

HOMES • FAMILY • ARTS • FOOD • TRAVEL • FASHION • HEALTH • BEAUTY

expat

EXPATLIVING.SG

# LIVING

JULY 2017

*Explore:*

Exotic India  
and Sri Lanka

**Get Motivated:**

Try Personal  
Training!

**CBD Dining  
Hotspots**

**50+** Cool  
Furnishing  
Ideas

**PHOTO  
COMPETITION**

Find out  
who won!  
**p78**



# A STEP BACK IN TIME

## Cruising Myanmar's Inle Lake





Time stands still at Inle Lake in central Myanmar's Shan Hills. KATIE ROBERTS explains why this stunning region deserves a place on your bucket list – and how to see it in style at a new resort.

For years, my plan to visit Myanmar was thwarted by unforeseen events, so when I finally found myself standing on the tarmac at tiny Heho Airport with hubby Sean (and the kids safely with their grandparents), I was feeling very pleased with myself. Door-to-door, the journey took almost a day, but leaving urban Singapore at 8am and arriving at this rural lake by 4pm was utterly worth it. And the best bit? You can visit any time of the year – summer and winter are equally appealing and enjoyable.

### SEE: Life on the Lake

Mellow and uncontrived, Inle Lake is home to tens of thousands of residents who, apart from having adopted boat engines and mobile phones, follow a traditional lifestyle. Being 22km from north to south and 12km from east to west, the lake can really only be explored by boat, and preferably one with

a motor rather than oars, although the latter is of course more relaxing – for the passenger, anyway.

There's much to see on a one-day trip around Inle Lake, including the **Intha** fishermen who have traditionally rowed their wooden canoes with one leg wrapped around the oar to leave their hands free for fishing and managing their conical fishing nets. An image of one of these men, backlit by a glorious sunrise, has made the region justifiably famous, and is just as impressive to see in person.

Our itinerary included a look at the **floating gardens**, a term that fails to evoke the huge scale of the thousands of acres of tomatoes, chillies and flowers that seemingly float on the lake surface. These gardens are an important source of food and income; mud is dredged from the bottom of the lake and piled onto bamboo sticks that are lashed together to form a bed thick enough to support trellises. While the long-term sustainability of this agricultural practice is in question, it's an impressive sight, especially when villagers row in and out between the lines of plants to harvest their crops.





Inle's "five-day market" is held in five different locations over five days. No matter where you visit (we caught the action at **Nam Pan**), it's a haven for souvenir hunters and photographers seeking to snap local people doing their shopping. The market stocks everything from locally made cigarettes to food, clothes, boat parts and household supplies; villagers pack their purchases securely into long-tail boats before motoring home to their stilt houses.

Cottage industries abound on and around the lake, and opportunities to observe craftsmen at work are included in many tours. It's impossible not to admire the skill and patience that goes into lotus-silk weaving, bamboo crafts, umbrella-making, cigarette-making, metalworking (knives), boat-making, and silver-smithing – and there are numerous opportunities to purchase souvenirs.

Cultural and religious sites abound: they include **Phaung Daw Oo Pagoda**, a massive Buddhist temple; **Nga Phe Chaung Monastery**, famed for its jumping cats; and **Inthar Heritage House**, renowned for its art gallery, hotel training school and Burmese cat breeding centre (unfortunately closed on the day we tried to visit).

If there's a must-visit, it's the **Indein Pagoda**. This ramshackle complex of a thousand Shan stupas dating from the 14th to the 18th century rises higgledy-piggledy up a hill. Those at the top are adorned in gold and silver, and with hundreds of tiny bells that chime in the wind. There were few tourists the day we visited, and it felt otherworldly; almost as if Buddha himself was blowing the breeze. We spent a good hour scrambling amongst the older, more dilapidated stupas, and we braved the weeds to snap some Indiana Jones-worthy photos.

We managed to fit all that in with a leisurely stop for lunch before motoring back to the jetty at Sanctum by about 3pm. The fascinating tour was arranged by the hotel and at US\$35 was absolutely value for money. If we'd had another day, we could have headed further south and explored more of the lake.



Young monks in Nyaung Shwe Monastery



Boats gathered at Nam Pan outdoor market



Inle Lake is famous for its unique style of aquaculture





## STAY: Monastic Splendour

Truth be told, I was coming down with flu when we arrived at Inle. Not only is illness unwelcome holiday baggage, it also changes how you feel about your accommodation.

Sometimes when you make a booking, it's with this idea in mind: "We'll be out touring all day, so we just need a room to sleep in". At other times, you think: "We'll just want to chill out at the hotel and relax." Thankfully, I'd opted for the latter, and had also added an extra day to our itinerary, giving us three full nights and days at Inle Lake's new **Sanctum Inle Resort**. It proved perfect for laying low with a lurgy – a couple of quiet walks on the edge of the lake, and a few lovely meals before taking the boat trip on the final day were more than satisfying.

This 90-room resort has been designed in Spanish monastery style, complete with cloistered arches and lashings of beautiful teak and rain-tree wood. The proportions are lavish, and the final flourishes of French designer Brigitte Dumont de Chassart have contributed to making this a beautiful and luxurious retreat.

Rooms range in size from 40 to 150 square metres, and feature lofty ceilings, natural wood floors, plush beds, air-conditioning, Wi-Fi and cable TV. There are four different room types and inter-connecting rooms for families and groups, plus larger free-standing villas. The monastic-style windows and large doors open to wide verandahs that are perfect for contemplating the lake, the rice paddies, the farmers tending water buffalo, and the sun setting behind distant hills.

The in-house spa features a wide range of treatments, including a Burmese massage, which is said to be like a Thai-style treatment but without oil. I opted for the signature treatment, a tamarind full-body scrub, and was lathered in a chunky brown paste consisting of fresh tamarind, herbs and salt; I felt very clean and fragrant afterwards.

There's a swimming pool to cool off in, but the climate is mild and pleasant year-round owing to Inle Lake's location on a plateau 800 metres above sea level. Peak season is November to February, and I'm assured it's something akin to an English winter. They light a fire in the cosy bar, and that's when the beautiful Scottish wool blankets will be needed as you snuggle up in the sublime lounge with a good book, and possibly a whisky.





The famous floating gardens

## SURROUNDS: Beyond Inle Lake

- Grab one of the hotel's free bikes and explore Red Mountain Winery; the roads are relatively quiet
- Visit Nyaung Shwe town
- Head off to Kalaw, to the Green Valley Elephant Camp
- Visit Pindaya, a cave of 9,000 Buddha statues; it's a 2.5-hour drive from the lake, and there are also potters and paper parasol crafters in the vicinity
- Take a hot-air balloon ride over the lake



## SAVOUR: Burmese Cuisine

The delicate local cuisine is unique, though influenced by Myanmar's Thai and Indian neighbours. *Mohinga* is a popular dish all over the country: it consists of a fishy broth of ground chickpeas and vermicelli noodles, topped with a squeeze of lime juice and a sprinkle of chilli flakes. Like Chef Lin (pictured), I could eat it every day of the week! One of 11 in the kitchen at Sanctum Inle Resort, he worked abroad in Doha in the Middle East, and also in the Maldives, before returning to Myanmar.



The resort is self-sustaining, with a vegetable garden for salad, herbs and fruit; it also bakes its own bread. Though the food changes every three months to reflect the season, popular mainstays on the restaurant menu include fish in banana leaf, Shan noodles and tea leaf salad. With a terrace overlooking the lake and indoor and outdoor dining options, this is a divine spot to enjoy breakfast, lunch and dinner.

## SNAP: Photography Heaven

Inle Lake is truly a photographer's paradise. Whether you're capturing the busy markets, the sun setting over the lake, or a one-legged fisherman, there's an abundance of stunning scenes. Just make sure your camera card has enough storage capacity!

## Getting to know the locals

Sanctum's Resident Manager Nyo Nyo lived away from Myanmar for 15 years while working in hospitality at the Shangri-La in Dubai and Muscat. She decided to return home to be part of the opening team at this luxurious resort. Nyo Nyo speaks perfect English – all Sanctum staff learn English in school, and a teacher visits the resort to conduct additional in-house training. As for touring the area, she recommends a visit to the Indein Pagoda. "I love travelling up the weirs by boat, watching as the water level gets higher and higher – it's an exciting trip," she says.



## Make it happen

Opening room rates at Sanctum Inle Resort ([sanctum-inle-resort.com](http://sanctum-inle-resort.com)) start from US\$284 per night. Flights between Yangon and Heho Airport take 75 minutes on KBZ Airways (\$150 per person); it's a one-hour ride by car to Sanctum Resort from the airport. Myanmar visas can be arranged online. [EL](#)