

MYANMAR

The Mandalay Loop

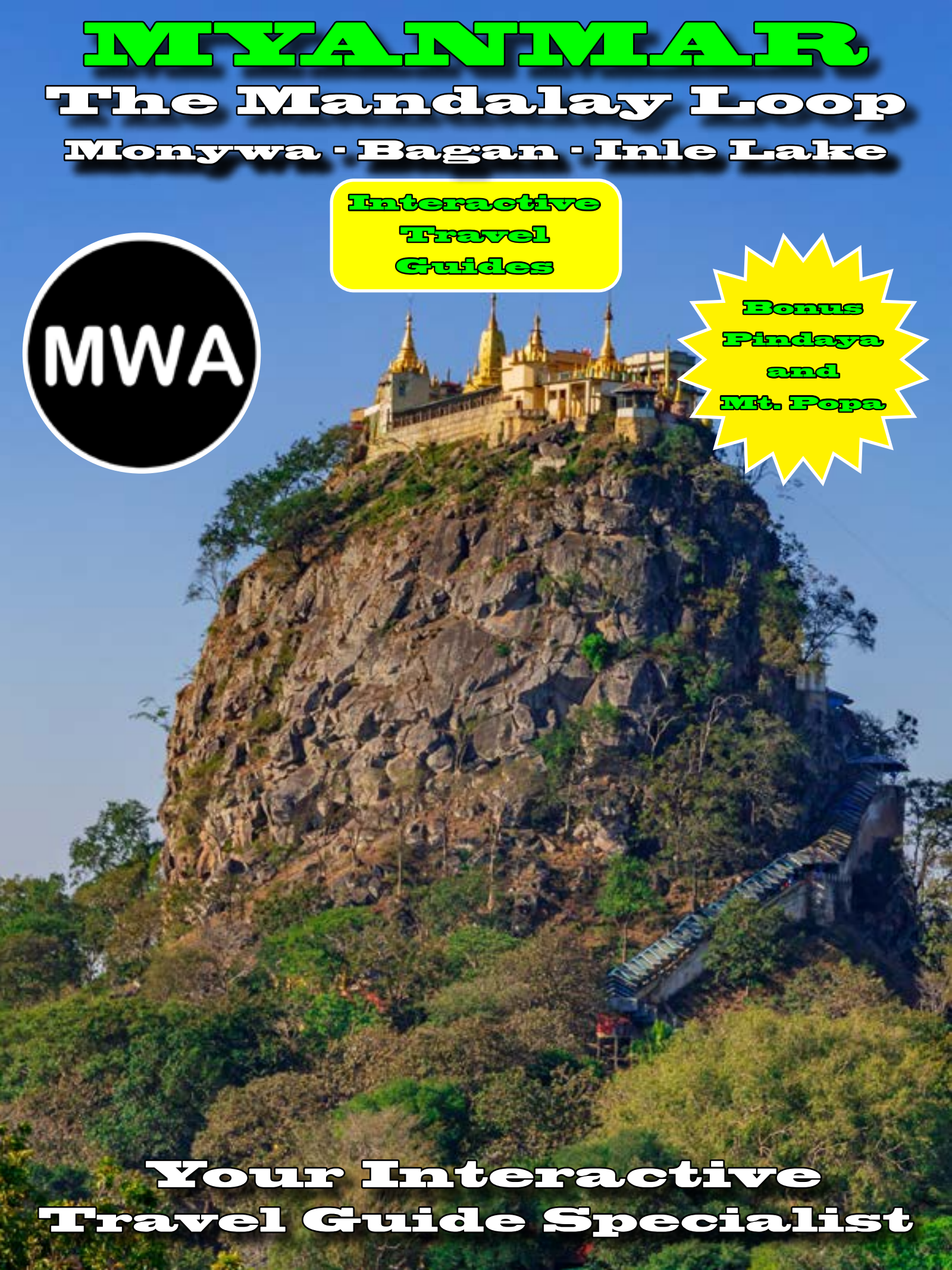
Monywa - Bagan - Inle Lake

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FOREWORD



Thanks for downloading this FREE interactive travel guide. You've made an excellent choice if you plan on **GETTING OFF THE BEATEN TRACK** in **MYANMAR**. Before you delve into the content of this travel guide, please take a few minutes to read this foreword. It outlines how to make the best use of the information contained within.

First-hand experience: This travel guide has been put together using first-hand experience gained from traveling to, and exploring, all the locations presented within. The information and photos featured in my travel guides, have been collated over years of putting boots on the ground. There is no second-hand information, or information which is plagiarized from other travel sources, within this guide. Every cave, waterfall, river, viewpoint, jungle trail, temple site, guesthouse and restaurant presented, or promoted, I have been to and seen and/or experienced myself.

Getting off the beaten track: The primary focus of my travel guides is **ADVENTURE TRAVEL** (and activities) to locations which are non-mainstream tourist destinations. As an example, there is no information for the mainstream tourist locations of Myanmar (except as transit hub's before heading off to a more remote location) listed in this travel guide. As such, the information in this guide is directed towards travelers (not tourists) who are keen

for a bit of adventure - caving, climbing, jungle trekking, kayaking - in an off the beaten track location, of South East Asia. If these types of activities aren't to your liking, then this travel guide won't be much use to you. There's no information in here about the party towns in South East Asia.

Budget travel: Knowing the importance of making the most of your hard-earned currency, my travel links ([12GO ASIA](#)) and accommodation links ([AGODA](#)) are predominantly budget oriented. They provide a range of options for getting to a central hub, or base, from which you can make your daily explorations.

Independent sightseeing: Instead of going on group tours, I strongly promote the idea of renting your own vehicle (car or motorbike) and venturing out yourself. To help you get to the exact location, there's always a [GOOGLE MAPS](#) link to show the route from a hub (hotel or guesthouse) to the sightseeing attraction. If there's a local tour operator offering excellent adventure type tours, or activities, I'll provide links to their website. A good example of a great adventure tour operator is [GREEN DISCOVERY LAOS](#), who offer excellent caving, kayaking and trekking tours throughout Laos.

The Table of Contents: This is page four of the travel guide and has a sequential list of sections, which you can go to directly by clicking on the **GREEN** numbered tab.

YouTube Links: These take you directly to my YouTube Vlog ([Megaworld Asia](#)) where you can see short, high quality travel videos of the numerous attractions listed in my travel guides. If you enjoy the videos, please hit the like button and don't forget to subscribe to see my upcoming adventures.

Your next adventure is just one click away

Safe travels,

MEGA

Mandalay Loop

Monywa - Bagan - Inle Lake

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**Your Next Adventure
Is Just One Click Away**

How To Use This Interactive Travel Guide

The Table Of Contents: To effortlessly move from the TOC to the page you want to view, simply click on the **page number**: 

YouTube Links: These will take you to a short highlights video, of the sightseeing attraction, in the section you're looking at:



Other Links: These take you to ancillary services such as recommended restaurants, or car and motorbike rental agencies, in the location you're traveling to:

ANCILLARY SERVICES

Travel Links: This takes you to **12GO ASIA**, an excellent travel group which provides a range of options for getting around the region:



The Table Of Contents: To move back to the TOC, click on the **yellow arrows**, at the bottom of each Page: 

Google Maps Links: These provide a route from a designated location (e.g., a hotel) to a particular sightseeing attraction:



Information Links: These links take you to information sites, such as Wikipedia or Wiki-voyage, to provide more in-depth info on a particular subject or location:



Accommodation Links: This takes you to the Agoda website to check accommodation availability and make bookings:



It's Time To Get Off The Beaten Track



THE MANDALAY LOOP TOUR SCHEDULE

About: The following tour is an extended loop trip through the north of Myanmar. It starts and finishes in Mandalay and takes in: **Mandalay, Monywa, Bagan, Mt. Popa, Pindaya and Inle Lake.**

My ten-day Mandalay loop tour is as follows:

Day 1: Travel from Bangkok to Mandalay with a regional airline;

Day 2: Mandalay - visit Grand Palace, Mandalay Hill, and Sanda Muni Pagoda;

Day 3: Travel from Mandalay to Monywa by local bus - visit Thanboddhay Pagoda, and Maha Bodhi Ta Htaung (world's largest standing Buddha);

Day 4: Monywa - visit Po Win Mountain and Maze Caves;

Day 5: Travel from Monywa to Bagan by local bus - visit an elevated temple for sunset views over Bagan;

Day 6: Bagan - visit an elevated temple for sunrise views over Bagan and visit various temple sites;

Day 7: Bagan - Do a day trip to Mount Popa (53 km away) using a taxi and driver;

Day 8: Travel from Bagan to Pindaya using local airline - flight from Bagan to He Hoe with a local airline, then taxi to Pindaya;

Day 9: Pindaya - visit Pindaya Cave complex and check out the 400 years old Pandanas Trees;

Day 10: Travel from Pindaya to Inle Lake using local taxi - take a boat trip across the lake for sightseeing at Shwe Inn Dein Pagoda;

Day 11: Travel from Pindaya to Bangkok, Via Mandalay - use local airlines to Mandalay, then regional carrier to Bangkok.

Getting to Mandalay: Generally, the most convenient place to get a flight from is Bangkok. Flight time from Bangkok to Mandalay is approximately 1.5 hours. There are daily departures, non-stop, with a number of regional airlines. **Click the link below to the available travel options from Bangkok to Mandalay:**



The Northeast corner of the Grand Palace

MANDALAY - GENERAL INFORMATION

Airport to town: Mandalay Airport is relatively small and sits well outside the city limits. Its approximately 40 km from downtown Mandalay with a run time of 50 - 60 minutes. A Minibus from the airport to downtown Mandalay is 4000 Kyats. Note: A private taxi is 15000 kyats. **Note: 1 US = 1640 Kyats.**

Currency use: The main foreign currencies used to exchange for Kyats are the US, the EURO, and the SGD (Singapore Dollar). **Note:** If you are bringing foreign cash, check it very carefully as the Burmese money changers, or hotels for that matter, will not accept any notes with rips, worn areas, and discoloration. Notes with a slight imperfection will be accepted at a reduced exchange rate. If you buy US in Thailand before coming to Burma, check all the notes before walking away from the money changer.

Recommended hotel in Mandalay: The NEW WAVE MANDALAY HOTEL is located nearby the grounds of the Grand Palace. A great uninterrupted view from the top floor bar looks out across the Grand Palace, and to Mandalay Hill beyond.

Click the link below to check room rates and availability at the New Wave Mandalay Hotel:



Recommended hostel in Mandalay: The DOWNTOWN MANDALAY HOSTEL is a popular choice for those looking for budget accommodation. Click the link below to check availability at the Downtown Mandalay Hostel:

DOWNTOWN MANDALAY HOSTEL

Where to eat: Not too far from the Royal Power Hotel is the Shan Ma Ma Myanmar Restaurant. It seems to be a popular spot for backpackers and travellers as the food is reasonably good and relatively low cost. A nice ambience with a street side setting. Click the link below for directions to the Shan Ma Ma:



The Shan Ma Ma Restaurant

MANDALAY SIGHTSEEING

Sightseeing in Mandalay: There are plenty of attractions within Mandalay. Getting around is fairly straight forward as the streets and roads are based on a grid system (much the same as in New York) and radiating out from the Grand Place, the central feature of Mandalay. There are other attractions outside the city limits (the U Bein Bridge at sunset being a favorite) but if you're stretched for time, as I was, then the two main attractions are the Grand Palace and Mandalay Hill.

The grand Palace: This is actually the old, historical walled city of Mandalay and is formed by one massive four sided fort, inside a protective moat. If you've been to Angkor Wat and been impressed by the size of that structure, and its encompassing Baray (moat), it's is small in comparison to the size of Grand Place's perimeter. Each side is a highly impressive 1.6 km in length. **Note:** The main entrance (only access point) is at the mid-point of the eastern wall.

Early morning walk: Try something different, as I did, and set out early on foot around the perimeter of the Grand palace to get a



Street scene

close up view of the locals out on the street selling their wares, or exercising in the cool morning air. Due to the fact the Mandalay New Wave Hotel was right across the road from the South Western corner of the Grand Palace, I decided to walk two sides of it to get to the base of Mandalay Hill. **Click the link below for directions from the Mandalay New Wave Hotel, to the base of Mandalay Hill:**



The view along the Eastern wall towards Mandalay Hill

MANDALAY SIGHTSEEING

Mandalay Hill: To the north of the Grand Palace is Mandalay Hill. This is probably the most popular attraction in Mandalay and seems to get a lot of sightseers for the sunset view out over the surrounding terrain. It sits, pretty much, near the north east corner of the Grand Palace and if you are coming up the eastern side you will have a clear view of the hill all the way.

The Base of the Hill: From the north east corner, cross the road and 200 meters further on you will be at the base of the hill. As with any major tourist attraction, in any part of the world, there is a melee of taxi's, touts, trinket sellers, and street side restaurants to be seen here. There is actually a large intersection formed by the junction three roads, with the hustle and bustle of vehicles (including horse and buggies) coming and going. On the left side, as you are facing the hill, is a large and gleaming Pagoda.

Getting to the top: To get to the top of the hill there are two options; go up in a taxi, or take the flight of stairs. Having done both it's a no-brainer, a taxi is the easy option. To avoid potential accidents on the narrow track,

the road up and down runs in one direction. Basically, you go up one side of the hill and down the other. Once you arrive at the congested parking area at the top you disembark, and then take an elevator the final twenty meters to the summit.

The Stairway: For those feeling active there's a stairway all the way to the very top. There are two starting points but the one at the TWO LIONS runs up at a fairly gradual rate, and takes in a number of small pagodas on the way.

Remove your shoes: It is a requirement for all visitors to remove their shoes before entering all Pagodas in Burma. If you walk up from the bottom (the Two Lions) you will be asked to take off your shoes at the very beginning. Meaning the entire walk to the top is done in bare feet.

Note: the stairways are fairly clean and smooth so there's issues with potential cuts and scrapes. As mentioned, it is a fairly lengthy hike but one of the benefits of doing it is you get see other smaller Pagodas on the way up which those going by taxi don't see.



The Two Lions entrance

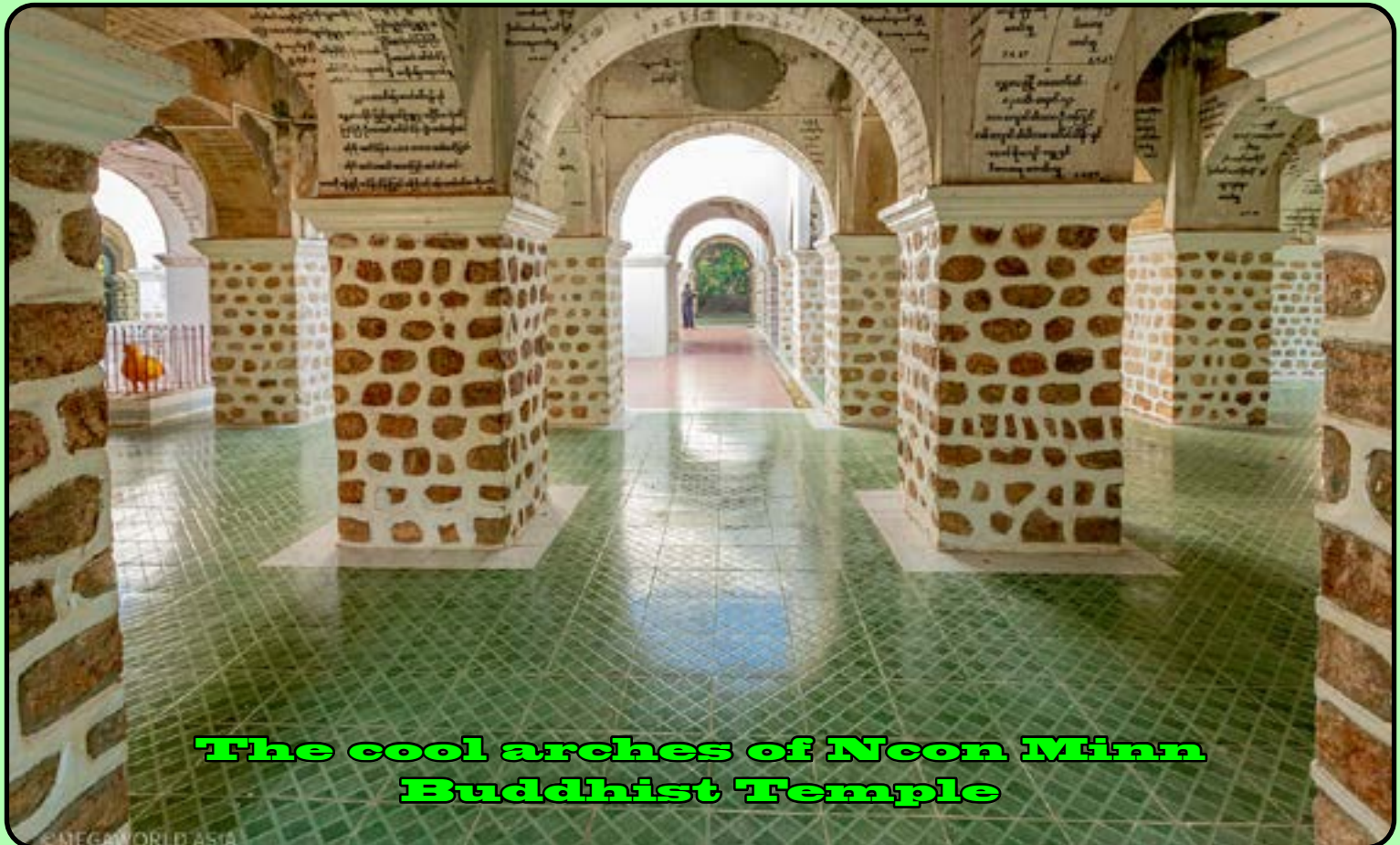
MANDALAY SIGHTSEEING

The Ascent to the Summit: There is well over 500 steps from the Two Lions Entrance to the summit. Having said that, it's still a relatively easy hike. On the way there's a number of interesting Pagoda's with some impressive internal features. The first one is the BYAR DEIK PYAE PAGODA which has a spectacular standing Buddha statue, with the right arm raised and pointing forward. Approximately 200 meters further along the stairway is the NCON MINN STUPA. The internal area features a multitude of brickwork arches, reminiscent of ancient Roman architecture. From here it's just a short distance to the summit.

At the summit: Entry price is 1000 kyats. After doing the walk to the summit a sensible option is to get a taxi truck back to the bottom. A fare for a ride in the back of a taxi truck is 1000 Kyats. One of the benefits of doing the trip to the summit in the morning, as opposed to the late afternoon is you'll have time to check out the other pagodas at the bottom of the hill.



Byar Deik Pyae Pagoda



The cool arches of Ncon Minn Buddhist Temple

MANDALAY SIGHTSEEING

Sunset on Mandalay Hill: Viewing the sunset from the summit of Mandalay Hill is probably the most popular tourist activity in Mandalay. I went a point of going in the morning and for the sunset to see what the contrast is between the two. Having done so I can quite confidently say where it's quiet and serene in the morning, it's chaotic and crowded in the late afternoon/early evening. The sunset, obviously, can only be viewed from one side of SU TAUNG PYAE PAGODA so getting your own little piece of the western perimeter wall is a priority if you want to get an uninterrupted view and/ or some good shots.

Arrive early: You'll need get there at least an hour before sunset to ensure you get a spot along the wall, otherwise you'll be standing behind others. To find out what time the sun sets, ask one of the locals or do a search on-line. Is it worth going up there? I would say yes but having ticked it off the bucket list, I won't be back.



Note: when you go up to the summit for the sunset, arrange to have your motor bike taxi, or taxi, standing by for you for the trip back down. You can negotiate a round trip fee before setting off from the bottom of the hill. As soon as the sun sinks beyond the horizon, clear off the viewing platform straight away because there's only one lift to the bottom and if you linger too long, the queue waiting to get down to the car park area is lengthy.



Sunset from the top of Mandalay Hill

MANDALAY SIGHTSEEING

Sanda Muni Pagoda: Another Pagoda which is well worth a look at is the Sanda Muni Pagoda, just across the road from the base of Mandalay Hill. The main feature of this site is it has hundreds of white topped, small stupas around a large central golden one. The importance of this Buddhist site is that it apparently has the world's biggest book. At the base of each stupa are three-sided alcoves housing inscribed stone tablets which, apparently, are individual pages of the book. For one reason or another, the Sanda Muni Pagoda is always far less crowded than the summit of Mandalay Hill.

No entry fee: There is also no entry fee. Leave your shoes at the gate and make the short walk to the central area, then climb a few steps up to the large elevated golden stupa. From this raised position you can look out over the white stupas and also see the temple on the summit of Mandalay Hill. **Click the link below for the location of Sanda Muni Pagoda:**



MANDALAY TO MONYWA

About: MONYWA is a less traveled destination in Northern Myanmar. It is located approximately 126 Km due west of Mandalay. It is generally considered an off the beaten track destination for travelers to Myanmar, as it is out of the way of the general route most (heading south to Bagan) people tend to take. Monywa's primary attractions are: the world's tallest, free standing Buddha statue; a pagoda with five hundred thousand Buddha images; and a mountain with more than seven hundred man-made caves carved into it.

Getting there: There is two options here, by bus and rail-car. However, due to the fact there's only one train departure per day to Monywa the most flexible option is by bus. A Mini-bus to Monywa costs 3000 Kyats and there are departures every hour from Mandalay Bus Station. The run time to Monywa is approximately 3 - 4 hours. **Note:** there is two bus stations in Mandalay, so be sure your taxi from your hotel understands you are getting a bus to Monywa. The Monywa bus departs from the THIRI MANDALAR HIGHWAY Bus Station

Local transport: The busses (they are mini-busses) are local transportation, meaning they will potentially stop dozens of times on the way to pick up and drop off paying passengers. The busses normally depart on time and may take at least an hour to clear the city limits of Mandalay, as the driver and his assistant hustle to get a full complement for the run across to Monywa. **Click the link below for travel directions from Mandalay to Monywa:**



Hazardous roads: If you are using busses regularly to get around Burma you'll quickly notice that most provincial roads are not much more than narrow, sealed tracks. Overtaking is quite hazardous and made even more so by the fact most vehicles are designed for driving on the left side of the road, and not the right. This creates the situation where the driver has an obscured view of the road ahead and he will need to use his assistant to give him a safe call to overtake buses and lorries.



The bus to Monywa

MONYWA - GENERAL INFORMATION

Arrival in Monywa: With all the stops to pay toll fees, the trip will be lengthened by a few minutes or so. If you depart from the Thiri Mandalay Highway bus station at 9 am (as I did) you will arrive at the Monywa Bus Station by 12.30 pm. There's then a melee of tuk-tuk touts hustling you for a ride to your hotel. The town area is very close, no more than five minutes away, so pay no more than 1000 Kyats per person for a tuk-tuk ride to your hotel.

Recommended budget hotel in Monywa: The King and Queen Hotel is a clean and comfortable accommodation option, centrally located in town. [Click the link below to make a booking inquiry:](#)

THE KING & QUEEN HOTEL

If you arrive in Monywa in the early afternoon, you'll have time to see the standing the Buddha/Thanboddhay Pagoda as these are nearer ones. A round trip in a tuk-tuk is 15000 Kyats and the staff at the King & Queen Hotel can arrange it for you. A motorbike hire from the hotel is 7000 Kyats per day.



The standing Buddha



The Thanboddhay Pagoda

MONYWA SIGHTSEEING

The Thanboddhay Pagoda: With its five hundred thousand Buddha images, of varying sizes, is quite possibly one of the most spectacular Buddhist temples in the world. The external structure is a maze of spires, and the faded colors give the building a bit of a worn look. Upon stepping inside though, the picture changes dramatically with dozens of passageways filled with an array of golden Buddha statues filling the entirety of the spaces within. **Click the link below for directions from the King and Queen Hotel:**



The seated Buddha Forrest: After viewing the Thanboddhay Pagoda you can make your way to the Maha Bodhi Htaung for the sunset. However, before doing so there's a very interesting site to spend a bit of time checking out just a kilometer or so before arriving there. Right next to the road, in a wooded area, is a field of hundreds of seated Buddha statues in



neat lines facing towards the standing Buddha. What makes this attraction even more bizarre is that each of the seated Buddha's has an umbrella as part of the construction. The best time for viewing this attraction would possibly be at sunrise when the sun is shining on the faces of the statues and in the cool of the morning, the enshrouding blanket of fog would give quite a surreal effect to the site.



MONYWA SIGHTSEEING

Maha Bodhi Htaung: After spending 15 - 20 minutes at the seated Buddha forest, move on to the standing and reclining Buddha attractions just a kilometer or so further along the road. For access to the site there is two options; take the sealed road all the way to the top of the hill or do the climb up the stairway from the bottom entrance. The benefit of doing the stairway climb (which is a gradual ascent) is that it takes in the temple and reclining Buddha on the trail to the top. If you take a motorbike taxi all the way to the top (straight to the standing Buddha) you'll need to then walk back down to the reclining Buddha.

Massive statues: Both statues are incredibly impressive and although the reclining one is massive in its dimensions I was told reliably by many Burmese there's an even longer one at another location in Myanmar. The Maha Bodhi Htaung is officially the world's tallest free-standing Buddha and in the golden hue of the late afternoon sun, is incredibly impressive. There is an internal stairway which ascends to the shoulder area of the statue for



spectacular views across the terrain. However, you'll need to get to the site a bit earlier as the access doors at the base of the statue are closed at five PM. After watching the sunset from the viewing area around the base of the statue a nice option for getting back to the bottom of the hill is to walk back down the road. Towards the bottom of the hill (on the right-hand side of the road) you'll be able to have a look at a massive sleeping Buddha.



MONYWA SIGHTSEEING

Po Win Mountain and The Shwebataung Labyrinth: These two sites are both in the same area and approximately 42 km from Monywa. To get to the Po Win Mountain area I had the King & Queen Hotel arrange a taxi for myself and two other travelers, and the price was a very reasonable 30,000 Kyats (a touch over US 20) for the round trip and waiting time. **Click the link below for directions:**



A Long Ride: The road is reasonably good initially but towards the end (as you get closer to the site) it gets narrower and rougher due to the remoteness of the area. It is for this reason it takes almost an hour to get there by taxi. **Note:** For those considering a cheaper option, such as a tuk-tuk, it's not worth it when considering the difference in price and comfort for the ride. The quoted tuk-tuk price is twenty-five thousand kyats, just 5000 less than the taxi.



Tour Planning: The time of day to go there is really a personal choice and will depend on your time schedule obviously. Due to the time constraints of my fellow travellers, we went in the morning. Which, when one considers the harshness of the light towards midday, was a poor choice. **Note:** If you want to get some good photos, plan to get there by 4 pm. Or do the maze caves first as they are all internally lighted, and not effected by the time of day.



MONYWA SIGHTSEEING

Small Caves: Some of the entrances are small and almost impossible for the average person to go into. Other caves are much larger and have cement construction doorways which allow you to enter and see the arrays of Buddha statues inside. You'll see Buddhas in varying positions: sitting, reclining, and standing. Many of the smaller caves have carved doorways which one can mistake as a cement construction. A closer inspection reveals the arches, and surrounding artwork, are carved entirely from the rock.

Monkey alert: Po Win Mountain is a great site to explore and its size means you could possibly spend at least two hours or more checking out every nook and cranny of the labyrinth of caves and small pagodas. The only slightly negative aspect of the site is the pesky Macaque Monkeys which inhabit the place. Just as with many temple type attractions across South East Asia, these monkeys are mischievous and have been made even more so by generous tourists handing out food to them. They can be entertaining to watch but they are also



Beware of the Monkey's

prone to the attempted theft of tourist's belongings. While there I had two occasions to observe monkeys jumping on the back of sightseers and trying to tear open their backpacks. Take care of your belongings, especially hand-phones if using them to take photos, and make sure any loose items such as hats or caps are secured in a backpack to avoid theft. Once you lose something, the Monkey will scurry off and you'll not get it back.



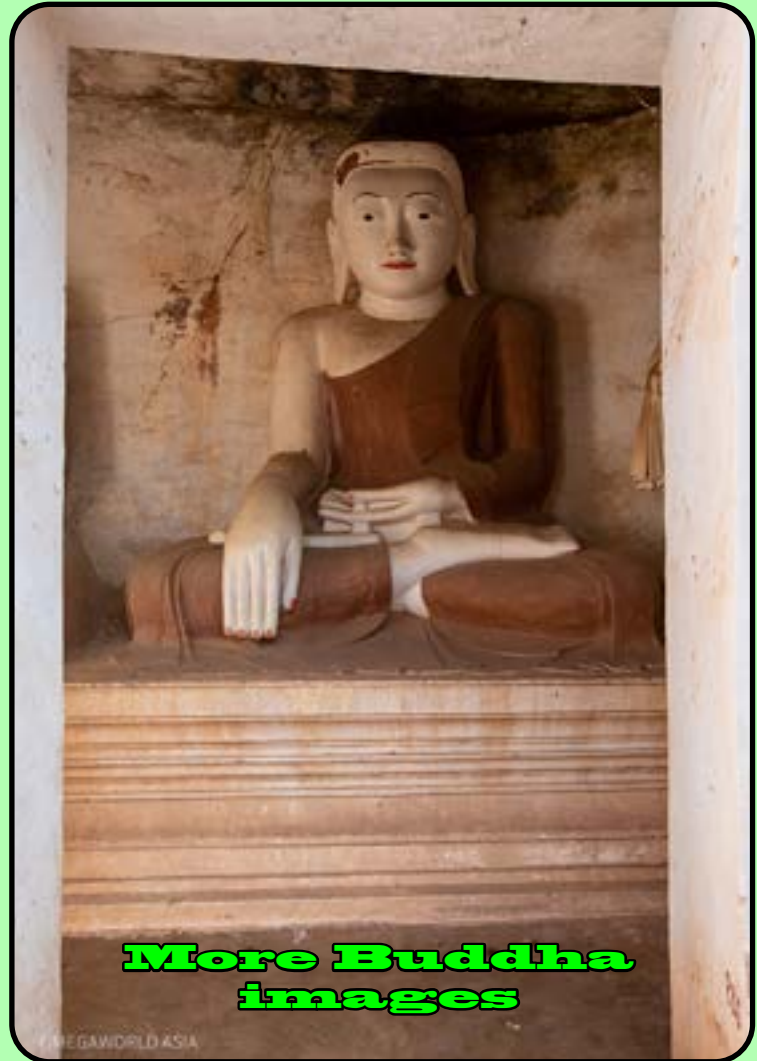
Many caves with Buddha images

MONYWA SIGHTSEEING

The Shwebataung Labyrinth: This is another highly impressive maze of man-made caves and temples, carved into the rock formations. It's located just a few minutes' drive from Po Win Mountain and is definitely worth checking out as part of your tour to the area. The taxi hire price, from the King & Queen Hotel, included visitation to both sites. **Click the link below for directions from Po Win Mountain:**



A smaller site: The Shwebataung Labyrinth is a smaller site than Po Win Mountain, with significantly less walking needed to view its entirety. Most of the Buddha images (statues) are housed in alcoves, which are larger than what's seen at Po Win Mountain. Most of your viewing time will be undercover and out of the direct heat. For this reason it's probably better to visit this site after you've been to Po Win Mountain. It should take no more than 1 - 1.5 hours to view the whole site. As with Po Win Mountain, there's an **entry fee of 300 Kyats** (US 2.50) for the Shwebataung Labyrinth.



MONYWA TO BAGAN

About: Bagan is generally considered to be Myanmar's premier tourist destination. With its prolific spread of ancient temples and pagodas (**quoted to be over 2000 structures**) it certainly has drawing power for those wanting a first hand glimpse of this major center of Buddhism from the old world. After spending four days there I can confidently say, the attractions of Bagan are well worth the effort of checking out. **Click the link below for directions from Monywa to Bagan:**



Getting there: Generally, most people traveling to Bagan will go there directly from Mandalay (if they are in the north of Myanmar) so getting there from Monywa was a bit of an "off the beaten track" travel experience. Luckily there are regular local buses from Monywa to Bagan. The Buses, which are mini-buses, depart from the **Monywa Highway Bus Station** and the fare is 3000 Kyats. If you are staying at the King & Queen Hotel you can buy your ticket at the hotel reception desk, they can

also arrange tuk-tuk transportation to the bus station for 2000 Kyats.

Local Buses: As mentioned, the buses are local buses meaning they cater more to the needs of the Myanmar natives, than tourists. It is quite normal for these buses to delay their departures by up to 30 minutes to ensure a full complement of passengers before pulling away. During the trip to Bagan the bus will pull over many times to allow local passengers to alight and board. Invariably it will not arrive at its destination on time.

Note: All major tourist areas in Myanmar have a ZONE FEE for foreigners. If you are flying into Bagan, you get hit with the zone fee in the arrival's hall. If you travel from Mandalay or Yangon on a VIP Bus (a big bus) you'll get hit with it as soon as you alight at the terminal in Bagan. If you get lucky and manage to avoid it, as I initially did, at some point in time during a sightseeing excursion around Bagan, a government official will approach you and ask to see your zone fee ticket. If you don't have one, no problems. Just pay it on the spot.



More than 2000 temples

BAGAN - GENERAL INFORMATION

Where to stay in Bagan: The town of Bagan sits along the banks of the Irrawaddy River and is split into three main areas: **Nyaung-U, Old Bagan, and New Bagan.** If you are flying in, or coming down from Mandalay on a bus, you will enter the town from the northern end, which is **Nyaung-U.** This is the most established area of the three and **has the greatest number of accommodation choices, restaurants, and cafes.** It is the place where most travelers and backpackers tend to stay. Old Bagan is more of an upmarket area and even though it's closer to most of the major temple sites, it's filled with expensive resorts. New Bagan is the most distant area from the temple sites but is worth checking out as it has a good number of inexpensive accommodation choices.

Peak Season: During the cooler months (December - February) the number of tourists visiting Bagan tends to be at its peak (due to the dry, clear weather), so it goes without saying many of the guesthouses and hotels are fully booked. To avoid having to do the run around, book your accommodation prior to arrival.

In this regard, Agoda or Bookings.com are good options. I decided to splurge for my three nights in Bagan and booked at a mid-range resort in Nyaung-U, called the Zfreeti. **Click the link below for booking inquiries at the Zfreeti:**



Centrally Located: This hotel is well located in Nyaung-U and is just a short walk to some of the **better restaurants** in the area such as **Weatherspoon's and Rain.** Another benefit of staying at the Zfreeti is there's a tour company just across the road, which hires out **power bicycles and E-bikes.** At 6000 Kyats for the day, an E-bike is a better option as the temples are spread over quite a large area and getting around them takes quite a bit of time. **Note:** An E-bike is an electric bike and when fully charged only has a maximum range of 45 km.



Zfreeti Hotel Poolside

BAGAN SIGHTSEEING

Sightseeing in Bagan: The two big ticket things to do in Bagan are watch a sunrise and a sunset, preferably from an elevated viewpoint. Unfortunately trying to achieve these two objectives, without bumping into a horde of others hoping to do the same thing, becomes a cat and mouse game trying to find a vantage point which isn't packed to the gunwales.

Restricted Access: In years gone by sightseers were able to climb up just about any temple to get an elevated position. However, since the recent death of a temple climber who fell, restrictions are now in place and only a few structures are open for ascending. A lot of the structures which are designated as safe to ascend, aren't even temples or pagodas. They're just flat roofed, brick buildings. It seems out of the hundreds of structures in the area, there's only five or six which the authorities have deemed safe to climb.

Get There Early: The problem with this is unless you get there early (at least an hour before the sun sets or rises) you will not get a front row position. While at one site, someone jokingly referred to the tripod wars which had

erupted between photographers vying for the best position along the edge of the structure. However, as with many things in life, there's always a way around this ongoing struggle to find a relatively uncrowded vantage point.

Hire a Tout: Normally, in the hour or so in the lead up to a sunset or sunrise, there will local touts running around on motorbikes. These guys often claim they are selling artwork but for a small fee (2000 Kyats) they'll lead you to an uncrowded vantage point. On my second day in Bagan I got very lucky when I paid one of these touts to take me to an uncrowded structure. He took me to a temple which was undergoing refurbishment. It had a local construction team on its upper levels and with all the bamboo scaffolding about, the place looked off limits. I shared a great sunset view of the surrounding area with just two others. **Click the link below for directions to a viewing platform:**



A Bagan sunset

BAGAN SIGHTSEEING

Sunrise over Bagan: Sunsets are great but it's the sunrises which are really the **holy grail** of views over Bagan. So much so that some are prepared to pay upwards of 350 US to experience it from a hot air balloon. Apparently, the views over the landscape are quite spectacular but, having said that, at 350 US they'd want to be. If you don't have 350 US to spare for a hot air balloon ride, you can get yourself into an elevated position to view the hot air balloons as they drift across the landscape.

Morning mist: In the cool mornings of the months of December and January the landscape looks amazingly surreal with the mist thick on the ground, and the bright glow of the sun just above the horizon. As with the sunsets, getting to a prime viewing point to beat the crowd is essential. I recommend **starting out from your hotel at least one hour before sunrise** so that you can get into position early. Once again, I was quite fortunate to get the assistance of an "art seller" and for a small fee, he guided me to a great, uncrowded structure.

Cold mornings: In the peak season months of December to February the weather is decidedly cool (or even cold) in the early mornings, and a warm jacket and hat are definite must haves.

Safety: All the temples or structures you can climb up have no fixed lighting and as such, the narrow stairways are pitch black as you ascend or descend. Be safe and take your own flashlight (torch). A headlamp is highly recommended as these will allow you to use both hands to assist you in your ascents and descents. As mentioned the stairways are often narrow, and they can also be steep and have high steps. If you slip, there's every possibility you'll fall to the bottom and sustain an injury.

Religious etiquette: As with any temples or pagodas in Myanmar, there's a requirement to remove your shoes and socks before entering the structures.

Note: Take a pair of flip-flops and once you get away from the busy entrance areas, put them on to give your feet some protection on the rough cement walkways.



Bagan sunrise

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BAGAN SIGHTSEEING

Day time sightseeing in Bagan: There are literally hundreds of temples and pagodas in Bagan and the reality is, even if you were there for two weeks, you'd never see them all. For those serious about photography, the early mornings and late afternoons are obviously the best time to be looking at temples.

Clear conditions: The weather in Bagan in the months of December to February is characterized by cool mornings, clear, blue skies, and bright sunshine during the day. In fact, it gets quite warm in the afternoons so getting sunburn is a definite factor if you are out and about all day. For those who want to visit as many temples as they can the main (or largest) in no particular order are:

- Shwe Zi Gone Pagoda
- Gubyaukgyi Temple
- Htilominlo Temple
- Ananda Temple
- Thatbyinyu Temple
- Shwe San Daw Pagoda
- Dhammayangyi Temple

If you are coming from the Nyaung-U end of town then most of these sites are on the left hand side of Anawratha Road (the main thoroughfare between Nyaung-U and Old Bagan). Basically, if you start at Shwe Zi Gone you can do the others going in one direction. Some of the bigger structures have lighting so they can be viewed in the early evening also

Note: Apparently the difference between a pagoda and a Temple is that the pagoda is coated in gold colouring, and a temple is just red brick.

Dhammayangyi Temple: This is the largest temple in Bagan and apparently was used as a set in one of the original Tomb Raider movies. It's a massive building with a labyrinth of stairways and corridors within. You could probably spend at least eight hours at this temple and probably still not see it all. **Click the link below for directions:**



Early evening lighting

BAGAN TO MOUNT POPA

About: MOUNT POPA is approximately 53 km east of Bagan and for most people it's an out of the way location. Because of this most travelers to Myanmar will not bother going there. For those who make the effort it generally means making a day trip from Bagan, with a hired taxi and driver. With a day to spare in Bagan I decided to make the trip to Mount Popa. I arranged my transportation with the travel shop across the road from the Zfreeti hotel, and for 35000 Kyats I got a comfortable taxi and driver for the days outing. **Click the link below for directions from Bagan to Mt. Popa:**



Getting there: After about forty minutes of travel time I got my first glimpse of Mount Popa as we began ascending into elevated terrain. Mount Popa is a huge rock pinnacle, which rises abruptly from the surrounding plains, and sits on the eastern flank of another higher peak. At just after 9 am we arrived at Mount Popa and, with the sun shining brightly on its



vertical, western wall, it was a great time to get some good photos.

Reduced Access: At a point approximately 1 km from the entrance my driver told me he was stopping at a parking area, to avoid damage to his vehicle from roadworks, and I could get a motorbike taxi the rest of the way. That suited me because I could stop off at a couple of viewpoints along the track and at 2000 Kyats for the round trip, the extra cost was hardly worth worrying about.



MOUNT POPA SIGHTSEEING

Stairway to the top: After getting some good distance shots at a couple of viewpoints, my motorbike taxi driver dropped me at the entrance and told me he'd be back to pick me up at my nominated time. The entrance and the stairway to the top were much like every other temple sites on a peak, I'd been to in Myanmar already. There was a chaotic melee of vendors around the entrance and also running up either the side of the stairway for a good distance. And just like all the previous sites I'd been to, the stairway had a roof over it all the way to the top. My driver had informed me the total number of steps to the top was 777. **Note:** There is an entry fee of 3000 Kyats.

Religious etiquette: Once again, and as with all approach stairways to all other temple sites I'd been to in Myanmar, there was the obligatory removal of one's shoes and socks. After depositing them in a locker box, I began the long ascent. Even though removing one's shoes and socks is a bit of a pain in the butt, it must be said the locals do a reasonably good job of keeping the stairways clean. Unfortunately, the cleaners who work on the stairway have turned their job into a way of badgering tourists for a handout.



Entrance Area

Donations: At around the midpoint of the flight of stairs they can be seen standing idly about, with a sponge mop in their hands. As soon as you get near them they wave a fistful of local currency at you and ask for "a donation for cleaning?" There's every possibility they don't get paid for doing the job and that the handouts they receive from the sightseers is their only means of income. After handing over a couple of 1000 Kyat notes, I continued my ascent.



Solid stairway to the top

MOUNT POPA SIGHTSEEING

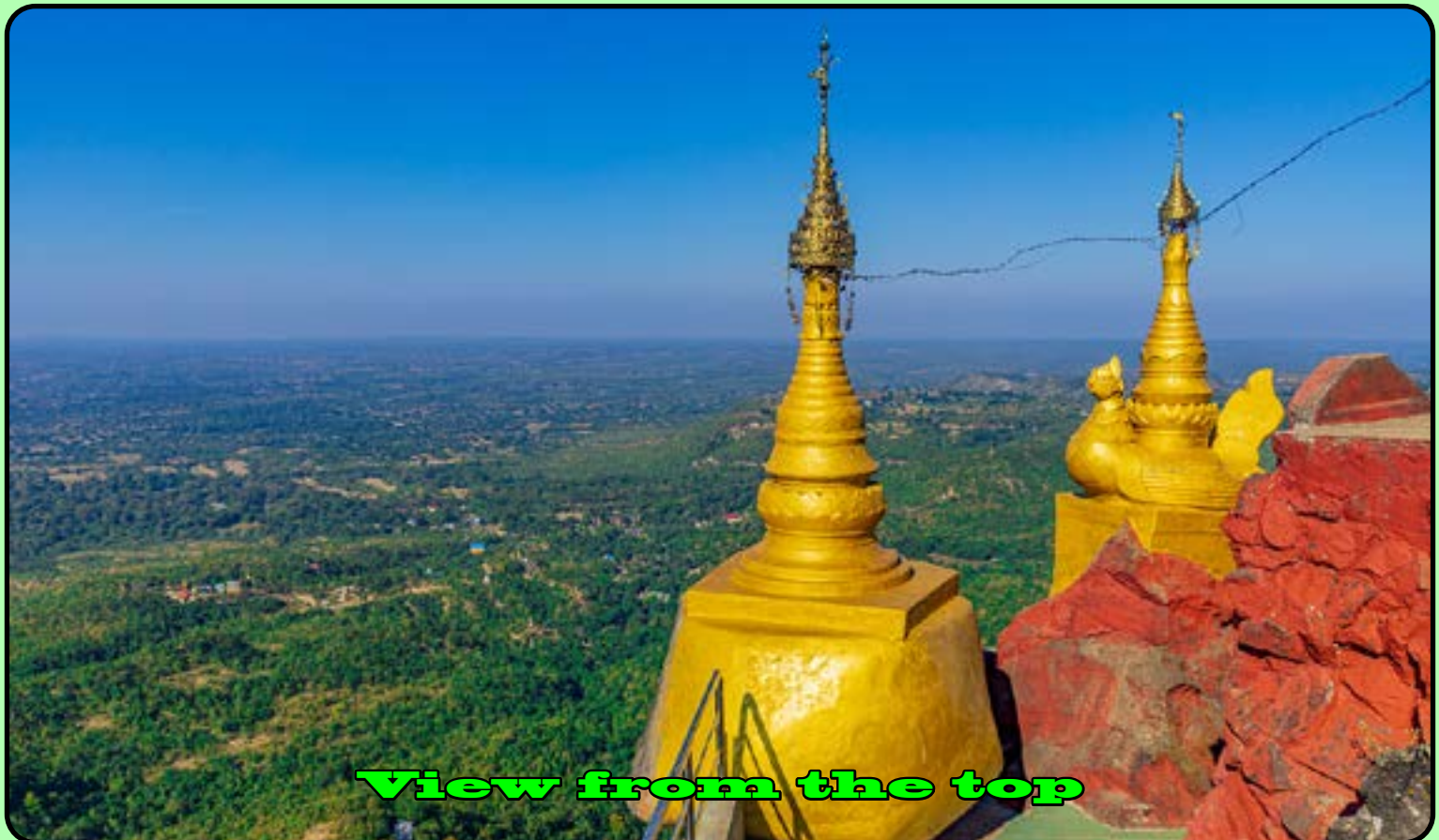
At the top: Once you arrive at the top the view is fantastic, especially on a morning with bright clear skies. There is one stairway which leads straight up to the temples and another, to the right, which takes you around the western, outer side of the complex and gives brilliant views across the terrain towards Bagan. There is also a sheer drop to the ground below. From this location the stairway leads into the temple complex proper. It's a bit of a hodgepodge construction with different rooms at different levels, and stairways leading off to nooks and crannies to be explored.

Note: The stairway to the top of the temple is a solid cement and steel construction, and very safe to walk on.

Worship Rooms: There are three main worship rooms and in each one there is a local sitting on the floor, behind a small table, asking for "donations." As you approach he'll point towards a large silver bowl and ask you to contribute. In smaller rooms off to the side, large glass cases filled with paper currency can be seen. To be honest, I found the whole experience to be rather crass when considering

what the idea of Buddhism means. I understand they need funding for maintenance and upkeep of the place, but one would think the 3000 Kyat entry fee one pays at the bottom of the stairway would go towards that.

The Business of Buddhism: When compared with Buddhist temples in Thailand, Myanmar's approach is a lot more hard-nosed and business oriented. Another thing I found quite amusing was the placards which had been fixed in place showing the names, and the amount given, of those who've donated. It seems Buddhist temples in Burma have no issues in advertising for beer bars in Beijing. Thirty minutes spent looking about (and dodging the requests for donations) was enough for me. The view from the top was great but my own take on whether Mount Popa is worth visiting is about break-even. If you've got nothing else to do with your time, then make the trip. Otherwise it's a bit of a ho-hum sightseeing experience.



View from the top

BAGAN TO HE HOE

About: The town of PINDAYA sits in the south eastern corner of Shan state and is often bypassed by for the nearby, and better known, Inle Lake. Having seen both I would say both places warrant looking at if you have time. If you are on a tight schedule I would wholeheartedly recommend foregoing Inle, and spending a couple of days in Pindaya instead.

Pindaya Cave: My reasons for this recommendation are based primarily on the visual splendor of Pindaya Cave (**8000 Buddha statues inside**). If you add in the low numbers of travelers going there, the less commercialized feel of the town, the great scenery (the 350-year-old Banyan trees lining the roads) and the exceptional Green Tea Restaurant, then Pindaya seems like a good alternative to Inle.

Note: The distance by road from Bagan to Pindaya is 320 km, over some fairly rough provincial roads. A bus trip (by local bus) can take around 8 hours or more, depending on how many stops are made along the way. **Click the link below for directions:**



Getting there: The third leg of my northern loop trip around Myanmar would take me from Bagan to Pindaya. This trip by road (on a local bus) is quite long and time consuming so, in the interests of maximising my available time left in Myanmar, I opted for a flight with a local airline: **KBZ Airlines**.

Note: There is no direct flight to Pindaya. The nearest airport to Pindaya is in the small provincial town of **He Hoe**, approximately 50 minutes from Pindaya by taxi. The flight time from Bagan to He Hoe is roughly 40 minutes and the cost is approximately USD 80 for the one-way trip.



HE HOE TO PINDAYA

He Hoe: Once you arrive in He Hoe, the fun begins trying to haggle with the taxi mafia to get a lower price for the ride to Pindaya; approximately 34 km. Invariably you will end up paying more than you must but if you share the ride with others who are heading there, or onto other locations, you can reduce the cost.

Note: the **actual fare** for a one-way trip from He Hoe to Pindaya, or vice versa, is **35000 Kyats**. When I traveled back from Pindaya to He Hoe the hotel I was staying at, the Conqueror, arranged a taxi for me and the price was as above. Unfortunately, the taxi mafia in He Hoe don't see things this way, as they will charge 50000 Kyats and not budge on the price.

He Hoe to Pindaya: The road from He Hoe to Pindaya is a narrow, winding provincial road (it's sealed all the way) which takes in some very nice scenery en-route. If you go in the cooler months (Dec - Feb) and travel in the early morning (Pindaya to He Hoe) you will see a surreal landscape of valley's filled with heavy mist.

Cow Market: The only other thing of note to see on my drive from He Hoe to Pindaya was the local cow market day. It was quite a spectacle in the bright sunshine as hundreds of beasts milled around with their owners, in a large fenced off area. To break up the trip we asked the driver to pull over for a few minutes while we got in amongst the cattle to get some memorable photos. **Click the link below for directions from He Hoe Airport to Pindaya:**



Note: As with all other areas in Myanmar, there is a **zone fee** to enter the Pindaya area. The zone fee is **6500 Kyats (approximately US 5.00)**. There is a road side booth which the taxi driver will stop at, just outside He Hoe, and you will be required to pay the 6500 Kyats. You will receive a stamped ticket for the Danu Zone, which is good for one week.



The He Hoe Cow Market

PINDAYA - GENERAL INFORMATION

Recommended Accommodation: There are a number of choices in Pindaya with the Golden Cave Hotel, and the Conqueror Resort Hotel, being the more popular. Perhaps because they are the closest to the Cave and only a thirty-minute walk from the cave entrance. I booked three nights at the Conqueror Resort through Agoda. The price was around USD 40 (a little on the high side for what it is) and includes breakfast and free WIFI. Click the link below for booking inquiries at the Conqueror Resort:



Note: It's also much colder in the Pindaya area, as compared with Bagan, as it's at an elevation of approximately 1350 meters (4000 feet) above sea level. Overnight temperatures in the cool season (November - February) can get as low as **8 Degrees Celsius**. A jacket and a woollen hat are highly recommended.



Where to eat: If you are staying at the Conqueror Resort you'll get breakfast included in the room rate. For lunch and dinner there are basically two options. The first is the Burmese food restaurant right next door to the Golden Cave Hotel. The food is inexpensive and wholesome with a mix of vegetable, rice, and meat curries available.

The Green Tea Restaurant: This is a great spot for some good food, and a great view out over the lake. It serves a great brewed coffee, espresso, or cappuccino. It's an excellent place for lunch after a morning walk around the lake.



PINDAYA SIGHTSEEING

Sightseeing in Pindaya: The town of Pindaya sits around a small, picturesque lake. The main town area is at the northern end, while the Conqueror Resort is at the southern end. One complete circuit on foot, of the lake, is approximately 2.5 km and is a nice walk in the cool morning air or at sunset.

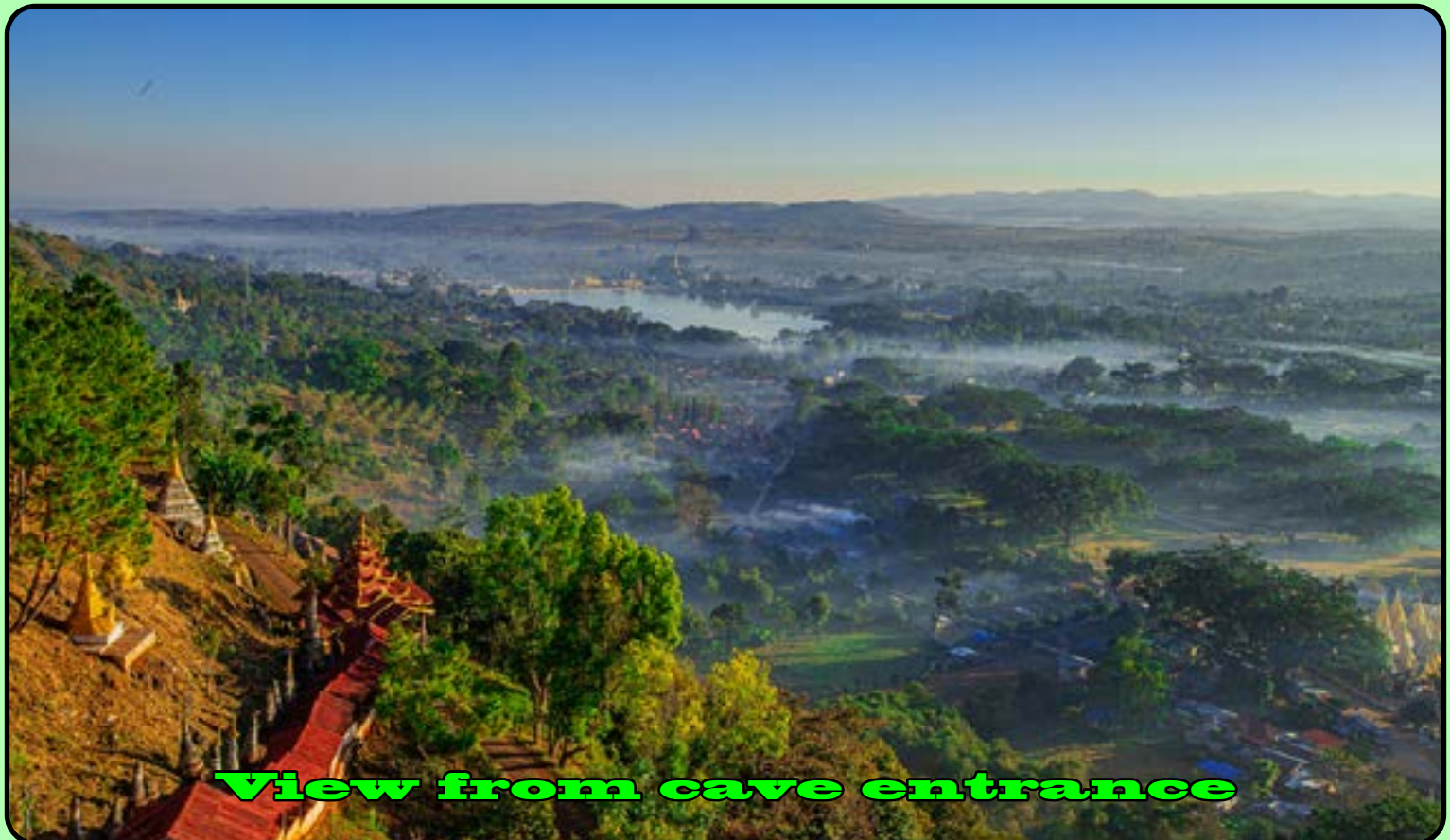
Getting to Pindaya Cave: The walk from the Conqueror Resort to the cave entrance takes approximately 30 minutes. The initial part of the walk, when you leave the hotel entrance, is flat and takes in a forest of **massive Banyan trees** which sit in a wide, grassy area on both sides of the road.

Motorbike Taxi: I would say the better option is to take a motorbike taxi up to the cave entrance (cost is 3000 Kyats for the round trip) and after you've seen the cave, have the driver drop you off at the bottom of the hill on the way back. That way you'll be able to view the temple and stupas which sit at the bottom of the hill, and then take a leisurely walk back through the forest of Banyan trees on the way to the hotel.



Massive Banyan Trees

Pindaya Cave: This is definitely the highlight of a trip to Pindaya and an amazing sight to say the least. I first learned about Pindaya Cave, some five years ago, from a fellow traveller and cave enthusiast. I determined, there and then, that any future trip I made to Myanmar must also include Pindaya Cave. The cave entrance is half way up a peak which overlooks the lake. **Click the link below for the location of Pindaya Cave:**



View from cave entrance

PINDAYA SIGHTSEEING

At the cave: The cave itself is not that long (just a 200-meter penetration) compared to caves in Laos and Vietnam. However, what it lacks in penetrative length, it makes up with amazing color and vibrancy from all the statues that have been put in place. The cave is actually part of a temple complex and as with any other temple in Myanmar there is a requirement to remove one's shoes and socks before entering.

Getting to the cave entrance: There are two options to access the cave; a long, covered stairway and, if you're feeling less energetic, the lift. There is also some bizarre artwork in front of the entrance which includes an archer lining up his bow and arrow at a huge, black spider. The cave opening hours are 6 am - 6 pm and if you want to beat the crowds, get there early. I went at 7.30 am and also got the benefit of a great view out across a mist covered terrain below.

Entry Fee: As with all other temples and pagodas in Myanmar, there's an entry fee for foreigners. There are signs which clearly ad-



The cave entrance

vertise this above the entry booths. And even though it seems like blatant discrimination (locals go in for free), when compared with the entry fees for foreigners in Thailand, it really is just a small amount (US 2.50).

Note: If you are planning on using DSLR cameras, or video handy-cams, there is also a charge for foreigners to take these into the cave as well. The charge is 300 Kyats per camera.



Pindaya Cave

PINDAYA SIGHTSEEING

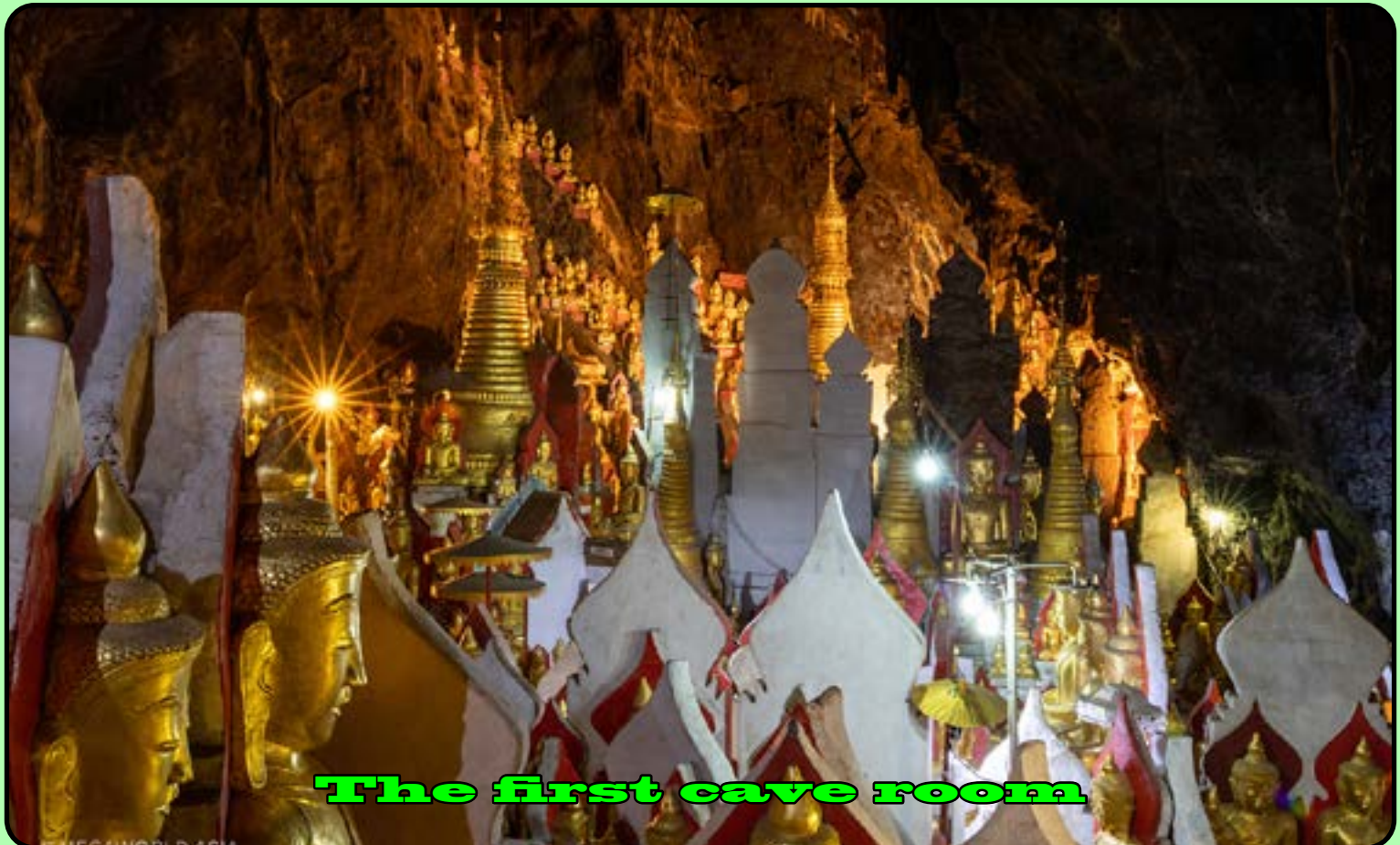
Inside the cave: Once you enter the cave proper you will be confronted by a mass of Buddha statues in the first room. This is actually the largest, and highest, room of the cave and as such there literally thousands of Buddha statues crammed in there. Many small ones adorn the walls and higher sections of the first room but it's the floor area which catches the eye. Most of the largest statues are amassed in this first part of the cave.

Cave rooms: If you make your way to the back end of this first room you'll get an elevated view across the thousands of statues, towards the front entrance. It truly is quite an amazing sight. From the first room there's a short, narrow path which leads into the rest of the cave. The second room is quite large and dry and there are a number of smaller side rooms, on different levels, with access stairways from the main pathway. Actually, the second and third room are virtually one as there's a large opening between the two. The divide between the two is marked by a large, golden stupa.



The 2nd cave room

Cave tour: My recommendation for doing the tour through Pindaya cave is to quickly move through to the back end and then take your time working your way back to the main entrance (exit) getting the shots you want. As you get closer to the entrance/exit the cave will become dryer and there'll be an increase in natural light. All in all, I would say that a tour through Pindaya cave is a definite highlight of a trip to Myanmar and should not be missed.



The first cave room

PINDAYA TO INLE LAKE

About: As a sightseeing attraction, INLE LAKE is probably the 2nd most popular destination for tourists and travelers, after Bagan. The lake is a large, shallow body of water with a number of branching canals which lead to various local villages and Pagodas. Aside from these primary attractions, the idea of staying in accommodation which is either **along the edge of the lake**, or **on stilts directly above the water**, also appeals to a good number of visitors.

Getting there: If you're coming from Bagan, then there's two options:

- A grinding 330 km ride (7 hours) over rough provincial roads in a local bus (a minivan)
- Take a local flight from Bagan to He Hoe Airport, and then catch a taxi for the 40 km (1 hour) transfer to Inle

Obviously, the choice will come down to individual budgets. If you choose to take a bus from Bagan, be sure to have a good supply of patience pills before getting underway. **Note:** There is a ZONE FEE of 13500 Kyats (US 10) per person, for all foreigners to enter the Inle area.



From Pindaya: As I was already staying in Pindaya, my only real option for getting to Inle was hiring a taxi for the 60 km trip. The Conqueror Hotel organized one for me, even though the 50,000 Kyat price tag was more than I'd figured on. The travel time, due the poor condition of the roads near Inle, was approximately 1.5 hours. **Click the link below for directions from Pindaya to Inle:**



INLE LAKE - GENERAL INFORMATION

Accommodation Options: After doing a short amount of checking on-line, before departing from Pindaya, I opted for a mid-range hotel called the INLE STAR. This is a three-star rated hotel, conveniently located right next to the tour boat departure point. It has large, comfortable rooms and a roof-top restaurant. **Click the link below for booking inquiries at the Inle Star Hotel:**



Budget accommodation: The INLE INN is highly recommended. **Click the link below for booking inquiries:**

THE INLE INN

Where to eat: The JUNGLE RESTAURANT (French) which serves excellent western food. If you get bored with Burmese food, head to the Jungle. It's only one hundred meters from the Inle Star Hotel. **Click the link below for directions:**



Inle Sightseeing: The main attraction of Inle is obviously the lake and specifically, taking a boat tour. Inle Lake is a large shallow lake with a number of branching canals which lead to various villages and Pagodas which are part of a standard route most of the boat operators seem to work to. The most impressive Pagoda is the SHWE INN DEIN, which is situated on the far side of the lake and will take approximately two hours to reach. **Click the link below to see video highlights of the inle Lake Boat Tour:**



INLE LAKE SIGHTSEEING

Doing the boat tour: As mentioned, staying at the Inle Star Hotel is an excellent option for the convenience of being near the marina (tour boat departure point). The price of the tour is 25,000 Kyats (this maybe reduced if there's more than one person) and all the boats seem to have the same, or similar, tour routes.

The standard tour: Unless you have a specific location in mind, the standard tour is to cross the lake (north to south) then head down one of the canals to a village which Hmong (long-necked) weavers and silver smiths. After a thirty-minute stop at one of the craft workshops, the tour continues through more canals to eventually arrive at Shwe Inn Dein village. From here, passengers can walk up the hill to see the impressive Pagoda. Once you've seen enough of the Pagoda, it's back on board the boat for the non-stop run back to the marina. This round trip, with all the stops, will normally take about five hours.

The Lake: From the marina, it's five km trip down a canal before eventually getting onto the lake. Where the canal opens onto the lake there's normally a gathering of fisherman



Inle fisherman

waiting to do some one-legged poses for the sightseers. Whether or not these guys are real fisherman, remains to be seen. But they certainly strike some great one-legged poses, for the cameras. Their expected tip rate is 5000 Kyats. After this brief stop, it's a one hour run across the lake to the next stop. On the way sightseers can enjoy the ambiance of the calm waters and surrounding landscapes. You'll probably also get to see some real one-legged fisherman on the way.



A tour boat cruises across Inle Lake

INLE LAKE SIGHTSEEING

The canals: At the southern side of the lake the tour boat branches off into a series of canals which eventually lead to the arts and crafts village. Once again, unless you have a pre-determined location in mind the boat driver will lead you to a craft shop which he probably has some kind of deal with.

Hmong Weavers: I was taken to a weaver's shop to see the Hmong Women (long necks) working their looms. I was actually quite impressed as it was the first time I'd seen Hmong Women with all the rings around their necks. According to the one of the ladies at the shop, who spoke reasonable English, the original purpose of the rings was for protection from Tiger attacks. Apparently, Tigers will normally bite the neck to kill their prey.

Arts & Crafts: Once you've had a look at the crafts people plying their trade (and taken photos) you'll be ushered through to the merchandise area of the store to look at an array of carvings and memorabilia. The choice is entirely yours of course, but it's not really all that expensive.



Hmong weavers



Arts & Crafts



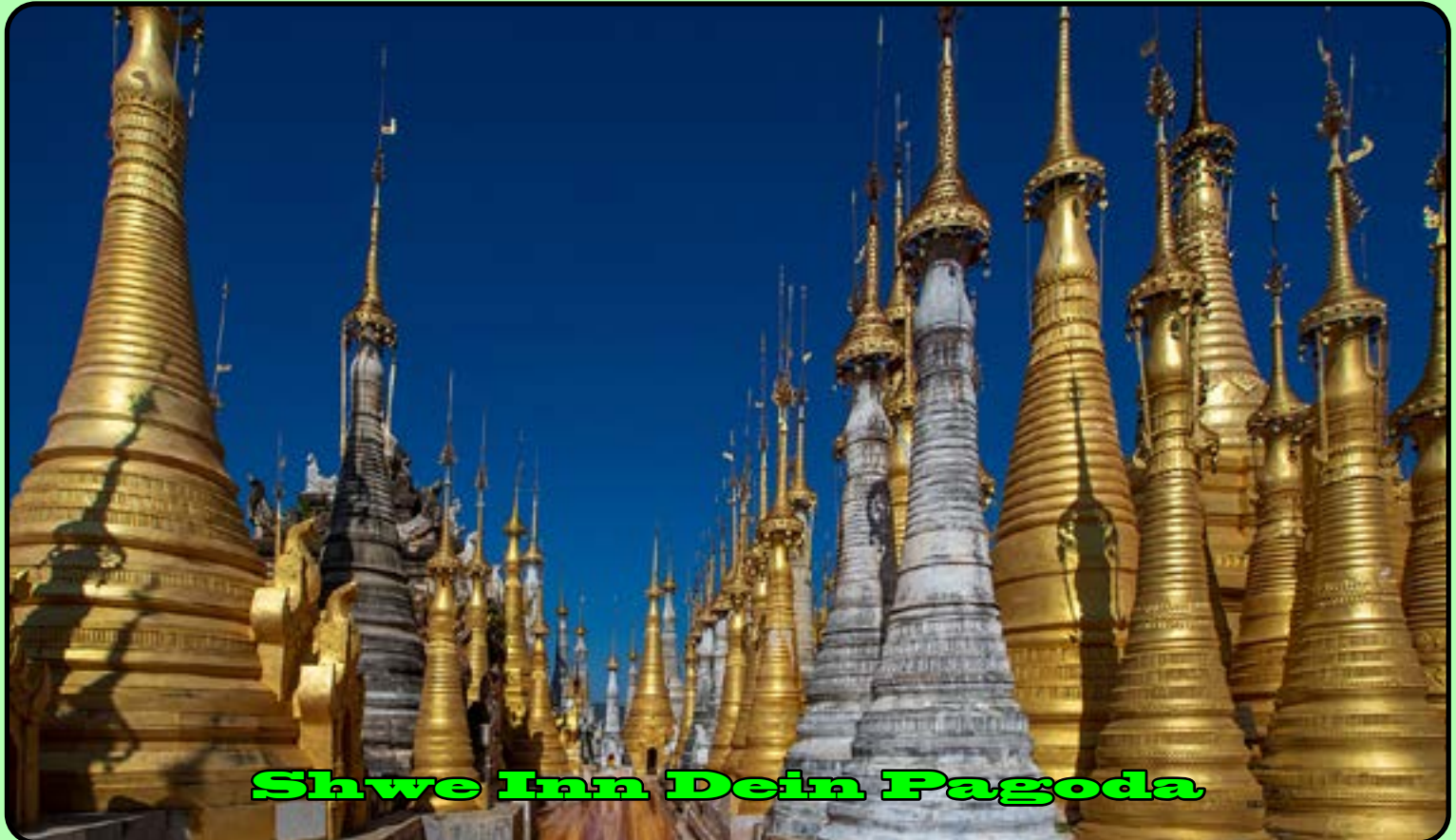
Cruising the canals

INLE LAKE SIGHTSEEING

Shwe Inn Dein Pagoda: This is probably the highlight sightseeing attraction of the boat tour. It also happens to be the end of the line for the canal. The driver will park the boat at a jetty and wait while sightseers go up to the Pagoda. It's approximately six hundred meters beyond the village and an easy walk up a slight incline.

Two Thousand Stupas: According to local information sources the pagoda has around 2000 stupas crammed into its area. It's certainly an impressive sight. Particularly the new section, with its forest of gold-painted stupas glowing in the bright sunlight. The old section, which is behind the new area, is also worth a few minutes checking out. The stupas aren't painted but the contrasting coloration of the brickwork makes for some nice shots if you're doing a bit of camera work.

Back to the Marina: Unless you've made prior arrangements with the boat driver, once the tour of the pagoda is completed, it's a direct run back to the marina. If the weather is good it's great to be able to sit back and enjoy the scenery of the lake.



COMPLETING THE LOOP - RETURN TO MANDALAY

More time at Inle: For those who have more time available, staying in Inle for a few extra days is definitely a great idea. Unfortunately, I was on a tight schedule and after just one night in Inle I was heading back to Mandalay. But definitely for those who have a few days to spare, a bit of time spent exploring around the OFF THE BEATEN TRACK canals of the Inle area, is sure to reveal more hidden sight-seeing gems.

Heading back to Mandalay: For convenience and time saving, I caught a local flight from He Hoe to Mandalay. If you're traveling on a budget, and have the patience, then a local bus is another option for getting back to Mandalay. Travel time by bus is approximately six hours. **Click the link below for directions from Inle Boat Station to Mandalay:**



I hope this helps you in planning your MANDALAY LOOP TOUR. Safe travels, Mega.



Po Win Caves



Near the Irrawaddy River in Bagan

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