

Home > In Depth

## SEEKING SERENITY ON INLE LAKE, BURMA

New resorts and tours operators are rocking the peaceful waters of Inle Lake in a scramble to ready for the cresting wave of Burma-bound travelers. BY MERRITT GURLEY

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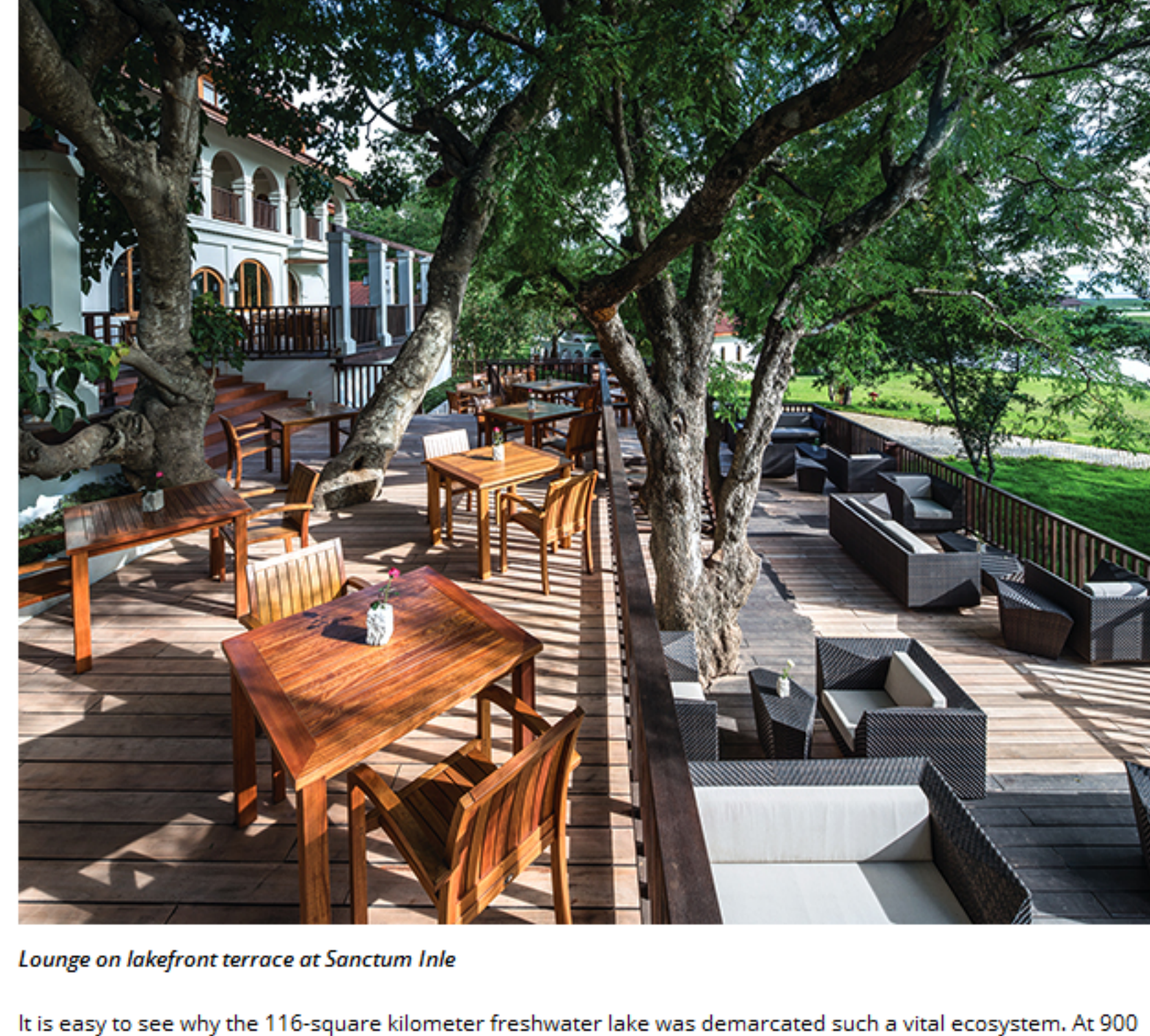


**THE SKIES OPEN AND THE LAKE**, suddenly, is everywhere, pouring down from above, seeping across the horizon, thrashing beneath our long-tail boat. Then, just as suddenly, as if to the cue “let there be light,” the sun splits through the clouds, tames the rearing waters, and paints a gaudy rainbow across the wild blue yonder. The lake, now a perfect mirror, reflects the arc in a full circle, a rainbow bull’s eye, and in the center, the Sanctum Inle jetty, positioned right in time for our arrival.



*Inle Lake’s Intha fisherman paddle with remarkable balance*

As we putter up to the wooden gazebo on the waterfront, the background is all Burma with wild green hills and the intractable crawl of tropical flora, but the architecture, with broad arches and a central courtyard surrounding a marble fountain, would look more at home in Madrid. Sanctum Inle, which is scheduled to grand-open next month, is bringing modern luxury to the lakefront, a break from the rustic-chic rooms that have been gathering dust on these shores for years. Picturesque Inle, which last June became the first place in Burma to join the unesco World Network of Biosphere Reserves, is a prime target for the travelers pouring through the country’s ever widening doorway and Sanctum exemplifies the new class of international hotels lining up to wave them in.



*Lounge on lakefront terrace at Sanctum Inle*

It is easy to see why the 116-square kilometer freshwater lake was demarcated such a vital ecosystem. At 900 meters above sea level, the basin lies in the palm of the southern Shan Hills, where the scenery is a farrago of misty mountains, jungled hummocks, rice paddies and even wine vineyards. The lake itself is dotted in lily pads, mint-green marshes, half-sunken stupas, stilted villages and floating vegetable gardens. Some of the endemic wildlife, like the Inle Lake danio fish, can be found nowhere else on Earth. This is also the only place to see Intha fishermen whose precarious one-legged paddling stance and conical bamboo traps have become icons of Inle. Watching their efforts play out in person feels like having magical binoculars to the past. Most of the local industries have remained unchanged for generations: rolling cheroot cigars, silver work, boat-building, ceramics and hand weaving garments. The flora and fauna are ancient and the culture is a living piece of history, but easier access, new tours and upscale hotels have these quiet waters rippling with the tides of change.

“There was only one hotel here when I was a child and it was always empty,” my guide Myint Aung says. “Now there are many, and they are all full, and every year more are built.” Yes, international brands are descending like egrets on the shallows. A Novotel, the first in Burma, opened in November 2014, and later this year should bring the launches of an MGallery and a Hilton. Developing tourism while preserving the environmental and cultural charm of the destination is kind of like, as the Burmese saying goes, trying to catch two eels at the same time. Yet, properties are pulling it off. Accor has implemented a sustainability program and is introducing one of the country’s most sophisticated water treatment systems, and Sanctum works with the surrounding communities to minimize impact wherever possible.

Mindfulness, serenity, harmony: Sanctum Inle takes the tenets of Buddhism beyond just codes of practice, and into the actual design as well. “It is a blend between the monasteries you find here and those in Spain,” says Philippe Arnaud, the general manager of Sanctum Inle. At first it seems too ascetic a concept to be driving a luxury resort, but the more I explore, the more sense it makes. The lake provides such a tranquil setting that it invites reflection. The interior designer, Brigitte Dumont de Chassart, is based in Paris but her influences seem to span the whole of Europe, with Romanesque loft ceilings and minimalist Scandinavian-style furnishings in the room types that range from the Cloister Classics to the two-story Abbey suite. Arnaud describes Sanctum as a merging of “the spiritual and the secular, the past and the present, East and West.” He could be talking about modern Inle as well.



*Inle’s famous Phaung Daw Oo Pagoda*

I ask Myint Aung what he makes of the mad-dash development churning up the lake he calls home. “It is very good for us,” he says, which doesn’t surprise me as his livelihood is linked to the boom. He gives it a little more thought as we motor past a golden stupa and boatyards docking gilded barges. “We are losing something too. Some of the men on these boats aren’t real. They are fake fishermen, hoping tourists will pay them to take pictures.” That’s an unsettling notion and it has me eyeing each stilted house with suspicion. We pass a thriving tomato garden floating like jade jetsam and there behind it is a fisherman, balanced on one foot, thrusting his net across the water. I raise an eyebrow at my guide.

“No, no,” Myint Aung tells me. “He’s real. He’s a true fisherman. Here you will still find so many true things.” Let there be light.



*Plush pillows and purple accents in a Sanctum suite*

### FURTHER AFLOAT

New tours are offering wider access to remote areas of the lake.

### INDEIN CREEK

On Inle’s western bank, this narrow twisting creek is lined with paddy fields, toiled by farmers and water buffaloes, and dotted with more than 1,000 ancient stupas. “The trip takes you farther and shows you more of Inle than most tours,” says Grace Ei, head of tours at FlyMya, which began offering the day-long excursion two months ago. [flymya.com](#); seven-hour tour **US\$127**.

### SAGAR

A three-hour boat ride across Inle will bring you to the seldom-visited sunken city of Sagar, with its 100 half-submerged stupas and the quiet villages of the Pa-O hilltribe, followed by an overnight stay in a quaint eight-room lodge. “Not many tourists go to Sagar,” my guide Myint Aung says. “It is an unusual scene, with so much history half hidden in the water.” [backyardtravel.com](#); **US\$249 per person**.

### ORIENTAL BALLOONING

December through February, you can take a hot-air balloon ride for an aerial view of the mountains and shores of Inle. “We are very proud to fly there,” says operations manager Ni Ni Khaing, “as we can show an amazing bird’s-eye view of the lake’s most beautiful places.” This experience launched a year ago, but is not widely advertised. [orientalballooning.com](#); **US\$420 per person**.

### THE DETAILS

#### GETTING THERE

Eight local airlines fly into Heho. Book flights to Inle online through [FlyMya](#), a service that just launched last year. It is a 45-minute drive from Heho to Nyaung Shwe, the main town near Inle. It is a 30-minute boat ride or an hour drive from Nyaung Shwe to Sanctum Inle; travel times vary by property, depending on where they lie on the lake.

#### Sanctum Inle Resort

This Spanish-style resort with a monastic motif intends to inspire reflection, with 96 lakeside villas, a bar serving up local wines and ales, a spa, boutique shop, restaurant and cigar lounge. **Doubles from US\$188**.

#### Novotel Inle

The first Novotel in Burma, this property has 122 contemporary suites and villas on the lake, each with its own separate bedroom and living area. **Doubles from US\$180**.

#### Villa Inle

An indie but a goodie, Villa Inle has rooms looking right out over the water, and an infinity pool set in their sprawling gardens with a view of the lake. **US\$391**.



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