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Asia's Lost Treasure Trove

Filled with remarkable temples and pagodas, Myanmar's Bagan is rich in art but rarely visited. Exploring a 13th-century city under a modern repressive regime.

BY TOM WRIGHT
Bagan, Myanmar

In the late 13th century, the mighty Mongol emperor Kublai Khan rode onto this sprawling plain dotted with thousands of brick pagodas. Soon after, the Mongol hordes came crashing down, and more than 200 years of artistic flowering, akin to Europe's Renaissance, was snuffed out almost overnight.

Time has stood still since then—or so it can seem to modern-day visitors to the ancient city of Bagan, the center of a Buddhist empire that once stretched across a large swath of modern Southeast Asia. What remains of ancient Bagan are a few humble villages interspersed among some 2,500 Buddhist pagodas and temples, making the Bagan Archaeological Park one of the richest, and surely one of the least-visited, artistic treasure troves on earth.

Myanmar, the former Burma, has been ruled since 1962 by a repressive military junta, and tourism here has never really taken off. Further isolating the regime was the military's decision to block foreign aid in the aftermath of the May 2008 cyclone that left



130,000 dead or missing. As a result, Bagan, formerly known as Pagan, today attracts only a tiny fraction of the numbers flocking to Asia's other ancient sites, such as the famed Angkor Wat temple complex in Cambodia.

Crowds jostle to photograph Angkor Wat

at sunrise, but at Bagan, it's possible to be completely alone at almost any time of day—especially outside the peak November-to-February season of dry, cool weather. Part of Bagan's charm is in getting lost and happening upon a small temple with a half-finished

fresco—the artist interrupted, perhaps, by the Mongol invasion—or an underground monastery where monks have meditated for more than 800 years.

Some say tourism to Myanmar isn't ethical because much of the money visitors spend ends up in the hands of airlines and big hotels linked to the military. The U.S. has imposed economic sanctions banning imports of Burmese products and prohibiting new U.S. investment in Myanmar, and some nongovernmental groups advise against travel there.

A number of Burmese, though, including some members of the National League for Democracy party of detained opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, say international tourism is a lifeline in a country with poor living standards. Independent travel—staying at boutique hotels, shopping in family-owned workshops, eating at small restaurants—is the best way to put money directly into the hands of locals, says Nyo Ohn Myint, a leading opposition figure. State-organized package tours, which generally book guests in government hotels, should be avoided, he says.

A two-hour flight from Yangon, Myanmar's largest city and home to its only inter-
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Ancient Bagan was the center of an empire stretching across much of modern Southeast Asia; dragons, below, at a temple in Mandalay.