

Should You Go?

No-one argues Myanmar (Burma) isn't one of the world's most exciting destinations, but a complex question mark has hovered over the country since the birth of a tourism boycott in 1995. Does your money, no matter how carefully spent, sustain a military dictatorship that has imprisoned political dissidents, used forced labour, cracked down on peaceful demonstrations (as was seen in September 2007) and seized foreign aid (most notably following Cyclone Nargis in May 2008)? Or does isolating one of the world's poorest countries not only deprive a burgeoning private sector of income, but also push the government into the arms of neighbours with bigger bankrolls and their own serious human rights issues?

Essentially, no outsiders are happy with the situation, but not all agree on what to do about it. Some activists, quoting prodemocracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, liken a visit to 'condoning the regime'; others suggest boycotts have only snoozed possible change for over a decade – that, with more engagement (including tourism), Myanmar could have opened and risen like Vietnam has.

So, should you go? Lonely Planet believes all prospective visitors must ask, and answer, this question for themselves. This section outlines all sides of the argument, as well as showing how, if you go, to keep the bulk of your money in private hands.

THE BOYCOTT

After decades of self-imposed isolation, and a crumbling economy that necessitated the former 'rice bowl' importing food for survival, in the 1990s Myanmar began opening itself up. The world's longest-running military dictatorship invited foreign investment, bumped up the tourist visa from a week to 28 days, and readied itself for a massive 'Visit Myanmar Year' in 1996, with hopes for half a million visitors. Some hoped that the government that had ignored the results of the 1990 election (see p47) was changing. But then word leaked out about what was happening. Numerous sources, including Burma Campaign UK and the *New York Times*, reported that hundreds of thousands of forced labourers were being used to build airport runways and roads, and ready tourist sites like Mandalay's palace moat. In other places, such as Old Bagan, whole villages were forcibly relocated to make way for high-end hotels.

The responding tourism boycott had an immediate effect. The government cut back its target to 200,000 arrivals – and eventually even that number wasn't met.

Governments – even the US and those in the EU, who have signed on sanctions against Myanmar generals, banks and exports – have been shy to endorse an all-out tourism ban, but other outsiders haven't. Some activist groups continue to encourage foreign businesses and tourists to stay away, and many tour operators, travellers and celebrities have backed the boycott.

Other activists, including many exiled Myanmar citizens who ran from government bullets during the 1988 prodemocracy demonstrations, believe the boycott has outlived its purpose, pushing the generals into far more lucrative deals with fellow Asean countries and neighbours like India and China. Author of *The River of Lost Footsteps* and one-time supporter of sanctions, Thant Nyint U, called further isolation of a self-sustained government 'counterproductive and dangerous'.

'We don't care if we have a military government, a socialist government or a democratic government. We just want one who will care about the people,' a retired doctor told us in 2008.

The boycott worked, at least by its original goal: Myanmar received fewer than 200,000 visitors during its Visit Myanmar Year (1996), well below the government's initial target of 500,000.

Groups like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch claim forced labour has decreased this decade but still continues, particularly in remote, mountainous regions. Allegedly none is connected with tourism.

One '1988 generation' protestor told us after the 2007 protests: 'I love Aung San Suu Kyi. We all do. I used to agree with her on the boycott, but things have changed. It doesn't work.'

Occasionally overlooked in the debate are the locals themselves, many of whom privately declare unconditional support for the 'lady' (as Aung San Suu Kyi is known) but disagree with her on the boycott, believing that isolation only strengthens the generals' position. Many locals point out that over the past decade and a half the tourism sector has become increasingly privatised – visitors can now choose from several hundred private hotels and keep up to 80% of expenses in private hands. Those locals that have qualms about tourism stress that they don't want visitors 'just to come and admire the scenery' (to quote Suu Kyi), they want them to be thoughtful and informed and engage with locals.

DIVIDED VOICES

Other than the generals themselves, essentially everyone speaking out on the boycott hopes for the same thing: a democratic Myanmar, the release of political prisoners (including Aung San Suu Kyi), and an improved economy and public services. The difference is in how this can be achieved.

Aung San Suu Kyi

'The bulk of the money from tourism goes straight into the pockets of the generals.'

Aung San Suu Kyi, 1995

Governments tend to shy away from all-out endorsements of the tourism boycott (unlike the USA's clearer restrictions for Cuba), though the UK's Foreign & Commonwealth Office urges visitors 'to consider carefully whether by their actions they are helping to support the regime'.

For many would-be travellers the most compelling reason to support a total boycott is that Nobel Laureate for Peace Aung San Suu Kyi apparently says to. Or does she? Considering she's been under house arrest for much of the time since the boycott's birth, there are many divergent interpretations on what exactly her policy is regarding tourism.

In 1995 Suu Kyi asked travellers to 'visit us later', insisting that visiting at that time was 'tantamount to condoning the regime'. However, in her conversations with Alan Clements in 1995 and 1996 (included in the 1997 collection *The Voice of Hope*) she said, in response to his question about whether she was advocating would-be travellers to stay away: 'No, we are not doing anything like that. What we are asking for is a boycott of Visit Myanmar Year 1996.' At the time she suggested an 'alternative guide' to the country needed to be made. In 2002 she told the BBC that the National League for Democracy (NLD; the opposition party, which she leads) stand on tourism 'has not changed'.

She's expressed many opinions about the effect tourism may or may not have. She said in 1995: 'Visitors to the country can be useful, depending on what they do, or how they go about it,' and that 'tourists can open up the world to the people of Burma just as the people of Burma can open up the eyes of tourists to the situation in their own country if they're interested in looking.' But she also expressed concern that tourists who 'go around in air-conditioned taxis' don't see anything that's going on in the country.

In 2002 she said, 'the people of Burma, in general, do not depend on...foreign visitors to bring them information' but obtain knowledge of the international world via – 'limited', she admitted – radio broadcasts such as BBC, Radio Free Asia and Democratic Voice of Burma. Suu Kyi has remained an influential figure for worldwide political agendas. Her captivity often tops the list of outside rebukes of Myanmar. In 2007 an *Economist* article confessed that when she burst onto the scene, many journalists were 'a little in love with her'. Even as supporters begin to criticise some of her decisions, locals' reverence to the 'lady' is not in doubt. When she was allowed to make her first brief public appearance since 2003, just as the 2007 protests started to swell on the Yangon (Rangoon) streets, one monk told Human Rights Watch, 'we got strength from [seeing] her'.

After Aung San Suu Kyi's 1995 suggestion for an 'alternate guide' to Myanmar, the proboycott group Burma Campaign UK published *Burma: The Alternative Guide*, which was actually more of a detailed manifesto against tourism.

TO GO OR NOT TO GO?

Reasons Not to Go

- Aung San Suu Kyi has asked tourists not to come.
- The government used forced labour to develop tourist-related sights and services.
- Thousands of families have been forcefully relocated to make room for some tourism facilities, such as in Old Bagan.
- International tourists can be seen as a symbolic stamp of approval for the Myanmar government.
- It's impossible to visit without some money going to the military junta (eg \$20 for a visa, \$10 departure fee, entry fees at Bagan or Inle Lake, up to 12% tax on many services).
- Activists claim that tourism dollars help directly fuel government repression.
- The government forbids travel to many areas (p359 and p133), particularly those inhabited by minority groups, due to unrest.

Reasons to Go

- The vast majority of locals you meet – including many veterans of the 1988 prodemocracy protests – want you to come.
- The majority (possibly 80%) of a careful independent traveller's expenses goes to the private sector, a higher percentage than the government allocates for the public.
- Many observers point out that a four-decade (and going) trade boycott against Cuba never changed its leadership, and Myanmar gets more outside investment than Cuba.
- Through 'direct aid' efforts (p25), visitors can help a local community facing a humanitarian crisis.
- The government's biggest source of income from foreign visitors – requiring they change \$200 for government FEC notes (Foreign Exchange Certificates; see p347) upon arrival – ended in 2003.
- As outside communication is regulated, tourism provides an open two-way exchange between many locals and the outside world: locals see that they're not forgotten and visitors take away images and stories to share outside Myanmar. Bear in mind, though, the sensitivity around political issues (see p24).
- Human-rights violations are less likely to occur in areas where international visitors are present.

Proboycott Activists

'Nowhere else in the world have human rights abuses and tourism been so closely linked.'

www.burmacampaign.org.uk

Many proboycott activists, who are fighting for the military government to hand over power to the NLD, interpret all visitors as a financial and symbolic endorsement of the military junta, whether they be \$5-a-night backpackers, package tourists, meditation tourists or businesspeople. Often the argument refers to the government's abusive use of forced labour to build tourist infrastructure and services in the past, as well as the forced relocation of thousands of families from their homes (evident in Yangon, Mandalay and Old Bagan). But, ultimately, it's Aung San Suu Kyi who makes up the backbone of most proboycott stances. In a 2007 report, the pro-Burma group Tourism Concern stated they'd support the boycott 'unless we hear otherwise' from her.

Burma Campaign UK estimates that only a third of the country has access to outside radio programs by the BBC, Radio Free Asia or Voice of America.

ACTIVIST WEBSITES

Many groups have websites that outline Myanmar's prodemocracy movement, as well as providing details on human-rights abuses sustained since 1988. See also p29 for a list of other useful websites.

- **Amnesty International** (www.amnesty.org) Regular updates on the status of 1150 political prisoners behind bars before the September 2007 protests, and the 700 arrested afterwards.
- **Burma Campaign UK** (www.burmacampaign.org.uk) One of the more outspoken proboycott groups, which has written numerous articles and keeps a tab of celebrities enlisted in their 'I'm Not Going' campaign.
- **Burma Project** (www.burmaproject.org) This organisation is focused on human-rights abuses and suggests travellers 'think twice' before going.
- **Free Burma Coalition** (www.freeburmacoalition.org) Run by Myanmar-exile figure Zarni, who reversed his proboycott stance in 2003. The site includes links to Myanmar-related news.
- **Voices for Burma** (www.voicesforburma.org) This group, founded in the UK in 2003, supports 'alternative tourism', and provides lengthy tips on how to best visit the country.

One of the most active groups, Burma Campaign UK (BCUK; formerly Burma Action Group), calls the ongoing boycott a 'short-term strategy to ensure long-term prosperity' and one that requires cutting off the country from investment, including tourism. They doubt tourism provides a positive effect economically. 'Almost all of the money goes to the regime's pocket in one way or another,' says their website. And the organisation dismisses reports that most locals support tourism, saying it comes from those 'almost exclusively...working in the tourism industry', Mark Farmaner, acting director of BCUK, told the *Times* in 2007 that the 'real Burma' is only witnessed once you see the forced labour, political prisoners and palatial homes of the generals.

The Burma Campaign UK maintains that 'it is impossible to know whether services sold to private individuals haven't in fact been sold to the regime's own families.'

Protourism Voices

'At the heat of passion in 1995 and 1996, I supported the tourism boycott. It was a major mistake. The whole boycott and sanctions campaign, in which I played a lead role, was a major strategic mistake.'

Zarni, Free Burma Coalition

Many activists now championing engagement and tourism with Myanmar once argued against it. Zarni, founder of Free Burma Coalition, reversed his take on the boycott in 2003. He told us that proboycott activists these days are 'more keen to prove their strategy right than the considerations of the public welfare'. He joins some locals who now rebuke the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi for inexperienced leadership (as well, former British ambassador to Myanmar Derek Tonkin calls Aung San Suu Kyi 'an idealist unable to compromise with the rough reality of Southeast Asian politics'). Many believe she and the NLD missed an opportunity by not communicating with more open (and now removed) factions of the military (including the now-ousted former prime minister Khin Nyunt).

The tourist industry is now far more privatised than during its first toddler steps two decades ago, when the government controlled everything. Many argue that, while billions of dollars in foreign trade come annually (often with little distinction between private and government sectors), as much as

'Increased numbers of tourists to Burma would have some economic trickle down to local people but when compared to the millions in revenue it would earn the government...we believe it is not a fair trade.' – Tourism Concern

A grandmother veteran of the 1988 demonstrations in central Myanmar told us, 'I love Aung San Suu Kyi. We all do. She's a very good person, but too straightforward. That may work in the West, but this is Asia and you have to be more cunning.'

80% of an independent tourist's budget stays in local hands (see boxed text, p19). The tourism sector employs 300,000, not including grassroots businesses (eg trishaw driver, curry makers, handicrafts makers).

Some activists plug the benefits of 'alternative travel' – borrowing the term from an Aung San Suu Kyi quote. One is the UK-based Voices for Burma, formed in 2003, which draws a clear line between potentially negative and positive trips. They promote staying at private guesthouses, travelling to off-the-beaten-track locales and ensuring that for every dollar that goes to the government two more are spent in the private sector. Their website explains: 'By accepting the standard boycott view... we may miss an important opportunity to help the Burmese people.'

Tourism isn't only about bringing in money, in these viewpoints, but opening a two-way exchange. Zarni, once a tourist guide in the 1980s and now working on political transitions at Oxford University, told us: 'Tourism is a rare window for any Burmese to really learn about the outside world – in a way no electronic medium would allow. Tourists that sit and talk with locals can bring ideas, and ideas are oxygen.' This is something Vietnam knows a little about, some observers and locals like to point out. While the West argued about Myanmar, they embraced Vietnam – overlooking its record of thuggish leadership and intolerance of political dissidence – and the country has emerged as a new tiger with a growing middle class.

Author Thant Nyint U sees tourism as playing a notable factor in creating new freedoms and growth. He writes of the best-case scenario in *The River of Lost Footsteps*: 'If Burma were less isolated, if there were more trade, more engagement – more tourism in particular... then perhaps the conditions for political change would emerge over the next decade or two.'

A point occasionally still heard from some boycott groups is outdated. The National Coalition of the Union of Burma (www.ncgub.net), for example, still ranks the requirement of changing '\$300' with government changers as the top negative impact of tourism; this requirement (for \$200 actually) ceased in 2003.

THE ECONOMY

Part of the question of whether it's ethical to visit Myanmar is whether the money is what keeps the junta in power. While the government once hoped tourism would provide a huge source of hard currency, it's clear that, as time's passed, they've depended little on it. They now receive the lion's share of their income from trade of gems, timber, textiles and, most notably, oil and gas.

TOURISM'S EFFECTS

'Tourism is peanuts for the generals.'

Ma Thanegi, former aide to Aung San Suu Kyi

There are two ways of tracking tourists' expenses: the \$240 of a careful visitor's \$300 budget that stays in the private sector (eg family guesthouses, curry restaurants, trishaws and private buses); and the \$60 that joins the government's estimated \$13.7 billion GDP. Does either outweigh the other in importance?

Despite an official annual earnings of \$1900, many locals make much less – about \$440 according to the Burma Campaign UK's findings of £0.60 per day. The UN Development Program claims the people of Myanmar have the 13th-lowest income in the world. So a little goes a long way in helping. But, as boycott advocates point out, tourism reaches only a

An NLD official told Al Jazeera in November 2006 that he had 'no objection' to 'real tourists... who are really interested in the social, economic and cultural conditions. I think these people can always come to us, no problem.'

'Tourism is the thin end of the wedge to opening up Burma to international influences, but it is bound to be a long, slow process. The sanctions of the last 10 years have simply set the clock back.' Derek Tonkin, former British ambassador to Myanmar and chairperson of Network Myanmar

Moustache Brother Lu Maw (p270), a political comedian in Mandalay, told us in 2008: 'I need the tourists to pass on the news. We are always skating on thin ice here... Tomorrow? I'm not sure what'll happen.'

Former aide to Aung San Suu Kyi, Ma Thanegi, spent three years in Yangon's Insein prison, and told us many NLD members have always been against the boycott. 'Many people around Aung San Suu Kyi tried to dissuade her on the boycott. In '96, '97, '98, '99. I gave up trying around then.'

A member of pro-democracy local rap band Myanmar for Future Generations told us that 'boycott methods don't work any more and they don't affect the dictators much directly. If the country becomes isolated, can any exiled politician promise that we'll be free?'

Bribery is essentially part of all behind-the-scenes business in Myanmar. One private guesthouse owner told us they have to bribe their tax official. 'We pay the tax man 25% of the taxes we would have paid. He's a very rich man.'

small percentage of the population. In an August 2008 report, the World Travel and Tourism Council estimated that tourism provides about 5.8% of Myanmar's jobs (about 1.3 million) and that tourism was likely to rise another 4% that year, despite the negative impact of international coverage of the protests and the government's slow reaction to Cyclone Nargis. It's a figure many are reluctant to agree on. Meanwhile, local businessman and author Paul Strachan argued, in one protourism presentation, that there's a 10:1 'trickle-down' effect, as one local receiving money from tourism can end up helping nine others.

Obviously not all tourists come on the same type of trip nor for the same time periods. Of the 660,000 visitors in 2006, nearly 60% were Asian. About 65% of all tourists come on 'border trips', meaning a day across the border from Thailand or China – sometimes just for casinos (or brothels). The rest arrive in Myanmar through Yangon (the only practical way to reach its main destinations). About half are 'FITs' (foreign independent tourists); a quarter of these come on package trips.

No matter how tourists come, the government does receive money from a few direct expenses during a trip: the \$20 visa fee, the \$10 departure tax, at least a portion of entry fees at many sites (see the boxed text, p19), and something like 12% of tax on hotel accommodation.

Its fellow Asean countries see many more tourists but Myanmar's tourism has risen in recent years, from 62,000 in 1994 to 650,000 in 2006. Peak season arrivals dipped to 250,000 after the September 2007 protests, according to Asean statistics.

Adding it up, Myanmar certainly depends far less on tourism than its neighbour Thailand does (where 6% of GDP, or about \$14 billion annually, comes from tourism). Myanmar receives, at most, 0.7% of its GDP through tourism (calculated with CIA statistics and proboycott activists' estimates of the government receiving \$100 million per year).

THE WORLD & MYANMAR

'China is the key.'

Human Rights Watch

Treatment of Myanmar by other nations seems to be governed by how far from the border they are: the closer, the less offensive the regime; the further, the less countries want to interact.

Asian Partners

A pivotal moment in the past two decades came following the brutal crack-down on protests in the 1988 election. As the generals carted away thousands of prisoners and chased others to the hills, what would the world do? There was a moment when a financially ruined government stood alone. But then a long-time rival, Thailand, signed on to huge timber deals – just enough to ensure the regime's survival. And the generals haven't looked back since.

Soon after, additional support came through tourism – there has been \$1.1 billion in foreign investment in hotels and tourism services since 1988. But this focus faded a bit as bigger pies came into view. General Than Shwe has courted Myanmar's neighbours, discussing trade, oil and timber deals with India to the west, China to the north and its new Asean cousins to the south and east.

The Shwe gas reserves off the coast are valued at up to \$17 billion over the next 20 years. And in 2006 Thailand bought \$2.16 billion in natural gas. Despite Western sanctions against timber and jade, much of these materials

HOW DEEP ARE THE GOVERNMENT'S POCKETS?

It's impossible to say exactly how much the government makes in a year, in tourism or other sectors. Several activist groups, including the Burma Campaign UK, have suggested that tourism brings the government \$100 million per year (or about \$167 per visitor, if calculated with 600,000 visitors annually). The estimates of *Xinhua News* in China (referring to Myanmar's official figures) suggested tourism brings in \$200 million (to private and government sectors), before operating costs are deducted.

Considering the visa fee of about \$20, departure tax of \$10 and the 12% tax on purchases, a traveller staying away from government hotels and using privately run transport spends as much as 80% of their budget in the private sector – a bit less for shoestring travellers (see boxed text, p23).

Here are a few known figures to consider:

- **\$114** average daily expense per tourist to Myanmar (*Xinhua News* estimates)
- **\$900** spent per person per visit to Vietnam on average; thought to be comparable to Myanmar (source: Vietnam National Administration of Tourism)
- **\$1900** Myanmar's annual per-capita income; many locals earn \$200 annually (source: CIA)
- **\$50 million** estimated value of wedding gifts at General Than Shwe's daughter's wedding in 2006 (source: *Guardian*)
- **\$122–244 million** one estimate of the cost of building the new capital at Nay Pyi Taw (source: International Monetary Fund)
- **\$241 million** UK investment in Myanmar's oil businesses in 2007 (source: *Myanmar Times*)
- **\$300 million** value of showcased items at Myanmar Gems, Jade & Pearl Emporium in Yangon, held shortly after the EU's 2007 sanctions against gems (source: *Myanmar Times*)
- **\$470 million** foreign investment in oil/gas in 2006–07 fiscal year (source: *Myanmar Times*)
- **\$1.1 billion** amount of foreign investment in hotels and tourism since 1988 (source: *Xinhua News*)
- **\$2 billion** foreign exchange reserves (source: International Monetary Fund)
- **\$2.16 billion** estimated natural gas sales with Thailand (2006; government sources and Human Rights Watch)
- **\$4.3 billion** approximate value of exports in 2006, up 48% from 2005 (source: Asian Development Bank)
- **\$12–17 billion** estimated profits in Shwe gas deposits in next 20 years (source: government sources and Human Rights Watch)
- **\$13.7 billion** Myanmar's GDP (2007; source: CIA)

are reportedly exported to China, Thailand and Singapore, then used to make furniture or jewellery for export.

The flow of foreign investment isn't likely to slow soon. The next round of multimillion dollar investments focus on trade connections with Myanmar's neighbours. In early 2008, India signed on to spend about \$100 million developing a port in Sittwe to access more oil reserves in the Bay of Bengal, supposedly worth billions. Around the same time, Thailand won a bid to develop a new seaport at Dawei, while China will pay most of the costs of a massive highway from Kunming to a new Rakhaing seaport it will build at Kyauk Phyu, giving western China increased access to international trade routes.

Some observers had hoped that Asean could levy its influence for, at least, Aung San Suu Kyi's release. On occasion Asean officials have frowned over the generals' goings-on – even expressing 'revulsion' over the violent response

One Yangon local told us:
'Asean treats the generals
like spoiled kids. They
need discipline!'

GOVERNMENT FEES

Entry Fees

This box lists many of the government fees visitors to Myanmar will face, including those to visit some popular attractions such as Shwedagon Paya in Yangon or the Bagan Archaeological Zone. Many can be avoided if you alter your destination or the way you travel, while a few other fees (including sales tax and tax on accommodation) cannot be avoided if you visit.

- **Alaungpaya Palace**, Shwebo (K50; see p290)
- **Bagan Archaeological Zone** Even if you don't visit temples (\$10; p177)
- **Bago sites** (\$10; p147)
- **Chin State** Requires permit and taking either government or private guide (p334)
- **Elephant camps** Near Taungoo (p194) and Ngwe Saung (p145)
- **Hpo Win Daung Caves**, near Monywa (\$2; p289)
- **Inle Lake Zone** (\$3; p232)
- **Inwa** (see Mandalay Archaeological Zone)
- **Kachin State Cultural Museum**, Myitkyina (\$2; p308)
- **Khamti** Must take tour with government's Myanmar Travels & Tours (from \$1200 per person; p286)
- **Kyaiktiyo** (Golden Rock; \$6; p154)
- **Mandalay Archaeological Zone** Includes entry to Inwa (\$10; p261)
- **Mawlamyine's Mon Cultural Museum** (\$2; p159)
- **Mingun** Includes Sagaing Hill (\$3; p284)
- **Mrauk U** (\$5; the museum is \$5 extra; p328)
- **Putao** Must pay government fee to visit (p313)
- **Sagaing Hill** (see Mingun)
- **Shwedagon Paya**, Yangon (\$5; p92)
- **Sittwe Museums** Rakhaing State Cultural Museum (\$2; p325) and Buddhist Museum (\$5)
- **Thanboddhay Paya**, near Monywa (\$3; p288)
- **Thayekhittaya ruins**, near Pyay (\$5; p200)
- **Yangon museums** (\$3 to \$5; p104)
- **Youqson Kyaung**, Salay (\$3; p190)

Other Services

- **Beer** Myanmar Beer is a joint-venture operation
- **City buses** From K50 a ride
- **Gas** Official ration is two gallons per week per vehicle, beyond that requires black market
- **Golf** Many courses are government controlled
- **Inland Water Transport (IWT)** Government ferries
- **Internet** As with electricity, post and telephone, the dial-up service is government controlled
- **Licences** As with all business, guesthouse owners and private guides must get licences from government; also restaurants with alcohol licences pay an extra fee for the right to sell beer etc
- **Myanma Airways** Government's domestic airline
- **Myanma Railways** Government's train service, with foreigner fares marked up over 500% of local fares (p368)
- **Myanmar Travels & Tours (MTT)** Government-run tourist information service
- **Newspapers** *Myanmar Times* and *New Light of Myanmar*
- **Post and telephone** All calls and faxes run by Ministry of Post & Telecommunications; international calls of \$5 or \$6 per minute

WHO IS TAY ZA?

Some 'private' companies in Myanmar are run by government members on the sly, or by their family members or cronies. Most of this business is linked with high-income sectors like gems and timber, but some is in tourism services.

The most infamously linked with tourism is Tay Za, founder of Htoo Trading Company. The 40-something businessperson initially made his money in the '90s from timber, having procured access to virgin forests. Though married, he is rumoured to be connected with one of the daughters of head honcho Than Shwe.

Earlier this decade (in 2004), he founded Air Bagan and set up two luxury hotel chains: Aureum Palace (in Ngwe Saung, Ngapali, Bagan, Nay Pyi Taw and Pyin U Lwin) and Myanmar Treasure Resort (in Yangon, Patheingyi, Ngwe Saung, Mawlamyine, Bagan and Inle Lake).

EU and US sanctions in October 2007 directly targeted Tay Za. By November 2007, Air Bagan, which apparently loses \$1 million monthly, had to suspend international service to Singapore.

On the Air Bagan website, Tay Za maintains his independence from the junta and calls the sanctions 'misguided and unfair'. Despite a 2008 report in independent news organisation *Irrawaddy*, which quoted an unnamed Yangon-based businessperson saying that Tay Za's relationship with the government 'is not in fact as close as the press reported', most locals and observers remain doubtful.

to the September 2007 protests – but it's not been followed with action. One-time adviser to Asia for George W Bush, Michael J Green, likened Myanmar to a 'crazy drunk' on a block of Asean homes – it would take their unified confrontation to get the bottle away.

Western Sanctions

The West, meanwhile, has given a totally different response, by imposing economic sanctions against individuals and industries, and blocking involvement by the World Bank and IMF. Following Aung San Suu Kyi's arrest in 2003, the US targeted the textile industry, which led to the reported loss of 40,000 to 60,000 jobs.

More ambitious 'targeted sanctions' followed the September 2007 protests. The Australian government enacted the toughest, prohibiting the transfer of funds to a list of 418 government members or government cronies, including Tay Za (see boxed text, above). Many of these individuals are on the EU and US lists too, and both these entities have also banned the import of Myanmar timber and gems. Derek Tonkin, former British ambassador to Myanmar, said these targets 'represent only about 1% of Burmese exports to the EU' and has accused some targeted sanctions of simply lifting company names from a Myanmar Yellow Pages listings, thus affecting many 'prodemocracy supporters'.

What are missing from these lists, of course, are oil and gas, Myanmar's top draw and a field that 13 countries invest in currently – including \$241 million annually from UK companies. Bo Kyaw Nyein, an author for Myanmar news site Mizzima (www.mizzima.com), predicts 'the Burmese generals will laugh all the way to the bank' unless sanctions are expanded to include this gap.

The other part of the picture is the UN. Over six months after the 2007 protests, the UN visited the generals three times and had the chance to meet with Aung San Suu Kyi. The visits appeared to accomplish little. At research time there was a question about whether the Security Council would call for any payments embargos or sanctions against military officials.

Myanmar makes no weapons or military equipment. Much of it comes through sales from Russia, China, India and North Korea.

Myanmar locals aren't free to publicly discuss many things including politics. Throughout this book we've quoted many locals we met on this trip but, for their protection, haven't identified them by name.

If You Go

‘Don’t come in with your camera and take only pictures. We don’t need that kind of tourist. Talk to those who want to talk. Let them know of the conditions of your life.’

Yangon resident

This guidebook is geared for independent travellers, not those on group tours. Not only can you get more out of a trip travelling independently and meeting locals, but you can be more responsible for where your money goes.

We recommend against treating a trip as a means for political change. Foreigners who’ve handed out leaflets have been jailed (p341) and locals can be implicated by your gestures (eg taking a taxi to photograph Aung San Suu Kyi’s house).

A great thing about the tourism boycott to Myanmar is how thoroughly it reminds us all to re-evaluate the effect of travel on the places we visit. If you do go to Myanmar, there are myriad opportunities to make some little differences that can mean a lot to a growing number of locals. Some of it is keeping in mind where your money goes, and spreading it further than the normal tourist trails; another is (and it may sound goofy) talk and talk and talk, and make new friends. Many locals cherish outside contact – they have so little – and the two-way exchange that comes from it is reassurance for them that Myanmar isn’t forgotten. If you’re spending all your time with one guide, or on your own, you’re not really seeing Myanmar right. The temples and mountains and markets are lovely, but ultimately a trip to Myanmar is mostly about the people. After we spent a few hours with a *nat* expert in Bagan while researching this book, for instance, the grey-haired local, offering a second cup of tea in his home, said, ‘I’ll remember you till the end of eternity.’

DIY OR PACKAGE TOUR?

‘If you want to go, go. I just try to discourage people from taking package tours. Nothing goes to the people. I encourage people to go individually.’

Pascal Khoo Thwe, author of From the Land of Green Ghosts

GIVING GIFTS & DONATIONS

Travellers handing out candies, pens or money to kids on hiking trails or outside attractions have had a negative impact (as you’ll certainly see when begging kids follow you around a pagoda). It’s not the best way to contribute to those in need, and many locals will advise you not to give to children anyway. If you want to hand out useful items keep this in mind:

- Try to give to schools or village leaders, not kids. Although a rewarding way to spend a day is going to a village school, asking a teacher what supplies are lacking, buying them and handing them out to each of the students.
- If you want to help a begging family, ask what they need. Often you can accompany them to the market and pick up food (a bag of rice, some vegetables, some fish) and be invited to see their home.
- Foreign-made gifts (eg pens) are generally cherished items, and more likely to find a place in a bookcase than actually being used. If you want to give useful items, buy locally. It not only puts money into the local economy, but locals are more likely to use the gift!
- Some items from outside the country are greatly appreciated though. It’s a good idea to carry books and magazines and discreetly give them to people you meet (for instance, leaving one behind in a guesthouse), particularly if there are any potential political overtones (eg copies of the *Economist*).

WHERE THE MONEY GOES

Travel costs (and other economic transactions) in Myanmar come in many forms. Some estimates suggest foreign travellers spend an average of \$114 per day per person, but it is much lower for those sticking with budget accommodation and getting about by private buses. This table gives *estimated* average breakdowns of how much the government may get from different types of travellers. The figures include government taxes such as a visa, fees and a 12% tax on all purchases.

In some places, there are ways around the imposed fees, such as in Mandalay (p261). Also see p33 for an itinerary that skips all sites and destinations that require government fees.

Travel budget	Amount the government receives	Type of trip
\$0	\$0	People who stay at home and read about Myanmar
\$300	\$85	A two-week trip skipping all government fees (eg Bagan, Inle Lake) and services, and sticking with family guesthouses and public buses
\$300	\$105	Another shoestring trip, but one that includes government fees at Shwedagon Paya, Bagan and Inle Lake
\$850	\$150	A two-week trip that includes three flights, a boat ride to Bagan and accommodation at midrange hotels
\$1100	\$175	A 10-day trip with a private car for a week and accommodation at midrange hotels
\$1750+	\$250+	A one-week trip staying at higher-priced hotels, taking several guided day trips, eating at hotels and taking four domestic flights
\$5000	\$575	The minimum amount that goes to the government for a deluxe cabin on a seven-night luxury cruise
\$1200	\$1200	The part going to the government from an Myanmar Travels & Tours (MTT) guided, three-day trip to Khamti (Nagaland)

Many locals who support tourism favour individual travellers over package tourists, who often pay their money outside the country and have far less local interaction while in Myanmar. Another criticism of such tours is that the government, in some cases, takes 7% of remittances to local agents who arrange things, and ‘encourages’ certain services to be used. We can’t say it’s a rule, but we’ve seen a high-end European agent almost exclusively use Tay Za’s Air Bagan and Aureum Palace hotels (see p21).

If you’re used to having a car at the airport waiting for you, and guides showing you where to go, that can be done *and* arranged privately. Just because some roads are rough doesn’t mean you have to sacrifice all comforts. Either contact a Yangon-based agent (p92) before a trip, or give yourself a couple of days to do so once you arrive, and they can help set up private guides, transport and hotels. Ask to pay as you go to ensure your money is spread out. And consider talking with more than one agent, telling them what you want, to gauge offers.

Better agents sometimes have some charity services in place: one private Yangon (Rangoon) agent started a small-loans program so that trishaw or boat drivers or weavers can purchase their means and slowly pay the loan back. Ask about contributing directly to a clinic or school as part of a trip (always do this in person).

Note that some high-end hotels import their furnishings, supplies and even food. Ask about it. Staying at hotels that use local products can keep more of your money in the country.

PICKING HOTELS

The days when uninformed travellers checked into government-run hotels are now almost entirely past. The dwindling number of government hotels – usually named for the city they're in (eg Sittwe Hotel in Sittwe) and haphazardly run – are frequently vacant these days. We recommend choosing from the 600 private accommodation choices, which we focus on in this book. That said, some money from your accommodation expenses – an estimated 12% tax – goes to the government no matter where you stay.

Visitors who want to be sure the least amount of their money goes to the government can stick with budget family-run guesthouses and minihotels. Those who want their stay to reach the most people sometimes choose to stay in midrange and top-end hotels, which can employ staff of 100 or more and often fund community projects.

We point out government hotels to avoid in this book, and flag some known government-crony hotels that we suggest passing on as well. See p336 for more on the types of hotels and where your accommodation spending goes.

SPREAD YOUR MONEY

Critics of independent travel argue that travellers' spending usually bottlenecks at select places, even if those spots are privately run. Familiarity can be reassuring – such as your trishaw-driver buddy, or the plate of noodles that didn't get you sick – but try to mix it up a bit. A few things to consider:

- Don't buy all of your needs (bed, taxi, guide, rice) from one source.
- Be conscious that behind-the-scenes commissions are being paid on most things you pay for when in the company of a driver or guide. If all travellers follow the same lead, the benefits only go to a select few.
- Plan en-route stops, or take in at least one off-the-beaten-track destination, where locals are less used to seeing foreigners.
- Mix up locations where you catch taxis and trishaws – and try to take ones from guys not lingering outside tourist areas.
- Try to eat at different family restaurants and if you're staying at a hotel, eat out often; eg in Ngapali Beach, local restaurants are just across the road from the beach and hotels.
- Either buy handicrafts directly from the artisans, or, if not, don't get all your souvenirs from one private shop.

DON'T COMPROMISE LOCALS

In a country that imprisons its people for disagreeing with the government's line, travellers need to ensure that they don't behave in a way that will lead to locals being compromised in the eyes of the junta.

- Don't raise political questions and issues in inappropriate situations; let a local direct the conversation. For example, don't come out with something like: 'Did you march with the monks in 2007?' or any-

All trains and most ferries are government run. Many visitors choose to go by private car with driver, private buses or air – but note that some runways were built with forced labour and there are government contacts in some airline companies (p361).

Unless otherwise specified, all sights and organisations reviewed in this book are believed to be locally owned and run businesses.

See p55 for a list of some dos and don'ts to remember on your trip.

SPIES LIKE THEM

At some point on your trip, you may be followed by local authorities, though few visitors ever realise it. (Our efforts to create a map of Taungoo – failed, sorry – certainly got their attention.) One way to get the eyes of military intelligence off your back is do what Emma Larkin does in her book *Finding George Orwell in Burma*: duck into a church. She writes: 'Since the Burmese assume that most Westerners are Christians, going to a church is a fairly innocent thing to be doing.'

AID & DIRECT-AID VOLUNTEERS

Sometimes it takes more than tourism and a trickle of money to reverse a situation. Even before Cyclone Nargis claimed up to 140,000 lives in May 2008, groups like Refugees International and Human Rights Watch were frantically waving a warning flag that Myanmar was facing a humanitarian crisis. And considering the block the military government made towards outside groups, including the UN, after the cyclone hit, there's little reason to believe much help will come from within.

Of the 50 poorest nations, Myanmar is last in per-capita aid – receiving about \$2.88 per person compared with an average of \$58. For years, sanctions (and the government's restrictions) have curbed many NGO efforts, but that may soon be changing. In 2008, for example, the UK doubled its total aid (to \$35 million), and Australian and European donors are giving \$104 million through to 2013 to fight disease like AIDS and malaria.

Tourism isn't going to fix this problem on its own, of course, but there are some small things you can do to help during your visit. Ask guesthouse owners, agents, teachers and monks about donations you'd like to make for medical or school supplies. Or stop in a village school and ask what materials they lack. Often about \$75 can get a book, notepad and pen for everyone needing them. Also consider taking some simple, locally bought medicines. When routes into the Ayeyarwady Delta reopen, see if there are things locals might need in areas damaged by Cyclone Nargis.

One remote Chin village we visited in Rakhaing State sees occasional tourists, and donations to the village leader had resulted in something they quickly pointed out: a corrugated metal roof on a stilt-house. 'Tourists paid for the roof of our school,' the leader told us.

Outside of small donations, some NGOs prefer tourists to stick with their trips and leave bigger projects for them. Joel Charny at Refugees International, who supports tourism in the private sector, told us, 'I am not a fan of tourists trying to turn into development workers. Let tourists be tourists.'

During research for this guide, however, we met several retired travellers who were new 'direct-aid volunteers'. They felt there wasn't time to wait for aid to reach locals so they come twice yearly to fund projects on their own. One, who has built and overseen many new school projects, told us: 'When I finish one, I only have to drive 10 minutes to the next village to find another in need.'

Another is a retired 'millionaire' from Switzerland, who has dug water wells, built homes for the elderly and set up schools for years. He advised: 'Never give money. Go in a shop and buy a kilo of rice for someone. Ask what they need and get it, not money.'

thing about Aung San Suu Kyi or the NLD where there are others that may be listening in – even if you are riding on a trishaw.

- Show equal caution regarding what you ask or say on the phone or via email.
- Asking a taxi driver to take you past Aung San Suu Kyi's house or to a NLD office could implicate them.
- Exercise care in handing over anything to a local that could carry political overtones (such as a copy of the *Economist* or Myanmar-related books).
- Outside of politics, be wary of places that treat minority groups as 'attractions'. The 'long-necked' Paduang women in Shan State (p239) have led to a zoolike tourist event. This is particularly problematic from visitors on the Thai side of the border, where Thai agencies offer \$8 tours of women who aren't allowed to leave. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees told the BBC in 2008 that 'one solution is for tourists to stop going'.

For safe hiking guidelines see p340, or p228 for suggestions on how trekking trips can bring helpful gifts to remote communities. For tips on responsible snorkelling and diving, see p339.

BACK AT HOME

Your trip to Myanmar doesn't end once you're back home. Alert us and fellow travellers via the Thorn Tree discussion board (www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree) if you've stumbled onto a new or changed government-operated service or have a suggestion on how to minimise money going to the government. Consider posting photos and perceptions of your trip on a blog. Write to your local Myanmar embassy to express your views about the human-rights situation there. And be sure to keep in contact with new friends made on the road.