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A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette

Myanmar



Saw Myat Yin

For Review only

CultureShock!

A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette

Myanmar

Saw Myat Yin

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Culture shock is a state of disorientation that can come over anyone who has been thrust into unknown surroundings, away from one's comfort zone. *CultureShock!* is a series of trusted and reputed guides which has, for decades, been helping expatriates and long-term visitors to cushion the impact of culture shock whenever they move to a new country.

Written by people who have lived in the country and experienced culture shock themselves, the authors share all the information necessary for anyone to cope with these feelings of disorientation more effectively. The guides are written in a style that is easy to read and covers a range of topics that will arm readers with enough advice, hints and tips to make their lives as normal as possible again.

Each book is structured in the same manner. It begins with the first impressions that visitors will have of that city or country. To understand a culture, one must first understand the people—where they came from, who they are, the values and traditions they live by, as well as their customs and etiquette. This is covered in the first half of the book.

Then on with the practical aspects—how to settle in with the greatest of ease. Authors walk readers through how to find accommodation, get the utilities and telecommunications up and running, enrol the children in school and keep in the pink of health. But that's not all. Once the essentials are out of the way, venture out and try the food, enjoy more of the culture and travel to other areas. Then be immersed in the language of the country before discovering more about the business side of things.

To round off, snippets of basic information are offered before readers are 'tested' on customs and etiquette of the country. Useful words and phrases, a comprehensive resource guide and list of books for further research are also included for easy reference.

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INTRODUCTION

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Unlike most of the other books in the *CultureShock!* series, *CultureShock! Myanmar* is not written by an expatriate who has lived in the country described but by a native of that place. What is presented is a description of certain points of sensitivity for the foreigner, but from an insider's perspective. Consequently, it was with some trepidation that I undertook the task of writing this book for fear of a native familiarity causing me to miss the wood for the trees (or vice versa).

To balance the description as far as possible, questionnaires were sent out to a sample of people who had lived in or, more commonly, had visited Myanmar. Foreigners who have lived in Myanmar for longer periods are mainly diplomatic corps personnel and United Nations staff, many of whom were not readily accessible. Anecdotal evidence is supplied where questionnaires could not be used. Such examples help to describe possible difficulties, situations and things to look out for.

When *CultureShock! Myanmar* was first published in 1994, it had seemed to be ahead of its time and unlikely to be very useful, as Myanmar was so closed and isolated under strict military rule and visitors were very few compared to the numbers visiting neighbouring countries. Now that a civilian government has been elected into power in 2016, it is my hope that this book will be of use, not only to those who will visit, but also to those who stay longer to work and to help develop Myanmar's economy, education and health sectors for the better while experiencing its culture and enjoying its beauty.

If this book is also of use to younger Myanmar people who have gone abroad for economic or other reasons, to help them explain Myanmar culture, attitudes and perceptions to their children and their new friends of different cultures, then this book would have achieved some part of its purpose.

My sincere thanks to Ms Shirley Hew and Ms Shova Loh for making this book possible through their friendship and large doses of encouragement. My thanks and appreciation to Ms Patricia Herbert for helping me with the questionnaires, and to all the respondents who shared their experiences and gave me much useful information, also to Mr John Okell for helpful suggestions which I have incorporated. Many thanks to the Britain Burma Society and Derek Brooke-Wavell, Honorary Secretary of the Society, and also to the following individual authors and next of kin for kind permission to use material from *Lines from a Shining Land*: Sir Nicholas Fenn, Dr Glyn Court, Stella McGregor (Pauline McGregor Currien) and Peter Smart (Mrs Joan Smart). To Joanne Riccioni, my editor, thank you for your great patience in working on the manuscript and putting it all together.

All errors and omissions in subject matter are my own. Any additional information or corrections are most welcome through the publishers.

Quotations have been used without changing the words Burma and Burmese to Myanmar as that was the way they were written.

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DEDICATION

It is common to see ethnic Myanmar women carrying their children while going about their daily work.



To my parents and teachers
with gratitude,
and to my family
with love.

MAP OF MYANMAR



GEOGRAPHY, HISTORY AND POLITICS

CHAPTER 2



‘Burma. It is beautiful and it is sad.
Much of its sadness lies in its beauty.’
—Timothy Syrota, *Welcome to Burma
and Enjoy the Totalitarian Experience*

GEOGRAPHY

Many people do not know where Myanmar is although Myanmar occupies a large land area of over 677,000 sq km (261,391 sq miles), between two very large countries (in terms of area and population)—India on its west and China to the east. When it was known as Burma (up to 1989), it was often confused with Bermuda, an island in the Atlantic Ocean. Since the end of 2010 Myanmar has been in the news once again after the release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and surprising reforms toward ending its isolation of decades.

Myanmar lies between latitude 10 and 28 degrees north, and longitude 92 and 101 degrees east. Borders are shared with Bangladesh and India in the northwest, China in the northeast, and Laos and Thailand in the southeast. Towards the south and southwest are the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal.

Myanmar can be divided into distinct zones, namely the northern mountain ranges, the Shan plateau in the east, the central Dry Zone, the river valleys, the Ayeyarwady (or Irrawaddy) delta and the long Taninthayi (Tenasserim) strip in the south.

The western and northern mountain ranges are very high and form the outer spurs of the Himalayas. There is snow in the most remote parts, though most Myanmar have never been to these areas. However, visitors (mainly trekkers from the mountaineering associations) say that the firs and the rhododendrons in bloom are a particularly beautiful sight.

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The Shan plateau in the east rises about 1,000 m (3,280 ft) above sea level. The Thanlwin (or Salween) river, which has its source in Tibet, flows down the plateau through very narrow and unnavigable gorges. The Ayeyarwady, however, is navigable, and it is the longest river in the country, beginning in the Himalayas and flowing for more than 2,000 km (1,242 miles). As well as being a major means of transport, the Ayeyarwady's annual flooding during the rainy season makes its rich banks and delta area the most fertile in Myanmar for paddy farming.

The river valley effectively divides Myanmar into two areas, the east and west. The eastern area is more densely populated and is connected to Yangon (formerly known as Rangoon) and other major towns by road and railway networks. In contrast, the western areas have to be reached by riverboat or by bridges—the most famous, and at one time the only bridge, is the Innwa (Ava) Bridge (also known as the Sagaing Bridge) near Mandalay. Many new bridges have been built in the late 1990s with Chinese aid, for example at Myitkyina and Pyay (Prome).

The Dry Zone is a semi-desert area, roughly in the centre of the country, where thorny trees, shrubs and cacti are the

main vegetation. It is in this area that Mandalay and Bagan (Pagan) are located.

The Ayeyarwady delta is made up of many creeks and streams with banks of alluvial soils suitable for growing rice, the staple of the local diet. Many fish and shrimps are also available in this area and the delta is famous for various types of dried fish, shrimp and fish sauces and pastes. Here, a typical meal is one of rice, fish paste dip and fresh vegetables (boiled or raw) from the farmer's vegetable patch. Similarly, in the areas where cooking oil is produced, a simple meal would consist of rice mixed with oil and lightly salted.

The Taninthayi strip that lies towards the south is largely cut off from other parts of the country. In this region, there is a long mountain range stretching north to south and a narrow coastal strip. While the land offers tin mines and quarries, the chief economic activity here in recent years has been trade with Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore. However, to reach the most southerly parts, transport has to be by sea or air.

Towns and Cities

There are few large towns in Myanmar (estimated population 61 million, 2014) except for Yangon which has been the capital since colonial times until the end of 2005 (when the government moved the capital to a newly built city named Nay Pyi Taw (NPT), meaning “royal city”, near Pyinmana about 322 kilometres (200 miles) north of Yangon) and the main port. Yangon is a quiet and green city with two large lakes and a population of about 5 million. The city, however, since 2010 seems to have suddenly morphed into a modern city with numerous high-rise apartment blocks, hotels and large shopping centres. The other two main cities are Mandalay (population 1,208,099) and Mawlamyine (Moulmein) which has a population of 300,000. Other towns are relatively small.

Mandalay, the country's main cultural centre, has grown in spite of several fires that razed large parts of the city to the ground. New and finer buildings are currently being built and the talk is that the financial backing behind these ventures comes from a growing class of nouveau riche who

Myanmar was to take over the rotating chairmanship of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and host the 12th ASEAN summit meeting in 2006, but due to pressure from the Western countries over alleged human rights abuses and the continued house arrest of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi among other issues, Myanmar gave up its turn to the Philippines. With Suu Kyi's release and socio-economic reforms, Myanmar chaired ASEAN in 2014.

may possibly be drug-related traders. How true such rumours are is anybody's guess.

Yangon has also made efforts to spruce up appearances of late. This has included compulsory repainting, walling, fencing and road repairs. Again, many of the community's wealthier members appear to have contributed financially to these projects, which have also included the

construction of parks, fountains and small-scale amusement centres.

One should also note that street names in Yangon are now Myanmar names rather than English. For example, Windermere Road, a long and winding road named after the English river, is now Thanlwin Road, after the Myanmar river. Roads that were spelt according to British phonetics are now spelt the way they would be pronounced in Myanmar. For example, Prome Road, one of the longest roads in the city (it really does lead to the town after which it is named if you follow it), is now called Pyi (also Pyay) Road. After independence, many roads were renamed entirely, so Dalhousie, Fraser and Montgomery Streets became Maha Bandoola, Anawrahta and Bogyoke Aung San Street respectively, after Myanmar's famous generals. Indeed, you'll probably find an Aung San Street in every Myanmar town.

Sadly, many small Myanmar towns which were previously quite prosperous by virtue of being located along the railway route, have now sunk into poverty because of the greater use of roads. This has been brought about by the import of large numbers of pick-up trucks that are used for carrying goods and people from one town to another.

Climate

Myanmar has three seasons: the dry season from March to June; the wet season or monsoon from July to October; and the cool season from November to February.



Climate, of course, varies from region to region due to the country's diverse geography. In the river valleys and delta, including Yangon, the rainfall is about 254 cm (100 inches) per annum and the average temperature is about 32°C (90°F). The hottest period is in April and May when temperatures can reach about 40°C (104°F), while it is coldest in January when temperatures often fall to 16°C (60°F). In the very high mountains, in the northernmost part of the country, there is snowfall in the cold season and temperatures can drop to freezing point in the other mountainous regions in the ethnic states.

The coastal areas in the west and south have very high rainfall, about 508 cm (200 inches) per annum. In the rainy season, this means days and days of continuous rain, unlike Yangon and the towns south of the Dry Zone where rain usually alternates with sunny periods. Take note that this continuous rain and the excessive humidity which results tend to cause mildew and fungus on clothes, books and even furniture.

In the Dry Zone, temperatures can reach an incredible 50°C (122°F). To cope with such unbearable heat the people have a number of customs and habits. Many will move beds and mattresses outdoors onto pavements at night, returning to the house in the cool of the early hours;

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others sleep on mats sprayed with water; while some will bathe in a barrel at regular intervals, or even stay there!

On a visit to Nyaung-oo near Bagan, I was forced by the stifling heat to join the rest of the town trying to sleep outdoors. Unfortunately, I ended up being awake for most of the night, listening to the conversations of neighbours who had given up on sleep and were spending the night catching up on gossip. This gossip also included reference to a wake which was being held around the corner, said to be a death caused by bathing at the wrong hour. Because of the high temperatures, the locals believe that sickness and even death can be caused by taking baths in the afternoons or after being exposed to the sun for a long period.

In the Dry Zone, during the cool season, it is dusty, dry and quite cold at night. Temperatures can drop to about 15°C (59°F) or less in Mandalay or Mon-ywa, for example.

HISTORICAL MILESTONES

The Myanmar people are very proud of their history, which dates back to the founding of Bagan (Pagan) in the 9th century AD. The Myanmar Empire was once quite substantial, spreading as far as Assam and Manipur to the west and as far as Cambodia in the east. The Myanmar kings traditionally conceived of themselves and their empire as the centre of the universe and they ruled with absolute power. Later, however, in their dealings with the advancing British, this was to eventually prove their downfall as they did not have enough knowledge or experience of the outside world.

Early History

Myanmar's early history is shrouded in myth and legend. However, experts believe that the Ayeyarwady valley was inhabited 5,000 years ago by the Mon who entered from the region now known as Thailand and Cambodia and began to cultivate the land. At roughly the same time, a loosely knit group of tribes known as the Pyu migrated from their Tibetan home and settled in the upper Ayeyarwady valley. Excavations show that a great civilisation centred around the city of Pyi, also spelled as Pyay (Prome). However, the

Pyu were defeated by the Mon in the 8th century and the Bamar (Burmans), who had previously been subject to them, came into prominence.

The First Myanmar Empire

The Bamar established their kingdom at Bagan but it was two centuries later, under the rule of King Anawrahta in the 11th century, that the first Myanmar Empire was founded. During his reign, the Mon people in the south were conquered and most of the country was united, except for the Shan hills and parts of Rakhine and Taninthayi. He also brought the Tripitaka to Bagan, thus introducing Buddhism to the people, who were previously animists. However, when the kingdom fell to the Mongols in 1287, it disintegrated into small states with the Mon building a new state in Bago (Pegu), the Shan at Innwa (Ava) and the Bamar at Toungoo.

The Second Myanmar Empire

The second Myanmar Empire was founded by King Bayinnaung between 1551 and 1581. He regained territories lost by his predecessors and added to them Chiang Mai, Ayutthaya (both now part of Thailand) and Taninthayi. The capital was moved to Bago, which became an important port for trade with neighbouring countries. Later, in the 17th century, the capital was moved to Innwa when the British, Dutch and French trading companies were established in Myanmar. However, with help from the French, the Mon captured Innwa in 1752 and from there tried to control all of the country.

The Third Myanmar Empire

It was only after eight years of warfare that the Mon were finally defeated by King Alaungpaya who united the country and formed the third Myanmar Empire. His son and successor, Hsinbyushin, successfully invaded neighbouring Siam and destroyed Ayutthaya in 1767. It was this conquest which brought the Siamese influence to Myanmar arts, dance and music. Hsinbyushin's brother, Bodawpaya, later won Rakhine and did much to improve communications, education and

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the legal system in Myanmar. The Konbaung Dynasty which this family founded was the last dynasty to rule Myanmar before the British took it over as a colony.

British Rule

The British annexed Burma, as it was known then, in three stages, during the three Anglo-Burmese Wars of 1824, 1852 and 1886. In the first, they gained the Rakhine and Taninthayi territories; in the second, lower Burma was conquered; while the third resulted in the control of Mandalay and upper Burma. The royal family members and their retinue were exiled to India.

It was only in the first part of the 20th century that nationalist leaders came into prominence.

World War II and Independence

During World War II, Aung San formed the Thirty Comrades, a group which resisted British rule and looked to the Japanese for help in training forces to fight them. When the Japanese Occupation proved to be cruel and ruthless, the nationalists were forced to seek the help of the British to drive the Japanese out. The Burma Independence Army (BIA) finally liberated the country from the Japanese on 27 March 1945, a date now known as Armed Forces Day (previously Resistance Day).

After the war, independence from the British was

National Hero

The most famous nationalist leader was Myanmar's national hero, Aung San. Starting his political career as a young student at Rangoon University, he developed and led the Thakin Movement, *thakin* (meaning "master") being a term the Myanmar had to use when addressing the British. Members of the movement deliberately wore traditional dress, especially jackets made of rough reddish brown cotton called *pin ni*.

negotiated by the nationalists. However, General Aung San and other cabinet ministers were assassinated on 19 July 1947, now commemorated as Martyrs' Day. Independence was eventually won on 4 January 1948.

Protest and Insurrection

The insurrections and protests which broke out shortly after independence have in fact continued to the present day.

Up to the late 1950s, the political and economic situation was unstable and in 1958, the armed forces formed a caretaker government. Elections were held in 1960 to return power to civil rule. However, the insurrection became more severe with the Shan still claiming the right to secession which had been promised them in the Panglong Agreement of 1947.

A coup d'état in March 1962 brought the Revolutionary Council to power and, soon after, the government declared its socialist aims under policies known as The Burmese Way to Socialism. The Burma Socialist Programme Party was also officially formed, but the government's extreme isolationism and attempts to be self-sufficient caused severe economic repercussions. Protest manifested itself in terms of frequent student demonstrations and workers' strikes.

In 1988, these protests reached a head when a students' brawl in a tea shop sparked nationwide demonstrations. The protestors were brutally suppressed by a military coup and the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) formed a government. The country's name was changed from the Socialist Republic of Burma to the Union of Myanmar and the names of towns and roads were all changed to Myanmar equivalents. Rangoon became Yangon, its name in Myanmar language, meaning 'end of strife'.

By the time elections were held in May 1990, more than 200 political parties had been formed under proposals for a multiparty form of government. The largest of these, the National League for Democracy (NLD), was headed by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of General Aung San. Her party won the elections by a landslide, despite the fact that she herself was placed under house arrest in July 1989, after continuous harassment during her travels throughout the country giving talks and meeting people. She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 but, along with many of her supporters, remained under arrest, refusing to accept exile.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Saw Myat Yin was born in Yangon (Rangoon) in the post-war period. She was educated at the Methodist English High School and later at the University of Rangoon (now Yangon University). She is married and has two children. Saw Myat Yin is also the author of *Cultures of the World: Myanmar*, published by Marshall Cavendish Editions.