



# Mingalabar Myanmar

By Verne Maree

## -aweekend in Yangon

VERNE MAREE drops into Yangon for just long enough to get a taste of Myanmar's rapid resurgence.

It's an exciting time to be visiting Myanmar (Burma). In November 2015, Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy swept the board in the country's first democratic elections in half a century, winning 77 percent of the parliamentary seats.

A lot has changed in recent years. Though still effectively in charge, the military junta no longer makes it difficult for journalists to visit; getting my online visa (US\$50) for a press trip to Yangon was a breeze. Its biggest and commercially most important city, Yangon (Rangoon) used to be the only gateway to Myanmar; now you can fly direct to the cultural city of Mandalay or to the ancient heritage site of Bagan on a number of airlines.

### Five Fast Facts

- Burma (or Myanmar) was a British colony from 1852 to 1948. Its capital Yangon, called Rangoon by the British and laid out in grand colonial style, became the capital of British Burma around 1885; the city was renamed Yangon by the military junta in 1989.
- Many colonial buildings were destroyed before 1996, when a Yangon City Heritage List of 200 notable edifices was drawn up. Downtown Yangon still has the highest number of colonial period buildings in Southeast Asia.
- In 2006 the tyrannical junta declared and built a new capital city called Naypyidaw, 700km away. Still, Yangon is still the country's largest and most commercially important city; its population grew from about 1.3 million in 1950 to over 5 million today, and dramatic growth is projected as democracy takes hold.
- Known as "The Lady", Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of Myanmar's Independence hero General Aung San who was assassinated in 1947, was kept under house arrest by the ruling junta for most of the period 1989 to 2010.
- In the country's first democratic elections in 25 years, in November 2015, Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD party achieved a landslide victory.



## Downtown Yangon

Downtown Yangon comes as a pleasant surprise – especially as I’d heard it described as “a bit of a sh\*t-hole, five years ago”. Laid out in grand British colonial style – Burma was coloured pink on world maps from 1855 until it won its independence in 1948 – it boasts generous parks, wide roads and solid Victorian architecture.

At its centre is the expansive Mahabendula Park, now sporting a gigantic monolith to independence. Around the park is a phalanx of grand Victorian buildings, the majority in various stages of mouldering decline; happily, though, quite a number have been restored in recent years, often funded by international private enterprise, explains our guide, Aye.

From City Hall, built in 1927 and refurbished in fetching blue around 2006, we pick our way along pavements crowded with tiny culinary enterprises. One US dollar (around 1,000 kyat, pronounced “chat”) gets me five big, crispy samosas stuffed with fried

cabbage, onion and potato. Vendors perched scant centimetres above pavement level on tiny plastic chairs toss together salads of noodles, papaya, tofu, fresh coriander leaves and more, served with bowls of fish soup. Street-side teashops are everywhere, and popular as meeting places.

Pansodan Street is famous for its second-hand bookstalls – an eclectic mix, to say the least. The Telegraph Office is seemingly unchanged in a hundred years, except for the addition of a fax counter adjacent to the one where you would have sent – or perhaps still can send? – telegrams.

Where Pansodan and Strand Street intersect, a pedestrian bridge offers a splendid view of downtown to the right and the muddy Rangoon River to the left; behind us is the famous Strand Hotel (1896), said to be the most expensive accommodation in town.

No Asian city tour is complete without a couple of hours’ shopping, right? In Yangon, it has to be Bogyoke Market.





Silks, lacquer-ware and jewellery seem to be the main focuses, if you're in the mood. Today I'm not, and end up paying two vendors (of postcards and monk sketches, respectively) several dollars each to go away.

### Shwedagon Pagoda

This is by far the main thing to see and do in Yangon. However many impressive temples and other religious sites you've seen, this massive complex of Buddhist edifices is something to behold. It's best visited in the evening, as shoes are not allowed and the marble underfoot becomes unbearably hot during the day.

It's completely acceptable to join in the public devotions, and unexpectedly enjoyable to stroll around the pagoda to find your own corner of worship, based on the day of the week you were born on. (Wednesday, for some unexplained reason, has two corners, one for those born in the morning, the other for those born later in the day.)





Each day is associated with a zodiacal animal: tiger, lion, tusked and tusk-less elephant (for Wednesday children), rat and guinea-pig; for mine, Sunday, it's the mythical garuda. When you get to your corner, you're supposed to pour water over the Buddha statue there to bring you good luck.

### Where to Stay

Thirty minutes from the airport (depending on traffic) and 20 minutes from the downtown area, The Sedona Yangon is well located on lovely Inya Lake. The original 12-storey structure was the city's first five-star hotel; now called the Garden Wing, it's been supplemented by the new 29-floor Inya Wing, where I and the rest of our media group stay in the utmost comfort of Premier Deluxe Rooms. They come complete with L'Occitane toiletries, a fruit-bowl, cookies, a hoard of cashews, a complimentary minibar – and daily delivery of The Straits Times (Myanmar edition).

Superlatives abound – it's now the city's tallest and biggest hotel; it has the largest swimming pool and the biggest and best-equipped gym (one-year membership US\$3,600); it's also proud of having the fastest (and free) Wi-Fi connection.

Aimed largely at the business traveller, it has numerous meeting rooms, plus a ballroom. Happily, though, a Burmese character shines through the gloss, reflected in cultural motifs such as the patheingyi (umbrella) and the harp-like song used throughout the rooms and public spaces.







### Around Inya Lake

Pluck up the courage to cross the busy road to the narrow park that borders Inya Lake – far less hairy, though, than Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City’s terrifying thoroughfares – and you can join the morning throng of walkers and joggers on the path that runs around the largest natural lake in the country. Note the “No Sex” signs: useful reminders for students from the nearby university who might otherwise forget themselves.

Directly across the lake, you can see the red-roofed home of Aung San Suu Kyi. Leaving the lake path and walking along University Avenue’s rather erratic sidewalk, I come across The Lady’s big front gate, boldly marked with signs for her NDL party and touchingly topped with a sun-faded portrait of her famous father. Now and then, visitors in private cars and taxis stop informally on the roadside to pose for selfies or group photos.

Adjacent to the hotel is Yangon’s newest and largest mall, Myanmar Plaza, touted as the country’s “first international retail experience”. Though the bulk of its tenants – from Furla and Zegna to Nike, Mango, Gloria Jean, MarketPlace and Ya Kun Kaya Toast (really!) – have not yet opened for business at the time of my visit

(December 2015), locals are posing for selfies with a gaggle of Christmas trees in the winter-wonderland-themed lobby, and KFC upstairs is bursting at the seams with ecstatic finger-lickers.

### Eating and Drinking

Fast food is an exotic newcomer to Yangon: the KFC in Myanmar Plaza is only its second ever, and there’s a single big, shiny Pizza Hut downtown, but that’s it for now. (One of our group remarks on the general slimness of the local population; but with the current pace of development, that could change faster than it takes to say “Supersize me”.)

Mohingar is the national dish, and I’m told that people take it seriously – each region has its own version. Served at the breakfast buffet of the Sedona Hotel’s all-day restaurant, D’Cuisine, it’s thick, slight spicy and coconut-tinged fish soup ladled over fine rice noodles and hard-boiled egg and garnished with coriander. Utterly delicious!

We enjoy dinner there on our first night, too – a wide selection of Asian and Western dishes, from sashimi and other seafood to regional curries, an excellent





prime rib and a patisserie-rich dessert spread featuring the divinely decadent, rich and sweet umali, a sort of bread-and-butter pudding made from croissants instead of bread.

Choosing an outdoor table means you can also watch the outstanding cultural dance performance by a government-endorsed troupe. Though it has elements of Indian and Thai, Burmese dance is unique: it seems to defy gravity. Luckily, it's hard to discern any rhythmic patterns so one is unlikely to feel moved to join in, even after several cocktails.

Other in-hotel restaurants include Orzo, where people come for the pizza oven; for dim sum they go to Dufu.

Keen to try some traditional Burmese food, we head for the Green Elephant in University Avenue, a fan-cooled alfresco restaurant that's just five minutes from the hotel. We're parched after a full day of sightseeing, and the quart bottles of chilled Myanmar beer barely touch our sides. Though the diners are mainly tourists, the food is fresh and authentic: piping hot tempura-style vegetables, a light lentil soup, and tasty chicken and potato curry with side-dishes of steamed rice,

stir-fried morning glory (a green vegetable) and an utterly delicious Thai-like salad.

### For Next Time

We are so lucky to be able to explore a variety of Southeast Asian countries over a series of three- or four-night long weekends. Having had this first taste of Myanmar, I'm looking forward to flying to its cultural heart, Mandalay, and then sailing overnight up the Irrawaddy River to float high above Bagan's expansive stupa-dotted plains from the vantage of a hot-air balloon. It's high on the list.

#### Getting there:

November to February are when Myanmar is at its coolest and driest, and so the best time to visit. SilkAir's 12 noon flight from Changi takes three hours, getting you to Yangon airport at 1.30pm – there's a rather odd 90-minute time difference. We cleared immigration and customs fairly quickly, but hear that's not always the case. 🇲🇲

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