

Burma

by bike



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Burma by Bike

a short guide to bicycle touring in Myanmar

www.worldbiking.info
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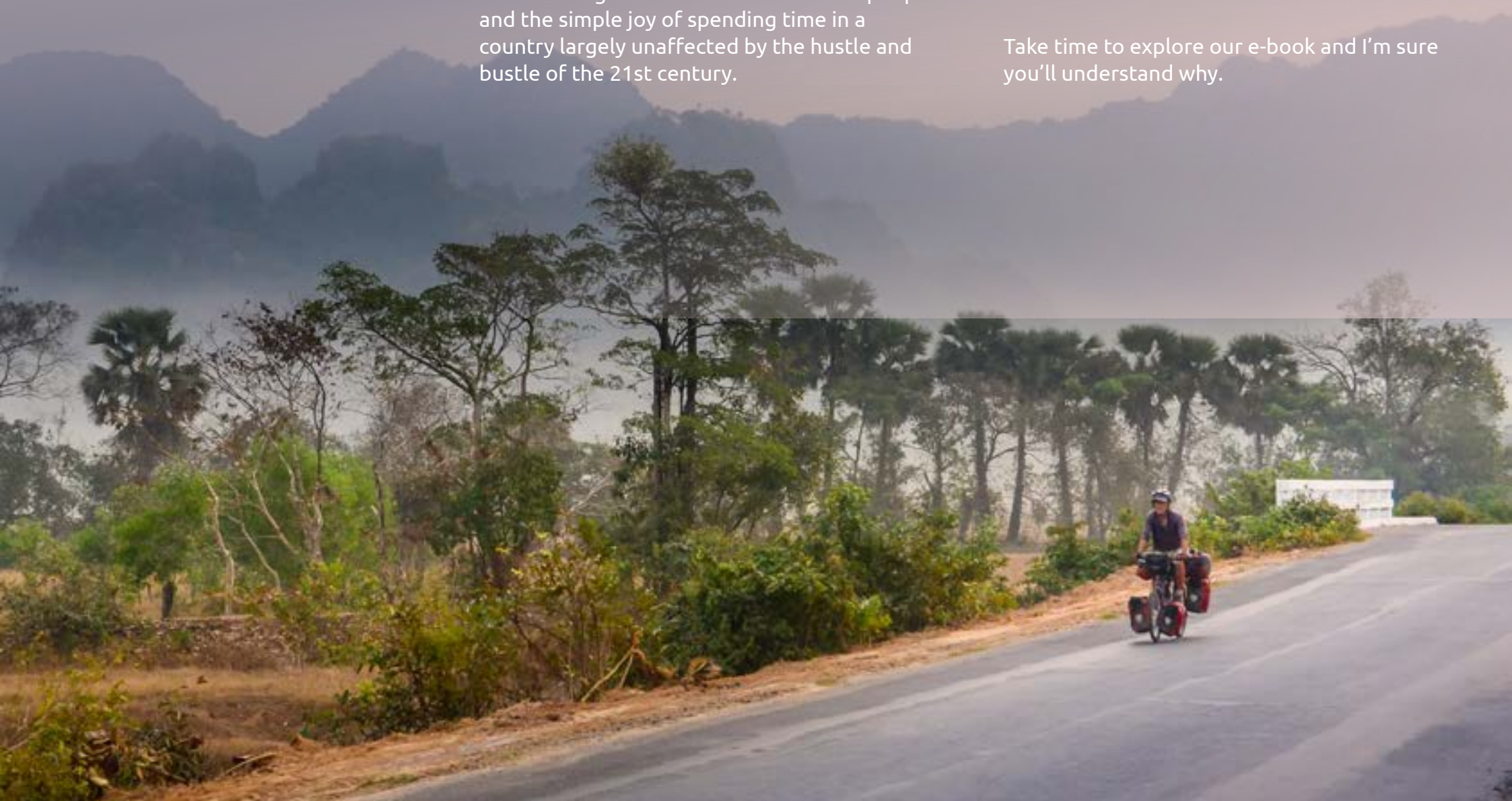


Why Bike Burma?

Myanmar is the current darling of Southeast Asian travel. Since sanctions were lifted in 2010, tourists have been thronging to the country. Most return raving about the kindness of the people and the simple joy of spending time in a country largely unaffected by the hustle and bustle of the 21st century.

You may be asking yourself if the country lives up to all the hype. Rest assured, it does! Of the 98 countries we've cycled, Burma ranks near the top of our absolute favorite destinations.

Take time to explore our e-book and I'm sure you'll understand why.





HIGH CLASS HIGH CLASS



On the Road

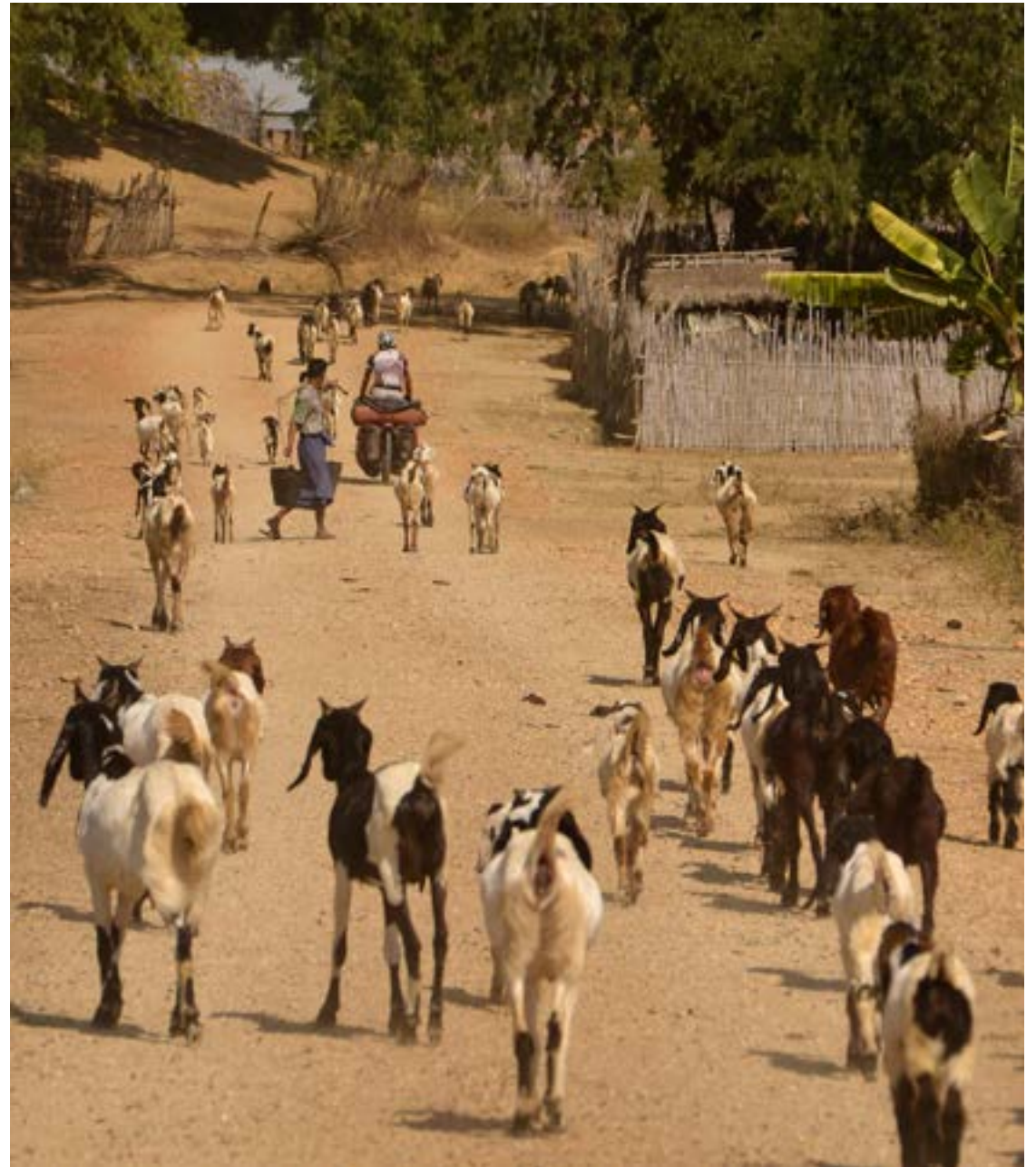
Touring Myanmar is like taking a giant leap back in time. You'll share the road with rickety wagons pulled by a strong team of oxen and locals on single-speed bikes balancing unbelievably heavy loads. You'll witness villagers with ancient tools heading to the fields and groups of gentle-faced, barefoot monks in bright flowing robes begging for their daily alms.





Rural Life

Pedaling between villages affords an intimate peek into rural life. Girls fetch water, toddlers scamper about at play, men bale hay, boys guide unruly goats to pasture, youth prod dawdling cows, giddy girls break stones to construct hand-built roads, old folks bask in the sun's warming rays.







Roads

Off the main highways roads are surprisingly serene. Most roads are paved, but the farther you wander into rural Myanmar, the more pot-holes and sand you'll encounter. Be prepared for mud and muck in the rainy season.











Temples

Myanmar must have the highest per capita number of temples in the entire world. Even the smallest, most impoverished places boast gleaming golden structures paying tribute to the Buddhist faith.

Watching the sunrise over the temples of Bagan is a highlight for most cyclists on a Southeast Asia tour.

Even if you miss the beauty of Bagan (as we unfortunately did), you can always enjoy the peaceful gardens surrounding the local village temples--they make great spots for a short break from the road.





Bagan at Sunrise
photo: © Jennifer Stahn



The Locals

The Burmese are warm, kindhearted people who seem genuinely pleased at the influx of foreign visitors into their country. You won't come across dour expressions, grumpy salespeople or surly hotel staff (except maybe in popular tourist towns). Service station attendants will offer you ice cold bottles of mineral water, restaurant owners may refuse payment, and market stall owners will often present you with gifts of fruits or snacks. You'll soon be asking yourself what you've done to deserve all the special treatment.







In spite of harsh working conditions, road builders offer up big smiles and friendly greetings to passing cyclists.





Not long back, talking politics was strictly taboo. These days, locals feel confident voicing honest opinions without risk of harsh reprisals.







1. The People.

You'll be met with genuine friendliness and heartfelt kindness throughout the country.

2. Great winter break.

For those wanting to escape a harsh northern hemisphere winter, Burma's climate is perfect. From November to February, there's little rain, lots of sun and the days are often cool and crisp like a perfect autumn day in Europe or North America.

3. The cycle culture.

Biking is the most common way to get around the country and it's fun to be part of the tribe.

4. Quiet tree-lined roads.

Myanmar is criss-crossed with an impressive network of shady secondary roads and it's possible to cover vast swathes of territory without rolling along Burma's notoriously narrow and hectic highways.

5. The food.

Incredible variety, always fresh and astonishingly cheap. Myanmar might just be the best place in Asia for a truly famished cyclist on a tight budget.

6. The monks.

What better way to start the day than by watching a line of gentle-faced holy men snaking their way through the streets as they gather alms.

7. Back in Time.

While we certainly don't want to romanticize poverty or lack of development, the charm of simple rural life in Myanmar can't be denied.

8. Sunrise.

Burma's got some of the best and it pays to wake up early and catch the spectacular golden hues.

9. Great photo opportunities.

The Burmese are very obliging when it comes to having their picture taken, so this is a great country in which to hone your portrait-making skills.

10. Being part of progress.

Myanmar is forging ahead towards democracy and economic development. As the country opens up, there are countless interesting conversations to be had about the country's challenging past and buoyant future.

BURMA TOP 10











You'll bump over dozens of rickety (and wonderfully fun!) wooden bridges as you pedal through the Burmese countryside.

In Myanmar you'll experience a calm and tranquility which is fast disappearing amid the hustle and bustle of much of Southeast Asia.



Hungry Cyclist's Delight

Tasty food at rock-bottom prices is one of the great pleasures of biking Burma. A typical meal consists of half a dozen or more vegetarian dishes in tasty sauces, fresh salads plus chicken or fish if you want them. An attentive server will be standing by with free refills of dishes you've found particularly tasty. In Myanmar, it's next to impossible to leave the table without completely stuffing yourself. At the end of the feast, you'll be presented with a bill that will never add up to much more than \$1. Myanmar meals are an unbelievable bargain that will help balance out the sometimes outrageous cost of lodging.





Getting in and Out

Entering

If you're flying to Myanmar, you can use the new e-Visa service to obtain a single-entry tourist visa. The cost is US\$50.

Those arriving overland, will need a visa in advance. The application is simple and usually takes just a couple of days.

Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur and Vientiane are all good spots to pick up the visa. You'll get a tourist visa valid for 90 days which permits a 28-day stay in Myanmar.

The easiest way to enter Myanmar is via Thailand at the Mae Sot-Myawaddy (Kayin State) crossing. You do not need a special permit for this crossing, only a valid Myanmar visa.

Special Permits

Special permits are required when entering or exiting Myanmar via India at the Tamu - Moreh crossing or via China at the Muse - Ruili crossing.

The Permits can be obtained in Yangon at Exotic Tours (\$50 charge) or at the Seven Diamonds Travel Agency (\$100 charge). We used

Exotic Tours and were completely satisfied with their service. The only advantage of using Seven Diamonds is that they have an agent in Tamu who will assist you with the border formalities. Exotic Tours, on the other hand, faxes the permit directly to the immigration officials at the border.

Permits can take up to 10 days to be issued. Luckily, you won't have to waste precious time on your visa waiting in Yangon. Once you have applied and paid in Yangon, your travel agency will send you a confirmation email and take care of getting the documents to the border.

If coming from China, you may be able to obtain the Special Permit at the Myanmar consulate in Kunming. This information is not confirmed, so be sure to double check.

Traveling to Myanmar from India is possible, but a little bit more tricky. Contact Seven Diamonds Travel Agency in Yangon via e-mail and they will obtain the Special Permit for you. The permit will be faxed to the Tamu border and you will make payment at the border when crossing into Myanmar.



Immigration formalities are fast, friendly & hassle-free!



When to Go

Myanmar has three seasons. The hot (best avoided) is from March-April, followed by the cooler rainy season from May-October. The country is subject to torrential downpours at this time and mud and muck can be a serious issue.

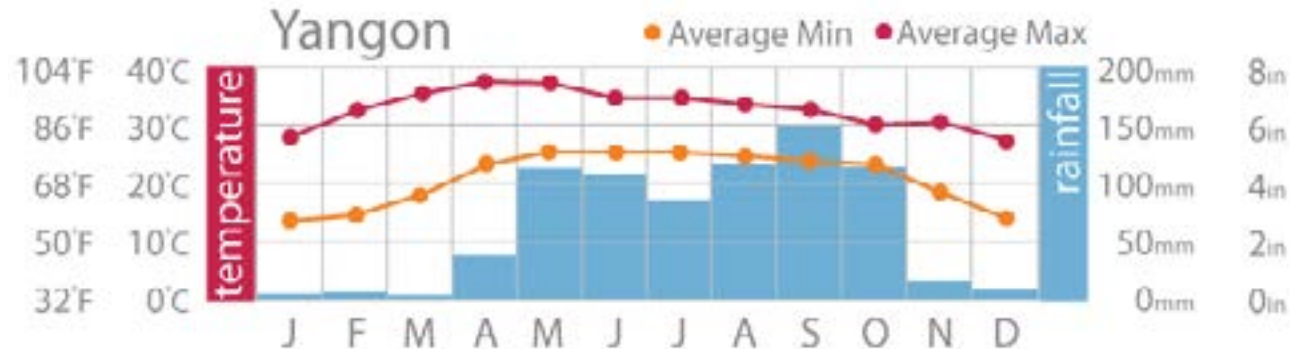
The ideal time to cycle Myanmar is from November-February when the weather is warm and pleasant but rarely stifling hot.

If you fly in directly from winter conditions in North America or

Europe, Myanmar might initially feel very hot. Don't worry, most people acclimatize to heat over a period of days to weeks.

Nights can be chilly so be sure to pack warm clothes. You may want to throw in a rain jacket, just in case!

Keep in mind that the cool season is also peak tourist time and it can be extremely hard to come by budget hotel rooms, particularly if you arrive late in the day as many cyclists do.



Where to Sleep

Tourist Hotels

Officially, foreign visitors are allowed only to stay in hotels and guesthouses with specific licenses to receive foreigners. These can be pricey. During peak season in popular spots like Inle Lake or Bagan, you might end up paying \$30 for a basic room that might go for \$10 in neighboring Thailand.. The minimum you'll probably end up spending is \$15-\$20 per night if you stay in authorized hotels.

Guesthouses + Temple Stays

In non-touristy spots, you'll have a couple of options. Authorities may allow you to check into a local guesthouse. This will cost around \$10 for a cramped room of questionable cleanliness. Washing facilities and toilets will be shared.

If you're way off the beaten track, authorities may allow you to stay at the local Buddhist Temple. In most cases you will put your tent up in a large hall and the monks will provide you with extra bedding and pillows. Once locals find out about your presence you can be assured many visits and photo shoots. The monks may also offer you some snacks or meals. In many cases, it will also be possible to prepare a meal if you've brought your own supplies. You may want to consider leaving a donation.

Camping

Camping is illegal in Myanmar, and it is almost certain that you will be moved on if authorities catch you pitching your tent. Hapless

bikers caught camping have been forced to move on in the middle of the night and pedal long distances in order to reach a town with approved accommodation. The Burmese are nice, but rarely ready to risk their jobs in order to accommodate foreign bicyclists.

Cyclists, of course, do manage to wild camp in Myanmar. We pitched our tent successfully on three occasions, but were also discovered by authorities twice. After being found out, we were once moved on to a nearby monastery and once, astonishingly, allowed to stay.

Stealth camping in Myanmar requires vigilance and a good dose of luck. Be sure no one is following you and pitch your tent well off any roads and far, far from any settlements. Use lights sparingly and keep noise to an absolute minimum. Villagers do roam about at night and there is a chance that you'll be discovered, even if you've followed all precautions and chosen a very well-hidden spot.

Safety

Myanmar is generally a safe country with little crime but, as in all countries, there are a few bad apples. A European cyclist was savagely attacked while wild camping near Bago in early 2015.





Riding Conditions + Navigation

Roads

Myanmar's roads are mostly built by hand, without benefit of modern machinery. Riding surfaces are accordingly rough.

Major highways are often narrow with little or no shoulder for riding. Drivers have little regard for two-wheeled travelers and size rules on Myanmar's roads. Think chaos and confusion.

You'll be much better off sticking to secondary roads, which offer refreshingly pleasant riding. Traffic on minor roads is usually limited to cyclists, motorbikes and farming vehicles. Roads are often tree-lined, almost always paved, but sometimes severely pot-holed.

A GPS is almost essential for navigating the back roads. Due to patchy internet access, your smartphone will often be rendered useless, so don't plan on consulting Google maps at every junction.

You could just rely on advice from the locals. Even in the remotest villages, you can usually find somebody who speaks English.

The problem is that locals will almost always direct you to the nearest highway, fearing that you'll get lost trying to navigate village roads.

Popular Routes

With the route through Tibet closed to independent travelers, Myanmar is now a key link in the Asia-Europe overland route.

It's possible to cycle from Thailand into Burma at the Mae Sot-Myawaddy border crossing and onto India's Manipur State via the Tamu-Moreh border.

Some visitors have reportedly travelled between Myanmar and China's Yunnan province, but we have not been able to confirm this.

Most cyclists follow the 1,700 kilometer overland route from the Thai border to Myawaddy – Hpa-an – Bago – Yangon – Pyay – Bagan – Gangaw – Kalemmyo – Tamu and into India. Expect mixed conditions with some perfectly paved portions and other stretches of pure potholes.

For an extra challenge, mountainous Chin State offers endless opportunities for adventure. Road conditions are notoriously rough, so be sure to get reliable information before setting off.







Locals are usually more than happy to point out the way!

Dangers + Annoyances

Safety

Myanmar is generally safe, even by Southeast Asian standards. Police keep a tight rein on things making street crime extremely rare. Scams targeting travelers are uncommon.

Political unrest will probably be your biggest worry in Myanmar. Although foreigners have not been targeted in the past, it is always a good idea to steer clear of any large gatherings or protests.

Fighting has occurred along border regions, including the popular entry point at Myawaddy near the Thai city of Mae Sot.

The border region with China experienced bloody conflict in 2015. Some areas are still strictly off limits for foreigners, so be sure to check for recent information online before travelling to Myanmar.

Checkpoints & Spies

Myanmar is inching towards openness and democracy, but a few vestiges of the erstwhile police state remain.

In sensitive zones, checkpoints are common. These are pretty routine operations and just a question of noting your details. Don't worry, this isn't a shakedown and you won't be asked to pay any bribes. Keep copies of your passport and Myanmar visa just in case.

The once massive spy network has been diminished, but not destroyed. Don't be surprised if you discover a not-so-secret plain-clothes policeman following you on motorbike. These cops are

highly annoying, but generally harmless. As soon as you leave their district, they'll drop off. If you're lucky, the guy in the next district will be completely disinterested and you can go along your merry way cycling in solitude.

Some unfortunate cyclists have reported being followed for several days. This may happen if you venture into remote areas or raise suspicions for one reason or another (impossible to figure out what's going on in the minds of Myanmar's ruling class).

MOST cyclists are not followed so this probably won't be an issue for you. If you are followed, the only options are to grin and bear it or attempt to lose the tail.



Dealing with Authorities

If you're unable to reach an authorized tourist hotel, you'll probably end up dealing with the Myanmar police or immigration authorities.

One strategy is to just show up late in the day (5-6 pm) at a police station and let the officers deal with the situation. In the best case scenario, they'll quickly sort out the situation and let you stay at a nearby monastery or authorize you to stay at a local guest house.

Worst case scenario, the police will insist you ride to the next city or throw your bike on transport.

Another strategy is to go directly to a temple and ask the head monk for permission to stay. The monk will most likely welcome you warmly without asking questions.

This may be an appropriate solution if you are in a remote area VERY far from any police station or village. Your stay will remain a secret between you and the monks.

If the police discover you staying at a monastery without their approval, you may be forced to leave.

Staying at monasteries continues to be a confusing issue. Some cyclists have had a great deal of success staying at monasteries, others have found it impossible.

The most important thing to keep in mind is that you don't want to cause problems for the kind monks. If police insist you leave a monastery, do so without complaint.



Myanmar's monks and local villagers are always ready to lend a helping hand--just be sure not to get them into trouble with authorities.

Money + Costs

Costs

Just a few years back, travelers to Myanmar were advised to arrive with bundles of pristine U.S. dollars.

Today, there are over 600 ATMs accepting foreign debit or credit cards. The biggest providers of compatible ATMs are CB (Co-operative) Bank and KBZ (Kanbawza) Bank. There's a K5000 transaction fee, and a withdrawal limit of K300, 000 per transaction.

ATM coverage in remote areas is still a bit patchy, so it's a good idea to bring US dollars (no creases, stains, marks or tears) or Euros (the authorities are less picky about the condition of the currency).

Banks and official money exchanges offer good exchange rates, so there's no need to change money with dodgy black market dealers.

The cost of bike touring in Myanmar varies widely. Accommodation will be your biggest budget item, followed by entry fees and food.

Plan on a daily budget around \$45- \$60 per day if you want to stay in mid-range hotels and try a few upmarket restaurants.

If you stick to basic accommodation and eat at local restaurants, \$25-\$35 should be enough.

We managed to get by on \$200 during our 28 day stay in Myanmar, but this meant skipping most tourist sites and avoiding hotels. Budget biking in Burma takes some effort, but it is possible.

Pace of Change

The rate of change in Myanmar is phenomenal. In most cases, the situation for travelers is improving. Guest houses are getting better (although don't expect to find A/C rooms everywhere), dining options are expanding, WiFi is becoming more common, mobile phone rates are plummeting and roads are being upgraded.

The big downside is that prices for accommodation are skyrocketing and flights into Myanmar are often fully-booked well in advance. In order to avoid surprises, be sure to google the latest information before you begin your tour.

The information in this book is accurate as of June, 2015.



Women Cyclists

Females cycling in Myanmar shouldn't experience any particular hassles or annoyances. Local women and girls pedal from village to village so you won't feel out of place.

Most women in rural areas dress in long sarong garments, but city women sometimes wear shorts and skirts. Lycra cycling shorts may raise a few eyebrows.

Women traveling as part of a male-female couple are generally allowed to stay at monasteries. Solo female cyclists, on the other hand, are usually turned away.

Women solo cyclists are often welcomed into family homes and offered exceptional hospitality.



Mobile Phones + Internet

For many years, SIM cards in Myanmar were outrageously expensive and difficult to obtain.

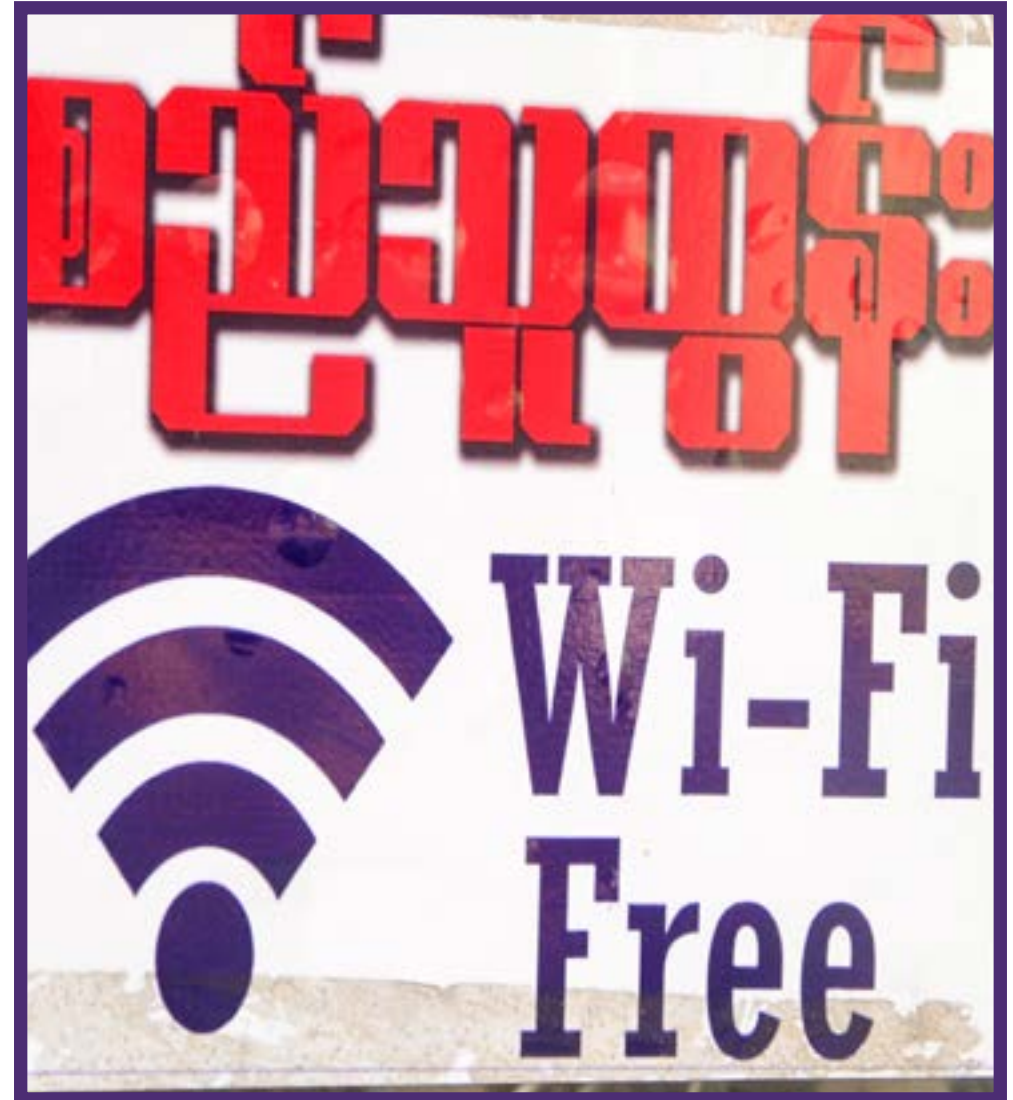
Foreign companies have now entered the telecom market and prices are dropping precipitously. You can set yourself up with a SIM card from Ooredoo or Telenor for an economical \$1.50.

Cell towers are popping up all over the country, but don't count on great connections.

Outside large urban areas, internet access is usually distressingly slow. WiFi is exceedingly hard to come by and Internet cafes are uncommon.

Forget about updating your website or uploading photos to Facebook or Flickr. You'll be lucky to get Gmail to open in HTML mode!

Think of Myanmar as a great place to take a break from the digital world.





About the Author

Amaya is on a quest to be the first woman to cycle every country on the planet.

With cycling partner and husband, Eric Schambion, she has pedaled more than 170,000 kilometers through 99 countries on six continents.

Amaya grew up Montana (USA), a place she still calls home despite not having lived there since the late 80s.

She is a contributing author to the Adventure Cycle-Touring Handbook and her writing and images have been featured in Adventure Cyclist Magazine, Bicycle Traveler Magazine and Bunyan Velo.

Follow Amaya and Eric's adventures as they enter their 10th year of bicycling around the world:

www.worldbiking.info



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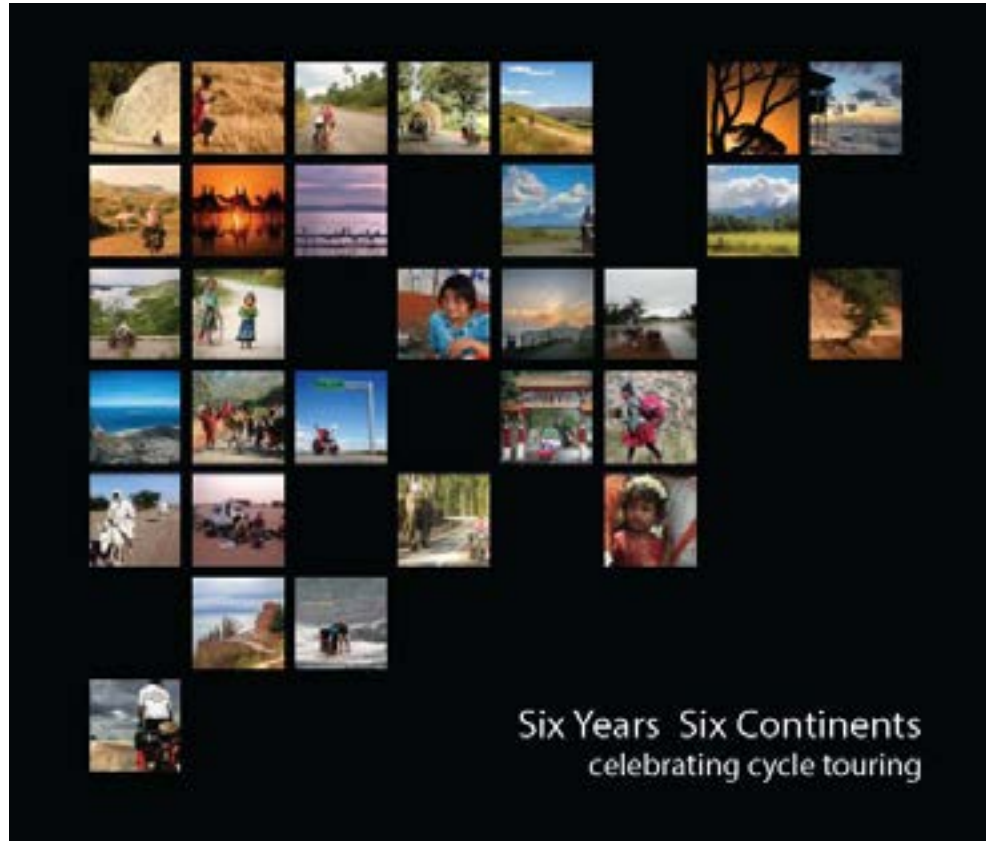
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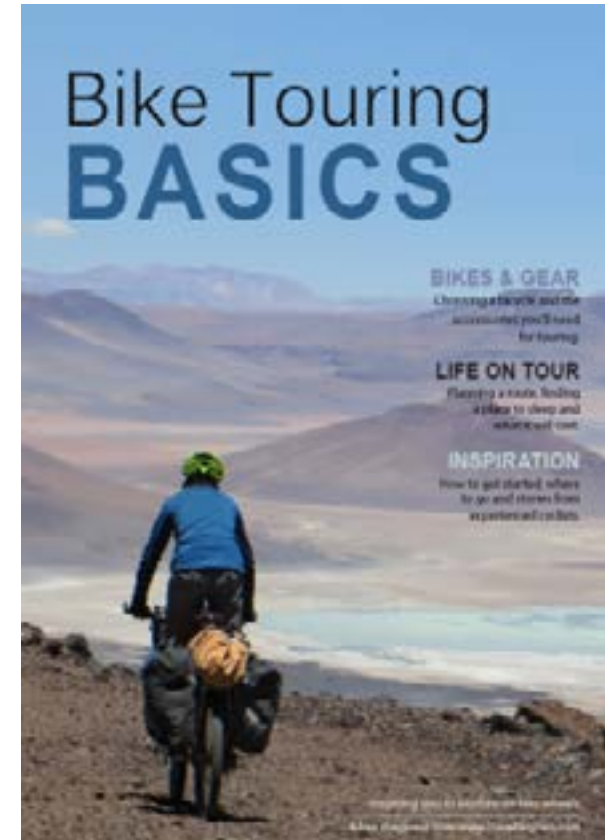
Images from the East Asian countries of Korea, Taiwan, the Phillipines and Japan.

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