

Should you visit Burma?

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Yes, according to Gill Charlton, who visited the country recently. She found its citizens keen to maintain contact with the outside world.

'Why is your government doing this to us?' says the taxi driver from Rangoon airport. He is referring to the British Government's call last summer for tourists to boycott Burma. "The company I'm employed by has cut my wages in half because there isn't enough work for us all."



Buddhist Burma: Shwezigon Pagoda was built in the eleventh century

His question is on the lips of many Burmese I meet as I travel around this beautiful but downtrodden land. Burma has a terrible record of human rights abuses, perpetrated by its repressive regime, which, with supreme irony, is called the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). The country has been under military rule, in one form or another, for more than 40 years - so why now increase pressure on British visitors to

boycott the country?

The short answer is to punish the regime for re-arresting Burma's elected leader, Aung San Suu Kyi (whom the Burmese refer to as "the Lady"), and other leaders of the National League for Democracy in a bloody strike on May 30 last year. The United States responded to this act of violence with new trade sanctions, forcing US clothing companies to cancel contracts, putting tens of thousands of Burmese women out of work and - according to critics of sanctions - into prostitution.

The European Union has always taken a more measured stance, saying that any sanctions should "ensure the ordinary people of Burma suffer as little as possible". As to visiting the country, it prefers to allow travellers to make up their own minds.

The trouble, say the Burmese, is that a tourist boycott misses its mark. "It's all very well for expatriate Burmese to push for sanctions but they don't have to live here," says another of my informants in Rangoon. "The money the regime makes from tourists is nothing compared to what it makes from oil and gas, from gems and from kickbacks from the opium trade. We think 500,000 ordinary people depend on tourism for a living. If the EU follows Britain's line, everyone living in Pagan (the country's main tourist site) will be destitute."



Meet the locals: townspeople of Katha prepare for the Festival of Lights

The British Government has come up with a number of reasons why tourism to Burma is "inappropriate" now. For a start, it argues that the medieval temple city of Pagan was forcibly cleared of residents. This is true. It happened in 1990. But for five years thereafter our government continued to help British companies trade with Burma.

Another argument concerns the widespread use of forced labour to construct tourist projects. Again this was true in the 1990s, but the International Labour Organisation says this is a thing of the past.

The most persuasive argument is that Aung San Suu Kyi apparently does not want tourists to come. This belief stems from her call for a boycott of the government-sponsored Visit Myanmar Year in 1996 "as a demonstration of solidarity with the democratic movement in Burma". But asked, at the time, by the writer and former Buddhist monk Alan Clements whether she was advocating that travellers and tourists stay away entirely, she replied: "No, we are not doing anything like that."

What she has said, on several occasions, is that tourists should examine their consciences before visiting Burma while the junta remains in power: "It is certainly a dilemma, and I think people can help most by studying the situation carefully and deciding what they can do to help," she told James Pringle, a journalist, in 2002.

I am on my way to Mandalay to join a riverboat bound for Bhamo, near the Chinese border. I want to see what life is like on the northern reaches of the Irrawaddy River, which has been closed to tourists for decades. I do not expect my visit to be of practical help to anyone, but as a Burmese friend said the last time I was here: "Just seeing foreigners walking around gives us hope that, one day, we too will be free."

The riverboat is owned by Paul Strachan, a Scotsman who started adventure cruises on the Irrawaddy in 1995. His Irrawaddy Flotilla Company restored

the original Pandaw, a 1940s Clyde-built steamer, which he found laid up on a muddy bank.

Pandaw III, a larger replica built in Mandalay in 2002, is a work of art in polished teak and brass with steamer chairs, wide wooden decks and spacious cabins with bathrooms. With a draught of just four feet she can travel upstream to Bhamo for a few weeks each autumn when the Irrawaddy is still high after the monsoon rains.

There are 28 passengers on this trip, mostly well-travelled British and Swiss. As we cast off, there is a thrill of expectation among both the passengers and crew, many of whom are going north for the first time.

The coffee-coloured river eddies and swirls around us as we cross to Mingun. A reception committee is carefully monitoring our approach. We watch from the deck as good-natured banter turns to argument; our observers are fighting over who gets to hassle whom in a sort of hawkers' roulette.

Mingun is famous for having the largest working bell in the world. It used to hang beneath an exquisitely carved wooden roof depicting, among other things, figures of yawning monks. Now they are gone, probably stolen by art thieves, and the roof is falling apart. "The monks are not interested in restoring it, neither are rich men," says our guide. "They prefer to give funds to build new pagodas and stupas." He points towards a line of purple hills, each crowned with a glistening white bell-shaped stupa made of concrete.

Travelling upstream is slow - but never dull. The river flows fast and shallow around great sand bars and islands where farmers use oxen to plough in the fresh layer of silt for the annual crop of peanuts and sesame. On the riverbank women thwack the family's wash against boulders and children throw lumps of clay at passing plastic bags. We overtake ferries so laden with passengers and cargo that sinking seems a real possibility. On the margins, long-oared sampans and fishing canoes bob along like toy boats.

Ali Baba would have no trouble hiding in Nwe Nyein, a village known throughout Burma for its shapely 50-gallon water jars. It is a place of quiet industry: in cool, dark sheds the potters manhandle heavy clay snakes on hand-turned wheels with the ease of years of practice. We are made to feel welcome. Small children hold our hands as we walk around admiring the shuttered wooden homes. The villagers nod and smile as we pass. We nod and smile and say hello. What do they say about us? I ask the guide. "They are saying, 'oh look, here come the Hello people'."

In Hti Gyaing, a carpenter invites me into his workshop. He is fascinated by my blonde hair and keeps pointing from me to the wall. Peering around the door I am confronted by a life-size poster of David Beckham in his Real Madrid kit. The Burmese can watch him in action, too; there are satellite

dishes all over town, beaming down 195 TV channels - and the government can do nothing about it.

Our next port of call is Katha, where George Orwell spent six miserable months as an officer in the colonial police force in 1926. The town is thinly disguised as Kyauktada, the setting for *Burmese Days*, his scathing attack on imperialism. Along the tree-shaded avenues many of the red-brick mansions have stood empty since the British left and the market that Orwell evoked so brilliantly is now full of Chinese merchandise: cheap clothes, plastic housewares and hand tools. The whites-only club where Orwell based much of the book's action is the run-down office of an agricultural co-operative.

On one early morning stroll - we're talking 6.30am - we come across a private school in a small village. A hundred students aged 15 to 17 sleep here and take extra classes both before and after attending state school across the river. They are overjoyed to see us in this remote place but shy about speaking English. I wish I could help with a conversation class but the captain is impatient to depart.

Our journey reveals a succession of extraordinary sights: ragged gold prospectors blasting away at the riverbank with water cannons; novice monks dressed like fairytale princes riding off to their monasteries; the echoing chatter of birds and gibbons in the magnificent second defile; and a building filled with hundreds of staring buddhas.

All the villages we visit appear peaceful and relatively prosperous with substantial homes made from teak and woven bamboo set in gardens shaded by pomelo, rambutan and mango trees. Life must be easier next to plentiful fresh water.

As we near Bhamo, the river becomes harder to navigate. Red and white bamboo poles mark the channel through the shifting sands. Even so, we always have a local pilot and, at tense moments, a sailor, using a long pole, takes the depth several times a minute and shouts it up to the bridge.

River dolphins greet our arrival in Bhamo as we moor a mile downstream of the town. There is no quay, only a makeshift path down the riverside cliff. Porters are doing the work of donkeys, bent double beneath bales of cotton weighing 200 kilos (440lb) that take four men to lift on to their backs. I cannot bear to watch.

We are now in the predominantly Christian state of Kachin, which signed a truce with the Rangoon government in 1993. For a border town with a big military presence, it appears fairly relaxed, full of schoolchildren and shoppers from rural areas. On street corners there are notices, in English, asking: "Can we help you?" and exhorting locals to "offer any assistance to foreign visitors".

I do strike up a conversation with someone who, again, shall have to be nameless.

"How are things?" I ask.

"Not too bad, though the electricity supply is awful. It comes from Katha and the poles are always falling down."

"Any forced labour around here?" "That's all been stopped, but now the regime is trying to stir up trouble between the Muslims and the Buddhists. They are trying to get them to fight each other so they can say they have to have big security here."

"Any success?" "No, everyone gets on very well together."

Back in Rangoon I visit Kalawya Tawya, a monastic school for orphans and poor children nominated by monasteries countrywide. The children stay until they are 18, when they can re-enter the secular world.

In Burma, Buddhism is not just a religion, it is a way of life. It teaches tolerance, acceptance and non-violence - which unfortunately makes a military junta's life easier. To acquire merit and ensure a better future life, most Burmese families feed monks, give generous donations to temples and perform regular worship.

Every day, just before noon, the young monks and nuns start lining up, all 1,600 of them. Many will have walked miles barefoot to people's homes to collect food. It is a moving sight as they file silently into the refectory and set out the little stainless-steel tins of different curries at long low tables.

"Feeding monks is a big commitment," says my guide. "My wife just can't say no to cute children so she has to get up at 7am every day to cook for seven novices. When we go away we have to find someone else to do it."

Rangoon, a mixture of crumbling colonial offices, housing projects and half-built skyscrapers, is a noisy, dusty place that struggles to cope with the crowds and the traffic. Motorcycles are banned after a would-be assassin got close to the car of one of the regime's leaders last year.

I negotiate a four-lane highway to reach the Shwedagon, a great gilded dome that rises 300ft from a marble platform studded with smaller stupas and meeting halls. It is the most sacred Buddhist site in the country and tonight is the start of the full moon Festival of Lights, Buddhism's equivalent to our Harvest Festival.

Hundreds of families are setting out mats and tiffin boxes; they will sleep here and rise to pray at dawn. I am fascinated by the weaving competition

taking place. In teams of three, young women dressed in their finest silk lungis are furiously weaving bright orange cloth for monks' habits. Behind are dozens of supporters, family and fellow workers, chanting encouragement, singing and dancing, eating and drinking. Passers-by donate 1,000 kyat notes (worth about 60p), which are pinned to the weavers' blouses. I speak to a young woman who turns out to be an off-duty official guide. She apologises for her English but we can hold a conversation.

The weavers, she says, are from Mandalay, the best in their factories. There is no prize for winning, only the merit of having woven the most cloth. Elsewhere groups of local textile workers sit beneath banners like trade unionists. I watch as a group rises as one to light clay oil lamps, their faces shining with hope. "They pray for wisdom," says my guide.

Will these people have work next year? I hope so, but it will be no thanks to the West.

I turn to see a backpacker refusing the services of a guide, pointing out the write-up on the Shwedagon in his Lonely Planet book. But tonight isn't in the guidebook. It is also a rare chance for ordinary Burmese to speak to foreigners in a busy place. If tourists are going to behave like this then Aung San Suu Kyi is right: don't come to Burma. But for those who have a genuine interest in the country and its plight, the Burmese will be very pleased to show you around and bend your ear.

On April 26, the Brussels-based International Crisis Group published a report on Burma that runs against the British Government's stance: "Sanctions may provide moral support for the embattled opposition, but they also contribute to the overall stagnation that keeps most people trapped in a daily battle for survival," it said. "The widely expressed belief in the West that just a little more pressure might break the regime has little objective basis."

I shall leave the last word to a Burmese friend of mine: "It's easy to be tough on Burma; we don't fight back and we don't have much that the West wants. We're an easy target. Iran and China have appalling human rights records too, but no one says 'don't visit them, don't buy their goods'."