

BURMESE DAZE

Should you even think about going to Burma? Few other places raise the question with such urgency. PETER HUGHES was there shortly before the Saffron Revolution was violently suppressed last year. He argues that there is nothing to be gained from boycotting travel to Burma. Quite apart from the magnificence of the country itself, its people have suffered far too long under a repressive regime that has left them cut off and isolated. Contact with travellers is essential in maintaining a dialogue with the rest of the world

WHERE IT ALL BAGAN
The 12th-century Thatbyinnyu Temple, which still dominates the temple-studded plain of Bagan.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS CALDICOTT

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VANITY FAIR TRAVELS TO... **BURMA**

WAY TO GO

The Ultimate Travel Company (020 7386 4646; theultimatetravelcompany.co.uk) offers two weeks in Burma from £3,375 per person, including two nights at the Governor's Residence, Rangoon; a night at the sacred mountain of Mount Popa; a night at Bagan; a three-night Irrawaddy cruise aboard the Orient-Express ship *Road to Mandalay*; four nights at Malikha Lodge; and two nights at Inle Lake; the final night is spent at the Governor's Residence. The cost includes international and domestic flights, transfers, private sightseeing by car with a driver and guide, and all meals.

NEED TO KNOW

DO make sure your travel company knows who owns the hotels they book for you. Insist they don't put you in a hotel that belongs to a member of the government or one of their cronies.

DON'T bother taking your mobile. With no roaming contracts, foreign phones don't work in Burma.

DO buy local handicrafts—and expect to bargain.

DON'T take photos of soldiers.

DO patronise small businesses. That way you know your money is going to people who deserve it.

DON'T expect to be able to check your email.

Internet access is restricted to the bigger hotels and the rare internet café. There is no access to Google, Yahoo or Hotmail accounts.

DO take US dollars. Hotels for foreign visitors will be priced in dollars, so is the \$10 departure tax.

DON'T discuss politics with anyone who doesn't know and trust you—and never if you sense you're causing embarrassment by doing so. A person's discomfiture may be concealing their fear.

DO buy a *longyi*, the cotton wrap that is worn by men and women. They are cool in both senses of the word and can be worn over shorts for temple visits.

DON'T accept the official exchange rate—it's worth 100 times less than the market rate. Be wary of the black-market money-changers; better to change your dollars in your hotel.

DO try Burmese food. It's full of flavour without being highly spiced.

DON'T expect to eat late.

DO take antimalarials.

DON'T plan a trip in the hot season. The best time to go is between October and February. You will need warm clothes for Inle Lake and the mountains.

PS

For a thoughtful discussion of the case for travelling to Burma, visit voicesforburma.org; for the case against, see burmacampaign.org.uk.

Melzer co-owns the hot-air-balloon operation at Bagan. In January 2007 he opened a ten-bungalow, luxury activity-lodge near Putao in the far north of the country, where tourism had been non-existent. I was issued with a bulging envelope containing 30 pages of permits to go there. Close to the Indian and Chinese borders, it's in a village so remote that timber for the building had to be delivered by elephant. A hundred feet below, and theatrically framed by the proscenium of the main lodge frontage, is the Nam Lang River, whose waters flow into the Irrawaddy.

It is a hugely ambitious project. The architect was Jean-Michel Gathy, who has several sybaritic hotels to his name, including the Chedi Muscat, the Setai, Miami and a couple of Aman resorts. Not surprisingly, then, Malikha Lodge is all rich woods, dark stone and textured fabrics, with teak bathtubs of a size you would associate with treading grapes. The lodge has imported not just its wood-burning stoves, linen, wine and ceiling fans but also the very concepts of leisure and extravagance to a village where only the houses with generators have electricity. It is, nonetheless, a model of what tourism can bring to Burma—employment, finance for the village and the surrounding national park, and contact with another world. In Melzer's words, "It brings a level of hope that doesn't exist elsewhere."

Some hotels are owned by members of the junta or their cronies. The Bagan tower, which has the nerve to charge \$10 for its non-view, is owned by a crony. These places are known to the holiday companies and avoided. With almost all of Burma's tourist industry being privately owned, a boycott attacks one part of the economy that is not under state control. Reduce the private sector and the state sector grows commensurately, and with it the government's power.

In his book *The River of Lost Footsteps*, Thant Myint-U, grandson of U Thant, the former UN secretary-general and himself a onetime senior UN official, makes an impassioned case against isolationism, which, he argues will only prolong military rule. "If Burma were less isolated, if there were more trade, more engagement—more tourism in particular—and if this was coupled with a desire by the government for greater economic reform, a rebuilding of state institutions, and a slow opening up of space for civil society, then perhaps the conditions for political change would emerge over the next decade or two."

As for my self-questioning, only in one respect have my views modified. Tourism, I am convinced, is good for Burma, but I am not so sure how good Burma is for a lot of the country's tourists. In Burma, what you see is invariably what the government wants you to see. I lost count of the times I heard tourists say, admittedly before the shootings, "You read such dreadful things in the papers, but you don't see anything like that here." One man, who had been in the country for two weeks, actually asked if there was a free press. To leave Burma without having understood what you have seen or, worse, proclaiming admiration for an enviably contented and disciplined society—and I have heard that too—is grotesque.

But does it warrant the campaigners' fixation with tourism? Of course they want to honour the wishes of Aung San Suu Kyi, who asked travellers to stay away, but it is also an easy outlet for their frustration. Sadly, the campaigns have so far failed, as the events of September 2007 so conspicuously confirmed. Tourism is a handy coconut at which the protest groups can shy their impotence. But it's a sideshow, and the people of Burma deserve better. They rejoice in seeing visitors, for the money they bring and for the contact they represent with a world that has manifestly not forgotten them. It costs us nothing to boycott Burma, but it does cost the Burmese. To ostracise them is to victimise them, and the Burmese have been victims long enough. □