

Text & Photos:
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YANGON

Colonial heritage meets
Buddhist charm in this
former capital

VITALS

Name: Yangon (formerly Rangoon)
Address: Lower (South) Myanmar
Size: 600 square kilometres
Population: 5 million
Weather: Tropical monsoon
climate, with a rainy season from

April to November and a dry
season from December to March
Money: Kyat (pronounced "chat")
National Airline: Myanmar Airways
International (www.maiair.com)
Website: www.myanmar-tourism.com



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IN A NUTSHELL

The former capital of Myanmar remains the biggest and most vibrant city in the country. Yangon, the gateway to Myanmar, is where most international travellers get their first sample of Burmese culture. The cocktail of sights, sounds and tastes – as well as shopping and entertainment options – will not disappoint.

Yangon is a mix of British, Burmese, Chinese and Indian cultures. The city is known for its colonial architecture, which, although decaying, remains a unique example of a 19th-century British colonial capital. New high-rise buildings were built from the 1990s as the government began to allow private investment. However, Yangon continues to be a city of the past, as seen by its *longyi*-wearing pedestrians, street vendors, rickshaws and betel juice-stained streets.



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1. Twilight falls over Kandawgyi Lake as the Shwedagon Paya glitters in the distance.
2. *Yoke the* – the old Burmese marionette string-puppet – makes for a good souvenir.
3. One of many colonial buildings from a bygone era.
4. Catching a ride on a local bus in front of Theingyi Zei market clock tower.

GETTING THERE AND AROUND

Nearly all international flights arrive in Yangon. The most common route to Yangon is via Bangkok, though flights also link Yangon with Kolkata, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore and Kunming. Many nationalities require a visa to enter Myanmar. Visa requirements change regularly so check with your local Myanmar embassy or travel agent before setting off. Recently the government stopped issuing visas on arrival. Getting around is easy on foot. Or hop in one of the many battered taxis or rickshaws plying the streets.



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5 PLUSES

1. On the whole, a safe city for travellers. Crimes committed against tourists receive severe punishment.
2. The city is easy to navigate by foot as the streets are laid out in a simple grid system.
3. Endlessly exciting with a fascinating blend of cultures and tradition.

4. One of the few cities in Southeast Asia where its people still wear traditional clothes as part of their everyday dress. Check out the variety of *longyi*, which are woven pieces of cloth worn around the lower bodies of both men and women.
5. Burmese are among the most sincere and friendly people in Asia.



5 MINUSES

1. You can only buy kyats in Myanmar. There are virtually no ATMs and credit cards are not widely accepted. US dollars are preferred for exchange and money changers often only accept crisp, unfolded US dollars. Count your kyats carefully, as tourists have been shortchanged. Avoid changing money with street touts.
2. Watch where you put your feet. Walkways are often uneven with uncovered potholes.
3. If you must have mobile telephone access, you will need to purchase a CDMA mobile phone with a CDMA card. Text messages overseas are not possible.
4. In some places, the power comes and goes. It will be handy to carry a torch with you.
5. The government has a less-than-stellar human rights record. Avoid spending money with government-linked businesses.

10 MUST-SEES AND MUST-DOS

1. No visit to Yangon is complete without a trip to the Shwedagon Paya, the most sacred Buddhist site in Myanmar. The 2,500-year-old golden stupa bears the heart and soul of the country. It towers over Yangon, rising a hundred metres above its base and is covered with 60 tons of pure gold. The atmosphere is quiet and subdued as monks pad around the stupa barefoot. Ask a guide to show you how to make offerings to the animal shrine that guards your birthday. Or watch the many devotees praying and making offerings. It is a fascinating place to see the world go by. Later, as the sun sets, position yourself near the western gate (look for markers on the floor) to catch the red, green and orange sparkling reflections of the diamonds at the tip of the zedi.

2. Sule Paya was built originally to house a strand of Buddha's hair. Located downtown in the centre of busy road intersections, the 2,200-year-old stupa sits on a traffic island amidst modern commercial buildings and shops. This sums up Yangon perfectly – traditional Burmese living in a fast-changing environment.

3. Take a stroll through the pleasant grounds of Kandawgyi Lake and watch the logo of Myanmar Beer come to life. The Karaweik, a huge reproduction of the royal barge, sits on the eastern edge of the lake. It houses a restaurant that stages traditional dance performances. Don't forget to admire the view of the Shwedagon Paya in the distance from the lake's boardwalk as the sun sets.



1. A street stall owner performs his craft – the making of betel quids.
2. Interesting buys along Mahabandoola Road.
3. The gold-covered Shwedagon Paya is nearly a hundred metres tall.



4. Yangon was once the commercial and political hub of British Burma. Today the city has the largest number of colonial buildings in Southeast Asia. A walk around the downtown area, particularly Strand Road and Merchant Road, reveals a mixture of the renovated and refurbished – the Strand Hotel, the Australian and British embassies – as well as many crumbling and decrepit historic buildings.

5. If you're not splurging on a stay at The Strand, enjoy a drink at the hotel's bar or sip afternoon tea in the lobby lounge. A bygone era comes alive under the whirring ceiling fans above the black and white marble floors of the Victorian interior. A private collection of local art and antiques adds to the ambience.

6. Join the locals in any of the numerous tea shops across the city.

Eavesdrop on the gossip and lap up the various flavours of tea.

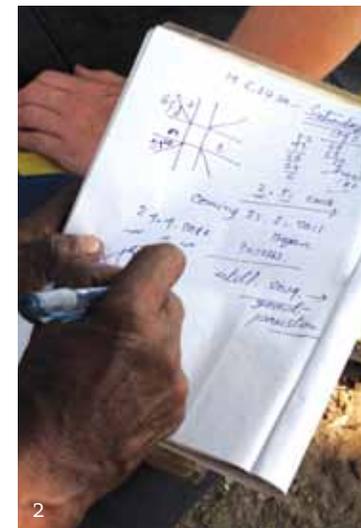
7. At Bogyoke Aung San Market, more than 2,000 shops come together under one roof. The market is an excellent source of Burmese souvenirs such as lacquerware, puppets, parasols, paintings and even the unique Burmese velvet sandals. Haggle away!



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8. Theingyi Zei market is the biggest in Yangon. Watch the locals shop for the freshest produce and taste some of the country's sweetest fruits.

9. Fortune-telling is popular in Myanmar. Pick one of the fortune-tellers sitting under the trees on the western side of Mahabandoola Garden, along Sule Paya Road. You can choose to have your fortune told via astrology, palmistry, numerology – or choose them all!



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10. Both Mahabandoola Road and Anawrahta Road are brimming with stalls selling all sorts of knickknacks, including betel quid. The Burmese chew the betel leaves, which are wrapped together with areca nut, lime and sometimes tobacco. The nut is itself a stimulant and promotes salivation. Hence the streets are stained with red juice spit! The sellers on Mahabandoola Road are more active in the day, while Anawrahta comes alive in the evening. It can be hectic as you jostle for space with the local shoppers, but it's all part of the fun.

5 ESSENTIAL EATS

1. Noodle fans will love the variety of noodle stalls in Yangon. Taste the difference between *meeshay*, *khao swe* and *monhinga* (Burmese national dish of rice vermicelli in peppery fish broth).

2. Munch on delightful snacks of samosas, deep-fried dough sticks and chickpea fritters at the streetside tea shops.

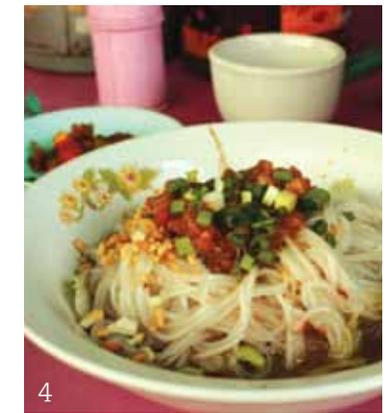
3. Tuck into tasty Indian food in the downtown area. Order a *thali* and savour the mouthwatering flavours of different dishes. Two good restaurants to try are Golden City Chetti and Nilar Briyani.

4. Zawgyi's Cafe is the place to enjoy a cool respite. Find a seat on the terrace and watch life go by as you escape the heat and hustle of downtown.

5. Beer stations are very atmospheric in the evenings. Sizzling grilled food on skewers paired with draught Myanmar beers complete the Burmese culinary experience.



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5 ESSENTIAL STAYS

1. **The Strand.** A classy heritage hotel built in 1901 by the Sarkies brothers, who also founded Raffles Hotel in Singapore. www.ghmluxuryhotels.com/Strand.htm

2. **Traders Hotel Yangon.** Business-class hotel in downtown Yangon. www.shangri-la.com/en/property/yangon/traders

3. **The Governor's Residence.** A renovated teak mansion set in a beautiful tranquil setting of lush gardens with ponds. www.governorsresidence.com

4. **Beautyland Hotel II.** A clean budget hotel that is centrally located. www.goldenlandpages.com/beauty

5. **The Classique Inn.** A well-maintained and pleasant family-run boutique in a quiet residential area. www.classique-inn.com AGP

1. A monk enjoys a moment of solitude at the Shwedagon Paya.
 2. A fortune teller predicts the future outside Mahabandoola Garden.
 3. Enjoy Myanmar – the local brew.
 4. It's yummy in Yangon with its many noodle dishes.