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TRAVEL: A BURMESE BEAUTY

By Stuart Forster, Mumbai Mirror | May 15, 2016, 12.00 AM IST



The spotless freshwater lake around the Shan Hills has become Myanmar's hottest tourist attraction.

Change is afoot in Myanmar. Increasingly, international tourists are flocking to explore a country that was once regarded off limits. Inle Lake has rapidly established itself as one of the country's most popular destinations.

For years, many travellers boycotted Myanmar in protest of the military government's human rights record. Following years of reform, last November, the National League for Democracy won a decisive victory in the country's first general election in 25 years. As a consequence, a number of Western travellers now see Myanmar as a viable tourist destination.

Chic resorts have already opened along the shores of Inle Lake. A handful of international hotel chains have set up close to the body of water in Shan State. The lake is around 550 km north-east of Yangon and internal flights between Yangon and Heho Airport, approximately 46 km north-west of the lake's shore, takes around 70 minutes. Alternatively, one can opt for the 10-hour-long bus journey between Yangon and Nyaung Shwe, the main town in the vicinity. The road transfer from Heho to Inle Lake takes around 45 minutes. Factor in additional time to stop by at the Shwe Yaunghe Kyang Temple, which dates back to the late 19th century. The wood facade has oval openings to provide monks and novices with light to study manuscripts. If you're travelling with a photography enthusiast, be warned, you'll have your work cut out to drag your companion away from this photogenic stop.

The Shan Mountains sweep upwards around the body of water, which stands at an altitude of 880 metres above sea level. The hues under their undulating ridges change as the sun shifts position throughout the course of the day. Approximately 1,75,000 people live on or around Inle Lake. Six different tribal groups call it their home. The dominant group is the Intha people. Some people believe the hardworking Inthas were encouraged to settle to farm land in the region during the reign of King Narapatisithu, more than 800 years ago. Others think they migrated here from the country's south, around 600 years ago. The Inthas are renowned for cultivating crops on floating farms. Ingeniously, vegetation is bundled to create islands tethered between bamboo poles. Farmers harvest three crops a year. Their tomatoes provide the mainstay of the region's delicately spiced cuisine.

The crops are transported by boat and sold at markets at settlements around the shore. If you enjoy people watching, then make an effort to experience a market day. People from the various tribal groups can be seen side by side as they buy and sell goods.

Boat tours provide a means for visitors to explore the lake and to navigate the narrow channels between vegetation. Farmers wearing straw hats can be seen balancing on wooden rowing boats tending to their crops.



From top: Farmers balancing on wooden rowing boats; a woman at the Inpawkhon village working on wooden handlooms; the Shwe Yaunghe Kyang Temple; The Nga Hpe Chaung monastery; a woman harvesting lotus stems

It's hard not to wonder whether they've learnt a thing or two from the kinsmen, the so-called leg-rowers of Inle Lake. The fishermen balance on one leg on the prows of their boats, setting and drawing in their nets. With their other leg they grip and control a heavy wooden oar, steering their vessel in a remarkable feat of multitasking that most men are unable to match.

Lotus stems are also harvested from the lake. At Inpawkhon village, you can see women snapping them to extract fibres that are converted into threads, then woven into luxury fabric on wood handlooms. Women from the Kayan tribe, whose necks appear elongated due to brass rings, can be seen busy at looms.

In contrast, the elegant length of those women's necks, dumpy gold orbs are the key attractions for casual visitors to the Phaung Daw Oo pagoda. Over the years, pilgrims have pasted countless wafer thin layers of gold leaves on five statues of Buddha on the temples main altar. The figures now resemble golden eggs rather than the Enlightened One. In October and November, the statues are transported by boat around the lake as part of an 18-day festival that embraces boat racing.

The creaking teak floorboards of the Nga Hpe Chaung monastery are also home to a number of Buddha figures. Locals refer to the place of learning and worship as the "jumping cat temple". Many felines also reside within the shaded halls of the monastery and let themselves be stroked by visitors. It's said that, until very recently, the monks would encourage the cats to perform tricks — including jumping through hoops — to earn titbits of food as reward. That, though, is no longer the case.

Changes are taking place, some more subtly than others. Visiting Inle Lake is not just a great way to take in the area's natural beauty, it's also an ideal venue to experience the land's various traditions and get an insight in to their culture.

BEFORE YOU PACK

WHEN TO GO

Inle Lake is a destination that can be visited throughout the year. Even in the rainy season, from May until October, the region receives only intermittent showers.

WHERE TO STAY

Overnight in style at the luxury Sanctum Inle Resort (www.sanctum-inle-resort.com; Maing Thauk Village; +95 92 52818805) where chic, minimalist rooms cost from \$240 a night. The price of Junior Suites starts at \$328 a night. The balcony of the Refectory restaurant overlooks the lake. The resort's Sanctum Spa offers an array of treatments.

The four-star Novotel Inle Lake Myat Min Hotel (www.novotel.com; Mine Thauk Village; +95 92 51041570) has a spa, a fitness room plus an 18-hole golf course. Rooms cost from \$74 a night.

WHERE TO EAT

The Bamboo Hut (War Taw Village) is a highly regarded local restaurant serving dishes ranging from steamed fish to seasonal salads.

Treat yourself to a meal in the restaurant of the stylish Inle Princess Resort (www.inle-princess.com; Magyinzin Village; +95 9 5251407). The serene dining room has wood floors and Shan paper lamps hang from the high ceiling.

GETTING THERE

Singapore Airways offers return economy class flights between Mumbai and Yangon International Airport via its Singapore hub. Prices start from around Rs 48,000. From there, a number of domestic airlines, including AirKBZ and Yangon Airways, fly to Heho, the nearest airport to Inle Lake.

COST FOR 10 DAYS

Once you're in Myanmar the costs of food and transport are relatively low unless you head to luxury resorts. Around \$100 (Rs 6,690) per couple per day should adequately cover costs and a week-long trip can be wrapped up in \$1,000 (around Rs 70,000).

VISA REQUIREMENTS

Indian citizens flying into Yangon can apply for an e-visa for entry to Myanmar. For further information, visit www.myanmardelhi.com

TRAVEL INFORMATION

Myanmar — www.myanmar.travel Inle Lake Tourism — www.inlelaketourism.com Hotels and tourism — www.myanmar-tourism.org

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