

etc TRAVEL

Myanmar It's all change for the former colony but the magnetism of its culture remains intact

MARTIN HUNT

A NEW dawn is rising in South-east Asia as five decades of military rule in Myanmar end after celebrated democracy campaigner Aung San Suu Kyi's party swept the board at elections. Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, nestles between Thailand, China and India, and in the colonial period during the 19th and early 20th centuries was a prized possession of the British Empire. However, since independence in 1948, chronic mismanagement of the natural resources of oil, gas, timber and gemstones has meant that the country has remained the poorest state in the region, with a third of the population thought to live below the poverty line.

Things are about to change and there is an overwhelming sense of anticipation from the Burmese, who until the recent elections and triumph of the National League for Democracy were fearful of discussing their opinions in case of reprisals.

Although officially called Myanmar, the people remain Burmese and speak Burmese, and they are delightfully engaging with a huge belief in karma. Their Buddhist faith is demonstrated by, as far as the eye can see, majestic golden pagodas and stupas (mound-like structures often used for meditation). Monks and nuns walk serenely to fetch their daily alms and novice monks play football in the school yard like any other of their age.

Visitor numbers have soared since the lifting of the tourism boycott in 2010 and Suu Kyi, who in the early years of her marriage lived in the Strathspey with her husband and young family, is adamant that the benefits from tourism will benefit all and not only the elite.

I was there in December and January, one of the best times of year to visit, with constant sunshine and temperatures in the mid 20s. There are no direct flights to Myanmar at present from the UK, so we flew to Bangkok, which means flying over Myanmar and returning to either Yangon (Rangoon) or, as we chose, Mandalay, a bustling city on the River Irrawaddy.

We were greeted at the airport by a guide immaculately dressed in traditional costume and a driver who negotiated his way through the thousands of newly imported motorcycles from China. The interesting driving protocol is something I hadn't anticipated; all vehicles are right-hand drive and drive on the right.

We spent our first day recovering from our journey at the pool and spa in the Mandalay Hills Hotel. The next day, after an early start and a two-hour drive, we arrived at the Botanical Gardens in Maymyo. Established in the 1890s, the



gardens are modelled on London's Kew and have an amazing collection of orchids. We also visited Candacraig, built by the then owner of the Aberdeenshire mansion which shares its name and which until 2014 belonged to Billy Connolly. After falling into a state of disrepair the Asian Candacraig is being restored as a hotel.

Burma was sometimes referred to as the Scottish colony, due to the prominent role played by Scots in exploiting the country's resources, one of the most notable figures being Sir James Scott. It was also Scots who owned and operated the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company, which ran from 1865 until Burma's independence from Britain.

The following day we arrived at the banks

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of the River Irrawaddy to be greeted by the staff of Pandaw river cruises. Pandaw is a homage to the original Irrawaddy Flotilla Company, which transported the colonial administrators from Rangoon to their Hill Station for the summer.

Our ship, the Kalaw, was built at William Denny on the River Clyde. Refurbished in 2014, it is an elegant means of transport. Our air-conditioned cabin was small but comfortable, with a shower room and rattan chairs outside on which to enjoy the passing landscape.

We disembarked for a tour of Mandalay, the last royal capital of Burma immortalised by Rudyard Kipling's 1890 poem, and visited the Maha muni Pagoda, the first

of many. We passed gold leaf and tapestry workshops as we wandered down the marble and stone carvers' street while they worked on hundreds of effigies for homes and places of significance around the country.

On return to the Kalaw, our small group of fellow travellers from Australia, Canada and Belgium gathered on the upper deck to get to know each other over cocktails. Meals were taken on the upper deck and were delicious and faultlessly prepared.

The following morning we set sail for Mingun to see the impressive remains of a pagoda that was never completed but was designed to rival the Great Pyramids. The next day we visited Sagaing, a centre

for Buddhist belief where more than 5,000 monks and nuns live. In the afternoon we travelled by ferry and horse cart in Ava to see a splendid teak-built monastery and we watched the sun set over a footbridge that's nearly a mile long.

Our journey on the "road to Mandalay" continued downstream to Bagan, allowing us to enjoy the surrounding visual treats on the river and on land. The water was so shallow that the seamen used poles to gauge the depth as we passed the narrows and we watched cattle swimming to reach fresh pastures on the opposite shore.

We stopped briefly to enjoy the delights of a pottery village where the children leaving school were intrigued with our western



Travel notes

Getting there

Travelpack has return flights from Glasgow to Bangkok Suvarnabhumi via Amsterdam with KLM (outbound) and Air France (return) from £373. Visit travelpack.com. WeFly has return flights from Glasgow to Yangon (Rangoon) via Dubai and Bangkok with airlines including Emirates from £587. Visit wefly.co.uk.

What to do

Pandaw offers expeditions on the Irrawaddy and Chindwin rivers and has almost 20 years' experience navigating three of the great rivers of South-east Asia. It cruises in Burma, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and China from June to April. Visit pandaw.com.



Clockwise from main: Buddhist monks begin their apprenticeship at an early age; boat trips on the rivers of Myanmar are an ideal way to see the country at a leisurely pace; British forces arrive at Mandalay in 1885, before gaining control of the city and annexing Burma

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clothes and our interest in their community, before we proceeded to Pakokku where we moored overnight on the river.

We took an early-morning tuk tuk ride to the bustling village market to drink tea with the locals in their earth-floored tea house, before absorbing the atmosphere of the market, where everything from dried fish to bike lights was on sale. After a two-hour cruise downstream we moored at Bagan, where we spent two days exploring the archaeological zone, a World Heritage Site with more than 3,000 listed monuments, including a fine 11th-century temple.

It had been a truly eye-opening trip and it was with a heavy heart that we said goodbye to our wonderful ship and its crew.