

Myanmar (formerly Burma)

Pronounce its name correctly (MEE-ah-mah) and you'll be sure to impress the locals!

Note: Myanmar is still a country in transition as it opens up to more foreign visitors, and so travel information to the country is quite changeable.

Visas

Tourist visas are single entry only and allow you to stay in Myanmar for 28 days. They have to be used within a 90-day window after they are issued. You always need a visa in advance of coming to Myanmar. The visa fee is \$20. You can apply for the visas online through the Myanmar Embassy's website, which has more information about visa requirements (http://www.mewashingtondc.com/visa_form_1_en.php).

Climate

The climate in Myanmar varies depending on elevation, but most of the country is considered tropical or subtropical. There are three distinct seasons:

Cold dry season	November - February	68° - 75° F
Hot dry season	March - April	86° - 95° F
Hot wet season	May - October	77° - 86° F

From June to August, rainfall can be constant for long periods of time, particularly on the Bay of Bengal coast, and in Yangon and the Irrawaddy Delta. The rain is less intense in September and October.

For these reasons, more tourists travel to Myanmar during the cold dry season. During those months, accommodations are more limited and potentially more expensive. Try booking ahead to avoid paying high prices for last-minute rooms. The hot muggy weather keeps many tourists away in other seasons, making some prices lower and accommodations easier to come by.

As a general rule, temperatures and humidity become lower at higher altitudes. In Chin State in the west, and parts of Shan State in the east, temperatures can get close to freezing, and in the Himalayan far north they may drop below zero.

Clothing

With generally high temperatures in the popular locations around the country, lightweight cotton and linen clothing is recommended for most of the year; warmer clothes may be needed for the evenings, which can sometimes be cool. Even outside the rainy season there can on occasion be downpours, so it is advisable to pack a light raincoat. Traveling to higher altitudes and further north, it is advisable to take warmer clothes, particularly in the cool season, when temperatures can drop significantly.

Budgeting

Accommodations and Food

Traveling in Myanmar can be very inexpensive, although the sudden spike in tourists since 2012 has inflated the cost of accommodations generally. The nascent tourism industry also suffers from a shortage of hotels, keeping prices comparatively high. Budget-friendly hostels can still be found, costing as little as US\$8 to \$25 per night. Thirty dollars can get you more space, and will also likely include air conditioning and a private bathroom. You can find luxury and style from around \$70 and up. The most prestigious hotels in Yangon can reach \$600 per night. (Be aware that money spent at some top-end, government-owned hotels does not contribute to the local economy the way staying at smaller locally-owned guesthouses will.) Dining is generally very affordable, as a traditional meal costs just \$3 USD or less. Upscale restaurants in cities and major tourist spots will cost significantly more. Tap water is not safe to drink, but bottled water costs around 30 cents per bottle.

Transportation

Buses cost \$7 to \$30 depending on the length of the journey and the class of bus (bring ear plugs). Domestic flights typically cost between \$40 and \$200 for a single-leg journey. Trains are slower than the bus, and tickets range from \$10 to \$25 when booking online (<http://www.go-myanmar.com/booking>) for "Upper Class" seats or sleepers. Rental cars start around \$70 per day, but are generally not practical for foreign visitors unused to the extremely poor road conditions.

Within cities, taxis are available, with costs varying depending on the travel distance. Be sure to bargain with the taxi driver before you get in the cab. Pickup trucks are the cheapest option, and are mostly used by locals. They are uncomfortable and usually very crowded, but they can be great for shorter distances, costing less than \$1.

Currency

The kyat (pronounced "chat") is the official currency of Myanmar. The US dollar is also widely used as an alternative currency, particularly for larger purchases. Foreigners are sometimes expected to pay in USD for hotels, high-end restaurants, flights, and access to historical sites. If payment is made in kyat for these transactions, it may be at a worse rate. You should expect to exchange roughly half of the money you take to Myanmar into kyat, and even more if you will spend more than a few days outside of Yangon, Mandalay, or May Pyi Taw.

IMPORTANT NOTE! US dollar bills must be in PERFECT CONDITION. Blemishes of any kind – creases, marks, folds, etc. – may result in a far worse rate of exchange or may not be accepted at all. Pre-2006 dollar bills or ones with the letters AB and CB at the start of the serial number (top left corner of each note) may not be accepted. Keep

bills, both American and Burmese kyat, in a folder rather than a wallet to keep them clean and flat.

Take plenty of \$10, \$5, and \$1 bills for hotels, flights, and historical sites, and \$100 or \$50 bills for exchanging to kyat. Money can be exchanged at banks in the downtown of larger cities and at most major airports (rates at banks will generally be better than at airports). Avoid using money exchangers on the street, who may try to lure you with better rates. It is said that they cleverly short change you unless you are willing to count your money three times.

There are recently some ATMS throughout the country that accept international bank and credit cards (most are concentrated in Yangon, Mandalay, Nay Pyi Taw, Bagan, and Inle Lake). Cardholders can withdraw local currency, and use their cards at a growing number of major outlets. Currently the only American cards accepted are Visa and Mastercard. For ATM cash withdrawals, there is a K5,000 (around \$4) transaction fee, and a withdrawal limit of K300,000 (about \$250) per transaction.

Telecommunications

You may find that telecommunication systems in Myanmar are antiquated and access is patchy and slow. However, the situation is changing almost every month, and infrastructure is gradually improving.

Mobile Phones

SIM cards sold by Telenor, Ooredoo, and MPT networks are now generally available for K1,500. They can be bought at numerous street-side retailers in most larger towns, cities, and tourist sites. To purchase a SIM card, foreigners need to have photocopies of their passport photo page and Myanmar visa page, as well as one passport photo. SIM cards are 3G mobile data enabled (although speeds can be slow) and standard SIM and micro SIM cards are available.

International roaming with an increasing number of foreign mobile networks is now possible in Myanmar; the situation is changing fast, so it is best to check with your operator.

Mobile network access is often patchy or non-existent in rural areas, but usually works well in towns.

Land Lines

Phone stands can be found on streets and in shops around Myanmar. Local calls cost around K100 per minute. International calls cost over US\$5 per minute and can only be made from hotels; only some call stands will allow international calls. Be careful, as you may be charged for calls that fail to connect.

To make calls from Myanmar to another country, dial 00 then the international code for the country you are calling, then the local area code (minus the 0).

To make calls to Myanmar from abroad, dial your country's international access code, then 95 and the local area code (minus the 0). Be warned that making calls to Myanmar can be difficult: calls will often not connect, particularly to numbers outside of Yangon, Mandalay, and Nay Pyi Taw.

Internet

These days, you can find an internet café or hotel with wifi even in remote locations in Myanmar. However, internet speeds can be extremely slow, especially in rural areas. Prices at internet cafes are usually around K500 per hour, although they may be higher outside cities. You can find free wifi at many restaurants and bars.

Due to bandwidth restrictions, internet speeds can change markedly according to demand through the day. If you use Gmail and you are working or spending an extended period of time in Myanmar, it is worth downloading Gmail Offline; this works much better than regular Gmail with slow connections, and also allows you to work offline.

Previous government internet restrictions have now been lifted, so people are free to access most websites and services – including Facebook, Twitter, Gmail, and so on.

Electricity

The electricity supply in Myanmar is unreliable; black-outs can occur regularly, particularly in rural areas. It is therefore advisable to have a flashlight for the occasional drops into darkness, particularly if you are staying in budget accommodation.

Electrical outlets in Myanmar are 220-240 Volts (the United States' are 120 Volts), and electrical sockets tend to be one of the two European standard types: the 'Type C' Europlug and the 'Type E'/'Type F' Schuko; some sockets take multiple plug types. It is advisable to take a universal adaptor that fits a variety of socket types.

All luxury hotels and most mid-range hotels have generators for back-up electricity, which is usually available 24 hours a day.

Vaccinations and Medical Care

Vaccinations and disease preventions should be taken before traveling to Myanmar. The following are the most commonly recommended: Hepatitis A and B, Diphtheria, Polio, Tetanus, Japanese Encephalitis B, Rabies, Tuberculosis, Yellow Fever, Typhoid, and Malaria. These are usually administered in a single injection.

If you take regular medication, you should make sure to have enough for your entire stay; buying over-the-counter drugs in Myanmar should be avoided for safety reasons.

Ask your doctor ahead of time about prescription-strength medication to treat traveler's diarrhea, and how you should plan to rehydrate if/when you experience symptoms. You should use DEET insect repellent outside of major cities.

Always consult a doctor or travel clinic before travelling to Myanmar – and do so around eight weeks before your trip. UM affiliates can visit the University Health Service's travel website (<https://www.uhs.umich.edu/travelhealth>) for more information, travel precautions, and contact information to make an appointment.

Avoid public hospitals in Myanmar if possible as they may be unsanitary. Outside of Yangon, reliable medical care can be difficult to find. The following medical centers are recommended in Yangon: International SOS Clinic, Parami Hospital, Asia Royal Hospital, Bahosi Medical Center. Outside of Yangon, larger hotels will be able to recommend doctors and clinics with experience treating foreigners. In the case of very serious illness, it may be advisable to be treated in Bangkok. You should make sure to take out comprehensive travel insurance before traveling to Myanmar.

Safety and Security

Myanmar is very safe in terms of personal security in the areas that foreigners are allowed to visit. Incidents of crime against foreigners are extremely low and Yangon is considered to be one of Asia's safest large cities, with no areas that need to be avoided. Pickpockets are commonplace, however, so avoid keeping valuables in back pockets, and be aware of your belongings out in public.

People dressed as Buddhist monks and asking for money are not truly monks, as begging for money is against Buddhist teaching. True monks do accept alms, but those who make the rounds with alms bowls normally do so in the very early hours of the morning. You may sometimes be approached by 'money changers' and people trying to sell things (their statements should not always be taken at face value), but this will usually be done in a good-natured manner. In fact, you will often find that people approaching you simply want to take the opportunity to talk to a foreigner and maybe practice their English.

Some Issues to be Aware Of

The vast majority of people in Myanmar are friendly and helpful, but there are various safety and security issues to be aware of:

- Roads, pavements and many types of transport are generally in a very bad state of repair. Cars are sometimes driven with little thought to road safety or discipline and vehicles are often driven at night without their lights on.
- When walking, particularly at night, you should be careful where you step. Pavements can have big holes in them and, because of bad lighting and frequent electricity black-outs, taking a flashlight is a good idea.

- While the areas in which foreigners are permitted to travel are totally safe, other areas are not. Some parts of Myanmar, particularly border areas, are held by independent national groups that have been at war with the government for many years (although most have now signed ceasefire agreements). Travel to these areas is highly restricted, and roads throughout Myanmar have regular checkpoints for identification purposes. To find out more about travel to these places, go to destinations. To find out more about the background to the conflict, go to about Myanmar.
- Tap water is not safe to drink; you should always buy bottled water.
- Outside established tourist and top-end restaurants, food preparation is not always up to western standards. It is advisable to take daily probiotics as a precaution, and diarrheal medication if symptoms occur. A doctor may be able to prescribe greater-strength medication in preparation for your travels. Take care to rehydrate yourself.
- It is important to guard against insect bites. See **Vaccinations and Medical Care** for more information.

Some areas of Myanmar do remain off-limits for tourists due to local violence. Some restricted areas can be accessed with an appropriate visa, but these are rarely given. For an up-to-date list of permitted areas, visit <http://www.myanmar-tourism.org/index.php/tourist-information/permitted-areas>.

Women Traveling Alone

Women travelling on their own are unlikely to encounter any problems, although short skirts and bare shoulders might attract some unwanted attention or accusing looks in a country that is deeply Buddhist. Modest dress is recommended regardless of gender.

Women are sometimes restricted from specific areas of religious sites, such as Mount Kyaiktiyo, where women cannot touch the golden rock itself; although here – as everywhere – women are in general free to move around. Women should avoid any physical contact with monks, although friendly conversation is perfectly acceptable.

LGBTQ+ Travelers

Although Myanmar is a socially conservative country and homosexuality is still technically illegal, the LGBTQ+ community is growing in profile and trouble is unlikely to occur. In more remote parts of the country attitudes may differ, and overt signs of same-sex affection may be frowned upon. It is customary in Myanmar to hold hands with close friends of the same sex/gender, and so this will not likely be viewed unfavorably, but in a Buddhist society that values modesty in general, stronger displays of affection—regardless of gender—will likely draw disapproval.

Muslim Travelers

There has been some violence between Buddhists and minority Muslims in Myanmar. Travelers may also encounter some anti-Muslim sentiment to a degree similar to that in the United States in recent years. In Myanmar, on a day-to-day basis, particularly in larger cities, the Buddhists and Muslims tend to co-exist peaceably.

Accessibility

With infrastructure that is often rooted in a different age, travel for people with disabilities can be very difficult in Myanmar. Buildings rarely have facilities for wheelchairs, and buses and trains never do. It is advisable to consult specialist travel companies in your own country.

Language and Place Names

Myanmar is a hugely diverse country with many different ethnic and language groups. Burmese is the main language, but English is spoken by many people in cities and tourist areas (to varying degrees of proficiency); most hotels and tour agencies have some staff with a reasonable level of understanding.

Because of Myanmar's diversity and its colonial past, most places have two or more names that you might find used in newspapers, on the internet, on maps and in literature – the most prominent being the name of the country itself, which is referred to as both Myanmar and Burma. However, in Myanmar, almost everyone uses the name Myanmar.

Spellings sometimes vary in Myanmar; this inconsistency is most challenging for visitors when it applies to hotels and road names. But if you bear this in mind, it is not too difficult to work out, as it is usually only one or two letters that are different. Also, because there is only one word for 'road', 'street' and 'lane' in Burmese (làn), English-language maps in Myanmar tend to be inconsistent in their usage of the three English words.

Learning and using even a little bit of Burmese will elicit many smiles. You can access an extensive Burmese language and audio pronunciation guide at <http://www.go-myanmar.com/language-place-names-and-peoples-names>).

Cultural Differences and Adapting to Myanmar

As with all countries, Myanmar has its own set of unique cultural traditions and idiosyncrasies. Some of these are fascinating; some require sensitivity; some require the visitor to adjust. But above all they combine to make a nation that is as warm and welcoming as any in the world: locals are almost always keen to help out and make friends.

Buddhism and Religious Courtesy

Buddhism is at the heart of Myanmar culture and it permeates private and public life. Most young people spend time in monastic education, and monks and nuns hold a revered place in society: they should not be touched; they always sit at the highest place available (for example at a table or on a bus – which often means on the roof); and they hold privileges such as the freedom of first class travel on public transport, sometimes with their own reserved places.

In some parts of Myanmar, particularly mountainous border areas such as Chin, Kachin, and Karen states, Christian belief is deeply held, often mixed with older animist traditions (as with the rest of Myanmar).

Points of religious courtesy:

- Revealing clothing is sometimes frowned upon, although it is increasingly common among Myanmar women. At religious sites, legs and shoulders should always be covered.
- Shoes and socks should be removed before entering any shrine, pagoda or monastery. It is also customary to remove shoes before entering private homes and many offices.
- The head and feet are important in Myanmar culture, as the highest and lowest points of the body. No one, including children, should be touched on the head. Feet should never be put on tables or used for touching or pointing.

Other items to be aware of:

- Myanmar women should not in general be touched by men. If a woman wishes to shake hands, she will offer her hand first.
- Couples should avoid public displays of affection.
- Avoid using loud voices.
- Public displays of anger and frustration will be viewed unfavorably.
- Don't be offended when locals make a kissing noise. This is simply the Myanmar way of calling attention, and is not a derogatory sound aimed at you!

Other Cultural Issues and Talking Politics

When preparing for a trip to Myanmar and travelling around the country, it is important to bear in mind the lack of development. It is a poor, almost entirely cash-based economy with little official banking; large parts of the population do not have direct access to the national electricity grid (which frequently shuts down); and only a small percentage of the population has access to the internet or a fixed telephone line, although these figures are improving.

As with many parts of Southeast Asia, good-natured bargaining and haggling for prices are a big part of Myanmar culture – although you may find that some vendors will bafflingly stick to their guns. People will be appreciative if the economically advantaged traveler chooses to bargain less and contribute more to the local economy.

Pace of life and idiosyncrasies

The lack of development also means is that life in Myanmar exists at a very different pace than it does in most developed countries; people are usually in much less of a hurry, and are more likely to stop to help. This also means that you may have to wait longer to be served – signs of impatience will not be taken well.

As in many parts of Asia, saving face is very important to people in Myanmar. This means raised voices or aggression are not taken well. It also means that if you ask someone a question (for example, directions or the price of an item), they will often give you an answer – even if they have no idea. This comes out of a wish to be helpful, but it is important to bear in mind.

To western eyes, perhaps one of the less appealing Myanmar traits is betel-chewing. This mild intoxicant is used by many males in Myanmar, and results in a reddening and rotting of the teeth and plenty of spitting, resulting in the frequent sight of red blotches on the streets of Myanmar.

Other types of idiosyncratic behavior may sometimes be displayed that can simply be attributed to Myanmar's recent history of isolation and corresponding lack of knowledge of the outside world. If this behavior seems offensive to western eyes, it is rarely, if ever, meant to be. For example, jackets and t-shirts with Nazi swastikas (not the ancient symbol) are popular amongst young men.

Talking politics

As Myanmar undergoes dramatic reform, it is becoming easier to talk openly about politics. Locals happily wave flags for Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy party, where until recently this might have landed them in jail. There remain sensitive areas for conversation, such as inter-ethnic and religious conflict, but in general few subjects are taboo. Violence between Buddhists and minority Muslims means that you may well encounter some anti-Muslim sentiment – although on a day-to-day basis, particularly in larger cities, the groups tend to co-exist peaceably.

LGBTQ+ Travelers

Although Myanmar is a socially conservative country and homosexuality is still technically illegal, the LGBTQ+ community is growing in profile and trouble is unlikely to occur – although of course in more remote parts of the country attitudes may differ, and overt signs of affection may be frowned upon.

Yangon has a growing number of gay-friendly bars and a semi-regular LGBTQ+ night called FAB that appears at venues around the city; check local listings for the upcoming events.

The Taungbyone Nat (spirit) Festival is one of the biggest festivals in Myanmar and attracts large numbers of LGBTQ+ revelers.

Other Useful Information

Embassies

Myanmar has embassies in many large countries, and additional consulates in some regional cities in China and the USA. It does not currently have an embassy in all European countries.

Most foreign embassies are located in Yangon, which is the largest city and business center of Myanmar. There are also Chinese and Indian consulates in Mandalay.

Business Hours and Public Holidays

Business hours can vary, but in general the following apply:

- Shops: Monday to Saturday 9:30am to 6pm or later; many shops open Sundays, some markets closed Mondays
- Restaurants: all week 8am to 9pm
- Internet cafes: all week 9am to 10pm
- Banks: Monday to Friday 9am to 4pm
- Post offices and other government offices: Monday to Friday 9:30am to 4:30pm.
- Business office hours: Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm; some offices open Saturday

Public holidays (2016)

January 4th – Independence Day

February 12th – Union Day

March 2nd – Peasants' Day

March 23rd – Full Moon of Tabaung

March 27th – Tatmadaw (Armed Forces) Day
April 13th-16th – Thingyan Water Festival
April 17th – Myanmar New Year
May 1st – Labour Day
May 20th – Full Moon of Kason (Buddha's birthday)
July 18th – Full Moon of Waso (Dhammasetkya Day)
July 19th – Martyrs' Day
October 15th – Full Moon of Thadingyut (Festival of Lights; end of Buddhist Lent)
November 13th – Full Moon of Tazaungmon
November 23rd – National Day
December 25th – Christmas Day

Thingyan (the Burmese new year water festival) is by far the biggest nationwide holiday in Myanmar, and sometimes offices will close for a longer period of time than the official festival period.

During the Thingyan Festival, it can be difficult to get long-distance transportation: train services are reduced; bus services do not operate at all on many routes, and are severely reduced on others; but planes generally operate on a standard timetable. Furthermore, transportation at the beginning and end of the festival can get extremely busy and should always be booked in advance.

Myanmar Time Zone

The time zone for all of Myanmar is UTC/GMT +6½ hours. Myanmar has no daylight saving – the time remains the same throughout the year.

Postal Services in Yangon and Mandalay

Most towns have a post office, usually open Monday to Friday from 9:30am to 4:30pm. International postage for letters and postcards is cheap, but can take quite a long time to arrive.

DHL is recommended for larger and high value packages, and has offices in Yangon and Mandalay.

Responsible Travel in Myanmar

Although the government is undertaking far-reaching reforms, Myanmar still has huge problems to overcome. Travel for foreigners is generally very safe, with among the lowest crime rates in Southeast Asia. But high-level corruption and entrenched interests are widespread; HIV/AIDS is a big problem, with some of the highest prevalence rates

in Asia; child labor, including in the armed forces, remains all too common; and illegal drug production (and consumption) is rife in some border areas.

If you are concerned about the political situation and where to spend (and not spend) your money, the best way is to keep yourself as informed as possible.

News and Independent Media

The “About Myanmar” section on Go-Myanmar.com (<http://www.go-myanmar.com/about-myanmar>) gives a brief overview of the country, its history and its people; the website is continually updated with the latest travel and accommodation information. But things are changing fast and if you want up-to-date political and economic news, go to any one of these independent websites:

- The Irrawaddy (<http://www.irrawaddy.com/>)
- Frontier Myanmar (<http://frontiermyanmar.net/>)
- The Myanmar Times (<http://www.mmtimes.com/>)
- Democratic Voice of Burma (<http://www.dvb.no/>)

You can also check out Amnesty International (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/>).

Travel and Interacting with Locals

When travelling in Myanmar, the best way to ensure your money reaches the people is to support local communities – buy local products and eat where locals eat.

It is important to be aware that entrance fees, which are sometimes paid in US dollars and are charged when entering many popular destinations such as Bagan and Inle Lake, go to the government. Some say that this is absolutely a bad thing, but in today’s environment of change, the truth is more nuanced; the government of Myanmar is far from perfect, but it is now actively seeking advice from NGOs and European governments on responsible tourism and development.

If you want to find out more about responsible travel in Myanmar, check out the online guide for tourists, put together by the Myanmar government, the Hanns Siedel Foundation and Tourism Transparency (<http://www.dosanddonsfortourists.com/>).

Above all, you should know that the people of Myanmar want you to visit! When travelling it is almost always feasible to pay money to local, independent shops, tour guides, hotels and guesthouses. Not only do your tourist dollars go a long way, but also locals are endlessly curious about foreign visitors and are delighted to engage with them about almost anything.

The majority of the information in this packet was taken and adapted from the site Go-Myanmar.com.