

Stepping into the Light



Before the Queen's Diamond Jubilee and the Olympics turned the world's attention to the UK, 2012 belonged to Myanmar. With the help of Country Holidays, MONICA PITRELLI explores a land on the verge of recasting itself from recluse into world player.

Burma or Myanmar – which to say?

The short answer is – it depends who you ask. Though the government officially changed the country's name from Burma to Myanmar in 1989, adoption of the new name has been mixed. Some governments and news agencies still use Burma, often for political reasons; today though, the new name has greater acceptance. Among the Burmese, both terms are used.

Yangon

It's said that Yangon is the city where time stopped. The grand British colonial buildings are crumbling, and rusty old cars – many deemed too old for the streets of Singapore – clog the roads. In *Ghost Train to the Eastern Star*, American travel writer Paul Theroux describes returning to Yangon 30 years after his initial visit, only to find a city that had barely changed at all.

Yet, the city is not the same as in decades past. It's just that transformations here are of the less visible sort. The name of the city (and country) has changed, the capital moved to Naypyidaw (currently off limits to tourists) and references to its former days as a British colony have been wiped from many public places. When asked what it feels like to learn that your national flag has been changed or your currency rendered valueless overnight, one Yangon local politely told me, "We don't appreciate it."

Yangon is Myanmar's largest city, and progress, though slow, is pushing forward. Still, those in search of a Big Mac will be sorely disappointed. This level of enterprise just doesn't exist, which for many is part of the country's allure. Yet, the airport is surprisingly modern, and efforts, says Pha, are being made to refurbish the city's historic buildings. Pha is my guide in Yangon; he's a friendly and knowledgeable chap with a penchant for straight talk. (This is rare; licensed guides are coached in what to say and, more importantly, what not to say when tourists ask particularly prickly questions.)

While most Burmese still wear the *longyi* (a tube of fabric similar to a sarong sewn from end to end), shorts and jeans are popping up on young people, a fact older generations disdainfully attribute to the influence of Korean movies (though one young Burmese man tells me: "It's really only the girls who like them; the guys like action films from Hollywood!").

We pass **Inya Lake** – where American John Yettaw famously swam to the home of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in 2009 – and stop outside her front gate. The street has been blocked for a while, says Pha. He wasn't able to take Michelle Yeoh here when he showed her around town a few years ago.

"Actually, I didn't know who she was. I just thought she had a lot of questions about Aung San Suu Kyi. I learned later that she was here to research her role for *The Lady*," he said. (Apparently the Burmese government was tipped off later too, as Yeoh was deported upon arrival on a subsequent trip.)

The party headquarters for the National League for Democracy is housed in a small, low-key shophouse along a busy road. Maps of the contested districts in the by-elections hang on the wall. Just days ago, the NLD won a historic 43 out of 44 contested seats in the 440-member lower house of parliament.

I ask Pha if there was excitement in the city following the elections. "A little," he says. A little? With international press descending in droves and Aung San Suu Kyi's slow ascent from political prisoner to parliamentarian, why so little enthusiasm? He explained that the people are happy, yet cautiously optimistic, with many waiting for the 2015 general election to see just how serious the government is about change.

Where to Stay: The Governor's Residence

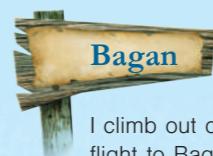


Previous:
Yangon's
Shwedagon
Pagoda, the
largest and holiest
pagoda
in Myanmar.

Above:
A new purchase at
NLD headquarters
– a Daw Aung San
Suu Kyi calendar.

Below:
Catching some
shut-eye by
Yangon harbour.

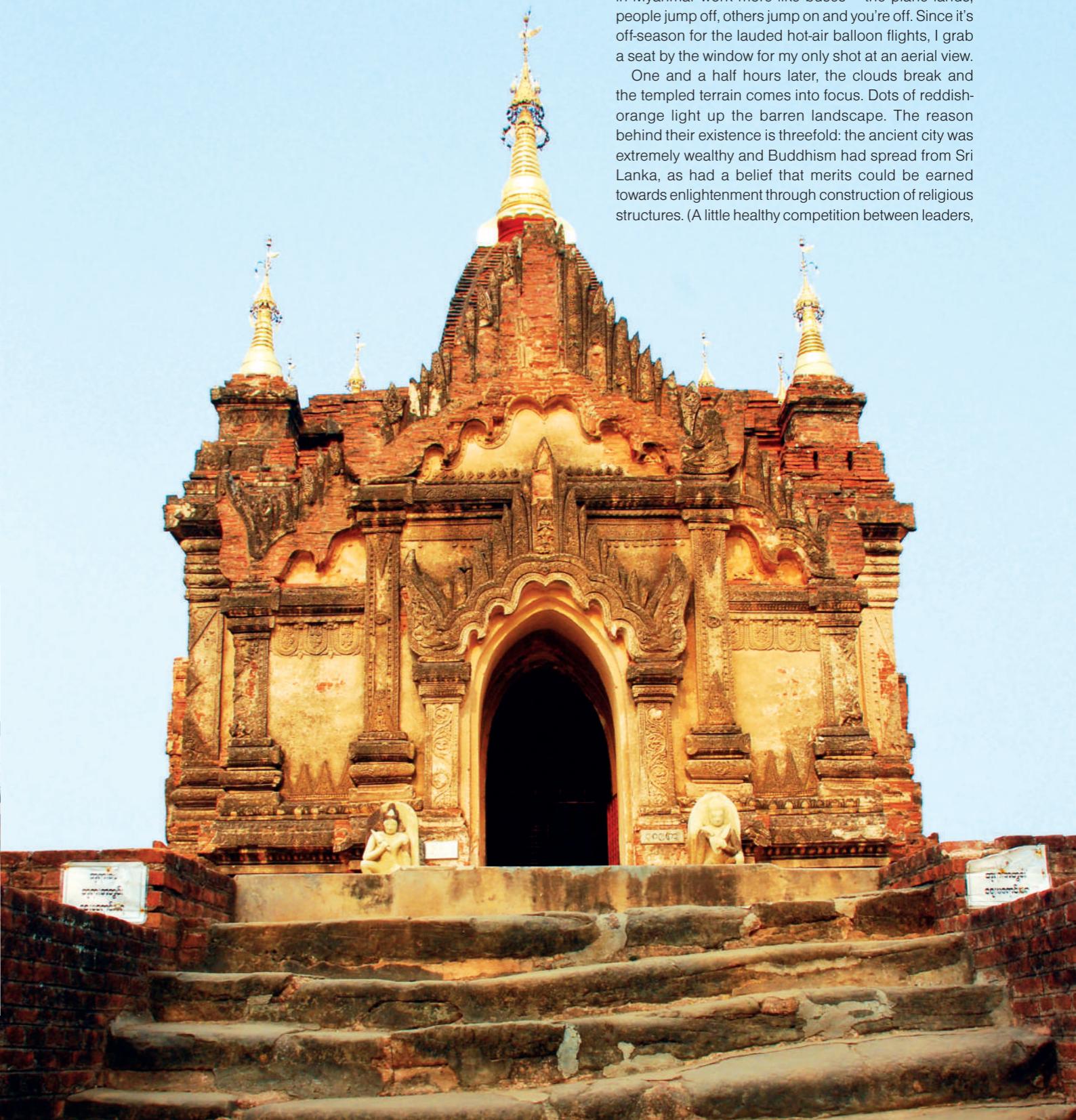
Opposite:
Bagan's Izagawna,
a moderate-sized
temple with an
onsite family
appointed by
the government
to protect and
repair it.



Bagan

I climb out of bed at 4am to catch an early morning flight to Bagan. It's the same time that the country's revered monk population rises, too. Domestic flights in Myanmar work more like buses – the plane lands, people jump off, others jump on and you're off. Since it's off-season for the lauded hot-air balloon flights, I grab a seat by the window for my only shot at an aerial view.

One and a half hours later, the clouds break and the templed terrain comes into focus. Dots of reddish-orange light up the barren landscape. The reason behind their existence is threefold: the ancient city was extremely wealthy and Buddhism had spread from Sri Lanka, as had a belief that merits could be earned towards enlightenment through construction of religious structures. (A little healthy competition between leaders,





each endeavouring to build the grandest temple of them all, didn't hurt either.) It seems everyone got in on the act. Ordinary folks built small pagodas; monks, ministers and the wealthy built medium-sized ones; and the royal family is to be thanked for the largest – and most touristy – temples.

As the capital of the Bamar kingdom from the 11th to the 14th century AD, Bagan was once a great city with a population thought to number in the millions. The wooden houses and palaces are now gone, as are most of the people, yet around 3,000 temples and pagodas remain – a small fraction of the estimated 13,000 that once existed. Most have been lost over time to the elements, the great **Irrawaddy River** and a devastating earthquake in 1975.

I pull out of the airport and into my first pagoda – the rather modest **Izagawna**. My guide, Myu, is discussing the pagoda's architecture and history when a sudden look of concern crosses her face. Two young backpackers in shorts and singlets are walking up. She excuses herself to politely tell the women to cover up or leave. They cover up. Shorts are disallowed, even for men.

Many tourists travel from temple to temple in air-conditioned vans; others bike and a few walk. Occasionally, a bus passes with domestic pilgrims dangling from the top, the passengers yelling out a collective "Heeeeeooooo!" at my presence. The people of Myanmar are known for their friendliness.

The most well known temples are crawling with tourists – and vendors looking to cash in on their



dollars. The best "sunset temples" are predictably busy come dusk; here, monks angle to photograph the sunsets and tourists angle to photograph the monks. But for every crowded temple, there are hundreds that sit in silence.

Over the next few days, older girls approach me and offer to trade their wares for... my mascara. After the tenth request, I finally ask, "Why mascara?"

"Because it is beautiful," says a young teenage girl.

Similar to Angkor Wat, trinket-selling children tug at tourists' heartstrings. They all peddle the same postcards and bracelets. Myu says that as more tourists come, more children do too.

"I'm fearful for my people," she says.

Clockwise from top:
As tourists increase, so do child merchants.

A little girl wears thanaka, a pale yellow paste used to control oil and protect against the sun, considered beautiful in Myanmar.

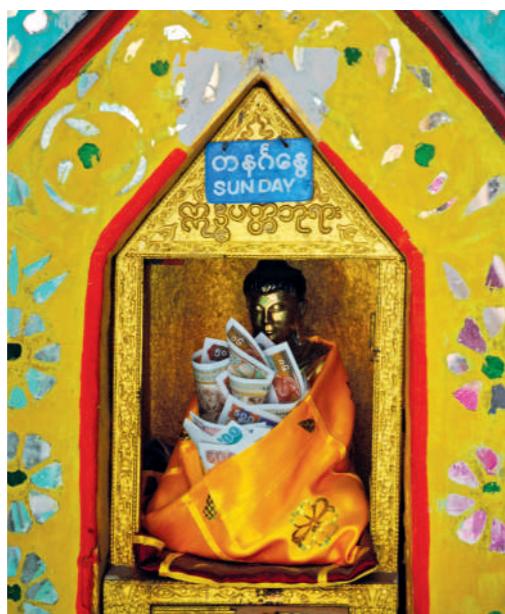
A boy tends to a younger sibling in Bagan.

Where to Stay: Bagan Thiripyitsaya Sanctuary Resort

Mount Popa

I can't wear black today. The nat don't like black. The nat are part of Myanmar's well-entrenched spirit worship, and today I'm climbing 777 steps to the **Popa Taungkalat Shrine** to pay homage to the 37 most powerful spirits, the Mahagiri Nat. Give them offerings, and you will be protected; ignore them and suffer their wrath – fires, earthquakes (the mountain is, in fact, a volcano) and other destruction. I'm told this isn't exactly proper Buddhism, but old habits die hard, especially among the notoriously superstitious Burmese.

On a bumpy road to the mountain, we pass villages without electricity or running water. Showering is done with a kettle or – more easily – via a weekly trek to the riverbank. At a roadside market, women buy and sell fresh produce, nuts and seeds, while children as young as four years old rock babies



and tend to their younger siblings. This village is home to 1,000 people and just three telephones. I'm introduced to a weathered, 81-year-old woman who has

walked three miles to buy vegetables. She gathers her purchases and starts the slow journey home.

At the mountain, I kick off my shoes and begin the ascent to the monastery. My calves have something to say about this the following morning. The view, which can afford views of the city of Old Bagan – doesn't, as a blanket of haze has set in. Or maybe, just maybe, it was the work of the nat, a local woman theorises that evening.

A sunset cruise on the Irrawaddy is on today's schedule. Envisioning a boat packed with chatty tourists and out-of-place champagne toasts, I almost bow out. In the end, the rickety old vessel has room for 50, but carries only two – the captain and me. We tick up the river at a snail's pace past the golden **Shwezigon Pagoda**. The captain kills the motor and we watch as the horizon slowly swallows the sun.

Kalaw

Touching down at Heli airport puts me firmly within the borders of the Shan State. Honey-sellers huddle in roadside shelters and members of the Pa-O tribe pass in packed carts. I count 24 people in one van. The market in Aungban is busier than usual; Thingyan, the national water festival, is just days away, and everyone is preparing for the festivities.

The British founded Kalaw as an escape from the searing hot plains, and the small town's mountain estates boast beautiful old colonial mansions. My hotel, the Amara, is one of these, a historic British home with fireplaces, well-worn Oriental carpets and soaring pine trees (another import attributed to the British). At about 1,300 metres above sea level, the night air is delightfully crisp, even during the hot season.

My local guide, Htay, and I set out for an afternoon of trekking. After two hours (and one very close call with a particularly feisty snake), we come to



our first village, where about 1,000 members of the Palaung tribe live. An old woman invites us into her home for tea. We pass a visibly upset middle-aged man, his hand shielding his face as he stares at the sky. Hyat whispers, "He is losing his sight and doesn't know why."

Back at the hotel, I order tea in the rose garden and strike up a conversation with a young German woman. A steady diet of curries and fried vegetables wasn't agreeing with her husband's stomach, forcing them to cancel a three-day

trekking adventure where nights would have been spent on monastery floors. She didn't have favourable reviews of Mandalay, which makes me feel better about leaving it off the agenda.

Where to Stay: Amara Mountain Resort

Inle Lake

Back in Aungban, Htay and I mount our bikes and set off for a four-hour ride to Inle Lake. The road is bumpy and the biking arduous, but it's the best way to see barefoot men and women, the latter often with infants strapped to their backs, working the fields.

At the lake's edge, we throw our bikes into a long, skinny boat and head for our hotel by water. The driver easily steers around bathing children and water buffalo, past houses on stilts, submerged electricity lines and the famed **Intha fishermen**, who, teetering on the end of narrow boats, row with one leg while standing up. It's easy to tell tourists from the local people; tourists are conspicuously perched on chairs while locals sit cross-legged on the floor of the boat. And locals usually grant a passing wave, while tourists quickly avert their eyes to prevent the other's presence from killing the authenticity of their own journey.

"Ever seen any of the fishermen fall in?" I enquire of the old man at the boat's helm.

"Never," he laughs.

An hour later, a rower jumps aboard to silently navigate the final stretch to the lakeside hotel. Soon, I'm sipping a Mandalay rum elixir on the hotel's verandah as the sunlight fades and the stars emerge. In Myanmar, "proper women" don't drink alcohol, a rule that doesn't seem to apply to tobacco, as I encounter many older women smoking fat cheroots the next day. Like any city, each neighbourhood on the lake has its trade, and a nearby village produces large quantities of the stuff. Others concentrate on lotus weavings or iron works. I tour each village by boat, stopping to get a closer look at the floating gardens that grow on the surface of the lake.

The next day, I return to Yangon. Nearly two weeks have passed since the elections took place, and virtually every newspaper and magazine at the airport kiosk carries a front-page photograph of Aung San Suu Kyi. People are lining up to buy the latest copies. It seems there still is hope for the future, even if it's only "a little" at present.

Where to Stay: Inle Princess Resort

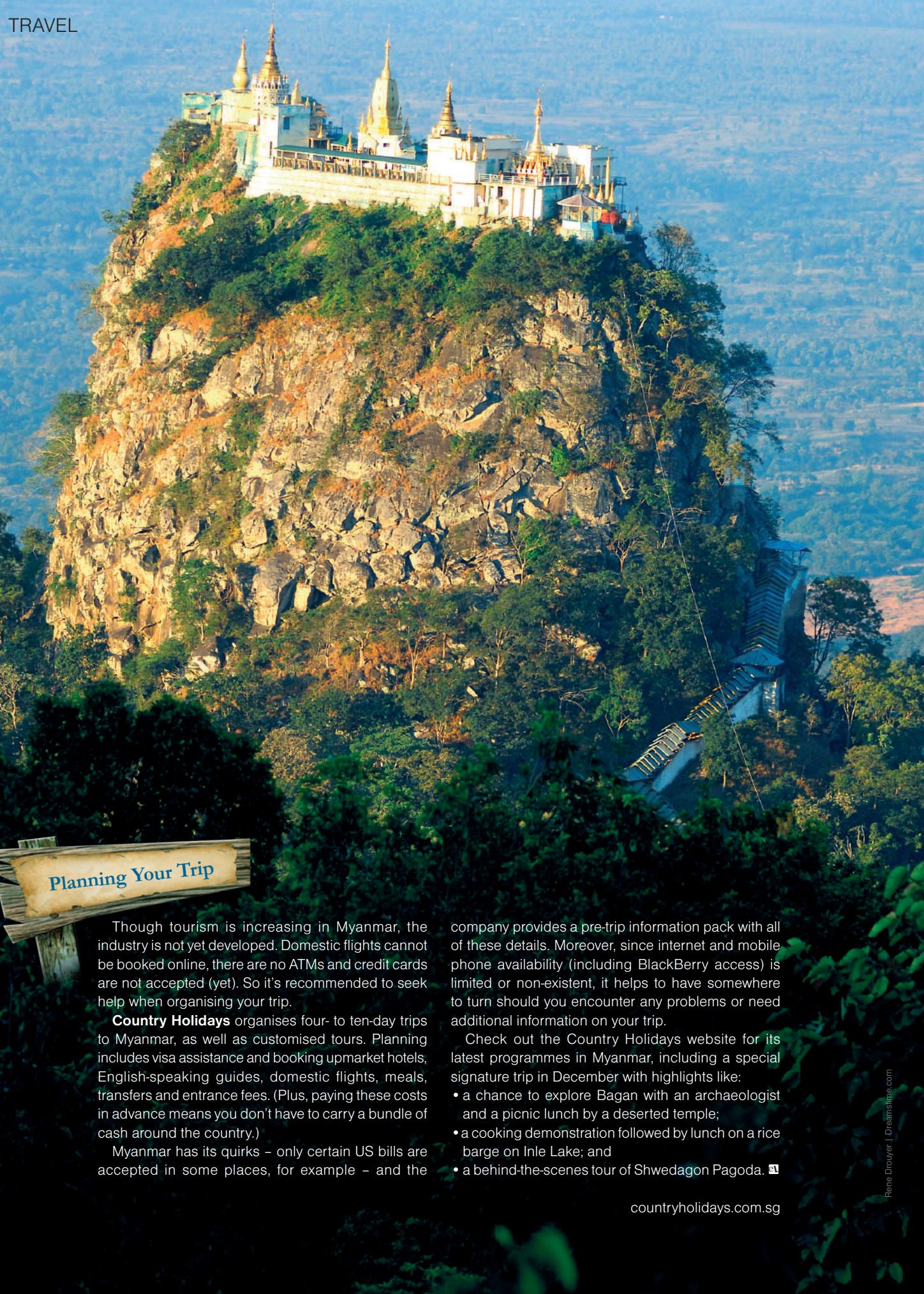
Opposite:
Myanmar's government has demonetised notes three times in the past 50 years, wiping out people's savings overnight.

A woman sells small parrots at the Aungban market. "People like to raise these birds because they can talk, especially when you give them green chilli," says Htay.

Below:
Intha fisherman row with one leg and the upper part of one arm, keeping their hands free to fish.

A man fertilises the soil of the floating gardens.

Next Page:
Mount Popa.



Planning Your Trip

Though tourism is increasing in Myanmar, the industry is not yet developed. Domestic flights cannot be booked online, there are no ATMs and credit cards are not accepted (yet). So it's recommended to seek help when organising your trip.

Country Holidays organises four- to ten-day trips to Myanmar, as well as customised tours. Planning includes visa assistance and booking upmarket hotels, English-speaking guides, domestic flights, meals, transfers and entrance fees. (Plus, paying these costs in advance means you don't have to carry a bundle of cash around the country.)

Myanmar has its quirks – only certain US bills are accepted in some places, for example – and the

company provides a pre-trip information pack with all of these details. Moreover, since internet and mobile phone availability (including BlackBerry access) is limited or non-existent, it helps to have somewhere to turn should you encounter any problems or need additional information on your trip.

Check out the Country Holidays website for its latest programmes in Myanmar, including a special signature trip in December with highlights like:

- a chance to explore Bagan with an archaeologist and a picnic lunch by a deserted temple;
- a cooking demonstration followed by lunch on a rice barge on Inle Lake; and
- a behind-the-scenes tour of Shwedagon Pagoda. ☕