

BEYOND BOUNDARIES

Editor's note: China Daily continues its reports from neighboring countries in an effort to shed light on topics relevant to China. This is the second installment of a four-part series from Myanmar.

A land of smiles for the weary traveler

The minute I arrived at my hotel in Yangon, help was on the way. A smiling doorman handed me a glass of cold orange juice in a welcoming gesture.

His considerate treatment managed to instantly revive a dusty traveler who felt dazed after a 40-minute drive from the airport in a dilapidated taxi on a bumpy road as the temperature soared to almost 40 C.

In my previous experiences in visiting foreign countries, I have always found hospitality to be one of my most lasting memories. My trip to Myanmar was no different.

During my 10 days in Myanmar, as I made contact with hotel staff in different cities, they just kept reinforcing my good impression: they were everywhere when you needed them, and they were nowhere if you preferred to be alone. Whenever they talked to you, no matter what

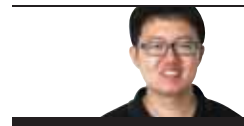
the topic, they began with a big smile and ended up with a bigger one.

It was just like what Myanmar's tourism minister told me: Hospitality is their tradition and responsibility, and a smile is Myanmar's trademark.

In some senses, the tourism industry in Myanmar is a mirror that reflects the overall situation of the country's current development.

The country obviously has great potential: the mysterious, beautiful, unpolluted landscape, the heartfelt smile, the relatively small number of tourists compared with other popular destinations. But on the other hand, the tourism industry's shortcomings are equally noticeable. Everyone who has been to Myanmar cannot ignore the challenges it faces in the short term.

There are several key things that desperately need to be improved for tour-



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YANGON JOURNAL

ists, including the backward infrastructure, the difficulty in getting a mobile phone card and the erratic electricity supply.

Sometimes this can be frightening. One morning in the hotel where I stayed in Yangon, I finished my breakfast on the second floor and intended to return to my room on the 11th floor. I got into the elevator, but it suddenly stopped halfway because of a blackout. My colleague and I were trapped in the darkness for one minute and were kind of freaked out at first. When the electricity supply resumed and the elevator door opened on the 11th floor, I saw the

hotel staff working normally, as though nothing had happened.

During the rest of my time in Myanmar, neither my colleague nor I made a fuss about it anymore. It is something you have to get used to when traveling in Myanmar during the hot season.

As an expert noted, the tourism officials here also need to remember that Myanmar's rivals are ASEAN countries, including Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore, which are more mature markets with better facilities. And those who visit Myanmar for the first time are usually not first-time visitors to Southeast Asia. So it won't be easy to win hearts and minds, if tourists complain about their accommodations and other services.

A South China Morning Post article said that going to Myanmar reminded some Hong Kong businessmen of the experience of visiting



People pray at the Shwedagon pagoda.

ZHANG WEI / CHINA DAILY

Shenzhen in the early 1980s.

If Shenzhen can be transformed, why not Myanmar?

In Yangon I met a hotel manager who is a student in an MBA program co-hosted by Myanmar Chinese Cham-

ber of Commerce and Jinan University in Guangzhou. When I asked her about the challenges that Myanmar tourism is facing, she seemed optimistic.

"There is a long and bumpy

way to go. But opportunities are always behind the challenges, aren't they?"

"Do come to visit Myanmar before the huge crowds do," she added. "They will come soon."



U Htay Aung, minister of hotels and tourism of Myanmar

Tourism: Chinese investors welcome

FROM PAGE 1

Many international hotel groups have returned, keen to invest. A new hotel construction project in Yangon was approved in April, local media reported.

A joint venture by a British and a Chinese company will build a hotel and a serviced residence in the Pyin Oubon Industrial Zone in suburban Yangon. Another high-end hotel built by a Hong Kong company will open soon in the same city.

In Yangon alone, another 1,000 new rooms will be built to serve the booming market this year, the minister said.

When asked about foreign visitors' security and safety issues while traveling in Myanmar, the minister shrugged off any concerns. "Seeing is believing," he said.

Myanmar will host the 27th South East Asian Games at the end of this year and it will chair the Association of South East Asian Nations next year. Both will be good opportunities, involving visits by athletes, businesspeople, political leaders and travelers, he said.

"We will get a lot of mass market experience out of these events."

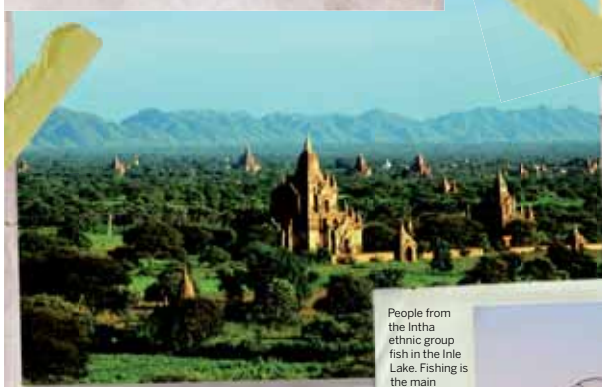
AN ENCHANTED PLACE WHERE TIME STANDS STILL

Myanmar, with its cultural and geographic diversity, is one of the most exotic countries in Southeast Asia. Visitors will be spoiled by all the things to do. But the following five places should be on a traveler's agenda, as recommended by U Htay Aung, minister of hotels and tourism.



Monks walk on the U-Pain Bridge in Mandalay, central Myanmar. The bridge, with a history of more than 200 years and called the Lovers' Bridge, is 1,208 meters long — the longest teak bridge in the world.
WU ANG / XINHUA

BAGAN
Bagan is located in the upper part of Myanmar and was the capital during its first dynasty. But its architecture is the foundation of its popularity. More than 2,000 temples and stupas (dome-shaped Buddhist shrines) are located along the eastern bank of the Ayeyarwady river and are spread over 42 square kilometers through a desert-like plain. A panoramic view of this land at sunset is an image that will forever linger.



Pagodas in Bagan, central Myanmar. The small city boasts some 2,000 pagodas, the highest concentration in the country.
WU ANG / XINHUA

FACT BOX

Population: **61.12 million**

Weather: Myanmar has a monsoon season from May to September.

Racial groups: **There are more than 135 different ethnic groups in Myanmar.** Its major racial groups include Bamar, Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Chin, Mon, Rakhine and Shan.

Religion: More than 80 percent of people in Myanmar embrace Theravada Buddhism.

Christians, Muslims and Hindus make up most of the rest.

Language: The Myanmar language is predominant. A wide variety of languages are spoken by ethnic minorities. Given Myanmar's colonial past, English is also spoken.

Currency: **The local currency is the kyat**, which is divided into 100 pyas.

Capital: **Nay Pyi Taw** in Central Myanmar. (Myanmar moved its capital from Yangon to Nay Pyi Taw in 2005.)

Largest City: **Yangon**

People from the Intha ethnic group fish in the Inle Lake. Fishing is the main industry in the lake, which is known for its rowers who wrap one leg around an oar to propel their boats through the water.



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PUTAO

Putao is located in Kachin state. It is known for its orchids. A rare species, the "Black Orchid", grows in the mountains to the west and east of Putao. The weather in Putao is cooler than the rest of the country and mountains covered in snow can be seen almost throughout the year in certain parts of Putao.

MANDALAY

Mandalay brings you closest to the real Myanmar. The country's second-largest city, with a population of 700,000, is the country's cultural heart where dance, music and drama are part of city life. It is also known for its gold and silver crafts, wood and marble carving, silk thread weaving and ancient tapestry. One of the highlights in the city is Mandalay Hill. The spectacular view, well worth the 1,700 steps, takes in the outlying areas of the Ayeyarwady plains and the misty Shan hills.

INLE LAKE

Inle, located in the Shan Hills, offers a unique and different facet of the Golden Land. Mesmerizing visitors with its picture-perfect sights, the lake region offers an alternative to the attractions of Bagan and Mandalay. It boasts the picturesque Inle Lake, the fascinating Pindaya Caves and the cool and colorful hill towns of Taunggyi and Kalaw. Numerous villages surround the freshwater lake, with foggy mountain ranges forming the backdrop. The weather of Inle Lake differs from other places in the country since the air is a bit cooler and drier. Among the unique aspects of culture that visitors can find there are fishermen who row boats with their legs.

YANGON

Yangon, the country's largest city, also considered the Garden City of the East, is the gateway to Myanmar. In this "Land of Pagodas", the magnificent Shwedagon pagoda on Singuttara Hill is a major attraction. Originally 8.2 meters tall, it now stands close to 100 meters after numerous renovations by Myanmar monarchs. The pagoda, more than 2,500 years old, enshrines strands of Buddha's hair and other holy relics. Colorfully dressed worshippers offering flowers, food, candles and water can be seen circling the shrine daily. A sunset visit promises a spectacular sight, when rays from the setting orb hit the golden spire.

The Shwedagon Pagoda on Singuttara Hill in downtown Yangon. The pagoda has a history of more than 2,500 years.
ZHANG WEI / CHINA DAILY

