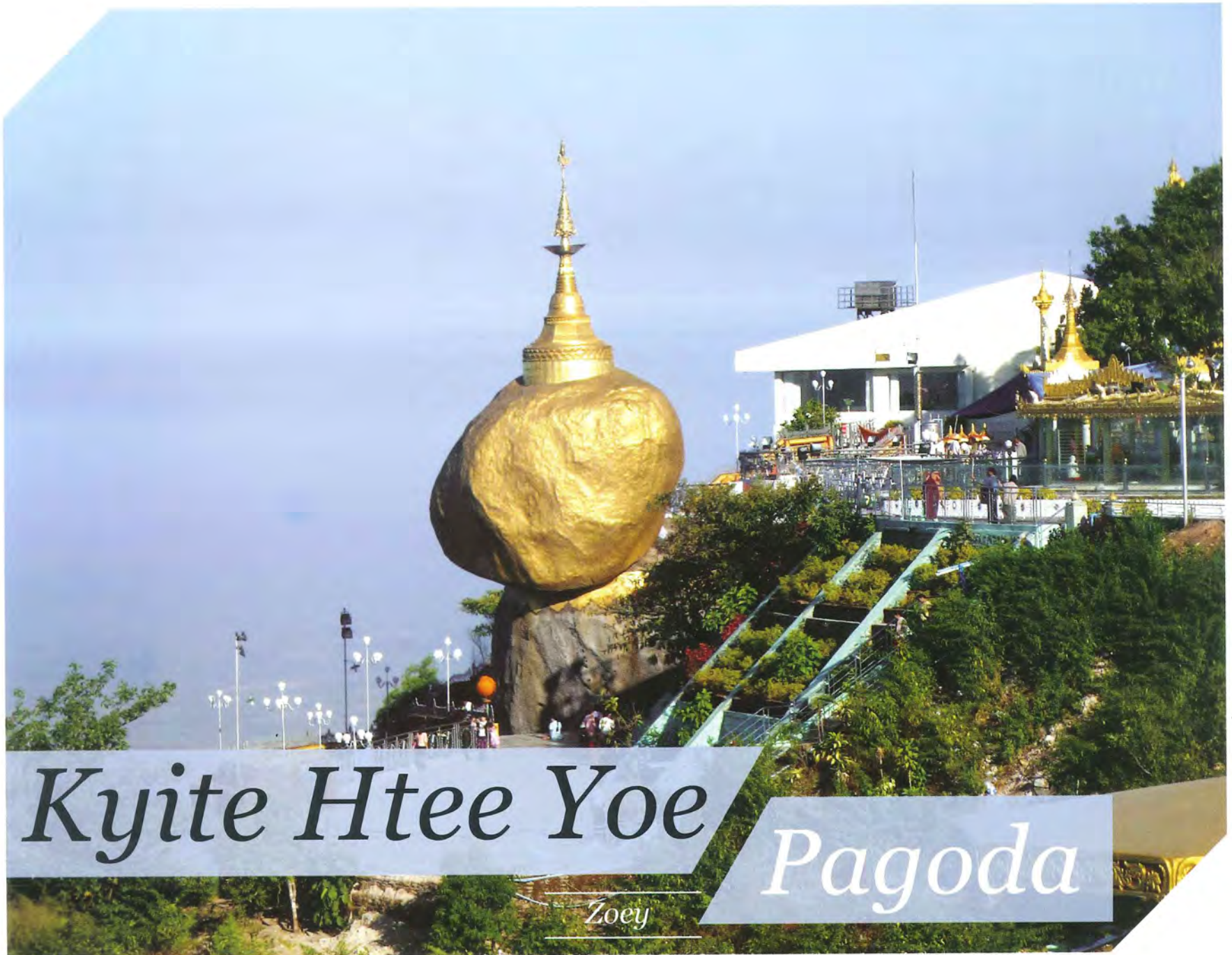


# MYANMAR INSIDER

THIS MONTH'S INSIDER NEWS ON BUSINESS, LUXURY, REAL ESTATE, LIFESTYLE & LEISURE

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# Kyite Htee Yoe

# Pagoda

Zoey

**M**ount Kyaiktiyo (Kyite Htee Yoe), famous for the huge golden rock perched at its summit, is one of the three most sacred religious sites in Myanmar, along with the Shwedagon Pagoda and the Mahamuni Temple. It is a well-

known Buddhist pilgrimage site in Mon State, Burma. Pilgrims come here from far and wide to worship and add gold leaf to the rock, which seems to defy gravity by delicately balancing on the edge of the 1100-metre high mountain.

For many visitors, the rock (standing 7.6 metres tall) and the gilded pagoda which sits on top of it (itself 7.3 metres tall), which are said to cover a hair of the Buddha, are the main draw, but another reason to make the journey are the panoramic 360 degree views of the surrounding Mon State mountains from the summit. It takes pilgrims' breath away.

In the Mon language, the word 'kyaik' means "pagoda" and 'yo' means "to carry on the hermit's head". The word 'ithi' means "hermit". Thus, 'Kyaik-htiyo' means "pagoda upon a hermit's head".

### **Kinpun and ascending the mountain**

There are a few hotels at the top of Mount Kyaiktiyo, but many people stay in the 'base camp' village of Kinpun, which has a lively atmosphere and a good range of places to eat. If you are staying in Kinpun, it makes most sense to arrive in the late afternoon or evening, and then ascend the mountain the following morning.

The journey up Mount Kyaiktiyo involves taking an extremely crowded open-top truck which rushes alarmingly through the spectacular jungle scenery like a roller coaster,

there is a stopping point located 1.5 kilometres from the summit, from which some choose to walk the fairly steep and strenuous, but otherwise straightforward, route to the top. By the time you have reached the pagoda at the summit, you will truly feel as if you have been on a pilgrimage.

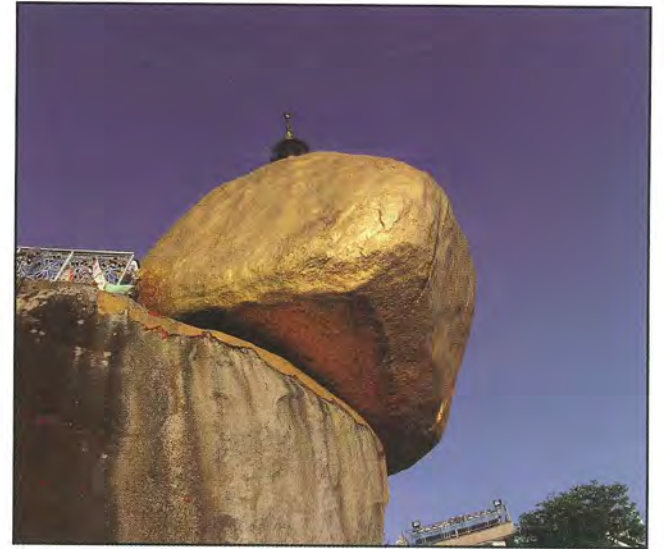
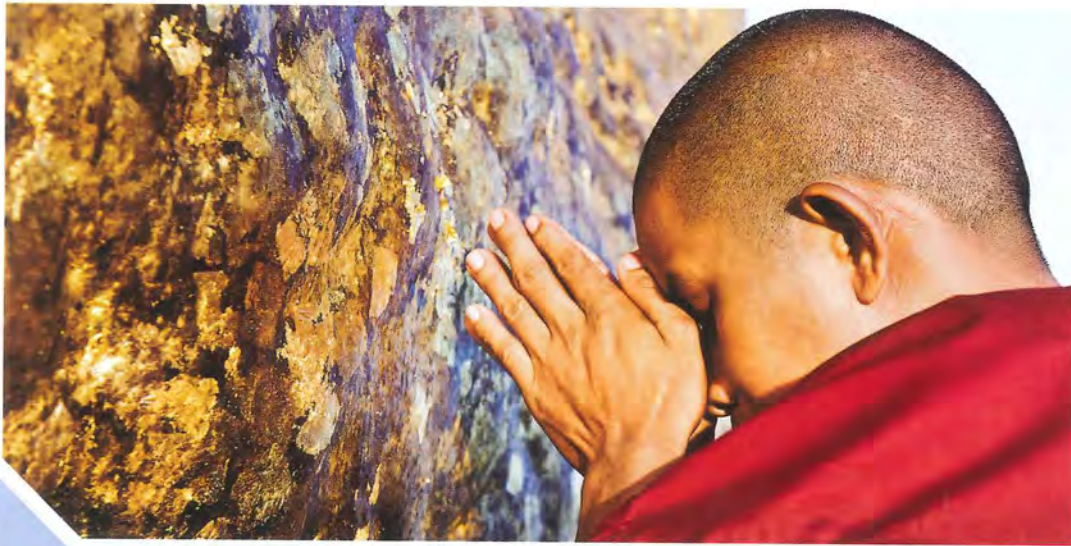
It is possible to hike to the top of the mountain from Kinpun, which is an even longer about five hours and more exhausting journey than taking the truck, but the walk is mostly covered by the jungle canopy and gives the chance to see some peaceful views and rare species of birds along the way. The path is straightforward to the top and is well paved. If you want to take part in the full religious experience when you get to the summit, there is a fee to place some gold leaf on the rock – but only men are allowed to touch the rock because of Myanmar's tradition.

### **Festival**

The five Thousand Lights Festival takes place at Mount Kyaiktiyo in January and features food offerings at dawn and candle lighting after dark, illuminating the mountaintop.

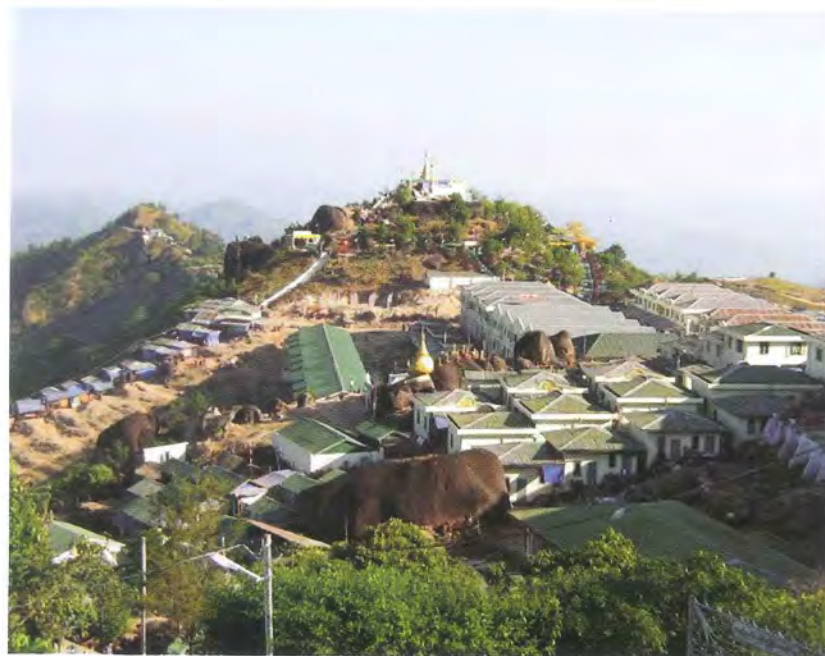
*The journey up Mount Kyaiktiyo involves taking an extremely crowded open-top truck*





*Stick golden leaves on the face of the Golden Rock*

*The five Thousand Lights Festival takes place at Mount Kyaiktiyo in January*



**Geography**

The pagoda is located near Kyaikto in Mon State in the northern part of the Tenasserim coast. The Golden Rock is situated at an elevation of 1,100 metres (3,600 ft) above sea level, on top of the Kyaiktiyo hill that is also known as Eastern Yoma mountain and it is on the Paung-laung ridge of the Eastern Yoma mountain. It is at a distance of 210 kilometres (130 mi) from Yangon.

The Kinpun village is at the base of Mt. Kyaiktiyo. It is the closest to the Kyaiktiyo Pagoda. You can get there by car from Yangon. From the base camp at Kinpun, the hiking trek to the pagoda is about 11 kilometres (6.8 mi) and many devotees do this trek as part of the pilgrimage rites. There are also many temples and pagodas, which have been built recently on other hills in the vicinity of the Kyaiktiyo Pagoda that are visited by pilgrims and tourists by trekking along foot tracks.

Near the top of the mountain, there are two large lions guarding the entrance to Kyaiktiyo Pagoda. From this location, known as Yataung (the last point for vehicular traffic), pilgrims and visitors have to climb to the

Golden Rock barefoot, after leaving their footwear behind.

**Environment around the pagoda**

The Golden Rock is the main attraction for the pilgrims who offer prayers and also stick golden leaves on the rock in reverence. A main square close to the golden rock has many establishments that deal in religious paraphernalia for worship and offerings made by the pilgrims. Adjoining the plaza area is the Potemkin village where restaurants, gift shops, and guest houses are located. A new terrace has been built at a lower level from which visitors can get a good view of the rock and the pagoda.

**Pilgrimage**

Kyaiktiyo Pagoda or Golden Rock has become a popular pilgrimage and also tourist attraction. At the peak of the pilgrimage season, during November to March, an atmosphere of devotion is witnessed at Kyaikhtiyo pagoda. As the golden rock gleams in different shades from dawn to dusk, pilgrims' chants reverberate in the precincts of the shrine. The sights at dawn and at sunset are unique.

Lighting of candles, meditation and offerings to the Buddha continues throughout the night. Men cross over a bridge across an abyss to stick golden leaves on the face of the Golden Rock, in deep veneration. However, women are neither allowed to touch the rock nor cross the bridge.

Pilgrims visit the pagoda, from all regions of Myanmar and a few foreign tourists also visit the pagoda. Even disabled persons who are staunch devotees of Buddha visit the pa-

goda, walking up the track on crutches. Old people, who can not climb, are carried on stretchers by porters to the Pagoda to offer prayers to Buddha.

The Full Moon day of Tabaung in March, is a special occasion for pilgrims who visit the shrine. On this day, the platform of the pagoda is lighted with ninety thousand candles as reverential offering to the Lord Buddha. The devotees who visit the pagoda also offer fruits, food and incense to the Buddha.

*Pilgrims visit the pagoda, from all regions of Myanmar and a few foreign tourists*



# Visa opens its first Myanmar office

American payment company, Visa opened its first office in Yangon recently and appointed a country manager. It aims to expand its network in Myanmar's continuously growing electronic payments market. The company plans to operate online payments for e-commerce with its partner banks and merchants alongside their Auto Teller Machines and other electronic payments means.

Visa appointed Mr. Hiro Taylor as country manager in Myanmar. Visa entered Myanmar banking market in October 2012. Since its entrance to Myanmar market, Visa has seen considerable growth in the uptake of electronic payments and Myanmar becomes the fastest growing market for Visa globally. Visa has brought 1,150 ATMs across the country. Regarding electronic payments, it has more than 1,800 retailers. Visa has

worked together with eight local banks including Kanbawza bank, CB Bank and Myanmar Oriental Bank and mobile payments, eCommerce channels, and Prepaid Card Programs has been launched in Myanmar.

Mr. Hiro Taylor said, "A channel we are trying to grow is e-commerce, which would enable cardholders to buy air tickets or book hotel rooms online."

"Our big mission in Myanmar is to transform reliance on physical currency to electronic card payments," he said, "which would be faster, cheaper and easier for consumers and companies."

Visa is the California based financial services corporation that provides financial institutions and merchants with Visa-branded payment products. Its licensed banks and financial institutions offer credit, debit, pre-



paid and cash-access programs to their consumers. Today, visa operates in 200 countries and territories and the products and

services are available on any device - card, laptop and mobile device.

# Bogyoke Aung San Market Popularity at its Peak

*Anu Seth*



A new wave of consumerism, buying and spending, has swept cities like Yangon ever since the country opened up over two years ago. Needs and wants are multiplying, much to the delight of retailers, in new shopping malls, stand-alone brand outlets, traditional stores in downtown Yangon, and also in the famous oriental Bogyoke Aung San Market in the heart of the city. Considering the wide range of products it offers, it is only natural for it to be the most popular shopping destination,

and its popularity is only growing by the day. One would have expected the newer malls to supersede this 89-year old market, with the latest designs in fashion and home accessories, but as of now, none can match the wide range of goods available in Scott Market, at competitive and affordable prices. Its location, old world charm, warm and friendly shop owners, and compact size make it extremely convenient. There is no other place that comes anywhere close, since it houses the smallest to the biggest,

cheapest to the most expensive, and hence is a one-stop place for all Myanmar products. Also known as Scott Market, the two-storied, covered shopping arcade opened in 1926, and was named after the then British Municipal Commissioner, C. Scott, till it was renamed after General Aung San, in 1948, and called Bogyoke Aung San Market, Bogyoke being the Burmese term for General. The names ones hers sound like Bojo Market or Scott Market. It stands out for its colonial architecture reminiscent of British Rule, and for the well-travelled, bears a striking resemblance to Kolkata's New Market, though its wares are comparable to the famed Chatuchak weekend market in Bangkok, Thailand. The array of handicrafts available here remains unmatched. The market structure features in the Yangon City Heritage List and retains its position as one of the city's top three tourist destinations.

Bogyoke Aung San Market showcases craft and workmanship traditions that are over a thousand years old, passed on from generation to generation. The gold and silversmiths carve unmatched intricate designs that hold pride of place in homes and museums all over the world. Woodcarving and weaving as seen here is difficult to replicate, just as much as the lotus silk and tapestry weaving.

Puppets, mother of pearl and ivory wares, display the amazing talent of Myanmar folk, and all these look resplendent as they adorn small shops in the market.

The market remains crowded throughout the day, with at least ten thousand visitors a day, not all of them customers, though. The peak tourist season sees the market overflowing with people, while the rainy season has thinner crowds, but business continues. Most shop owners are English speaking, which is a big plus, and for the acceptance of credit cards at bigger outlets, a boon for those wary of carrying large amounts of cash. Though it boasts of a North, South, East and West wing, there is no segregation of products available in each.

#### **Popular then, even more so now**

Twenty years ago, this market was the only big shopping area, that was bazaar, mall, eating joint and weekend outing destination, all rolled into one. Gradually, newer shopping complexes came up, but neither footfalls, nor the revenue earned by the Bogyoke market outlets has decreased. The variety and range of options for a single product remain unmatched. Additionally, prices here remain lower than those found at Junction or other malls. While branded products may not be available, here, as yet, there are numerous other options to choose from. A walk down its cobblestoned inner streets reveals readymade garments, ranging from the ethnic to the trendy.

One may wonder why the market continues to draw crowds, at a time when trends and fashions are changing in Myanmar, and a section of the population, especially the youth are discarding traditional attire for Western wear. The reason is not far to seek. The world over, while we marvel at technological inventions facilitating our lives, the human aesthetic sense is drawn to all artistic man made creations, that display talent, skill, expertise in techniques that create exquisitely beautiful pieces. In this day and age of short attention spans, quick results and fast paced activities, it is difficult to fathom how a craftsman can spend months carving a single piece of wood, or weaving a silk stohl. It is all this, that one gets to see in the market.

The 1641 shops spread over an area of over 29,000 square meters do brisk business from tourists and locals alike. While tourists



form over 40% of the crowd, the rest comes from local residents besides Myanmar folk visiting from other parts of the country. What everyone enjoys is the unique shopping experience browsing through small stores laden with goods, narrow alleys holding treasures, and of course, local foods and fruits.

#### Spoilt for Choice - Gems and Stones

Bogyoke Market remains the best place to buy jade products, trinkets and decorative pieces to adorn homes, and some of the best jade pieces are seen in the first row of the market, facing the road. It is here that tourists pick up Buddha statues, jade rings and bangles, and other pieces. The Central Hall is the air conditioned haven for stone jewelry, selling rubies and sapphires, spinels and emeralds, besides other precious and semi precious stones. Myanmar is famous for the world's best rubies and sapphires, and tourists and locals alike, seek opportunities to invest in the Mogok ruby, even as its prices hit the roof. Cheaper ruby varieties are stocked in plenty, and one can therefore buy a string of rubies for \$500, or a single stone for \$10,000, depending on origin, color, cut, clarity and size. Most of the rubies are heat treated. Interestingly, the designs offered are nearly the same in every shop, but some boast of a better reputation. Local certification is available for larger sized precious stones. Myanmar pearls are also catching the world's eye and an increasing number of shops deal exclusively in pearl jewelry, again ranging from USD20 to thousands. On the outer fringe, a few exclusive diamond outlets have opened up. We are told Myanmar is a good place to buy diamonds too! Prices have been spiraling upwards for the last five years, and many products have slipped from the common man's levels of affordability. It is fascinating to see the fine workmanship in the tiny jewelry crafting shops, found in some alleys.

#### Lacquerware

The market has over a dozen shops selling the famed lacquerware, which is displayed in living rooms of the elite, and also used for serving food. Lacquer products are carved out of bamboo or wood and then coated with resin extracted from the local thitsi tree, and the colors used are all natural. The lacquer industry is found in Bagan, Pyay, Monywa, Mandalay, and in Rakhine, Shan and Mon states. Incised lacquerware is multicolored and the designs are taken for folktales and legends, zodiac signs and other motifs. In larger pieces, often, an entire story is depicted through the drawings. The most eye-catching is the gilt lacquerware, in which gold foil is added to the incised lacquer designs. These are more expensive and ornate with the black and gold combination being most popular. Myanmar's lacquerware is different from other Asian countries famous for lacquer like China, Japan, Thai-



land and Korea, but as much a part of the nation's cultural as one of the most valuable art forms. Over the years, the industry has become more commercial, the designs less intricate and less time consuming, and therefore turnover increases, and with lower prices, is affordable for a larger segment

*Considering the wide range of products it offers, it is only natural for it to be the most popular shopping destination,*

of people. Scott market, still has shops selling the most expensive, traditional designs alongside the cheaper ones.

#### Music, Art and Woodcraft

For art lovers, there is plenty to choose from in the numerous small art galleries. Fine paintings by young budding artists in water colors, oils, stones and crayons are seen in the open alleys as well. Paintings of monks are a favorite amongst expatriates and tourists. Ornate picture frames enhance the beauty of each work of art.

Sandalwood figurines, decorative pieces and mementoes, silverware, intricately carved are found in a few shops. Further into the alleys, one comes across bamboo and cane products from the simplest to the most intricate, tanakha and other local herbal products. Incense sticks, fragrant oils, creams, green teas and other local beverages are all favored gift items with a huge turnover. Wood carvings and boxes, bowls and statues made out of hard wood are sold at almost every nook and corner.

One of the most unusual and beautiful pieces tourists like to buy is the saung gauk, the Myanmar harp. Shaped most often like a bird, the hollow body is made out of padauk wood, and the top covered with deer skin, while the strings are made of silk, and are



5-13 in number. The ornate red and gold instruments are eye-catching and fascinating. Musical instrument shops stock other products as well, like drums, guitars, gongs and xylophones, to meet the requirements of music fans.

#### Fabric, Fashion and Footwear

The largest selling item we are told, are the Myanmar slippers. The black velvet footwear, worn with national attire and any other outfit, is cheap and comfortable. Called the hnyat-phanat, the flat soled, sometimes embellished footwear is used for formal and casual wear.

The first floor and scores of shops at ground level sell fabric of all types, from fine cottons and durable polyester, to fine lace and net, tapestry and silk. Seamstresses and tailors can make outstandingly designed outfits



for men and women. The market is quite the garment paradise, offering traditional Myanmar dresses from various states. From plain cotton longyis to the intricately woven ones from Rakhine, Karen fringed jackets and Kachin metal trimmed costumes, the range is tempting and attractive.

#### A sip and a snack

Shoppers find enough of refreshments and food options once inside the market, as no shopping experience is complete with snacking breaks. From green tea to durian and avocado shakes, fried foods, baked semolina deserts to Shan noodles, authentic Chinese and Thai food, plus numerous regional delicacies, every corner has something delectable to offer. The food court in the center is always full. Not to mention luscious fresh fruits, and juices.

Several parts of the market are undergoing repairs and renovations. A spruced up look would help in adding more elegance to this unique market. Even in its present state, it is way ahead of other shopping destinations. Yangon may yet not be called a shoppers' paradise like Bangkok and Singapore, but it offers enough and more for those who dig into the treasures of Bogyoke Aung San Market.

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# There is Something about Thai Food

Anu Seth

Look east, and two of the most exotic tourist destinations appear on the horizon—our mesmerizing Myanmar and its immediate neighbor, Thailand. One exudes an old world charm, and the other is cosmopolitan and modern, with tourism as its biggest industry. Both countries have a predominantly Buddhist population, and the tropical climate implies similar agricultural produce is cultivated, both being considered as rice bowls to the world in the past even as they work towards becoming the world's largest rice producers again. Thailand is also the most popular gateway to Myanmar, offers employment to over 2 million Myanmar nationals who migrated across the border legally and illegally, and is one of the largest foreign investors in the country.

Thai cuisine has become an integral part of life in Myanmar, while also having influenced Myanmar food over centuries. In Yangon, numerous exclusive Thai food restaurants are seen flourishing, frequented



*Both countries have a predominantly Buddhist population, and the tropical climate implies similar agricultural produce is cultivated*



by locals, expats and tourists. It is just that Thai food has such a refined taste, with its phenomenal variety and delectable harmony in flavors that tingles the taste buds and leaves everyone clamoring for more. Thai food fans opt for Legacy Restaurant when they want an authentic Thai meal in a simple ambience, Sabai Sabai, Mai Thai, Le Nacha, Bangkok Kitchen, Pattaya, Thai Kitchen and numerous others for flavorsome and completely satisfying meals, close in taste and presentation to similar meals in Thailand. All multi-cuisine restaurants offer popular Thai preparations, which remain amongst their most frequently ordered dishes.

## What Makes Thai Cuisine Unique

The Thais have perfected the art of cooking using the abundant, flavorful natural produce of their fertile country. Even certain varieties of the rice grown there are so aromatic, that 'Thai fragrant rice' has become

the commonly used term. Every fruit is so sweet and juicy, every vegetable so pretty to look at, and the herbs grown are of the best quality, enhancing the flavor of the most bland foods.

Interestingly, Thai food has also evolved over time, with various Asian and European influences, primarily due to its strategic location at the cross roads of the east-west sea route. The distinct Chinese influence is evident, and it started with the first Chinese migrants from Yunnan coming to occupy the Thai Peninsula. Thai cuisine also imbibed from neighboring culinary practices and thus one finds dishes along the Mekong River having a strong influence from Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. In the north, soups and curries display the Myanmar influence, while the Southern part of Thailand displays how Muslim cuisine has impacted Thai food preparations.

Thai cuisine has a comparatively short culinary history, evolving from around the 13th century A.D. The initial, rather rudimentary cooking techniques of boiling and grilling with little beyond salt and pepper, soon added the Chinese style of frying, stir frying and pan frying and adopted the Chinese metal wok as a cooking vessel. Today, food is prepared in numerous ways. Leaves and raw vegetables are pounded to make salads, lighter vegetables and meats are stir