



Upper Myanmar's Historical Capitals

Bagan, Mandalay, Sagaing-Inwa & Shwebo

Highlights

This road trip goes on a circular historical tour through upper Myanmar, visiting **Bagan** and **Mandalay**, the first and last of the nation's old royal capitals.

It also visits **Mount Popa**, a home for Nat spirits on the slopes of a 1500m caldera, and the university city

of **Monywa** on the Chindwin River before continuing to **Halin**, the northernmost of the UNESCO Pyu Ancient Cities that mark the beginning of the Myanmar era of historical record.

A visit to **Shwebo**, the first capital of the Konbaung Dynasty is optional before the return to Mandalay and the old capitals of **Sagaing**, **Inwa** and **Amarapura**.

About this Guide

This guide is designed to make self-drive touring in Myanmar easier and must be used together with an online navigation application—we recommend Google Maps®. This guide uses Google Maps® spelling conventions for place names and distances, but actual distances from those shown in this guide may vary (±) by 2.5kms depending on starting point.

Tip: Google Maps is not always as up-to-date as their satellite imagery. Revert to the satellite view for road networks when such is missing from maps.

Use printed or online media (such as Lonely Planet's Myanmar guide or Travelfish.org) for detailed information. This guide lists sights and a few suggestions for restaurants and upscale (USD75+) and mid-range hotels (USD30–60+) in “overnight” paragraphs.

Before You Arrive & Drive

Valid Driver's License

To legally drive in Myanmar, you must have a valid international driver's permit or ASEAN driver's license.

Smart Phone and Navigation Application

Your smart phone should be preloaded with Google Maps® or other navigation applications.

Myanmar Sim Card

Getting a Myanmar sim card on arrival (essential for Google Maps®) is recommended—wifi in mid-range hotels is often inoperable. MPT coverage is good.

Removable Device Holder

Bring a detachable holder suitable to attach your device to the windscreen or dashboard for driver's ease of vision and minimal distraction from the road.

Contents/Planning Your Drive

Average journey speeds are often far less than 50 kph—do not plan on more than 200–250kms/day to ensure arrival at destination before dark!

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Distances (± 2.5 kms) between main destinations:

Mandalay City – Old Bagan:	± 183 kms
Old Bagan – Monywa:	± 153 kms
Monywa – Sagaing via Halin/Shwebo	±200/248 kms
Monywa – Sagaing /Mandalay City	±112/132 kms

Suggested One Week Itinerary (7 Days, 6 Nights):

Day 1: Mandalay – Bagan via Inwa & Myingyan,
Day 2 & 3: Bagan
Day 4: Bagan – Mt. Popa
Day 5: Mt. Popa/Bagan – Monywa
Day 6: Monywa – Sagaing/Mandalay via Halin
Day 7: Sagaing – Mandalay/Airport

Driving in Myanmar

All Yomacarshare rental vehicles are left-hand drive (right -hand shift) for **driving on the right** in Myanmar.

Traffic Speeds are relatively slow. Myanmar drivers are usually polite and often give way, especially outside of major cities like Yangon and Mandalay.

Due to old policy, more than 80 percent of vehicles are right-hand drive vehicles. This may contribute to uncertainty and greater caution. Approach intersections and circles cautiously and you will get through.

Lane discipline approaching intersections is strict. Drivers do not enter empty left-turn lanes and then cut back in—they may pass on the inside (right side)!

Sealed main roads are generally good, but uneven road surfaces and abrupt gradient changes are common—do not drive faster than the speed limit of 100 kph! Narrow one-lane provincial highways require extra care; drivers must slow and put offside wheels on the hard shoulder to pass oncoming traffic!

Tolls are common on Myanmar's roads and usually vary from MMK 200–900+. Keep plenty of small notes of Myanmar currency to hand in your vehicle.

Night Driving should be avoided since unlit vehicles and other hazards raise the accident risk factor.

Gas Stations: Please only top up your tank at new gas stations near large towns. These are less likely to serve contaminated fuel from old storage tanks that can lead to a breakdown of your vehicle!

Hotline - 09 966235338 (09 YOMAFLEET)

Contact: aung@yomafleet.com

Further information: yomacarshare.com

Section 1

Mandalay Int. Airport – Mandalay (± 39 kms)

From the airport, follow the toll-free extension of the Yangon–Mandalay Expressway north directly into Mandalay City. To visit Inwa (Ava), Sagaing (section 4) or Amarapura en route, fork left (north) at the second traffic circle (see “Around Mandalay” below).

Mandalay City

King Mindon founded “Shwemyo”, his golden capital in 1857, creating Mandalay’s simple grid of roads. Getting around this city of more than 1.2 million people (40–50 percent of whom are Chinese mainly from Yunnan) feels relatively easy.

The last of the royal capitals in the cultural heartland of the Bamar (Mranma) people, Mandalay contains some of the nation’s most significant Buddhist sites as well as the **Myanansankyaw**, the 1990’s replica of Mindon’s golden palace inside the citadel moat. To visit the palace (in the middle of a restricted military cantonment), park outside the east gate and walk in.

The royal palace is conveniently near the **Shwenandaw Kyaung** monastery northeast of the moat. The richly decorated hall is perhaps the only genuine example of a pre-colonial-era royal wooden building in Myanmar. Formerly the bedchamber where King Mindon passed away, its survival is due to his successor, King Thibaw, who had it moved along with King Mindon’s ghost outside the moats — the citadel was heavily bombed in World War Two.

Parking is easy at the **Kuthodaw Pagoda** just to the north, where the good King Mindon convened the 5th Buddhist Council in 1860 and had the entire text of the Tripitaka inscribed in Myanmar script on 733 upright stones, each sheltered in its own pagoda, and the Pali Commentary on gold and silver leaves on the central pagoda. Thus it is that the largest book in the world is preserved in stone.

Continue to the **Kyauktawgyi Paya** near the foot of Mandalay Hill to see a 900-ton marble Buddha image dedicated by King Mindon in 1865. Nearby is the start of the covered walkway up **Mandalay Hill**, which passes several shrines on the way up to Su Taung Pyae Pagoda on top. A one-way toll road up begins next to the U-Khanti Monastery (containing the Peshawar Relics) and goes to a pay car park near the summit before snaking down on the north side and then emerging from the east side of the hill.

A second area of interest in the city is the colorful life of the quays and the market along the **river frontage road on the east bank of the Ayeyarwaddy**, which is easily reached on 26th Street. Park where convenient and walk, perhaps to enjoy a drink at one of the beer station-type restaurants on the river. This is also the place to take a boat trip across the river to Mingun (see ‘Around Mandalay’).

From there, it is relatively simple to go to the **Jade Market** near the Shwe In Bin Kyaung Monastery—a pay-parking area is located on the west side of the market on the road next the canal. Parking should also not be difficult near the Unison Tea House at the first intersection to the north. The narrower streets in the surrounding area may reward walking more than driving.

Even if interest in Buddha images and Myanmar’s Buddhist culture is not fervent, do not miss the **Mahamuni Paya**, one of the most revered Buddhist sites in Myanmar. It is to the south of the intersection of BoBaHtoo Road and 82nd Street. Aside from paying respect to the Arakanese image and rubbing (for good luck) the famed 13th century Khmer bronzes, walk around the area to look at the handicrafts, whether carving images from wood or sculpting them from marble (the latter takes place south along the road directly west of the complex).

To see men create **gold-leaf** by sledge-hammering pure gold wedged between bamboo paper, go to two places open to foreign visitors on 36 between 77 & 79th streets. The Moustache brothers’ house and the Aye Myit Tar Restaurant are not far away.

Overnight in Mandalay

For Myanmar food, the **Aye Myit Tar Restaurant** stands out for its genuine feel; it attracts more local customers than the good but touristy **Green Elephant Restaurant**. Mandalay has many other restaurants serving Indian, Chinese, Thai and Western foods.

Upscale hotels are the **Mandalay Hill Resort Hotel**, **The Hotel by the Red Canal** and the **Sedona Mandalay**. Higher end mid-range hotels include the **Ayarwaddy River View Hotel**, one of few hotels by the river, the **Eastern Palace**, the **Hotel Mandalay**, the **Mandalay City Hotel** and the **Noble Mingalar**. Less expensive mid-range hotels include the **Great Wall Hotel** and the **Wilson Hotel**. Book in advance in the peak season.

Around Mandalay

It is an easy drive east to Patheingyi, from where lanes lead to various sites including a golf course and pagodas in the hills bounding the Shan Plateau to the east. Apart from providing platforms for views from higher elevations, the Buddhist sites are minor.

To go to Amarapura, Sagaing and Inwa south of Mandalay, follow the Shwebo Road (for directions, see Section 2 opposite). For **Sagaing**, see section 4.

Amarapura (± 10 kms from Mandalay)

A royal capital for 70 years until King Mindon moved it to Mandalay in 1857, the old citadel is just to the north of the Taung Tha Man Lake and consists of an encampment and suburbs. Today, visitors go to the leafy suburb on the west side of the lake, where roads end at a car park (Kan Pat St. is closed at its southern point). There, local restaurants and stalls crowd the access path to **U-Bein's (U Pain) iconic teak footbridge**. The Soe Moe **handicrafts shop** is nearby and **silk shops** are not far away on Mone Tane St and the Mandalay-Shwebo Road.

Inwa (± 30 kms)

Most visitors to the four times royal capital formerly known as Ava take horse carts waiting by the former city's east gate. The carts are best for the narrow, unsealed country lanes through farming land to **Ok Kyaung** & the **Namyin Tower** within the moat. Outside the old city, it is practicable to drive to pagodas, the **archaeological museum** and the **Bagaya Kyaung** wooden monastery to the west.

Mingun (± 41 kms)

The 22-kilometer road to Mingun from the Koe Pay (9 feet) Bridge in Sagaing becomes a narrow lane winding between pagodas below Sagaing hill but widens to the north. In Mingun, the white **Mya Thein Tan Pagoda** looks pristine and the **Mingun Bell** sonorous. However, the badly cracked pile of the **Mingun Pahtodawgyi** and broken chinthe nearby seem apt symbols of a king (Bodawpaya, 1781-1819) who was unable to properly care for his builders let alone people or armies. Most visitors to the site come across by boat from Mandalay.

Tip: If you find a restaurant you like with an English-Myanmar bilingual menu, photograph it so that you can use it to help you order at restaurants without English menus.

Section 2

Mandalay – Myingyan – Bagan (± 180 kms)

Head for the Mandalay – Myingyan Road at the traffic circle close to the Kainkyi Shan Restaurant near Inwa. **This is also the route to the airport (MDL).**

West of Inwa, the Myingyan road quickly enters a rural landscape of low hills with occasional views over distant landscapes, passing small villages en route.

00 kms: Mandalay Railway Station

± 10.5 kms: **Amarapura**: detour east & follow Maha Gandar Yone Street south to U Pain Bridge.

± 16 kms: **Sagaing Bridge** junction
The Mandalay – Shwebo road goes northwest beneath the railway & over the river to Sagaing.

± 17+ kms: **Inwa Bridge** junction
The old road to Sagaing turns right (northwest) to the road-rail bridge. Turn left (east) and then promptly right (southwest) for Inwa & Myingyan.

± 20.5 kms: **Yangon – Mandalay Expressway** circle
The road joins the toll-free part of the expressway from Mandalay: continue southwest.

± 23.5 kms: **Myingyan Road** circle (Kainkyi Shan R.)
Turn right (northwest) for Inwa and Myingyan/Bagan. *N.B. The BOC gas station is the last before Mandalay Int. Airport.*

± 24.5 kms: **Inwa**
Detour right (north) for Inwa—4.5 kms to the east gate of the old capital and the waiting area for horse carts (see opposite). The route passes several old pagodas.

± 47 kms: **Gway Kone** Village

± 58 kms: **Myotha** Town

± 67 kms: **Mandalay Myotha Industrial Park**

± 103 kms: **Highway 2** (Myingyan – Myittha) junction

± 107 kms: **Myingyan**
Myingyan Township has a population of ± 275,000 and is known for its infamous prison (Wikipedia), but stopping for tea at stalls in front of the Sanvadaupya Pagoda will be more restful. The mid-range **Kaung Kaung Hotel** in the south part of town offers reasonable comfort.

- ± 109 kms: **Myingyan – Nyaung-U** junction
Southwest to Nyaung-U and south to Mt. Popa (± 83 kms) via Thaingtha (± 21 kms)
- ± 120 kms: **Road-rail bridge**
Expect some traffic delays at a rough, narrow combined road and rail bridge.
- ± 153 kms: **Ayeyarwaddy Bridge** junction
Southwest to Nyaung-U or north to Pakokku (see Section 3)
- ± 168 kms: **Junction** east of Nyaung-U:
Left (south) to Nyaung-U – Kyaukpadaung Road, Nyaung-U Airport (± 6 kms) & New Bagan (± 14 kms). Continue right for Nyaung-U (± 7 kms).

Tip: Take the Anawrahta Road from Nyaung-U to reach sites in Old Bagan west of the Tharabar Gate, which is closed to all 4-wheel vehicles—consider propitiating the Min Mahagiri Nats associated with the niches by this gate if passing through.

Bagan

The heart of the more than 10-kilometer-wide archaeological zone is **Old Bagan** (abbreviated as OldB), which has its own recent history. Having lived for decades in a sleepy village amid the greatest concentration of crumbling (especially after the 1975 earthquake) Buddhist remains in Myanmar, the villagers were moved in 1990 to a new site five kilometers to the south. This new site became what is now the large tourist village of **New Bagan** (NewB).

Gathering pace in the 1990s, meanwhile, the zeal to rebuild former crumbling piles of brick resulted in more than 2,000 ancient religious sites being renovated; old ruins became relatively scarce.

The backpacker atmosphere that until 1990 had pervaded Old Bagan (OldB) disappeared when high-end, government-sponsored resorts were built on the best sites along the river. New construction included the architecturally strange, but worthwhile **Bagan Archaeological Museum**, and the reconstructed **Thirizayabhumi Golden Palace**. The builders attribute the palace design to King Anawrahta, though historians attribute it to Kyanzittha.

Bounding the archaeological zone five kilometers to the northwest is the relatively small old market town of **Nyaung-U** (Ny-U), which over the years has similarly grown with tourism, but in a way that reflects its longer history than New Bagan.

Three main sealed roads trisect the zone between Nyaung-U and New Bagan—unsealed lanes between

them pass clusters of sites. Between Old and New Bagan is the village of **Myinkaba** (MyinK), which is known for its lacquer wares.

Later Bagan-era sites and (handicraft) villages and the controversial Nan Myint Tower are located near the southernmost of the three roads crossing the plain.

Chronological Itinerary for Bagan Sites

Visiting sites in (approximate!) order in which they were built shows how Bagan architecture evolved.

Though King Pyinpya is credited with first building its walls around CE 849, Bagan's greatness is attributed to King Anawrahta (1044–1077?), who brought Hinayana Buddhism from the Mon kingdom of Thaiton, reputedly “honorably confining” its king Makuta in the **Nan Hpayaya** (MyinK) in the process.

Among the sites attributed to his and his son King Sawlu's period are the Hindu **Nat Hlaung Kyaung** (OldB), the **Pahto Thamya** (OldB), which contains paintings illustrating the Pali Scriptures, the **Manuha Paya** (MyinK) and the **Lawka Nanda** (NewB), where boats landed.

Grand temple construction beginning in the reign of Kyanzittha (1084–1113) includes the **Shwezigon** (Ny-U) and the small compound on its southeast side where Anawrahta (who may also have initiated construction of the Shwezigon) formalized the figures of the 37 Nats, the **Ananda Pahto** (OldB) and the **Apeyadana** (MyinK).

Temples built in Alaungsithu's reign (1113–1165) include the **That Bin Nyu** (OldB), **Shwegu Gyi Phaya** (OldB) and the **Gu Byauk Gyi** (MyinK). The latter has fine stucco work and is next to the Myazedi Pagoda, where the stone inscription that allowed deciphering of the Pyu script stands.

Narathu (1165?–1174) did some vile deeds when he built the **Dhammayan Gyi Pagoda** in the central plain. Narapisithu (1174–1211) is credited with the **Gawdaw Palin** (OldB) and the **Sulamani Pahto** (central plain) if not his son, Nantaungmya (1211–1231), who probably built the **Maha Bodhi** (OldB) and **Htilominlo** (OldB–Ny-U).

A final site is the **Mingalar Zedi** (Mingalazedi OldB–MyinK) built by the reputed tyrant Narathihapate (1256–1287). This king's work gave rise to the Burmese saying, “The pagoda is finished and the great country ruined.” His son murdered him in 1287, the year the Mongols occupied Bagan.

Tip: Readily available e-bikes provide an opportunity for a change of pace in a relatively small area crowded with sites such as Old Bagan, but an air-conditioned car will not run low on battery when visiting outer parts of the 15 square-kilometer archaeological zone.

Overnight in Bagan

Enjoying a sunset meal by the river at one of several such restaurants near Old and New Bagan would seem a natural choice, but there are also some highly rated (online) restaurants near the Tharabar Gate and North of the Ananda Pahto. Thiri Pyitsaya 4 Street southwest of Nyaung-U has many restaurants to choose from, as does the main Kayay St. and adjacent streets in New Bagan.

Of the luxury resorts, the **Aye Yar River View Resort**, **Bagan Hotel River View** and **Thande Bagan Hotel** look favorable, especially for their facilities overlooking the river. The **Hotel Tharabar Gate** enjoys a leafy setting.

Bagan is well served by mid-range hotels, some with architecture emulating a Bagan style as curious as that of the museum. In the Nyaung-U area, consider the **Bagan Umbra Hotel**, the **Oasis Hotel**, the **Thante Hotel** and the **Zfreeti Hotel**. In New Bagan, the **Kaday Aung Hotel**, the **Kumudara Hotel**, the **Blue Bird Hotel** and the **Myanmar Treasure Resort** look reasonable.

Tip: Whether it is for popular activities like hot-air ballooning in season or staying at the best resorts, book in advance, especially if travelling in the high season (Nov–March). However, though the balloons do not operate out of season, fertile land becomes green in the rainy season, overcast skies temper the sunlight and the pace of life feels relaxed.

South from Bagan

Bagan – Mt. Popa (Kyaukpadaung) – Sa Lay – Chauk

This road trip describes a loop route south of Bagan in a clockwise direction (*warning! NH2 south of Bagan may be impassable if flooded—the longer route on the west bank of the Ayeyarwaddy is an alternative*).

The Popa caldera 50 kilometers southeast of Bagan provides an opportunity for a visit to one of Myanmar's most famous spiritual sites known as Taung Kalat. It also offers the chance to climb through lush vegetation to the summit of Taung Ma-Gyi (Mt. Popa, 1518m).

A day trip can only cover part of the 200-kilometer circular route to Popa and the historical village of Sa

Lay described here. The full route requires an overnight stay near Popa or at Sa Lay.

00 kms: junction of Kyaukpadaung Rd. & NH2

± 3 kms (south on the Kyaukpadaung Rd)

2nd Street intersection: Nyaung-U Airport (east)

± 4.5 kms: **Myingyan Rd.** junction

Bagan bus station & gas station

± 22.5 kms: **Byat Ta Pan Sat Road** junction

Turn left (southeast) for Popa.

± 46 kms: **Kyaukpadaung – Thaungtha Rd.** junction

Turn right (900m west to a sharp left turn for Taung Kalat).

± 49 kms: **Mt. Popa** (Taung Ma-Gyi) junction

Turn left on the lane to the **Popa Mountain Resort** (2.4 kms). A small parking area is at the start of the climb to Taung Ma-Gyi (Mt. Popa).

Climbing Mt. Popa (Taung Ma-Gyi, 1518m)

The hike begins at around 800m in elevation from a point near where the road to the Popa Mountain Resort crosses above a stream ± 300m from the resort (you may also park at the resort). An early start is recommended, perhaps after brunch at the restaurant at the Popa Mountain Resort (if on a day-trip from Bagan), which enjoys a view over the Taung Kalat and the plain to the west. The ascent reportedly takes at least two hours on a 5–6 km hike with a 700m change in elevation (take a left after about 10 minutes walking up a dirt trail from the car park). Don't forget to take enough water!

Tip: travelling with a light change of clothes and a towel is advisable to refresh after any physical exercise. A towel can also cover the car seat and help keep it clean.

± 51 kms: **Taung Kalat** (657m)

The village at the foot of the volcanic plug is the start point for the stairway passing shrines to the Nats on the way up to the pagoda at the top. The village contains several restaurants and a Nat museum (south past the entrances to the covered stairways). Though all the Nats are represented, the four Nats that have their homes here are the Mahagiri nats, Byatta and Me Wunna. Asking your hotel to organize a loquacious guide who can explain it all should make a visit much more fun.

Overnight near Mt. Popa

Two upscale resorts near Mt. Popa make an overnight stay appealing, especially if plans include climbing Taung-Ma-Gyi. The **Popa Garden Resort** (opened 2017) views the Taung Kalat and Taung Ma-Gyi from below, while the **Popa Mountain Resort** looks out over the Taung Kalat and the plain beyond. A few other mid-range resorts are nearby.

- ± 61 kms (direct)/67.5 kms (via Taung Kalat):
Kyaukpadaung–Nyaung-U Rd. intersection
Turn right (northwest) for the fast return to Nyaung-U (± 47 kms). Continue south for the road west to the historical village of Sa Lay (± 46 kms from this point) and or Chauk (± 39 kms).
- ± 62/00 kms: T-junction Kyaukpadaung:
Turn west for Chauk (distances from this point).
- ± 11.5 kms: T-junction NH2. Keep straight (west)
- ± 31.5 kms: Junction. turn south for **Sa Lay** (± 14 kms)

Sa Lay (± 62 kms direct from Nyaung-U via Chauk)

Thought to date back to the late Bagan period in the 13th century, Sa Lay must at some time been a larger settlement judging by the number of zedis (pagodas) nearby. These alone might not justify a journey from Bagan, but the old wooden **Yoke Sone Kyaung** pagoda, the vestiges of colonial architecture near the market and the languid local atmosphere of this riverside village contrasts with the globalized feel of Bagan. An overnight stay is possible at **Salay House**.

- ± 38 kms (from Kyaukpadaung): junction
Turn north (right) for Nyaung-U (± 41 kms) on NH2 on the east bank of the Ayeyarwaddy. The route passes through Chauk Town and then some low hills containing the Chauk Oilfield. The road fords several, usually dry sandy creeks that may flood in the rainy season—approach with caution and do not attempt to cross if other Myanmar drivers are declining to do so in the flood season!

Chauk–Pakkoku (± 97 kms)

To avoid returning to Bagan via Highway 2 (after visiting Sa Lay), continue north to Pakkoku and Monywa by crossing the Ayeyarwaddy to **Seikphyu** and heading north via **Kyun Chaung** (± 58 kms from Chauk), **Myit Chay** (± 67 kms) & **Pakokku** (± 97 kms). This route is ± 28 kms longer than the direct route on the east bank from Chauk to Pakokku via Bagan. This is also a possible return route to Bagan if NH2 is impassable north of Chauk.

Section 3

Bagan – Monywa (± 144 kms)

This route follows the Mandalay Road for ± 23 kms before turning off north to cross the Ayeyarwaddy. North of Pakokku, it passes through low country where dry farming predominates before it crosses the Chindwin River.

On the route north to Monywa, side trips go to the historical village of A Myint and the Buddhist site of Boddhi Tataung (see Around Monywa).

00 kms: junction of Kyaukpadaung Rd. & NH2

- ± 21 kms (from Nyaung-U)
Ayeyarwaddy Bridge Junction: turn left (north) and cross the river via the 3.5-kilometer-long road & rail bridge.

- ± 28 kms: **Mindat – Pakokku Road** intersection
Turn right (east) to enter Pakokku or continue north to bypass.

- ± 30 kms: **Pakokku**
Pakokku is a medium-sized university and market town on the Ayeyarwaddy. Mid-range hotels like the **Thu Kha**, which is the closest to the downtown market area, should offer enough comfort for visitors who wish to stay and engage with this town's peoples.

- ± 57 kms: **Pa Khan Gyi**
Turn west in this small village to visit the wooden monastery building of **Kyaung Daw Gyi**. Less than 100m north of this turning, the main road passes through an old walled settlement.

- ± 69 kms: **Yesagyo** Junction
Go right (east) for Yesagyo (± 5 kms) to a town on the Chindwin that is likely to be seldom visited by foreigners. The route to Monywa goes left (west).

- ± 75 kms: **T-Junction**
Turn north (right) for Monywa.

- ± 93 kms: **Sin Phyu Shin Bridge** (road & rail)

- ± 118 kms: **Monywa – Sagaing Road** junction
Left (northwest) for Monywa and east for Sagaing.

- ± 120 kms: **Chaung U**
Detour west for A Myint historical village side (± 14 kms west, see “Around Monywa”). From A

Myint, a passable unsealed road follows the levee north, offering an unvarnished look at life on the floodplain of the Chindwin River. However, this is a slow (± 26 kms) route to Monywa due to rough road surfaces—4WD only!

± 128 kms & ± 133 kms: **Monastery** side roads
Turn east for **Thanboddhay Monastery & Boddhi Tataung** (see “Around Monywa”).

Monywa

Monywa has a pleasant location on the Chindwin River, but like many Myanmar riverside towns its river frontage is not (yet) advantageously used for recreation. The old commercial center is roughly between Nyaung Pa Pin Street (south), the railway station (east) and Bula Lan Street marked by the traffic circle with a statue of Gen. Aung San astride a horse (north). This area contains the old market and the two main pagodas, the **Shwezigon** and the **Sutaungpyi Paya**.

The town is a center for agricultural products and is known for its cotton blankets. Extensive university facilities are to the east of town and a strong military presence is a reflection of former troubles with recalcitrants in distant hills to the west.

The urban atmosphere changes around **Kan Tar Yar Lake** to the north, where trees, the lake and a small pagoda on an island create a park-like feel. It is in this area where the city's best restaurants and accommodation is found.

Overnight in Monywa

Places to eat downtown near the clock tower circle include the **Eureka Bakery & Café**, where a fresh coffee in the morning might make up for 3 in 1 served elsewhere. Restaurants are plentiful in the vicinity of the lake, including one on a small island. The **Oke Soe Food Garden & BBQ House** (evenings only) and **Fancy Restaurant** are among restaurants popular with locals in this area.

By the lake, the **Win Unity Hotel** offers upscale bungalows and a pool. Not far away, the mid-range **Monywa Hotel** has old-style lodge rooms in a leafy setting and reasonable parking compared to the **Chindwin Hotel**, which has newer rooms in a downtown medium-rise. South of town, the modern, spacious mid-range **Jade Royal Hotel** is a second hotel with a pool in Monywa.

Around Monywa

Thanboddhay Monastery & Boddhi Tataung (± 20 kms)

Drive ± 10 kms south on Highway 71 and turn left (east). After ± 2 kms, the road passes the **Thanboddhay Monastery**. Its main feature is a pagoda with many spires over a hall containing arched alcoves with large Buddha images and thousands of smaller ones.

± 8 kms to the east are the two colossal Buddha images of **Boddhi Tataung**, one sitting, one standing (and a lesser reclining one). Visitors can climb up to the 25th floor inside the standing image, where murals depict worlds according to spiritual attainment—small windows restrict views, however. The road south passing the lane to the seated image joins Hwy. 71 ± 15 kms south of Monywa (± 128 kms from Nyaung-U).

A Myint (± 38 kms)

To reach the historical village of A Myint, take Highway 71 south to Chaung - U (± 24 kms) and turn right (west) on a narrow and uneven sealed lane to A Myint (± 38 kms). With many ageing pagodas in the area, this village is not unlike Sa Lay (near Chauk), but the village is smaller and is surrounded by rice paddy that may flood in the rainy season. The village has a small market and a couple of teahouse-style local restaurants. The sometimes rough, muddy unsealed road along the levee north eventually becomes a pitted, sealed lane to Monywa (± 26 kms).

Hpo Win Daung (± 42 kms)

Over the years, Buddhist devotees have hollowed out cave-like chambers and Buddha images from sandstone rock, creating an unusual pilgrimage site.

00 kms: Aung San traffic circle on NH71/Buta Lan Rd.

± 9 kms (north from Monywa)

Chindwin Bridge junction: turn left (west).

± 13 kms: Junction: turn south (left)

± 25 kms: **Ladpardraung** intersection

Turn west (right) before the second copper mine.

± 36 kms: **Hpo Win Daung** junction

Turn left onto the small lane heading south.

± 42 kms: **Hpo Win Daung**

± 100 m beyond the entrance gate, a stairway left goes up to chambers with Buddha images dug into rock. The road south from the car park at the foot of this stairway goes about 600m to the **Shwe Pa Taung**, which is sunk deep into rock.

Section 4

Monywa – Halin (Shwebo) – Sagaing (± 225 kms)

The route described here follows a one-day diversion on the Monywa–Wetlet road to Halin/Shwebo before going to Sagaing. If daylight time becomes short after visiting Halin, consider missing Shwebo. Choice of restaurants and hotels in Shwebo is likely to remain limited to the lower end of the market.

Aside from being part of the Pyu Ancient Cities UNESCO World Heritage Site, Halin itself is a farming village with friendly folk deep in a rural landscape—getting there is as much the fun as seeing the bare remains at Halin’s archaeological sites.

A shorter alternative skips Halin and follows Highway 71 directly from Monywa to Sagaing (± 112 kms), passing the small town of Myinmu (± 57 kms), which has one or two places for a cold drink along the river frontage (see section 2 “Mandalay – Myingyan” for places across the Ayeyarwaddy River from Sagaing).

East to Halin & Shwebo

00 kms: Aung San traffic circle on NH71/Buta Lan Rd.

± 27 kms (Monywa – Wetlet Road)

Monywa Industrial Zone junction (tanker trucks on the Ayadaw Rd go to the oil refinery here.)

± 43 kms **Ayadaw**

± 59 kms: **River Mu Bridge**

± 70.5 kms: **Sagaing–Shwebo Road** intersection
Turn left (north) on the Shwebo Road—avoid the route to Halin via Wetlet (unsealed north of Wetlet).

± 86.5 kms: **Halin** side road from NH7
(± 4.5kms north of the Shwebo toll booth) Turn east onto a lane where Highway 7 turns sharply north after crossing a canal. This part-sealed and part-unsealed all-weather road is the best road to Halin (± 16 kms). It crosses a canal (± 8.5 kms—do not follow Google Map’s suggested routes along this canal!) and the railway between Shwebo and Wetlet before reaching Halin Village.

N.B. The route south from Halin to Wetlet (± 12 kms) is unsealed and, depending on season and maintenance, rougher than the route described above from the Shwebo Road.

± 101 kms: **Shwebo** market

UNESCO World Heritage Pyu Ancient Cities: Halin

Archaeological remains show the area has been a site for human habitation for at least 4,500 years, but the visible remains are those of the Pyu civilization from circa 200 BCE to 900 CE, predating Bagan. The remains largely consist of excavated/reconstructed brick foundations, the most significant of which are protected by roofs. Some of the 12 entrance gates to the 3,200 (north-south) by 1,600-meter formerly walled site can be seen from the air, but the once 9-meter thick walls have all but vanished.

The Pyu are said to have skillfully engineered irrigation at the site and mined for salt and silver. They are thought to have had extensive trading links.

To reach the main archaeological sites north of the village, drive east past the short access road to a hot spring to the **Halin Archaeological Museum** (closed Mondays). Follow this road north between the pagoda atop a low rise to the west and some old ruined zedis to the main sites.

While this access road is all weather, unsealed tracks link almost all remote sites within the archaeological zone. Along with 4WD vehicles, oxcarts have no problem with muddy ruts in these tracks, especially in the rainy season.

Shwebo

King Alaungpaya, who founded the city and the Kongbaung dynasty that was to rule Myanmar for more than a century in 1752, presumably had Shwebo’s slightly tilted square moat (its sides are ±3.5 kms) built before he died in 1760. The remains of the moat and the reconstructed palace (at the end of the road on the north side of the market) are the main evidence of Shwebo’s once grand royal origins.

Overnight in Shwebo

Apart from local Myanmar restaurants and beer stations, **Café Just** (Shin Phyu Shin St) has a menu with pasta dishes. Shwebo has a few lower mid-range hotels, of which the **Pyi Shwe Theingha** and **Moon Shine Guesthouse** look the best (and consequently may be full). Hotels in Sagaing are better (± 91 kms on good road from Shwebo—avoid driving after dark!)

Shwebo – Sagaing

00 kms: junction of NH7/Yang Gyi Aung Rd.

± 15.5 kms: metalled side road east to Halin

± 31 kms: Wetlet-Monywa Rd Intersection
East to Wetlet & west to Monywa (71 kms)

± 49.5 kms: **Sadaung**

± 69 kms: junction NH7/NH71 **Monywa –
Sagaing Road**

± 84.5 kms: **Kaungmudaw Pagoda**

± 90 kms: **Traffic Circle**
Keep right for Sagaing Market (± 2 kms).

Sagaing

Sagaing was a capital for 49 years in the 14th century and three years in the 18th, but its legacy is as a center of Buddhist learning and practice. Dozens of monasteries are on the hills—Sagaing appears to have been where nobles weary of life in the royal court of a capital nearby sponsored a zedi and a retreat for themselves. Sagaing remains pleasantly quiet today, but you will need a guide to see more than the views over the river from the **Soon U Ponya Shin Paya** and **U Min Thonze** caves atop the hill. To reach them, follow the road that passes to the east of the Sitagu International Buddhist Academy.

Overnight in Sagaing

Finding restaurants in the suburbs of Sagaing may not be straightforward. At night, stick to places in the market near the Aye Cherry ice cream shop, if not a downtown beer station. The mid-range **Hotel Sagaing** and the **Happy Hotel** are within walking distance of the market and comfortable enough to consider Sagaing as an overnight alternative to Mandalay.

± 23 kms: (from Sagaing) **Mandalay Int. Airport**
Cross by the Inwa Bridge and drive to the Mandalay – Yangon Expressway (a gas station is by the Tada U– Mingyan Rd circle and the Kainkyi Shan Restaurant). Continue on the Expressway, turning west for the airport at the traffic circle before the first expressway tollbooth (see Section 2, page 4).

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Happy & safe driving!