

Yangon and Beyond

Myanmar continues to open up to tourists, but right now it is still a country of undiscovered gems

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BALLOON OVER PLAN OF BAGAN IN MISTY MORNING. MYANMARTHINKSTOCK



is the first stop for the vast majority of travellers and is home to almost all of the country's luxury travel industry offerings.

CHATRIUM HOTEL ROYAL LAKE

Chatrium Hotel Royal Lake sits on the north shore of Kandawgyi Lake and is a short drive from the city centre. Each of the 300 rooms has a view of the lake and the city's most famous tourist attraction, Shwedagon Pagoda, which is particularly nice at sunset.

There are three restaurants – Chinese, Japanese and international – as well as three bars. The rooms were refurbished in 2014 with inspiration coming from lotus flowers, so expect pastels on the walls. Furniture is striking by contrast, using more vibrant colours to balance out the subtle walls.

The Riley suite is the jewel in the Chatrium crown. It is spacious

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Inle Lake is most renowned for its stilted homes and fishermen; relax poolside at Chatrium Hotel Royal Lake; enjoy mesmerising sunsets at Chatrium's Lobby Lounge and Sunset Terrace

Myanmar is not on the travel itineraries of most travellers to Southeast Asia, at least on an initial visit to the region, perhaps best described as a second-tier country when it comes to tourism, just behind the likes of Laos and to a lesser degree Cambodia. It is also relatively new to the travel and hospitality industries, and primarily the domain of adventurous backpackers.

But this wasn't always the case. George Orwell, Rudyard Kipling and Somerset Maugham wrote about Myanmar when the sun never set on the British Empire. Independence from the British came in 1948 and then military rule saw the country become isolated from the international community.

The most famous face of Myanmar is Aung San Suu Kyi. The daughter of General Aung San, the man considered the father of modern-day Myanmar and who was assassinated six months before the independence he helped negotiate came into being, Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest for calling for democratic elections in 1989. She would spend a total of 15 years under house arrest over the next 21 years. On November 13, 2010 she was released for the last time. This came five days after Myanmar held parliamentary elections in which The National League for Democracy, led by Suu

Kyi, won a majority of seats and formed a government although without Suu Kyi as president as she is constitutionally barred from holding that office. Since then Myanmar has been opening up but still tourism figures are dwarfed by even neighbouring Cambodia.

A beautiful country with mountains, rivers, plains and coastline, it borders Bangladesh and India to the west, China to the north, and Laos and Thailand to the east, and as such has a unique regional food culture and dozens of languages and ethnic groups.

YANGON

A bustling city where the streets are packed with people and vendors and the roads are jammed with traffic, Yangon is the country's biggest city. Made the capital of British Burma after the Third Anglo-Burmese War of 1885, it remained the capital of the Union of Burma after independence. Although it is still easily the most populated city in the country and most important commercial centre, the government officially relocated the capital to the newly built city of Naypyidaw in March 2006.

Still, the city known during the British colonial days as Rangoon





at 300sqm and offers the best views of the pagoda and lake and has hosted, among others, Hillary Clinton, Shinzo Abe and Norwegian royalty.

The relatively small Nemita spa has eight rooms and offers a range of mostly Thai-style treatments. www.chatrium.com

BELMOND GOVERNOR'S RESIDENCE

The Belmond Governor's Residence is a beautiful 1920s-colonial era building that was home to the ruler of Myanmar's southern states. Fans overhead and teak furniture allow you to step back in time and enjoy the city as it was during the British colonial period.

Located 13km from Yangon International Airport in the Embassy Quarter, the Governor's Residence sits in a garden oasis with lotus pools and resident peacocks. A haven of tranquillity after a day spent sightseeing, each of the 49 rooms and suites are also true to the period with mosquito nets over four-poster beds and teak and silk used throughout.

Mandalay Restaurant serves traditional Burmese dishes, while the Burmese Curry Table offers a buffet-style smorgasbord of fragrant Burmese curries along with vegetables, rice, salads. Set in a spacious open-air lounge with views of the pool and gardens, it is beautiful after the sun goes down. www.belmond.com

THE STRAND HOTEL

The Strand Hotel is the old dame of Yangon and, if author John Murray is to be believed, "the finest hostelry East of Suez." Even though that was over 100 years ago in his book *Handbook for Travellers in India, Burma and Ceylon*, the Strand still enjoys this unofficial title.

Built in 1901 and acquired soon after by the Sarkies brothers, famed for Raffles in Singapore and The E&O in Penang, the three-storey Strand Hotel has been an unwilling participant in the history of the country, with perhaps its lowest period coming when it was used as a stable during World War II by the Japanese.



The Strand has 31 suites which makes it practically a boutique property by global standards. Polished teak floors and vintage textiles give a luxurious feel to the rooms while neutral colours create a sense of calm. Original art work reminds guests of the hotel's storied past while the incorporation of technology makes it practical for business travellers and ladies and gentlemen of leisure at the same time.

The Strand Hotel takes drinking and dining seriously, and while the laid-back Strand Cafe is the setting for breakfast and Sarkies Bar at The Strand transports you back to a time when Noël Coward and Rudyard Kipling sipped cocktails here, The Strand Restaurant promises a memorable dining experience thanks to Christian Martena. The experienced chef has created a menu of modern Mediterranean dishes a twist. www.hotelthestrang.com

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Dining is taken seriously at The Strand Hotel; Belmond Governor's Residence offers a haven of tranquillity; the Belmond property is housed in a colonial building

BEYOND YANGON

Nay Pyi Daw is the country's new capital but it hasn't been as successful as the government may have hoped. Strategically located between Yangon and Mandalay and the tourism hot spots of Bagan and Inle Lake, NPT, as it is sometimes referred to, offers an opportunity to see what a Burmese ghost city might look like.

Accessible by train, bus and plane, the city is 320km from Yangon and while it feels like a city in waiting, it is still home to almost a million people. It also might just be the strangest city in Southeast Asia. It has attracted hotels who perhaps realised that as the seat of government, it will inevitably become populated and will attract heads of state from around the world.

KEMPINSKI NAY PYI TAW

European brand Kempinski is one of the early adopters. The property, with 106 rooms and 35 suites, has welcomed visiting dignitaries



from around the world including US President Barack Obama in 2014. In fact, one wall of the Diplomat Bar is lined with images of the presidents, prime ministers and ambassadors who have visited.

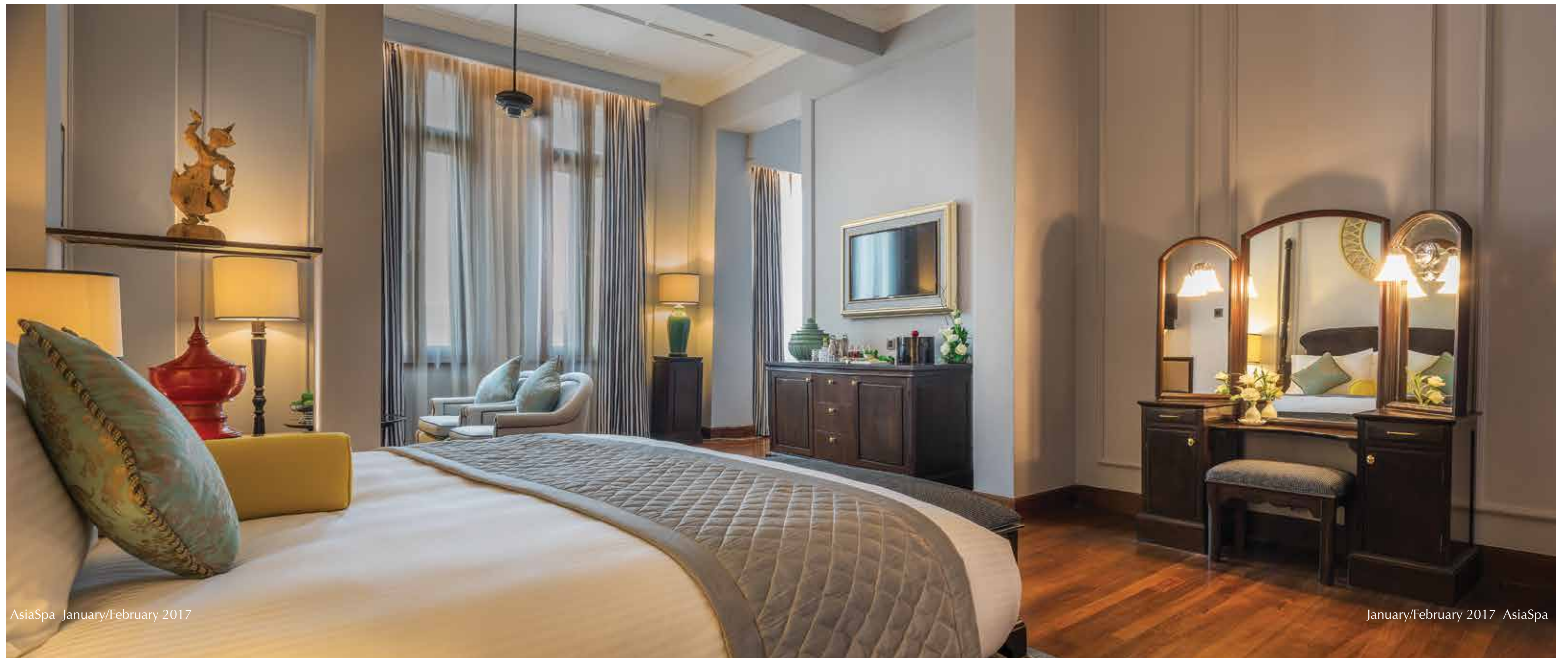
With a business-meets-luxury vibe, Kempinski Nay Pyi Taw can feel a little bit empty at times, but a few glasses of complimentary sparkling wine with breakfast – a Kempinski tradition – will soon see you lounging by the pool without a care in the world. Rangoon Kitchen is the hotel's all-day dining restaurant. Offering pan-Asian dishes, the excellent buffet breakfast mixes local dishes with Western staples, while dishes such as the Yangon tea house salad and the Rakhine traditional rice noodle soup make lunch and dinner enjoyable. www.kempinski.com

Perhaps the main attraction in the city is the 325ft Uppatasanti Pagoda. A replica of the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon, it is said to contain a Buddha tooth relic from China.

Located on the Irawaddy River, and northwest of Yangon,



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Enjoy complimentary sparkling wine with breakfast near the pool at Kempinski Nay Pyi Taw; The Strand Hotel's suite gives a sense of calm with neutral colours; the Kempinski hotel exudes a business-meets-luxury vibe



Bagan provides the majority of the iconic images that people associate with Myanmar: burnt orange skies strewn with hot air balloons rising over hundreds of pagodas. Located 200km southwest of Mandalay and 600km north of Yangon, Bagan is Myanmar's Angkor.

Still, with Myanmar's tourism industry in its infancy Bagan only attracts a fraction of what neighbouring tourism sites can expect. Currently around 250,000 a year visit the ancient city. As for where to stay, luxury options do not really abound in the city, but Bagan Lodge fits the bill.

BAGAN LODGE

On the doorstep of an archaeological marvel, Bagan Lodge pays homage to the Golden Age of Travel with furnishings that evoke the history of the more than 2,000 stupas that are a short distance away.

Bagan Lodge has 82 villa rooms and four suites, the latter being 98sqm and twice the size of the villa rooms. With two separate bedrooms, as well as a shared living room and bathroom, the



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Sanctum Inle Resort's remote location makes it an off-the-beaten-path gem; Bagan Lodge's villas pay homage to the Golden Age of Travel; blending Burmese and contemporary designs, Bagan Lodge is one of the few luxury options in the city



suites are ideal for families and groups.

A blend of Burmese and contemporary decor, the resort is the perfect place to start and end busy days exploring the rich heritage of the city. www.bagan-lodge.com

SANCTUM INLE RESORT

Inle Lake comes a close second to Bagan in terms of its ability to draw tourists. Forming the easternmost part of the Myanmar tourism diamond, Inle Lake is home to several properties but the most recent, and some say the best, is the 94-room Sanctum Inle Resort. With a large pool overlooking the lake, and a 150sqm Sanctuary Suite, Sanctum Inle seems to be upping the ante in the area.

Inle Lake is renowned for its stilted homes and fishermen, who have a unique one-legged rowing style. And while it is somewhat remote, requiring a two-hour flight as well as a short car ride and finally a boat trip, Sanctum Inle resort seems to revel in its off-the-beaten-path status.

A pair of suites with views of the lake, rooms range from 40sqm up to the 150 of the suites, and all come with lofty ceilings, natural wood floors and plush beds.

For dining there is the Refectory and for post-dinner drinks there is the Cloister Bar. For a more relaxing experience there is the 170sqm Sanctuary Spa. With five treatment rooms and a multitude of therapies, there is sure to be something on offer for whatever ails you. www.sanctum-inle-resort.com