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## 6 STREETS OF YANGON

14th Street - old Chinese houses, blood tonics, and nat spirits



## 8 ART

The Goethe-Institut makes its mark in Yangon

## 10 COVER STORY

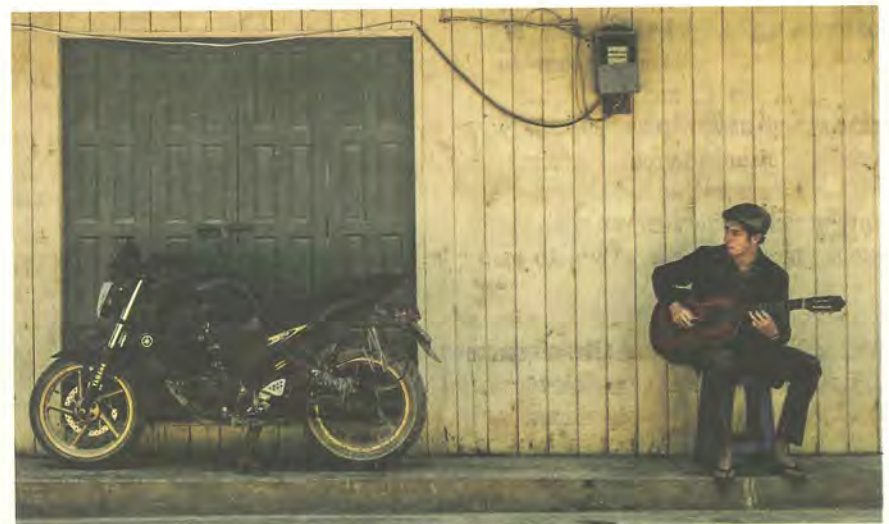
Mimi Wu chats with the Mother of Models, Tin Moe Lwin

## 12 TRAVEL

Keith Lyons explores the caves of Pindaya, and confronts the giant spider

## 14 IMPRESSIONS

Shwe U-Daung and his Burmese Sherlock Holmes, San Shar, walk the streets of Rangoon



## 16 ADVENTURE

Griffin Hotchkiss motorcycles through the wild back-country of Chin state

## 18 BUSINESS

David Madden takes on the technology revolution in Myanmar

## 20 CHEF'S PROFILE

Filipino chef, Davey Eek arrived in Yangon at Shwe Sa Bwe, helping Myanmar youth

## 22 IN FOCUS

A new photography space, Italian pizza, Sweet science, and Mediterranean bistro

## 24 HEALTH

The curative powers of pennywort leaf

## 26 HOROSCOPE

Our very own astrologer on the fortunes that lay in wake for April, 2015

### ABOUT MYANMORE

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Photo by imke.stahlmann

## UNDERGROUND, OVERGROUND, WOBBLING FREE IN THE SHAN PLATEAU

**Keith Lyons** takes us into the mysterious caves of Pindaya, with warnings of a giant spider and mild attacks of claustrophobia.

As we drive from Kalaw hill station through the high plateau town of Aungban towards Pindaya, the challenge is not to ask the driver to stop every few minutes to take photos of the unfolding scenery. The vistas revealed at each gentle twist and turn of the narrow road, add up to a picture-postcard panorama of rolling hills, patchwork fields and vast blue sky. Blocks of sunburnt colours arrange themselves on the softly rounded, undulating landscape. Most fields are lined by verdant hedgerows and contain at least one prominent tree. Every so often you see the exposed ridges of creamy grey limestone, and catch glimpses of the deep red earth, boasting its fertility.

As we cruise along past the alternating fields of pastels-coloured crops, the group I'm travelling with start to draw comparisons with more familiar landscapes in Europe or North America. "That looks just like Iowa,"

claims one. "Totally Eastern Europe," offers another. "I'm not sure if those places are populated by ethnic hill tribes with water buffalo and ox carts," I add, as we pass a hamlet where the locals are harvesting and processing freshly culled wheat.

A smattering of ethnic groups inhabit the area, populating different elevations, and specialising in cultivating selected labour-intensive crops, often with simple and antiquated equipment. Farming the best soil are the Palaung, the Danu, the Taung Yoe, and the area's largest and most distinctive ethnic group, the Pa-O, who sport dark indigo tunics and red-orange turbans.

On this stretch of 40km road from Aungban to Pindaya, dry rice and corn is grown, as well as the predominant staple crop of wheat, its golden heads nodding in the cool breeze. There are also potatoes,



Photo by Christopher Michel

cabbages, cauliflowers, onions, garlic, eggplant, the hanging gourd choko or chayote, green beans, sesame, rapeseed, ginger, chillies and turmeric. As well, is this area's famous crop, *Camellia sinensis*. We stop to pluck its pale-green serrated leaves, cradling the



soft glossy yield in our hands. "You can eat this tea," I urge my travel companions. "Locals pickle and eat it as well as using as a drink." Bitter and herbaceous to taste, we'll save some for the afternoon to add these 'tears of the Buddha' to hot water for drinking. Later we'll see warehouses where the fermented pickled leaves are sorted and packed for Myanmar's iconic snack, tea-leaf salad.

Coming into Pindaya, our car pulls up at the ticket office for the Danu Self-Administered Zone, where a US\$2 entry fee gives us access to this small town that is sited beside Pone Ta Lote lake, and centered around its five-day cycle market. On the fifth day of the market cycle, Pindaya is bustling, and leading up to the full moon of March, when centuries-old banyan trees will host one of the largest festivals of culture and commerce in Shan state. Pindaya is 1200m above sea level, making its climate typical of the Shan plateau, with chilly nights during winter.

If the expansive rural scenery and sense of spaciousness on a hazy, windy travelling way to Pindaya hasn't transported you to another place, there is a special spot nearby where you can go to find bliss. That location is deep inside the earth, through a narrow passageway that many can't find or are too afraid to enter. The good news is that only a fraction of the foreigners crowding Inle Lake, or the hiking hill station of Kalaw, make it to Pindaya, and most do it as a day trip from Nyaungshwe, or as a stop over between Kalaw, Inle lake and Mandalay. Pindaya's Shwe oo Min caves are the main drawcard in the area, not only as a tourist attraction, but also as an important pilgrimage site for the region's Buddhists. Either way, the journey and the destination make it worthwhile, whether you prefer the vibrant colours of prime agricultural land or if you just like the palate reduced to the black, greys, whites and gold of the caves.

Visitors often enjoy the coolness of the Golden Cave, though if you don't like confined spaces or have a fear of large spiders, take care. The huge connected caverns, packed with gilded Buddhas, have secret meditation chambers with small passageways that are not suitable for the claustrophobic or the obese. You don't have to be Buddhist to enjoy the cave experience, but you will learn something about Burmese Buddhism and there's a good chance you'll meet and interact with locals.

The Shwe oo Min caves are no ordinary karst system, and the extensive network of chambers and caverns have been tarted up Myanmar-style. Burrowed into the hills above the town, a mile or so from the main market, the cave pagoda (6am-6pm, daily, US\$3 entry, 300Ks camera fee) is home to around 10,000 Buddha statues. The largest spider you have ever seen in your life stands guard at the entrance to the caves, but there are walkarounds to prevent arachnophobia from hindering your enjoyment.

You can walk to the Shwe oo Min caves along a leafy road flanked by large banyan trees to the 19th century carved teak-panelled, Hsin Khaung Taung Kyang monastery, with its distinctive Shan-style tiered roofs and bamboo and bronze Buddhas inside.



Photo by Christopher Michel

Just beyond the monastery is a path lined with crumbling stupas with a series of covered stairways leading up the hillside (and by-passing the large spider).

You can also take a horse cart (2,000Ks) from the market that will take you to the lower pagoda entrance where the white stupa of Nget Pyaw Taw marks the start of the ascent, or a motorbike taxi will ferry you to the upper gateway (2,500k one way). Almost everyone regardless of how they have arrived, share the elevator for the final climb to the cave mouth.

There is a large recently-built glitzy pagoda at the entrance to the largest cave, the southern cave, constructed after explosives were used to enlarge the cave entrance in 1925. Interestingly, the renovations were funded by the local community, including donations by Hindus, Chinese and Muslims. Beyond the ornate temple, the main attraction in the huge cavern is not so much the natural cave system but what has been added. In every available horizontal surface and even secured to niches on the cave walls, are Buddhas, most of them gilded, some of them kept warm with a blanket in the cool atmosphere of the cave. There are nearly 10,000 statues, with some dating to the late 18th century. It is not known for sure when the caves were turned into a Buddha repository, with the earliest inscription dated 1773, but over the last two and a half centuries, lay people, religious, and rulers have added images.

The cave holds around seventy images made in the late 18th century Bhisakkaguru tradition from the Mahayana school of Buddhism, and these statues with quite unique facial features are only found here, suggesting Pindaya was once an enclave for a Mahayana cult differing from the dominant Theravada Buddhism. The image hands are a give-away. Look for a seed in the upturned right palm; new images are added by pilgrims and generous donors. A distinctive pair of dark 'perspiring' Buddha images are said to grant wishes, while near the end of the cave pilgrims collect evil-repelling black clay.

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At the back of the main cavern, away from the glare of the lights, look for the small entrance and passage leading to one of the cave's meditation chambers. If you are fit, not overweight, and not afraid of being trapped in small spaces, clamber on through and there you can sit quietly, usually in solitude, for a few minutes of peace. There are many tall tales that are associated with the caves. The main southern cave was surveyed in 1989 and is reckoned to be around 200m long, though local legend maintains that at the end of the cave a blocked-off passage leads all the way to Bagan. That would be a long walk in the dark.

There's a back road to Pindaya via Heho's cattle market to Inle Lake's Nyaungshwe, some 89 km away, offering new vistas and photo ops. There are no good public transport options for Pindaya, as buses from Taunggyi and Aungban require an overnight stay, but motorbike taxis from Aungban can do the area as a day trip, including the mulberry paper and umbrella-making workshops at the base of the caves stairs.

The Pindaya Inle Resort is the top option for accommodation, with the Green Tea restaurant beside the lake offering the best selection of local food. Beside the carpark small shops provide free samples of tasty local delicacies and snacks, including Shan tea, tea-leaf salad, rice crackers, sour plums and ants. ■