

What makes Burma so special?

First of all, the name. I refer to the country as Burma, the name adopted by the British Raj in the 18th century. The name is derived from 'Bama', the spoken name of the country representing the largest ethnic group. I find it particularly undemocratic that the military regime decided, without consultation, to change the name of the country to Myanmar back in 1989.

Burma is a country with a troubled past and a gently optimistic future. The most religious Buddhist country in the world, with more monks and more money spent on religion than anywhere else, has had mixed blessings throughout its history. From the time of British occupation in 1824 the country has vacillated from the richest in South East Asia to one of the poorest in the world. Until the release of Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest in 2010 the country was widely regarded as a pariah state. There is increasing evidence though of a country in transition and a government that is tentatively committed to democracy.

I write my account as one from a welcomed visitor to the country. My ultimate catalyst to visit Burma was Aung San Suu Kyi who is encouraging tourism albeit carefully and thoughtfully. The country is clearly on the brink of new discoveries, as the Burmese take their first tentative steps into joining the democratised world, and there is a feeling of opportunity in the air.

The allure of Burma is complex. Having been largely snubbed by the world since 1989 Burma is one of relatively few countries that have, until recently, remained undeveloped to visitors and tourism. A recent visit by US President Obama, the first such visit by a sitting US President, heralds a tentative acceptance by the West of Burma's moves to hold fair elections and relax their stance on political prisoners. All of this is far removed from what people do day to day. There may have been an awareness of Obama's visit to their country but the largely working class population are too busy toiling to spend much time thinking about foreign events.

The vast country is home to around 50 million people, most of whom work in the agricultural industries. Forests are still densely populated and farmlands are a patchwork of crops; sesame, beans and corn, all etched into the fertile soil. Everywhere you travel in Burma you see people working in the fields, using oxen to plough, but otherwise labouring with the backbreaking work themselves.



On Inle Lake the primary source of income is generated by fishing and farming on the lake. It's an incredibly tranquil place, often the only noise to be heard are birds during the day and cicadas at dusk. Diesel boats are used on the main lake thoroughfare but primarily boats are guided using the traditional Intha technique of rowing with one leg whilst standing. The sound of monks chanting floats caressingly across the water.

Burma is brimming with pagodas, temples and shrines that cast a relaxing aura wherever your path leads you. Monks are omnipresent; they are riding motorbikes, playing football and heading to monasteries for their studies. The culture of this land steeped in religion is integral to the personality of the people here.



The Burmese show a warmth and friendliness that puts the visitor at ease, allowing you to enjoy all that this country has to offer. There's something in the easy smiles of the people you meet, a mixture of innocence and hope. Poised to embrace the new world on their doorstep, most Burmese speak at least rudimentary English. Almost all have a happy disposition and a delightfully positive attitude which is well mixed with a little entrepreneurial nous. It's a country rich in minerals where power and wealth has too often wrested with the elite and the people of Burma are eager for change. And change is coming thick and fast with massive increases in tourism. It remains to be seen whether the changes will bring much needed positive impacts to the people of Burma. They truly deserve it.



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If you'd like to see a little of Burma with your own eyes you can view this short [video](#). It's a journey through the country, from tranquil Lake Inle, to the awe inspiring temples of Bagan and the magnificence of Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon. The scenery is truly breathtaking...

Victoria is the Founder of [The Milner Guide](#), an online travel resource developed to share travel knowledge and experiences. Victoria currently lives in Singapore and is exploring the Asia Pacific region with gusto. Previously based in Melbourne, Sydney and London with a stint in Salt Lake City, Victoria has also travelled extensively throughout Europe, the Middle East, Asia, the United States and Africa.

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