

Aleah Wilson

Feature writing

Rookies Guide to Myanmar

When planning a trip to Asia, many tourists think of exploring China, India or Thailand. However, there are multiple countries that many Westerners cannot locate on a map that are full of archeological treasures and rich cultures. Located in Southeast Asia lies a hidden gem – Myanmar. Despite recent social and economic discourse in past decades, their borders have recently been opened to tourism and adventure is calling.

Myanmar is filled with a beautiful culture that should be experienced by those who allow their minds to wander. It's a vast land covered in ancient pagodas and Buddhist temples as far as the eye can see. For someone who is unsure about navigating through rural country, I'm here to lead the way.

On a recent trip to Myanmar, I traveled through central Yangon and flew to the ancient city of Bagan. My trip was filled with cultural experiences unlike any other country I've encountered. I saw several pagodas, visited a small village in Bagan, explored the city of Yangon and took a scenic hot air balloon ride over Mandalay.

Horse and carriage ride through the pagodas of Mandalay



Photo By Aleah Wilson

Myanmar is known as the “Land of 1000 Pagodas,” and after a short period of traveling there, I’m aware that’s far from an understatement. The country is filled with different types of temples and sacred structures.

There are several ways to see the pagodas of Myanmar. For adrenaline junkies and thrill seekers, renting a moped would be a great option to get around the dirt roads. For those looking for a more laid back version, a tuk tuk or a horse and carriage ride might be higher on the list.

Student Lindsey Nichols enjoyed her horse and carriage experience. “It was an exciting experience seeing so many pagodas up close,” Nichols said. “I was impressed by the amount of architectural detail that went into each building.”

The coachmen who steered the ride were great sources for information. “I loved being able to experience the pagodas with someone who was born and raised in Bagan,” Nichols said. The men are helpful in pointing out the differences between each of the pagodas and giving some historical background on the areas.

Village of Magway



Photos By Aleah Wilson

Travelers in search of an in depth cultural experience should take a visit to the Village of Magway. The small village is located across the Irrawaddy River. Visitors can enjoy a scenic boat ride through the river on their way to the village.

The small village is filled with amazing men and women who create a variety of crafts ranging from baskets to blankets. The natives make a living creating works of art.

Traveler Elle Bergevin had a humbling experience while visiting the village. “Going to the village was the greatest experience I had on my trip,” Bergevin said. “Being able to see how others around the world live on a day to day basis was amazing.”

The local women in the village taught Bergevin how to weave baskets and she was able to meet some of their children. “The people I met in the village were so kind hearted,” Bergevin said.

Shwezigon Pagoda



Photo By Aleah Wilson

Bright, glistening and gold. The Shwezigon Pagoda is breathtaking on a sunny day. The Buddhist structure located in Bagan is grand in size. The whole pagoda is gilded gold. The floor is covered in bright white marble and it's truly a tourist sight worth seeing.

Student Annie DeFreitas was stunned when she saw the pagoda. "It was a breathtaking experience to walk up to the huge pagoda," DeFeitas said. "The structure was so bright and beautiful." A great time to visit the stunning structure is during the afternoon. It's not too hot and travelers have a chance to take in the view.

DeFreitas also commented on how peaceful her time was. "Going to the pagoda during the afternoon allowed me to calmly embrace its beauty," DeFreitas said. "It wasn't crowded like some of the other pagodas I visited. That's an experience I'll never forget."

Sunrise hot air ballooning over the pagodas of Mandalay



Photo By Aleah Wilson

Trust me, the early morning wakeup is worth it. The views are spectacular and unlike anything in the world. This is something everyone must have on his or her itinerary.

I ballooned with a company called Oriental Ballooning. The early day begins with a small morning breakfast at the takeoff site. Travelers are then divided into smaller groups to be instructed on their specific location in the basket.

The pilot later provides all necessary safety rules and regulations to ensure a smooth flight. Once the balloons begin to inflate, travelers are told to board the basket. Oriental Ballooning provided excellent pilots that ensured our safety and made sure we had a great experience.

Student Kylie Coziahr truly enjoyed her hot air balloon experience. “Ballooning over Bagan was an experience I’ll never forget,” Coziahr said. “It was amazing to see hundreds of traditional pagodas while watching the sunrise.”

The best part of ballooning during sunrise is watching the city and people of Bagan from above. “I watched the locals wake up and begin their day below,” Coziahr said. “I waved to men, women and children while I flew over their houses.”

Oriental Ballooning provided an excellent experience that travelers will never forget and the sunrise was surreal. Ballooning is something no one should miss, it’s truly unforgettable.

YGNWalls



Delphine De Lorme proudly poses in front of her project – YGNWalls. Photo By Brooke Ortmayer

Myanmar, like any other country, has its conflicts. One woman is determined to inspire positive growth within her community. Delphine De Lorme is the creative director behind YGNWalls – a community outreach program.

Delphine moved to Yangon from Paris a few years ago to make a difference in a community she saw struggling. “I came and saw the alley filled with trash and it upset me,” De Lorme said. “I wanted to clean it up and make a difference.”

She invited local artists and members of the community to help clean the alley and paint brightly colored murals on the walls. “It makes me happy when I come out and see children playing in a clean area,” De Lorme Said.

The alley located in Central Yangon is now clean and accessible to visitors and locals. The walls are covered in detailed murals several feet high. It’s a safe space for children to play.

Traveler Brooke Ortmyer was fascinated by the project. “The alley is a unique spot filled with vibrant colors,” Ortmyer said. “ I truly loved hearing Delphine tell her story and seeing her passion come to life.”

It’s a spot that deserves a visit and some notice. Travelers should make sure to stop by when passing through the city. De Lorme hopes her project gains more recognition. “Creativity is contagious, pass it on,” De Lorme laughed.

Schwedagon Pagoda



Photo By Aleah Wilson

Located in central Yangon, the Schwedagon Pagoda stands tall. Architect Okkalapa of Burma created the Buddhist structure in the 6th century. Before entering the Buddhist structure, it's required that all visitors remove shoes and socks. This is standard for all pagodas and one might consider bringing some wipes for afterwards because you're feet can get pretty dirty from walking around barefoot. Be sure to wear appropriate clothing that covers shoulders and knees.

After entering the pagoda, the traditional practice of pouring water over a Buddha is seen executed by locals. People pour the water over the Buddha placed in front of their birthday. The day someone is born is significant to his or her astrological sign. Their current age is how many bowls of water are poured over the Buddha's head. Visitors can partake in the traditional practice by pouring the water nine times and make a wish or pray. Nine is a sacred and holy number in Buddhism.

Traveler Brielle Bonetti took part in the tradition during her visit. "It was wonderful to participate in blessing the Buddha on my day of birth," Bonetti said. "It

really gave me a chance to participate in something that a passerby tourist might have missed.”

The blessing is a great way to be open-minded about different beliefs. One can gain a better understanding and appreciation for the culture. “It was beautiful to see everyone come together under a common religion,” Bonetti said.

The country has an endless amount of cultural learning and adventure to offer. It shouldn’t be passed up when planning a trip to Asia. The unique culture and people of Myanmar are innately welcoming and travelers can fulfill a sense of adventure when visiting the beautiful country of Myanmar.