



# BURMESE *days*



call it Burma. The name has a lovely jingle as it repeatedly slips off my tongue, after a slightly rough landing in Mandalay. For miles, it's just greenery and every so often an extra shiny Pagoda, shaped like a bell, sticking out its head proudly. The city, the last royal capital of the country, is the second largest, and is considered the hub of Burmese culture. The airport, like in so many of the up-and-coming South East Asian countries, is new, and a dozen or so local low-cost airlines line the tarmac excitedly.

My guide Joe, as I eventually call him, awaits with a warm toothy smile and a signboard with my name in English and in the local Burmese script that squiggles enough to hold my interest. I hop into the car that will now be our caravan for the next week or so. What

strikes me is that I am one of the very few tourists in what should be seen as high season. Instead of feeling worried, I am grateful and give myself a high five for finding time for this ravishing and unexplored place. The buildings we pass look newish and have that typical Asian contemporary aesthetic: minimal and almost makeshift. I realise as Joe starts to chat about Myanmar, that it is all recently cobbled together as the country tries to find democracy and freedom.

Our car, over the potholes and through the oncoming sea of bikes, darts straight out of town and into the nearby mountains. The night is spent at a hilltop town, Pyin Oo Lwin, where the once-ruling British escaped the city's overwhelming heat. I spend the cooler evening exploring dilapidated buildings around town, admiring the locals and their colourful attire of traditional cloth mingled with familiar branded t-shirts and Levis. Sitting with my feet up in a local café, I watch as a posse of boys in their monk dress sit at the Internet Café next-door playing computer games. A mere six months ago the country barely had Internet; now the locals are learning and embracing what technology can offer. Some of the locals, according to Joe, are resisting and want to find wellness away from modernity – but the young monks don't seem to care for that idea much.

The next morning, an early rise with some local coffee to assist, my hours are spent driving to another town, Kyaukme, towards the north east of the country. What strikes me immediately about this little, middle-of-nowhere town is how everyone seems to be a local. No tourists, no out-of-towners, just the usual town folk going about their business: the women are buying and selling fresh, mostly recognisable vegetables and cooked curries at the markets, men are spitting reddish beetle juice between glugs of very sweet milky tea, pink-clad



nuns are walking the streets in a meditative silence, and dark-haired children in formal uniforms are running home from school. My trekking supplies will all come from here, I am eagerly told.

My local trekking guide, Moe, meets me for a coffee in a local café to brief me. I sit among the locals as they read their regional newspapers and watch the barista boil up coffee with his theatrical moves. The coffee pours through the air and splashes into the milk, creating the frothy delight that ends up on the low table that appears to be ex-school desk surrounded by mismatched stools. A sweet treat, fried dough with more sugar than should be legal, is left on the table for me. I politely decline, hoping to find something healthier in the market – dried mangos and nuts are considered favourites around here.

The hike starts off with a drive in a rickshaw that takes us into the farm fields. We are dropped off with a friendly wave and a Buddhist blessing that only a certain tribe from the north of the country would comprehend. My shoes plod down on the earth and my connection with the country feels solid and respectful as I nod my head in respect to the landscape. This mediation expedition, effectively a hike, delivers an uphill almost instantly.

Moe, like so many young people from Myanmar, was at some point a Buddhist monk before he







left the Centre to become a guide. His knowledge of Buddhism, English and of course hiking are exceptional, as I quickly find out. My Western mind and behaviour of plenty of questions is quickly replaced by his suggestion of silence. It's 30-something degrees, and the sweat runs off my face, into my eyes, and eventually drips into my socks. The sun, and the way it touches my skin, becomes a mindful sensation opposed to the usual annoying caress, and the smell of aromatic vegetation overwhelms me.

We stop at tiny hamlets, if you can call them that, and are invited into traditional wooden homes built on stilts for tea, snacks and questions about my lack of wife. The villagers don't speak a word of English and are fascinated by my colour of skin and sun-bleached blonde hair – my iPhone surprises them the most, as does my eagerness to try Burmese cuisine without questioning it too much. We leave with blessings for the harvest and in the quest to be wed soon.

Just before nightfall, we arrived at a village placed at the top of the mountain we have climbed all day. As per custom, all visitors must report to the head of the village, who welcomes me in for some more bitter tea. According to him trekking is the best way to see his country and I should be grateful to have legs willing to take me. The translations became a little foggy but my exhaustion probably doesn't help the case either.

Bath time is a short walk out of town where a bamboo pipe sticks out of the rocky mountain. The ladies are friendly as they wash their colourful clothes and small kids smile while playing and slipping around the water. There was a moment of shyness as they see me coming. This is soon washed away, as I too strip down to my underwear and run around splashing in the water. Our humanness and joy of life is the same.

Washed, and in a fresh t-shirt, I am ready to meet some of Moe's friends. One, a teacher and the only English speaker in the area, entertains me with her quips from reading George Orwell. My Burmese days vs. his *Burmese Days* (the book) are wildly different and I realise, I have yet to scratch the surface of this country.

My bed, inside a local's home, is a soft sheepskin that is laid on the floor. With no bedrooms, just one open communal room, we all line up next to each other



with the cattle on the ground below and a thin wooden roof separating us from the stars above. A fire, used for the cooking, is nearby and dinner is served hot off the coals. The national dish called "Lahpet" is a mixture of all the favourite Burmese ingredients – pickled tealeaves, roasted nuts, green chilies, dried shrimp, beetle larva with vegetables, all topped off with plenty of fresh lime. I sit with the family on the wooden floors and I quietly eat my dinner as Moe explains to them who and what I am. After dinner, sleep is not optional; my body releases into the gift of rest.

At 4:30am the next morning, the sound of cattle and the smell of cooking wake me. Village life, high up in the mountain where no phones, clocks or other hindrances exist, starts early. Moe and I start with meditation, before caffeine of any kind. The local Buddhist temple, adorned with much less gold than in the cities, provides a perfect haven for us to sit and stop the "monkey mind". Moe, cross-legged and silent, guides us into a meditation, where my mind becomes so still, I am almost in a trance.

My body feels slightly sore, my head cleared from the stress of daily life, and I am getting into the swing of this other life where I can find some peace in simplicity. As the sun welcomes us to the day, we are thanking the family and waving them goodbye. Our trek continues, more villages to see, more beautiful groves of trees and deep rivers to discover and of course more moments of silence to be had. ■



### HOW TO GET THERE:

Fly Cathay Pacific from Johannesburg to Hong Kong. They have a direct flight from Hong Kong on their regional airline, Silk Air, to Mandalay. Visit the website for bookings and information: [cathaypacific.com](http://cathaypacific.com).

### HOW TO GET ORGANIZED:

Jacada Travel, based in the UK, is an expert in the area and will facilitate every single step of the way from accommodation to guides and everything in between. See [jacadatravel.com](http://jacadatravel.com) for more information.