

Life in Myanmar

By Ms. Purnima Udyavar
purnimaudyavar@gmail.com

Abstract

Myanmar, the land of Pagodas had enchanted the world for centuries. The influence of Buddhism can be felt in its rich cultural heritage. Its vibrant culture, exotic flora and fauna, and delicious cuisine make this country a great destination for tourism.

Keywords

Myanmar, Yangon, Burmese, Pagoda

Introduction

Myanmar, previously called Burma, is a beautiful country nestled amidst fertile plains, plateaus, golden valleys, and the deep blue ranges of the Rakhine Yoma, Bago, Shan Hills and Tenasserim Hills that run in the North-South direction from the Himalayas. It has three river systems, Irrawaddy, Salween, and Sittaung. The majority of its population lives in the Irrawaddy valley, situated between the Rakhine Yoma and the Shan Plateau. Myanmar's neighbors are Bangladesh, India, Tibet autonomous region, China, Laos, and Thailand.

Theravada (not *Mahayana*) Buddhism is practiced by ~90% of the country's population, while the rest follow Hinduism or Christianity. The Burmese speak a Sino-Tibetan language which belongs to the southern Burmese branch of Tibeto-Burmese; it is the most widely spoken language after the Sinitic languages. Burmese culture is greatly influenced by its neighbors, Thailand and China - besides its own heritage passed down from the people of Mon. Myanmar's ancient Buddhist culture, languages, and education system has accepted the influences from British colonial rule, its neighbors China, Thailand, India, as well as rampant westernization.

The people of Myanmar are ever smiling, charming, friendly and helpful, and reach out to one and all with the greeting *Mingalaba* which means 'Hello'. They have a very simple lifestyle. People wake up early morning as their work starts at sunrise! Cooking at home

takes up a large part of the women's daily activity and is conducted in the age old tradition of their grandmothers. Locally sourced seasonal food is used and reflects the traditions that have been passed on from generation to generation. This traditional 'organic' way of cooking has continued into modern times despite the dramatically changed world scenario.

Shan rice is the staple food of the Burmese. Rice, often eaten with lentils and dried shrimp, lotus stems, etc., is an integral part of their cuisine. It is usually accompanied by a salad made from a variety of greens. Fish rice is considered to be a delicious meal, and contains a choice of shrimp, fish, pork, beef or mutton or green vegetables. *Mohinga* - a soupy rice noodle dish (also called fish soup) is very popular; it is one of the mainstays of Burmese cuisine and is considered the national dish of Myanmar. It is served at small stalls at almost every 100 meters on the street. Burmese people relish it as breakfast and also have it throughout the day. They believe that any visitor's journey through Myanmar is incomplete if they have not tasted this dish!

In a typical Myanmar marketplace, you see vibrant, colorful stalls that sell everything from native wild herbs, fresh greens, vegetables, fruits, meat and seafood. Street food is simply amazing with an array of tempting bites, snacks and meals from sweet potato chips, boiled peanuts, steamed corn, meat, vegetables and seafood on barbecue skewers or with noodles, fruit platters, and ice creams, to name a few. One can gulp it down with fresh fruit juices or chilled Myanmar beer, thus making it the perfect meal! Typically, every evening you see groups of Burmese sitting at tea shops eating savories such as steamed buns, samosas or noodles as they sip on a very light milky tea, or enjoy beer! The Burmese people not only drink tea made from dried tea leaves but even snack on a tea leaf salad prepared from dry green tea leaves cooked in their own flavor, served with a garnishing of crunchy beans. Throughout the day, most Burmese eat betel leaf and smoke tobacco.

The traditional costume in Myanmar is the Burmese *longyi* (similar to the Indian lungi) - a long piece of cloth wrapped around the waist covering the wearer from hips to heels. Most men wear vests or T-shirts over the *longyi*, while women wear knitted tops or T-shirts above their *longyi*. On special occasions, the *longyi* is paired with a European style jacket. Many of their clothes are imported from India, Thailand, Indonesia or China. The preferred footwear for most people is the comfortable flip-flop. Applying *Thanaka* on their face is another

distinctive feature and culture of Myanmar, and has been used by Burmese women for over 2000 years. The yellowish white cream is made from the bark of the *Thanaka* tree, and is available in the markets in the form of powder or the twigs are sold in small bundles.



Image 1: Women in Longyi



Image 2: Applying Thanaka

The Chinese Lunar New Year is celebrated in a big way in the Chinatown of Yangon (previously Rangoon) which is predominantly occupied by people of Chinese extraction. There is an all pervading festive feeling with bright lights, Chinese lanterns, song and dance performances, street shopping, and much more. The Chinese temple located in Chinatown is the main place of worship for the Chinese community in Yangon. Around the time India celebrates the festival of colors, Myanmar celebrates the Full Moon Day - Tabaung Pwè Pagoda Festival, called Paya Pwe locally. The city dons a festive look and the excitement is palpable! On this day, the Burmese people visit the shrines at Shwedagon Pagoda, the pride of Myanmar. Its golden dome stands tall in its full glory, and can be viewed from different parts of Yangon. The Thingyan festival, a four-day celebration also called the Water Festival, is celebrated widely as the Burmese New Year.



Image 3: Burmese praying

What to see and do in Myanmar

Myanmar's natural resources - timber, natural gas, rubies, and jade, provide a substantial proportion of the national income of this country, one of the poorest of the region. However, the country is now developing infrastructure and facilities for tourism that will fuel economic growth. Myanmar receives moderate rainfall; it is not surprising that Burmese homes are traditionally made with bamboo and sloping roofs. There are well-maintained gardens alongside the major roads. The lush green landscape makes it a delight to drive through the countryside and watch the beautiful sunsets. Wherever you travel in Myanmar, you see lots of pagodas and temples set amidst beautiful lakes and pretty flora. 'Padauk' - the yellow flower of the Burmese rosewood tree is the national flower of Myanmar; it symbolized strength, love, peace, and success. Since it blooms just once a year - in April, it is referred to as the Thingyan (April) flower. The Burmese place this flower at their altar and prominently display real or artificial Padauk flowers in their shops. The Buddhists regard the water lily as a symbol of enlightenment because it emerges from the mud and water and of resurrection because it closes at night and blooms with the first rays of the Sun.

Myanmar is a major shopping hub and a delight for tourists. It is famous for its Jade and

gems, jewelry, wood carving, lacquerware, sand paintings, paintings on canvas or paper, ceramics, textiles, and items made of palm and bamboo. The Bogyoke Aung San Market (previously Scott Market) is a huge bazaar located in central Yangon. The sprawling covered market comes alive every day with people drawn to its many stores selling Burmese art, handicrafts, souvenirs, antiques, handbags, jewelry, gem stones, etc. It also has several restaurants and art galleries.

Farmer's Markets are set up every Saturday at various parks in Yangon. These markets bring together individual organic farmers and their city based customers. Besides stalls selling fresh fruits and vegetables, they also boast of a flea market, food stalls, local arts and crafts, music and cultural events, and other fun activities that draw visitors like a magnet. These markets are bustling with shopping and eating choices! The Yangon Weekend Street Market is another great place to visit; it combines shopping with walking (when the weather is right) as one explores the multitude of quaint stalls set up under colorful umbrellas. These stalls sell everything from the day's fresh pick of fruit (plums, jackfruits, and the ripest of mangoes that are neatly packed or sold as cut fruit) to food, clothing, fashion accessories, and cane work. Myanmar's cultural scene literally comes to life with music, dance, food, drinks and merriment at this unique bazaar.

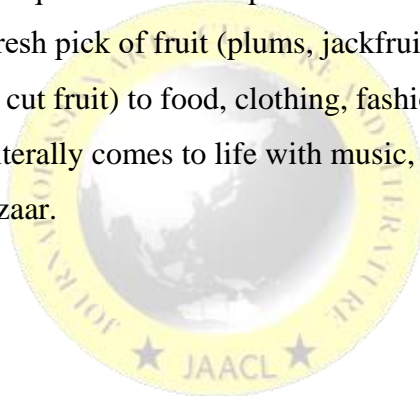




Image 4: Farmer's market

The Kali Bari temple is located in downtown Yangon – in a neighborhood that is considered to be the undefined ‘Little India’ of Yangon. Rubbing shoulders with locals of Indian extraction are Buddhists with their palms joined in prayer, for this temple that houses Hindu Gods and their pundits, also contains a beautiful Buddha idol to which people make offerings. The National Museum Myanmar at Yangon is a lovely experience as one can walk through the history of Burma, Burmese art, artefacts, paintings, historic memorabilia, ornaments, clothes and culture. The five-story museum founded in 1952 has an extensive collection from the ancient civilization of old Burma. The Lion Throne of the Burmese monarch is very precious, and I found it to be simply too exquisite. Indeed, having spent some time in this beautiful country, I cannot help but deeply appreciate the people and culture of our warm neighbor with whom we have had long standing ties.

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