3m sandstone obelisk brought here from Wethali by King Minbin. Considered the 'oldest history book in Myanmar' (by the Rakhaing at least), three of the obelisk's four sides are inscribed in a faded Sanskrit. Little can be made out now, but there's a clearer replica at the palace museum, left.

The east-facing side likely dates from the end of the 5th century. The western face displays a list dating from the 8th century outlining Rakhaing kings from 638 BC to 729 AD (King Anandacandra). Lying on its back next to the pillar is a cracked, 3.6m-long sandstone slab featuring an engraved lotus flower (a Buddhist motif) growing from a wavy line of water (Brahman motif) and touching an intricately engraved *dhammachakka* (Wheel of the Law).

Inside the temple's **prayer hall** (where attendants collect the US\$10 entrance for Mrauk U and a K1000 'light' fee) you'll see several doors ahead. Two lead to passageways that encircle the main Buddha image in the cave hall (which is seen straight ahead).

The far left (southwest) doorway leads to the **outer chamber**, a 94m passageway with sandstone slabs cut into six tiers. Over 1000 sculptures (perhaps over-illuminated considering the windows) show a lot of detail of Rakhaing customs (eg traditionally dressed dancers, boxers, acrobats), beasts of burden, and hundreds of Jataka (scenes from Buddha's past 550 lives). At each corner are bigger figures, including the maker King Minbin and his queens at the southwest corner. The passage exits back into the prayer hall on the opposite side.

Next to the outer chamber entry is a coiling **inner chamber** leading past dozens of Buddha images in niches, passing a Buddha footprint where – it's said – Buddha walked during his post-enlightenment. Once you get to the dead end, double back to the hall, and see if you can feel the passageway becoming cooler. Some claim it does, symbolising the 'cooling effect' of Buddhist teachings.

Along the **outer walls**, several reliefs can be seen engraved (some are hard to reach); a few on the south side are rather pornographic.

#### Andaw Paya

Immediately northeast of Shittaung stands a smaller, eight-sided **monument** with a similar linear layout: rectangular prayer hall to the east, multispired sanctuary to the west. Sixteen *zedi* (stupas) are aligned in a square-cornered U-shape around the southern, northern and western platforms. As at Shittaung, small windows admit light and ventilation, but here the fluorescent glare is dimmer. Two concentric passageways are

lined with Buddha niches; in the centre of the shrine, an eight-sided pillar supports the roof.

The original construction of the shrine is ascribed to King Minhlaraza in 1521. King Minrazaygi then rebuilt Andaw in 1596 to enshrine a piece of the tooth relic supposedly brought from Sri Lanka by King Minbin in the early 16th century. Most likely the roofline *sikhara* date to his later reconstruction, as their slender, terraced style is very different from that found at Shittaung.

#### Ratanabon Paya

This massive **stupa** (sometimes called Yadanabon), just north of Andaw Paya, is ringed by 24 smaller stupas. It was apparently built by Queen Shin Htway in 1612. During WWII a bomb nailed it, but it had already been picked at by treasure hunters attracted by the name, which means 'accumulation of treasure'. Recent renovations repaired the enormous bomb-made crack and reinserted the tall *chattra* (spire).

#### Dukkanthein Paya

Across the road to the northwest of Shittaung, the **Dukkanthein** (the name loosely means 'ordination hall that spiritually reinforces the town') smacks of a bunker (with stupas) set impressively on its small bluff amid a green field. Wide stone steps lead up the south and east side; take the latter to reach the entrance.

Built by King Minphalaung in 1571 in particularly troubled times, Dukkanthein's

#### MRAUK U'S TOP FIVE VIEWS

Bagan boasts its sunsets, but Mrauk U's best vantage spots – great any time of the day – rival it, with smoky refuse fires adding a spookiness to the hills and temples. Here are five goodies:

- **Shwetaung Paya** (p326) is the highest in Mrauk U
- **Haridaung** (opposite) has great westward views
- Hilltop just north of **Ratanabon** (p326)
- **Ratanamanaung**, accessed from the road just west of Sakyamanaung (p326)
- Hill just east of **Lokamanaung**, 500m west of the Palace (Map p324)



interior features spiralling cloisters lined with images of Buddha and, as per astrologers' strategic advice to the king, of common people, landlords, governors, officials and (notably) their spouses, who famously show off all of Mrauk U's 64 traditional hairstyles. Along the way, stairs lead off to an ordination hall. The passageway nearly encircles the centre three times before reaching the sun-drenched Buddha image set above the inner stairway. A fine *paya pwe* is held near the *paya* in mid-May.

The **Laymyetnha Paya**, 100m north, looks a bit like a squashed-up version of the Dukkanthein, but was actually built 140 years earlier. Inside the unrenovated pagoda, a round passageway is lined with Buddha images.

### North of Ratanabon

Around the hillock northeast of the Ratanabon are a few worthy sites. The first is this squat hilltop **Mahabodhi Shwegu** (built in 1448), above on the right, with a narrow passageway leading to a 1.8m central Buddha and four Buddhas in niches. The best are the 280 Jataka scenes, acrobats, worshippers, and animal love scenes (!) engraved onto either side of the narrow, arched entry walls.

Back on the road, and 120m north, is the octagonal **Laungbanpyauk Paya**, a slightly leaning *zedi* built by King Minkhaungraza in 1525. Some locals call it the 'Plate Pagoda' as its outer wall is still adorned with glazed platelike tiles in bright colours. Encircling the *zedi* are 16 Buddhas in niches with still-surviving detail. Its restoration feels more authentic than some temples.

At the end of the road, 200m north, the compact, highly ornate **Pitaka Taik** is the last remaining of the 48 libraries that were in Mrauk U. It was built in 1591 by King Minphalaung as a repository for the Tripitaka (Three Baskets; the Buddhist canon), which was received from Sri Lanka in the 1640s. It's wee – only 4m long and 2.7m high. The Pitaka Taik is near the old city wall, which ran east–west just to the north.

### EAST GROUP

Starting east of the Palace walls, this area stretches a couple of kilometres east.

### Sakyamanaung Paya

Roughly 1km northeast of the Palace walls, and behind Shwegudaung hill, this graceful

*zedi* was erected in 1629 by King Thirithudhammaraza. At this later stage, stupas were built more vertically and ornate than before (an absorption of Bamar and Shan styles).

The lower half of the well-preserved 85m *zedi* features a multitiered octagonal shape as at Laungbanpyauk Paya, but beyond this the bells reverts to a layered circular shape mounted by a decorative *hti* (umbrellalike top). At the western gate are a couple of half-kneeling, painted giants.

To the west is Ratanamanaung, which offers fine views.

### Kothaung Temple

One of the Mrauk U highlights, this temple (undergoing heavy restoration at research time) is a couple of kilometres east of the Palace. It's not necessarily the easiest to find by bicycle; locals will point the way. At 69m by 75m, the massive structure is Mrauk U's largest. Built in 1553 by King Minbun's son, King Mintaikha, to outdo his pop's Shittaung by 10,000 images ('Kothaung' means 'Shrine of 90,000 Images'), much of it was found in fragments. Legends vary – that lightning destroyed it, jewel-seekers overturned walls, or that it was built with inferior stones by a superstitious king bent on beating a six-month timeline.

Most of the outer passageway is accessible. It's lined with thousands of bas-reliefs on the walls and Buddha images (some headless) – probably the most jaw-dropping detail of Mrauk U. Stairways lead up to a top terrace, where restoration is underway to rebuild the 108 stupas that once dotted the temple top.

### SOUTH GROUP

South of the palace site, and across the river, are evocative, easy-to-lose-your-way backlanes through thatched-hut villages and a host of pagodas. About 1km south, the **Lak-saykan Gate** leads to the eponymous lake, a source of clean water and pride among locals. To the west is the interesting hilltop **Bandoola Kyaung**, a monastery where many worshippers climb the steps to see several Buddha images in covered areas.

Southwest of the Palace, the **Shwetaung Paya** (Golden Hill Pagoda) is the highest in Mrauk U; you can see it for nearly half the trip from Sittwe. Built by King Minbin in 1553, it's accessed by a few trails largely lost

under thick vegetation (best not to return after dark). The views are worth the scrapes: a full panorama of the Chin Hills, Mrauk U and the river leading towards Sittwe.

### Festivals & Events

A huge weeklong *paya pwe* (pagoda festival) is held near Dukkanthein Paya in mid-May.

### Sleeping

All hotels offer free breakfast. Electricity runs from about 5pm to 10pm or 11pm, unless otherwise noted.

**Royal City Guest House** (☎ 23808-19; s/d with shared bathroom US\$5/7, r/bungalow US\$10/15) A couple of hundred metres towards town from the docks, this friendly guesthouse is right on the river and next to two loud timber yards that quieten after dark. Some staff members sing lovely Rakhaing folk songs to fill the day's space. New bungalows are across the road. The cheapest rooms are very basic and very small (bed, window, small table and the space to put 'em in). The shared bathroom has no roof (nice for moonlit tinkles), but is kept quite clean. All beds have mosquito nets.

**Vesali Resort Hotel** (in Yangon ☎ 01-526 593; myathiri@mptmail.net.mm; s/d US\$30/35) The super-inviting, relaxing bungalows at the Vesali come with dark, wooden floors and mosquito nets. Night-lights run all night, but fans and electricity run only from 5.30pm to 11pm or midnight. It's slightly removed from town, and the bulk of the temples. Sometimes discounts can be arranged if you book ahead, and the 18 rooms do fill in winter. Some package tourists.

**Nawarat Hotel** (☎ 24001, in Yangon ☎ 01-703 885; fax 01-661 159; s US\$30-36, d US\$40-48; 🍷) Opened in 2001, this hotel is enviously set in walking distance from the Shittaung temple, but is a tad overpriced. Its bungalow-style motel units are clean and comfy, if a bit generic. The higher priced rooms get you 24-hour electricity; otherwise power clicks off from 6pm to 6am. All rooms have hot-water tubs, satellite TV, minibar and a photo of elephants behind the twin or double beds. The free breakfast is served in a restaurant open all day. It's on the package-tour circuit too.

**Prince Hotel** (in Yangon ☎ 01-441 0150, 01-286 701; www.mraukuprincehotel.com; r US\$15-20) Next to the

Vesali Resort Hotel, this leafy complex of seven bungalows used to be dark and dreary, but fixed itself up (somewhat) in 2004. Bamboo details fill the rooms, and staff will bring a bucket of hot water to ease your cold-shower fears. The hotel also makes up a useful Mrauk U map, and can point you to a nearby trail up the hill to Shwetaung Paya.

The Mrauk U Hotel, across from the Nawarat, is government-run.

### Eating & Drinking

Mrauk U has few eating options. The Nawarat Hotel has a good restaurant.

**Moe Cherry** (dishes K1000-2000, beer K1500; 🍷 11am-midnight) This traveller-focused, two-storey restaurant, east of the palace walls, serves a few meals and what's on offer changes nightly (there's no menu; just ask). There's a deliciously Rakhaing edge to the chicken curry, prawn and veggie dishes. At last visit, the cauliflower dish was a knockout. The restaurant also arranges car service to the Mahamuni Paya or around the sites. In 1998 the restaurant was uprooted from its location on the east side of the palace – along with other businesses/homes – by the government.

**Pyae Wa Restaurant** (dishes from K600; 🍷 7am-9pm) The food's pretty good at this lively Chinese hole-in-the-wall across from the market, but coming here is more about taking in Mrauk U's main action pedalling by. Veggie noodles are K600; meat dishes keep in the gristle just like the locals prefer.

**Da Nya Wadi Restaurant** (dishes from K500, draught beer K350) It's another mostly Chinese restaurant near the market, but this one has white bunnies hopping on the concrete floor.

### Getting There & Away

For information on the difference between the boat services to Mrauk U, see Sittwe (p322). At the time of research, the government boat to Sittwe (US\$4, five hours) left at 8am on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday; on other days a private boat (US\$10, four hours) left at the same time. Fast boats (US\$15 or US\$20, three hours) usually depart at 7.30am. Arrive at least 30 minutes early to purchase a ticket for the government or private boat (and have dollars ready), or ask your hotel to help beforehand.

The Mrauk U jetty is about 1km south of the market; trishaws meet arriving boats.

## Getting Around

A horse cart around the temples costs about US\$8 to US\$10 per day. A jeep is about US\$20. Hotels can get you a bicycle for K2000 or K3000. There's a taxi stand on the north side of the palace.

## AROUND MRAUK U

It's not usually possible to visit the sites listed following by public transport. A jeep to both runs to about US\$25. Also see right for details of trips to nearby Chin State. (Note that details change frequently.)

## Wethali

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Almost 10km north of Mrauk U are the remains of the kingdom of Wethali (aka Vesali, or Waithali in local parlance). According to the Rakhaing chronicles, Wethali was founded in AD 327 by King Mahataing Chandra. Archaeologists believe that this kingdom lasted until the 8th century. Little remains to see of the oval-shaped city. Many of the hillocks around the area are actually stupas, which have become covered. The walls of the 500m by 300m central palace site are reasonably well-preserved; its prayer hall is now used as an irrigation tank during the rainy season.

The main attraction for visitors en route to Mahamuni Paya is the so-called **Great Image of Hsu Taung Pre** (Pye), home to a 5m Rakhaing-style sitting Buddha. It's said to be carved from a single piece of stone and date to AD 327 (most visitors argue the features look more modern). The highly revered image is swathed in embroidered red holy cloth and attended by monks and nuns, who live nearby. Just behind are remnants of the moat and stupa-created hill-ocks or two.

Regular transport is rare. It's possible to reach here by bicycle (take the sign that says 'VSL' and 'you are here' east from the main road).

## Mahamuni Paya

မဟာမုနိဘုရား

Many local Rakhaing recollect, with fresh, fiery passion, how the Bamar King Bodawpaya sent soldiers to dismantle and remove the Mahamuni Buddha in 1784. Originally housed here at the Mahamuni Paya, 40km north of Mrauk U and just north of the

former ancient capital of Dhanyawady, the image is one of the country's most famous and venerated. Still, it's fascinating to visit the site.

Some Rakhaing believe the image was cast when Buddha visited the area in 554 BC. Others say the Bamar unknowingly took a counterfeit back to Amarapura (it now resides in Mandalay; p234) and the true one rests under the banyan tree at the site's southwest corner. The Rakhaing don't let go easily.

The current Konbaung-style shrine dates from the 18th or 19th centuries, as earlier ones were destroyed by fire. The Mahamuni Buddha is gone, but 'Mahamuni's brother' is now one of three fine golden images resting inside. Outside, on the southeast wall, is a 5th-century AD slab depicting a Naga queen. Down the steps, near the south walls of the shrine, is a **museum** with a couple of dozen relics and engraved stones. An 18th-century bell, placed nearby to keep invaders at bay, mysteriously disappeared a few years ago.

The hilltop golden stupas visible (barely) to the east mark Salagiri Hill, the fabled site where Buddha visited in 554 BC. The area is closed to foreigners.

The easiest way to get to the site is by hired jeep (about US\$20 or US\$25 from Mrauk U, including a stop at Wethali). It takes about three hours from Mrauk U. Public transport is infrequent.

## CHIN STATE

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At research time, much of Chin State remained a question mark for travellers. Across the state line in southern Chin State, traditional cultures continue more richly than elsewhere in the state. Many women still have traditionally tattooed faces, though it's a fast-fading custom. At higher elevations, they wear thick, striped cotton blankets draped over the body, and copper and bronze ornaments. Among the Khamui, a subtribe that inhabits lower elevations of the area, unmarried women wear short skirts and little else. Chin men tend to wear simple Western-style dress. Paletwa village, just across the state line, is on the Kaladan River.

As in the past, the only way to visit Chin State is by seeking (expensive) permission from a Myanmar Travels & Tours (MTT) office. In addition to the following access point, Kalaymyo (in Sagaing Division) is home to many Chin people, and can be accessed without permission; see p262.

Before setting out, it's best to check with MTT in Yangon (p89) for the latest info.

See p313 for more on the Chin people.

## TOURS

### From Bagan or Yangon

At research time, the only way to visit Chin State was via a guided trip from Yangon or Bagan. The trips enter Chin State west of the Chauk Bridge, south of Bagan. Nights are spent in Mindat, and excursions include hikes up Mt Victoria (Natmataung), which is excellent for bird-watching, and 'tattooed women' villages. Generally trips last three days. MTT quote prices at US\$150 per day per person, which includes a guide, transport and accommodation in a simple guesthouse. It might be possible to negotiate prices.

You need to book the trip at least five days in advance. Apparently the MTT office in New Bagan (p275) can arrange tours, but it seemed a bit up-in-arms about it when last checked; more dependable is pre-arranging from the MTT office in Yangon (p89). To save money, ask to meet the guide from Bagan at a specified date.

### From Mrauk U

The one-time popular trips to Chin State from Mrauk U were shut down by the government in October 2004. Trips are likely to recommence. Rumours of why the shutdown occurred range from insurgents battling government troops to a potential entrepreneur negotiating to 'buy a village' to corner the tourist market. If tours should begin again, it's likely the government will play a more active (perhaps exploitive) role than previously, when a US\$30 permission fee, US\$25 boat fee and US\$3 for a horse cart allowed travellers access to Chin State for far less than trips organised from Bagan.

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