

# To Myanmar With Love



*A Travel Guide for the Connoisseur*

*Edited & with contributions by Morgan Edwardson  
Photographs by Steve Goodman*

me from going. As a high school student, I studied hard and took few breaks. Teashops were my chance to relax and hang out with my friends.

The other reason I liked going was to listen to music. When I was growing up, many families did not have stereos at home. High school students did not have much pocket money, but hanging out with friends while listening to the latest music in teashops was a luxury we could afford. These days, many teashops in Myanmar also have TVs and show videos in addition to playing music.

I'm now living overseas, but when I return to Yangon, I still enjoy teashops. One new place I frequent is Zin, located north of town near the airport. It serves various types of tea, soft drinks, and coffee, as well as traditional noodle dishes such as *monhinga* and *ahn no kauk swe*. It also has good cakes, sweet sticky rice, pancakes, and *nan*. For a nice snack between lunch and dinner, I like munching on *ar pu shar pu*, a spicy Rakhaing noodle dish.

When I go to teashops like Zin nowadays, I often see some of my old friends. Sadly, we don't sit together and chat like we used to. Times change, and now that I'm living overseas we don't have as much in common to talk about.

With the opening of more modern cafés and bakeries in Yangon, the popularity of teashops among the middle class is waning. However, I highly doubt that they will disappear anytime soon. Owners will learn to keep up with the times, and there will

always be enough people who prefer tea made skillfully at a local venue as opposed to something poured from a packet. More importantly, teashops will remain a part of the social fabric: places where people can not only eat and drink, but also socialize and gossip as they have been doing all their lives.

## *Zin Teashop*

Teashops in Myanmar open very early, usually at around 5 a.m., and offer a variety of dishes for breakfast. Some noodle dishes are only available in the morning and sell out quickly, so get there early.

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## MON STATE

*Michael Pugh  
spits like a local  
in Kyaiktiyo*

Red splashes everywhere—on streets, sidewalks, storefronts, shirt-fronts, and even stray dogs—signaled that I was in betel nut country. Popular across Myanmar, betel nut was pervasive throughout the town

of Kyaiktiyo, with every other man on the street nursing a hefty plug between his cheek and gum.

I stepped over and around the stains, and the dogs, as my hotelier, Tun Tun, and I walked past open-air teashops and sleepy stores toward a large banyan tree at the center of town. The ground beneath the tree was stained almost completely red, like the floor of a slaughterhouse. At the center of this mess a frail old man stood behind a ramshackle wooden stall. The man smiled as we approached, exposing an impressive set of blood-red choppers. Tun Tun flashed his own crimson grin and greeted the man in Burmese.

This was Sitila, the local betel nut distributor.

A dark red seed from the betel (areca) palm, betel nut acts as a stimulant when mixed with lime powder. Chewing betel nut produces copious amounts of brick-red saliva, which explained all the splotches around town—and all the scarlet smiles.

The act of chewing betel nut in Myanmar goes back to the beginning of the country's recorded history. Long the habit of royalty, it is part of a tradition which states that dying men be given betel nut as a final earthly pleasure. I'd seen Tun Tun enjoy several such pleasures throughout the afternoon, and now he ordered two more: one for immediate use and one for bedtime.

Sitila plucked two fresh leaves out of a plastic bag, laid them flat on his counter, and smeared lime paste across them with a short knobby stick. He dropped small mounds of

crushed betel nut on top, drizzled tobacco over it all, and twisted each leaf up into a neat package the size of a bonbon.

Tun Tun shoved one in his mouth and the other into his pocket. He grinned and said, "You want try?"

Growing up in Wisconsin, I was no stranger to chewing tobacco. I figured betel nut wouldn't be much of a stretch. "Sure," I said.

Tun Tun spoke to Sitila, and the old man smiled at me.

I tried not to look at his teeth.

"Tobacco or no tobacco?" Tun Tun inquired.

"No tobacco."

The old man slathered a new leaf with lime paste and dropped a few broken hunks of nut atop it, repeating the ritual to create a package about half the size of Tun Tun's. He handed it to me and nodded with encouragement.

I popped the wad into my mouth and held it between my cheek and gum. Watching me, Tun Tun and Sitila gnawed on wads of their own.

"So, you chew it?" I asked.

Tun Tun nodded. His mouth was full of spit, and he tilted his head back to speak. "Chew, yes, but no swallow," he gurgled.

The leaf felt smooth and fresh in my mouth. The chunks of betel nut were sharp and unyielding. As I gnawed them, the leaf wrapper broke up and I could taste the gritty, alkaline paste and the peppery nut. I detected hints of baking chocolate, soil, and hand soap. I chewed and chewed and gathered saliva. Finally, I spat a gob of pinkish juice into the dust.

## MANDALAY DIVISION



*Don Gilliland  
applauds the teashops  
of Mandalay*

Mandalay. The name alone conjures up cinematic visions of an exotic Burmese oasis. It's enough to convince first-time visitors they are about to embark on a fabulous road to adventure.

The reality, as I discovered during my first visit, is much different. Modern Mandalay is a loud, dusty, and fairly unattractive city that's clogged with a staggering amount of traffic—everything from motorbikes and trucks to trishaws and ox carts. Even the city's much-vaunted tourist attractions, such as Mandalay Hill and the Myanmar Palace and Fort complex, did not rank among my trip highlights.

But I found at least one must-see sight in Mandalay: the teashops. Besides offering a place to indulge in addictively sweet cups of hot tea and filling meals, teashops are where I can enjoy the company of affable and curious locals, and experience one of Myanmar's true institutions.

Natives of Mandalay claim that their teashops are the best in the country. The subtleties that deter-

Tun Tun and Sitila smiled. "You like?" Tun Tun asked.

"Very good," I said. In fact, it wasn't bad. I began to feel a little buzz, like the kick of a double espresso.

I plucked a wad of kyat out of my pocket and gestured "how much?" But Sitila waved me off. This one was on the house.

### *Finding a betel nut vendor*

With their portable stalls, betel nut sellers like Sitila conduct business on streets and sidewalks across Myanmar. If you don't spot one immediately, ask around. There's probably a stand right around the corner.

### *Custom ordering your betel*

To order betel nut, simply specify whether you want tobacco, peppermint, or other spices added, and then watch the seller prepare your serving with betel nut and lime paste smeared on a leaf. Pop the morsel in your mouth, chew lightly, and—voilà!—you're participating in an age-old custom. A serving of betel nut can cost 40 to 100 kyats, depending upon the size of the "package" and the ingredients.

