

# The heart of *Burma*

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A land once as isolated as North Korea has opened its doors. On a two-week cycling trip, **Tracey Croke** is welcomed with warm smiles, open hearts and a sinister waft of men in dark glasses

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At last I see a roadside shack. I pull up for a rest. The rust-coloured dust is already settling around a group of concerned children as their football rolls towards me. “*Mingalaba* (hello),” I say, handing it back. The chillies drying on the mat in the midday heat make more noise than the children do... until a burst of giggles breaks through the curious silence.

I walk into the shack to find the owner attentively waiting. It's stocked with nothing I recognise except for three-in-one coffee sachets and sprite. “*Mingalaba*,” I say again. “*Mingalaba*,” is returned with a gleeful smile.

Among the mish-mash on offer, my hungry eyes spot large curious snacks in clear cellophane homemade

packs sitting next to half-litre water bottles refilled with fuel. “It's good,” the shop owner shyly beckons. A quick sniff tells me they haven't been deep fried in petrol so I buy a pack of the large, lumpy, splat-shaped brittle treats and precariously crunch into one. A deficiency in E colour additives leaves the mystery snack with an unappetising grey complexion, which my brain is determined to reference as freeze-dried dog vomit. Nevertheless it's delicious, welcomed by my stomach, and bean curd (I later discover) is nutritious.

Further inside, a yellow-edged portrait of Aung San Suu Kyi and her father hangs on a dried rattan wall. “The lady,” the shop owner proclaims with a wide smile. She brings a chair

over so I can rest, sit and admire it properly. “She's very famous around the world,” I say. “Yes,” the shop owner beams. I turn around to find her family and a couple of villagers have joined us. With hands clasped at their hearts they joyfully chorus “the lady.”

Feeling refreshed, fuzzy and overwhelmingly uplifted, I fill my cycling jersey pockets with three-in-one coffee sachets and push on to find my friends ahead.

I am in Burma, cycling from the mountains of Heho to the Bay of Bengal and back into Yangon. The two-week, 700km mountain bike trip, over mixed terrain, will involve long days in the saddle but also some rest days to visit a couple of the country's famous attractions, namely the world-

As I cycle further into the heart of Burma, I find not only overwhelming support for Aung San Suu Kyi, but outspoken people who are not afraid and eager to talk about her ☺



A monk helps with directions – but it's disrespectful to stand on his shadow



Off the beaten track: passing village children

renowned Inle Lake and the ancient city of Bagan.

A visit to Burma is well overdue for me. I had an opportunity to go there back in 2006 when I was travelling through Indochina. I decided to steer clear in support of Aung San Suu Kyi's wishes; she was under house arrest at the time.

Back then, travel to Burma was seen as an endorsement of the military regime. Many of the regime's tourism-related projects have involved forced labour, arbitrary property seizures, compulsory relocations and other human rights abuses, says Burma Campaign UK (<http://burmacampaign.org.uk>). However, since her release from house arrest in November 2010, Aung San Suu Kyi and her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), has said that responsible travel can help change the country and local people will benefit from the money spent.

Down those tracks that take me into the heart of Burma, Aung San Suu Kyi's hopes are materialising. Although some areas are still off-limits, tour companies are expanding beyond the more well-known sightseeing attractions. Small guest houses are popping up to cater for the tourist trickle and families are adding rooms for travellers to their humble homes. Trading in a level of comfort assured from the more established spots such as Inle Lake (recently reported in *The Telegraph* to be suffering from poorly managed 'over tourism' by the current regime) opens doors to cosy guest houses in the unlikeliest places, often –

surprisingly – with ensuite bathrooms.

English is widely spoken in Burma. “A good remnant of the colonial days,” my guide eloquently tells me. In a remote town, a group of giggling young women recommend a good place to get a Burmese-style breakfast. They point to a ramshackle brick building where a young boy is out front, speedily stretching dough with the finesse of a master baker under the semi-watchful eye of his father. We order the local dish that sent its aroma meandering ➤

#### Who's writing



**Tracey Croke** is a Sydney-based journalist, travel writer and photographer originally from the UK who writes about rough-toughty travel, off-track adventure and anything involving a bike. Her quest for a good travel story has seen her venture into post-conflict Afghanistan to join a pioneering expedition across the Pamir Mountains, sleep in a swag next to a croc-infested billabong and have her smalls rummaged through with the muzzle of a Kalashnikov. See more at [www.traceycroke.com](http://www.traceycroke.com) or on twitter: @TraceyCroke.





Age-old traditions:  
a fisherman at Inle Lake

Burma by bike: some roads  
were newly surfaced and smooth;  
others were rough and rocky



the streets to tease our hungry bellies. The pangs become unbearable when my nostrils fill with the smell of fresh dough slapped on the side of a hot clay oven baking to order. A few minutes later, we are all dunking warm charred flatbread into a thick tasty plate of chickpea stew; perfect sustenance for the ride ahead through the misty, balmy morning.

Sustenance is a big deal on long-distance bike trips. There is no shortage of places to get delicious food down the back roads for those in the know. Our local guides consistently seek out these hidden treasures. A mix of tasty and mildly spiced vegetable, meat and fish dishes materialise from the unlikeliest looking of places – tapas or meze style – in small bowls. Whether our arrival is expected or not, food is on the

table remarkably quickly and it keeps coming until we say stop.

After lunch, my bike is handed back to me by one of our local support team. The muck has been cleaned from my chain. My water bottle is filled. I'm offered snacks for the road ahead. They'll also check on me several times en route. They've only done this trip twice before and already they support like pros.

Along the route, mountain vistas, vivid sunsets, golden stupas, marching monks and local characters constantly demand our cameras' attention. In tiny villages, sleeping dogs, lolling pigs and wandering goats are benign to our arrival, but their warm-hearted owners and football-mad children are excited to see us venturing down their less-beaten path.

The amount of road building underway in Burma surprises me. And so does the number of flashy cars negotiating the rough roads. I lose count of the times a fully laden cart pulled by two oxen struggles to negotiate between a steam roller and a top-of-the-range BMW or Mercedes coming in the opposite direction. It's hot and dusty. Men, women and sometimes children toil breaking rocks with handheld hammers. As I judder across the newly laid hardcore, some of the road workers stand up to get a better view. "Mingalaba," we shout while trying to wave and steady our bikes. "Mingalaba," we hear from behind, followed by roars of laughter. The driver in dark sunglasses pretends not to notice as he thunders past.

Despite the smiles and laughter,

☞ Sustenance is a big deal on long-distance bike trips. There is no shortage of places to get delicious food down the back roads ☞

those men in dark glasses are a reminder that when you scratch the newly laid surfaces, tough rule remains. "Some observers are worried that with most sanctions and international pressure lifted, there is already some backsliding on human rights," explains Dermot Macward who owns Red Spokes, the company I'm travelling with. He started running tours here after the NLD ended its call for tourists not to visit Burma. While the country has already suffered a certain amount of tourism dollar destruction, if channelled properly, Dermot believes it has power to enhance the economic life of the people by creating new jobs and raising the standard of living. That means avoiding anything plush. Many of the bigger tourism-related businesses are still owned by the families of those in government, or their friends. But Dermot has already developed strong relationships with local contacts to ensure as much money as possible goes into the pockets of independently owned businesses, communities and local people, not the fuel tanks of top-notch BMWs. "It's difficult to know, but not impossible," he says. ➤

## Burma travel tips



Dermot Macward from Red Spokes Adventure Tours gives us five tips for travelling responsibly in Burma

### 1 Language

A simple greeting goes a long way. Say 'Mingalaba' when meeting someone, use 'U' in front of men's names and 'Daw' in front of women's names.

### 2 Customs

Learn about local customs and show respect to the communities you visit. For example, offer articles with both hands and keep both feet on the ground. Don't touch anybody's head. Don't touch women. Don't step over any part of a person.

### 3 Photo stops

Ask permission before taking photographs.

### 4 Monasteries

When entering pagodas or monasteries, wear modest clothing (no shorts, bare shoulders or chests) and remove your footwear. Show respect to monks, novices and nuns. It isn't acceptable to touch the robes or step on a monk's shadow, and don't sit with your back towards Buddha's image.

### 5 Giving back

Consider ways to contribute financially to communities not individuals, helping people to help themselves through development.



Grasses are still carried traditionally

## Aung San Suu Kyi in politics

Known as 'the lady' by the Burmese, Aung San Suu Kyi, who was under house arrest for almost 15 years and has won the Nobel Peace Prize, is planning to run for presidency in 2015. Here's a timeline of events

**1941** Aung San (Aung San Suu Kyi's father) forms the Burma Independence Army.

**1945** Aung San Suu Kyi is born.

**1947** Aung San and six members of his interim government are assassinated by political opponents.

**1962** Gen Ne Win leads a military coup forming a single-party state.

**1974** The new constitution transfers power from the armed forces to a People's Assembly run by former military leaders.

**1988** The National League for Democracy (NLD) is formed after a series of protests in favour of democracy, ending in the military taking over the country in a coup.

**1989** Aung San Suu Kyi is put under house arrest.

**1990** The National League for Democracy wins landslide victory in the general election, but the result is ignored by the military.

**1991** Aung San Suu Kyi is awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her commitment to peaceful change.

**2008** The Government publishes a proposed new constitution that bans NLD opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi from holding office.

**November 2010** The main military-backed party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), claims a resounding victory in the first election for 20 years. The election is widely condemned as a sham. A week after the election, Aung San Suu Kyi, who had been prevented from taking part, is released from house arrest.

**November 2011** The NLD rejoins the political process and Aung San Suu Kyi says she will stand for election.

**2012** NLD candidates sweep the board in parliamentary by-elections.

**2015** Next general election.

I had no intention of bringing up the political situation in Burma. Surely to do so would be dangerous? The authorities are conspicuous by their absence. I sense a watchful eye in busier towns. A man who has a crisp white shirt and sunglasses doesn't mingle well with the locals even in his traditional *longyi* (sarong-style skirt) His aftershave has an undercover cop or man-of-power waft. No one is talking to him, so I'd say he's all ears.

Yet, as I cycle further into the heart of Burma, I find not only overwhelming support for Aung San Suu Kyi, but outspoken people who are not afraid and eager to talk about her. In one village, my curiosity is piqued by a gathering. A man is standing on a box calmly addressing his attentive audience. A great swathe of red material with white stars and yellow pheasants – the unmistakable symbol of Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD party – catches the soft breeze above his head.

"Things have changed in the past year," a local man tells me. "People are no longer afraid to show their support. I think 70% now openly support the lady. A year ago that man would've been arrested."

Now Burma is experiencing more press freedom, investment, tourism and better relations with the international community, but the people are not seeing any financial benefit yet. "Everything is getting more expensive – property and the cost of living – but wages are not increasing. A sim card costs US\$200 – how do Burmese people afford that?" my new friend asks. "It's a whole year's earnings."

Mountain vistas, vivid sunsets, golden stupas, marching monks and local characters constantly demand our cameras' attention

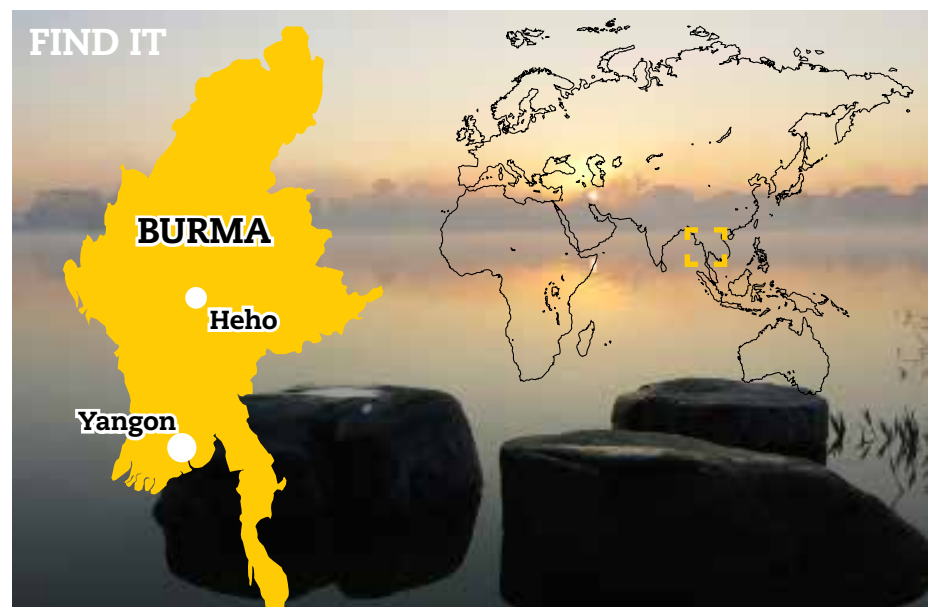
The conversation turns to next year's election and the recent change in the constitution by the regime that prevents Aung San Suu Kyi from being elected as president. "Aung San Suu Kyi has a very difficult job to do. She has to change the constitution. The regime and the people with money and power won't want to give up what they have."

"Will she stand?" I ask.

"She has to," he says. "There is no one else waiting in the background to take over from Aung San Suu Kyi. She is our last hope."

I ask the man about attributing his comments. He takes my pen and writes his full name on my notes. "I'm not afraid," he says. "You can write my name."

He is strong and confident, but I am not. I think about the human rights back-sliding, reports of ethnic





cleansing in areas still off-limits, the ongoing arrests of politicians despite others being freed, and the black cloud of men in dark glasses. Burma may be changing, but until the lady-in-waiting transcends from the hearts of the people to the head of the country, the name of my brave friend will wait too.



Negotiating a water crossing

The last leg into Ngapali beach was a particular bone-shaker, with mile upon mile of freshly laid hardcore. I get off the bike still jittering like a jackhammer and check my back teeth, which are chip-free and survived the testing terrain.

We walk into the quaint beach village with a smattering of restaurants serving humongous grilled prawns plucked out of the bay. A chalkboard sign hangs outside a shack advertising cappuccino and internet. It's calm, uncluttered and peaceful. I watch the copper sunset sipping my celebratory glass of chilled white wine and wonder what this place will be like in a few years time.

Another flashy saloon passes by. I imagine 'the lady' sitting in the back. She is wearing the signature flowers in her hair in honour of her father. She is smiling and waving after winning the election. She has finally taken her rightful place as leader. Behind her, decades of hardship and personal sacrifice. Ahead, she steers the transition of her beloved country.

"How would you describe your trip to Burma?" someone asks as we leave.

"Everything aches, including my heart," I reply. **AT**

## LET'S GO

Want to do what Tracey did? Here's how you can...

### Burma or Myanmar?

The military regime changed the name of the country to Myanmar on 26 May 1989. The democracy movement and the leaders of the ethnic resistance organisations, however, continue to use Burma and have urged the international community to do the same. They argue that the regime had no mandate to change the name of the country.

### Get there

Our trip began in Burma's former capital and largest city Yangon. Fly there with Qatar Airways ([www.qatarairways.com](http://www.qatarairways.com)) with a change in Doha; Thai Airways ([www.thaiairways.com](http://www.thaiairways.com)) with a change in Bangkok; Singapore Airlines ([www.singaporeair.com](http://www.singaporeair.com)) with change in Singapore or Malaysia Airlines ([www.malaysiaairlines.com](http://www.malaysiaairlines.com)) with a change in Kuala Lumpur.

### Where to stay

Visa rules state that tourists can only stay in hotels and guesthouses during their visit. Hotels in Yangon and in the more well-known tourist areas are expensive and comparable in price to the UK. In other areas, accommodation is generally a family-run guesthouse or a small hotel. Rooms are clean and comfortable with shared bathrooms or sometimes an en suite. The price of accommodation is included in the Red Spokes' cycling trip. For those interested in non-cycling travel in Myanmar, Manie Sithu Travel and Tours is a local Yangon-based company that can arrange guesthouse accommodation. See [www.myanmartravelplan.net](http://www.myanmartravelplan.net).



Delicious food

### When to go

The best times to visit are the cooler months, from mid-November to mid-February. After that it gets increasingly hotter, with the rains beginning sometime in May.

### The trip

I booked my trip with Red Spokes Adventure Tours, a small London-based specialist company with the motto Cycling with Altitude. The company

runs two trips to Burma: one for 11 days, the other for 14. The 14-day trip, that I did, costs from £1,595, not including international flights but including transfers, an internal flight from Yangon to Heho, accommodation and meals. Also included is a support vehicle with a driver and two local guides. The trip would suit those looking for a relatively unexplored destination who don't mind a mix of accommodation. You don't need to be a highly experienced cyclist but you do need to be in good physical shape, and prepared for some big hills and mixed terrain with an average of 70km, 800m ascent and six to seven hours in the saddle each day. See [www.redspokes.co.uk](http://www.redspokes.co.uk).

### What to take

The trip is fully supported and luggage is carried in a separate vehicle, but each day you'll need to carry a first aid kit, a basic bike repair kit and at least two spare inner tubes, plus wet weather gear and enough water and snacks to keep you going for several hours.

### Visas and passports

Tourist visas are valid for three months after issue to enter the country and to spend a maximum of four weeks there from the date of arrival. The Myanmar embassy in London ([www.myanmarembassy-london.com](http://www.myanmarembassy-london.com)) is currently quoting three to five business days to process a visa, but postal applications will take longer and rules change so leave plenty of time to apply. Passports must be valid for six months from the date of your return journey and have enough blank pages for visa and stamps.

### Money

The official currency, the Kyat, cannot be purchased outside Burma. You will need US dollars. There are particular and bizarre rules to avoid rejection and to get the best rates when changing money. The notes must be 100 or 50 dollar bills, unfolded and brand spanking new: no bends, no dog ears, no creases, no spots, no tears. They can't have the small Grant or Franklin head and they must not contain the serial numbers CB, BC or AB. Very few hotels and restaurants accept credit cards. There are ATMs in some cities but they may not work.

### Internet and phones

Many guest houses and hotels in Yangon and the popular tourist areas have wifi, but services are slow and often unavailable. Local telephone networks don't allow roaming so mobile phones won't work in Burma. A local sim card cost US\$200.