

# COMPASS

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BY COX & KINGS TRAVEL

## Terence Conran

Don't call him *Sir*

## Burma's Back

*We take the road to Mandalay*

Deserted Desert Drives

## *Namibia*

North Island

The *new* New Zealand

## Kate Humble

*On 23 Degrees of Travel*



# The Road Less Travelled

As the south-east Asian country of Burma finds itself back on the tourism map, writer *Mark Palmer* takes a journey along the Road to Manadalay

Rangoon provides a perfect snapshot of Burma's past, and its immediate future.

Though, arriving as night fell, my wife and I did not immediately spot the contrast, as a battered taxi took us to the decidedly unbattered Governor's Residence. Once home to the Kaya state governor, the Residence is now a wonderfully peaceful hotel set in immaculate grounds, graced by gentle, attentive local staff. We marvelled at the scene, as we dined by candlelight in the garden, fanned by gently swaying banana palms.

By day, it was easier to see how in the former capital Rangoon (also known as Yangon, the country as Myanmar), crumbling, classic colonial architecture competes for space with ugly new buildings. Home to roughly four million people, here rusty rickshaws and horse-drawn carts easily outnumber any modern 4x4s imported from China.

*"There is more gold on the pagoda than in the vaults of the Bank of England."*

At times, it felt as though we had been transported back to the 1930s, when an Englishman would not have ventured forth without a panama and an innate sense of superiority. But mostly, we witnessed the desperate poverty of a country cut off from the rest of the world: censorship looms large here; the internet is monitored and it's impossible for outsiders to get a mobile phone signal. Myanmar is a country of the harshest contrast.

To visit or not to visit ...? There had been conflicting advice going out to would-

be visitors to Myanmar for years, but the situation became clearer in November 2010, when Burmese opposition leader (many would argue the country's elected leader) Aung San Suu Kyi was released, having spent 15 of the last 20 years under house arrest. Since then, Aung San Suu Kyi has moved about the country with relative ease, even recording *The Reith Lectures* for BBC Radio. Significantly, both The Lady (as Aung San Suu Kyi is known) and the Burma Campaign UK have reversed their policy on tourism, as long as it is run through private companies without connection to the military regime. They think it important that informed individuals and small groups visit Burma. They want to bring the oxygen of publicity to the country.

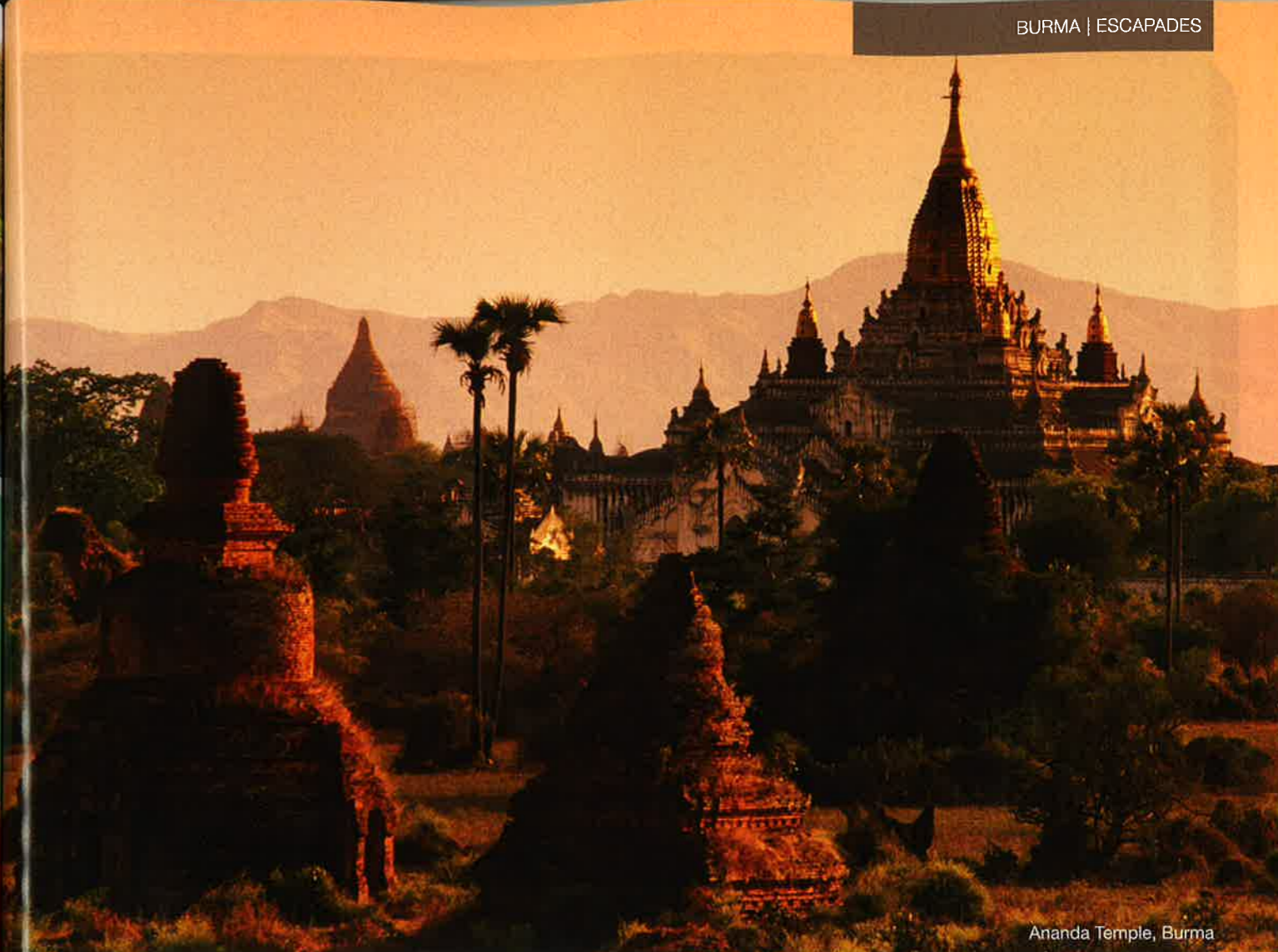
Cox & Kings carefully chooses partners without connection to the government: supporting projects that help local Burmese communities and



U Bein bridge, Amarapura



Lake Inle



Ananda Temple, Burma

< promoting sustainable development. While, it is not possible to guarantee no tourism revenue will reach the military government – for example through taxation – by choosing carefully, any financial gain for the government is minimised, while the benefits for local communities are notably boosted. Meanwhile, visitors to the country are able to see the situation on the ground for themselves: something the local residents are all too pleased about. As one of our guides put it: “Outsiders give us hope and remind us that we are not forgotten.”

And there is so much to experience in Burma. After watching a procession of monks in the country’s biggest monastery near Mandalay; capturing the setting sun from a tiny boat near the world’s longest teak bridge on Lake Taungthaman; sailing up the Irrawaddy river in a converted German cruiser; and peering down on Pagan (Bagan) from the top of a temple built in 1059, I can vouch that this is one of the most extraordinary countries on Earth.

*“Outsiders give us hope and remind us that we are not forgotten.”*

**T**he Shwedagon Pagoda is where every Burmese Buddhist must worship at least once in his or her lifetime. The hairs of Buddha are said to be enshrined here, and legend has it there is more gold on the pagoda than in the vaults of the Bank of England.

Visible from far and wide, the bell-shaped centre of the stupa rises up from a busy concourse, which in turn, is home to dozens of smaller temples and shrines. Many of those around us had been here all day – and would be staying most of the night, such is the wealth of attractions.

The next day we were to fly to Mandalay, but first our guide, San, takes us to Bogyoke Aung San: a thriving local market town, where locals live in picturesque bamboo houses. Much like everywhere we went, smiling children crowded around us: intrigued and excited, as if spotting aliens from a parallel universe. Which in some senses we were: a devoutly Buddhist country, here every male becomes a novice monk around nine years old, before taking formal vows at the age of 19 (although they are free to leave at any time).

**O**nce in Mandalay, we boarded Orient-Express’ recently renovated river vessel *The Road to Mandalay* (named after Kipling’s poem) for three glorious nights sailing. It seemed as though we had the river to ourselves, save for a few fishermen in their rickety boats. On the banks, women washed their clothes, oxen worked the fields and children played in the brown water. There was no evidence whatsoever of the 21st century – nor the 20th, for that matter.

I’ve never known a boat ride as peaceful or as poignant.

In Mandalay, we learned how gold leaf is made, visited a silversmith and viewed the astonishing Kuthodaw Pagoda, with its 729 miniature shrines: each with their own slab on which parts of the Tripitaka – the Buddhist scriptures – are inscribed. But the highlight was reaching Sagaing on the opposite bank early in the morning. There, scores of monasteries nestle in the trees high on a hill, looking down across the river over lush greenery. We were fortunate to be invited into a home to see how the locals, who sleep directly on the concrete floor, live. The house had its own Buddhist shrine in one corner and a picture of *The Lady* in another.

Pagan was where our journey ended. Once the first capital of the Burmese empire, this is the world’s largest Buddhist site, home to more than 3,000 temples, most of which were built between the 11th and 13th centuries.

*“Pagodas and stupas pop out above the treetops, shimmering gold. One of the most astonishing views on Earth”*

Everywhere you look, pagodas and stupas pop out above the treetops, most built from red brick, some in shimmering gold, others gleaming white, all tiered and sheer-sided. Each unique but, seen as a whole, amounting to one of the most astonishing views on Earth – just as Marco Polo observed during Pagan’s golden age in 1283, when more than 13,000 such temples stood on this fertile plain.

As sunset approached, you could feel a sense of expectation. Our vantage

point was the Shwe San Daw pagoda, from where we looked out across to the river and mountains in the hazy distance. The hundreds of temples in every direction made it feel as if we were about to witness a scene from the Book of Revelation.

It was at this point that I noticed my wife’s tears. Burma is a heavenly place run by devils: to be here is to witness humanity at its triumphant best and the abuse of power at its corrosive worst. “This is so beautiful, but so sad,” my wife said tearfully: “I feel happy and angry – and confused. But I would not have missed it for the world.” ●

Peter Popham’s new book, *The Lady and the Peacock*, about the life of Aung San Suu Kyi is reviewed on page 76.



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# < ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW: BURMA

by Cox & Kings Far East expert – Yaow Butwisate

## THE BACKGROUND

**LOCATION** Burma (Myanmar) is the largest country in south-east Asia and has borders with China, Laos, Thailand, Bangladesh and India. Another third of the country's perimeter is coastline, with the Bay of Bengal to the south-west and the Andaman Sea to the south.

**LANGUAGES** Burmese

**POPULATION** 56 million

**TIME ZONE** GMT +6.5 hours

**CURRENCY** 1 kyat (K / MMK) = 100 pyas Officially £1 = 9.95 kyats; however the regular market exchange rate is £1 = 1,500 kyats.

**VISAS** Required for British passport holders.

**POTTED HISTORY** The Toungoo dynasty of 1510 to 1752 unified small kingdoms in the area, previously part of the Pagan empire, which existed from 1044 to 1287. By 1885, the country was under British rule and, following independence in 1948, Burma has been in a long running civil war and under repressive military rule since 1962.



**TOP TIP** Visit as many villages as you can on your itinerary. Burma has some fantastic sights, but it is the people with their warmth, wit and hospitality that makes it such a memorable destination.

## BEFORE YOU TRAVEL

### WHEN TO GO

November to March is the best time as the weather is dry, but not too hot.

### WHAT TO READ

*Burmese Days* by George Orwell (Penguin, 1934, £6.61)

Set in the days of the empire, when the British ruled Burma, *Burmese Days* describes both indigenous corruption and imperial bigotry.

*The River of Lost Footsteps* by Thant Myint-U (Faber and Faber, 2008, £7.83)

Thant Myint-U portrays Burma's rise and decline in the modern world, from the time of Portuguese pirates, through decades of British colonialism, to current struggles.

### WHAT TO WATCH

*Return to Burma* (2011)

This film follows the story of its director, Midi Z, a Burmese national who returns to his homeland after 10 years away only

## THROUGH A WRITER'S EYES

*On the road to Mandalay,  
Where the flyin'-fishes play,  
An' the dawn comes up like  
thunder outer China 'cross the Bay!*  
Rudyard Kipling, *The Road to Mandalay* (1890)

to find that very little has changed. It was filmed secretly within the country.

### *The Lady* (2011)

This Luc Besson film starring Michelle Yeoh, tells the poignant love story of Aung San Suu Kyi, imprisoned for 15 of the last 20 years, and her husband, who raised their children in Oxford while campaigning for her release.

## BEING THERE

### WHERE TO STAY

**The Governor's Residence**  
Arguably the best hotel in Burma, the Governor's Residence hotel in Rangoon's Embassy quarter is housed in an imposing luxury teak mansion dating from the 1920s.

### Amata Ngapali Beach Resort

Located on a beautiful stretch of the pristine Ngapali beach, the resort's modern design and excellent levels of service ensure guests can relax in comfort.

### WHAT TO EAT

Burmese food is heavily influenced by Indian, Chinese and Thai cuisines, with mild curries made with fish, chicken and mutton, and lentil soup being the most popular dishes.



## SET YOUR COMPASS



### 1 The Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon

This majestic bejewelled pagoda, more than 2,500 years old in part, is arguably the most precious and sacred in Burma and dominates Rangoon's skyline at 99 metres high.

### 2 Mahagandayon Monastery in Amarapura

This monastery near Mandalay, founded in 1914, is home to several thousand young monks who queue up mid morning in their saffron robes to receive alms from pilgrims.

### 3 U Bein bridge in Amarapura

The longest teak bridge in the world, at 1.2km, is one of the most recognisable and photogenic sites in Burma. It dates from the mid 19th century.

### 4 Temples in Pagan

Once the capital of many ancient Burmese kingdoms, this area is now a major archaeological zone, with hundreds of temples and pagodas filling the horizon in every direction.

### 5 Inle Lake Scenic

Inle Lake is famous for its floating gardens and villages, the leg-rowers of the Intha tribe, and a diverse mix of cultures.

## TRAVEL WITH COX & KINGS RECOMMENDED TOUR

*The Golden Land of Burma* – 13 days / 10 nights from £2,495 per person. This round trip from Rangoon visits Mandalay, Pagan and Inle Lake.