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March 23 to 25, 10am to 9.30pm
- **WHERE**
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Free



The changing face of Yangon

Chen Jinyao explores a rapidly modernising city with an increasing number of skyscrapers and Western-style services

The curious thing about Yangon is that motorcycles are banned.

The official reason is that it improves traffic. But the Internet offers other explanations, such as a threat to a general and an attempt at distributing pro-democracy leaflets by errant motorcyclists. There is even one about an accident in which an official's son was knocked down.

Whatever the rationale, the ban has enabled buses, trucks and cars to fill the space left by motorcycles. And that has not improved the traffic situation. Roads are often gridlocked and motorists sound their horns frequently.

And boy, is it hell to cross the road. You need patience and lightning-fast reflexes to wait for a break in the stream of vehicles before making a mad dash across.

Or you could do like us

novices, and scuttle behind the outstretched arm of our guide, his hand deftly signalling when to stop and move.

But before we jumped off the pavement and threw ourselves into the deadly traffic, we looked down and saw the word "Mingalabar!" (hello) at our feet. The painted word of welcome was repeated along the kerb.

"This is done to lift the spirits of the people," said our guide, a wiry Yangonite clad in the traditional longyi (similar to a sarong) and slippers. We noticed that it was a style of dressing preferred by most men, including office workers.

"Pants are hot and longyis are comfortable," he said.

But traditional sartorial values aside, change is afoot in the city.

While many colonial-era buildings still stand downtown, they are flanked by rising skyscrapers. Global brands have set up shop in shiny malls, supermarkets sport takeaway deli counters

and bakeries are stuffed with all manner of luscious Western-style pastries.

Indeed, Myanmar's economy is among the fastest growing in the region, contributing to the rise in the number of cars on the road – and the traffic situation we were in.

While waiting to get to the other side, we heard a commotion. A huge snake had been spotted on the kerb. Like us, it wanted to go across. But unlike us, it was fearless, slithering across four lanes without hesitation.

"Seeing a snake means you will become rich," our guide said with a grin.

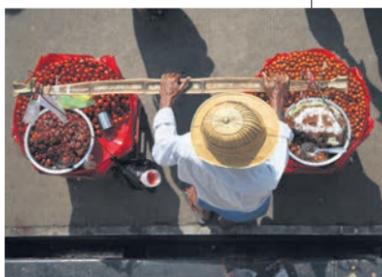
"It also means you will come back to Yangon."

We surely will. We will be back to see the rapidly changing scenes in this city, and hopefully, we will have developed the skills to cross the road – quickly and safely.



Top: The ferry to Dalah at sunset.
Above: A tray of sago worms.
Left: A vendor at the dock at the ferry to Dalah.

PHOTOS:
CHEN JINYAO



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The changing face of Yangon

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WHAT TO SEE & DO

■ **Walking tour:** Yangon Walking Tours' (tel: +959254008272 or e-mail: tourguidecircle@gmail.com). guides will give you the insider's low-down on their home town. During our three-hour downtown tour, our guide took us past merchant houses-turned-retail

outlets and makeshift stalls under overhead bridges, while weaving in tales of an era when Yangonites were "crazy rich".

■ **Ride the ferry to Dalah:** This is a great chance for visitors to see local life in action. During the 15-minute ferry ride to Dalah island, a fair bit of money changes hands between passengers and hawkers selling quails' eggs, cut pineapples, nail clippers and hats. Board at the Pansodan Jetty opposite The Strand hotel.

■ **Circular railway:** This train service (below), which makes a loop around the city, is excruciatingly slow but Yangonites prefer it to travelling by road because of the traffic jams. If you have the patience, a loop will take three hours. If not, you could hop off midway and take a cab back to town. The most convenient station to board is the Yangon Central railway station.



■ **Trawl second-hand bookstores:** Pansodan Road is lined with second-hand booksellers that carry Burmese and English books. Prices are low and bookworms can happily nose through the somewhat haphazard collections.

WHAT & WHERE TO EAT

■ **Street food:** Eat like the locals do — at street-side stalls. Try sago worms, the fat white larvae of a beetle found in the Irrawaddy Delta that are deep-fried until they acquire a crispy shell while the inside stays tender. A good place for street food is Mahabandoola Park, where a lane on one side is lined with stalls.

■ **Barbecue restaurants in 19th Street, Chinatown:** This road is also known as barbecue central because of the number of barbecue restaurants there. Choose from a display of skewered vegetables, meat kebabs and seafood, then wait for your selection to be grilled while you relax with a Myanmar beer or two and shoot the breeze like the Yangonites do. We went to Win Restaurant (No. 99-97), a local and tourist favourite.

■ **Mandalay Restaurant at Belmond Governor's Residence:** Mandalay Restaurant, located in luxury hotel Belmond Governor's Residence (www.belmond.com/governorsresidence), is good for European classics. But its setting easily tops its food — the tables are set along a veranda next to a manicured garden patrolled by ducks and peacocks. It is just the place to while away a few hours. The hotel, a colonial-style mansion, is also worth a look-see.

■ **Rangoon Tea House:** The hipsters have invaded Yangon, and a good thing too, for this hipster café (www.facebook.com/RangoonTeaHouse) is well worth a visit. It serves traditional Myanmar food, but in surroundings so chic, it could be an establishment in any major city.

GETTING THERE

We flew on Singapore Airlines from Singapore to Yangon.

TRAVELLER'S TIPS

■ You need a mix of United States dollars and the kyat, Myanmar's currency. Your US dollars must be crisp and without folds or they will be rejected.

■ Singaporeans do not need visas to visit Myanmar on trips that are less than 30 days.

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