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CITY OF TEMPLES

BAGAN, MYANMAR

Text & Photos | DAMON EVANS & HUI NG

WITHOUT A DOUBT, THE HISTORIC TEMPLES of Bagan constitute Myanmar's greatest architectural site and one of the most significant in Southeast Asia. Countless ornate temples and stupas are begging to be explored over vast plains that formed part of the ancient kingdom of Bagan.

Over 4,000 of the temples were originally built by the kings of Bagan, mostly between the 11th and 13th centuries. Amazingly, more than 2,200 religious structures are still standing today, and there remain an equal number of ruins. The major surviving architectural form at Bagan is the temple, or *pahto*, which can take on a variety of forms. They were places of worship that included richly frescoed corridors with sacred shrines and highly revered Buddha images.

Whether you choose to get off the beaten track or only see the main temples, you're sure to be

touched by the religious fervour that resulted in this unique collection of structures built over a period spanning two and a half centuries. Many visitors choose to see the ruins from the comfort of one of the shaded and padded horsecarts.

An ideal option is spending a day touring the main sights by horsecart to get a sense of orientation and later venturing to more remote or lesser-known temples by bike. Bicycles, hired locally, are ideal for the more intrepid, but the undisputed king of tourist transportation in Bagan is the venerable hot air balloon. It's a breathtaking, though pricey, way of getting an overview of the site's size and sprawl.

Most temples that you'll come across during your exploration of Bagan are divided into three periods. The early period from 850 to 1120, influenced by

Mon and late Pyu architecture, is characterised by perforated windows and dimly lit interiors. During the middle period, 1100 to 1170, temples became larger and better lit by broader windows, with attention given to vertical proportions rather than horizontal lines. Later, between 1170 and 1300, more intricate pyramidal spires and adorning tile work were added to the buildings, with more Indian-influenced characteristics.

Ananda Pahto, Dhammayangyi Pahto, Pyathada Paya, Sulamani Pahto and Thatbyinnyu Pahto stand out as the most impressive structures. At just over 60 metres tall, the Thatbyinnyu is Bagan's tallest temple, while the Dhammayangyi is the widest. Aim to be at the impressive Pyathada Paya pagoda with its huge terrace as the sun begins to set.

The Ananda temple layout is in a cruciform with several terraces leading to a small pagoda at the top covered by an umbrella known as the *hti*, the topmost feature found in almost all Myanmar pagodas. Dubbed the "Westminster Abbey of Myanmar", the temple is revered as an architectural wonder fusing Mon and adopted Indian styles.

Sulamani Pahto is one of Bagan's most beautiful temples, with lush grounds hidden behind its



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GETTING THERE AND AROUND

There are daily flights to Bagan from Mandalay and Yangon. A bus from either city is also an option, while ferries are available from Mandalay. Bagan is made up of several areas, including Nyaung-U, Old Bagan and New Bagan; Nyaung-U is the main gateway. Once in Bagan, the best way to get around is by horsecart or bicycle.

WHEN TO GO

Bagan remains hot and dusty most times of the year. November to February is the most pleasant time to visit, when temperatures are a relatively cool 30°C during the day and a chilly 10°C at night. Pack a sweater for the evenings and early mornings.

ACCOMMODATION

A varied range of accommodation is available, from guesthouses to boutique hotels and luxury options. Try Golden Village Inn if you're on a tight budget. Bagan Princess Hotel (www.baganprincesshotel.com) is a good mid-range choice. For a little luxury, try Bagan Thiripyitsaya Sanctuary Resort (www.thiripyitsaya-resort.com).

FOOD

There are numerous possibilities, but Nyaung-U's Restaurant Row, a strip of atmospheric eateries, is where the action is. For Indian food in a romantic courtyard try Aroma 2, or catch the nightly puppet show at Pyi Wa as you dine under a stupa. Green Elephant in New Bagan offers nice views of the Irrawaddy River.

MONEY

The currency is the Myanmar kyat (MMK). As at May 2011, US\$1 = MMK 6.4; €1 = MMK 9.5.

surrounding walls. Entered from five doorways, this temple was built around 1181 and is a prime example of later, more sophisticated temple styles, with better internal lighting. There's also much to see inside. The interior passage around the base is painted with large, attractive frescoes, and the carved stucco on mouldings, pediments and pilasters represents some of the finest ornamental work you'll see at Bagan.

Myanmar may never present the traveller of conscience with a comfortable choice, and many will allow their political objections to prevent them from ever visiting. But even the most hard-nosed and morally correct will find Bagan's undeniable charms hard to resist.

1. Soak in the joys of Bagan in style by getting around by horsecart.
2. The temples are at their most alluring doused in the day's last rays of sunshine.