

# Should You Go?

We think it's too early for either tourists or investment or aid... As long as new money comes in, the Slorc is under less and less incentive to change.

*Aung San Suu Kyi, 1995*

I have so much respect for the Lady [Suu Kyi], but I disagree with her. If I had a chance to argue with her, I know she'd listen. A 100% boycott's not possible.

*pro-NLD Yangon resident, 2004*

'Should I go?' is a question that Lonely Planet believes that all prospective travellers to Myanmar must ask, and answer, before setting foot in the country. The travel boycott – initiated by the Nobel Laureate for Peace, Aung San Suu Kyi, and endorsed by the British prime minister, Tony Blair, and some tour groups – began in 1996. Since then, much of the travel- and business-related world has been debating the pros and cons of the boycott amid an often-heated face-off. This section is a small stepping stone to understanding the main issues raised by both sides of the argument.

As part of the debate, Lonely Planet is often asked why we publish this book. We believe that travel is one of the most powerful forces for tolerance, understanding and democracy the world possesses. We feel, in the case of Myanmar, it is particularly important to maintain an updated resource that helps those who do decide to go maximise the money reaching local hands in this impoverished country, while minimising the money reaching the ruling military junta. Aung Sang Suu Kyi said in 1995 that Myanmar wasn't ready for tourism. Yet she also noted that 'Tourists can open up the world to the people of Burma just as the people of Burma can open up the eyes of tourists to the situation in their own country if they're interested in looking'. We agree.

**'As long as new money comes in, the Slorc is under less and less incentive to change'**

## THE BOYCOTT SPLIT

Myanmar is a land of mystifying contradictions, a country whose spirited people have withstood centuries of oppression, from Kublai Khan to King George VI to the present military regime.

Myanmar remains under the rule of the State Peace & Development Council (SPDC), formerly known as the State Law & Order Restoration Council (Slorc), an abominable military junta that has run Myanmar since 1962. After widespread peaceful protests in 1987 and 1988 and international pressure (see p43), the military conceded and announced there would be an election in 1990. Despite the 1989 arrest of a key member of the National League for Democracy (NLD), Aung San Suu Kyi, the NLD won a remarkable 82% of the vote. The junta never handed over power.

**'I disagree with her. If I had a chance to argue with her, I know she'd listen'**

### WHY A BOYCOTT?

In the mid-1990s, the military regime readied the country for 'Visit Myanmar Year 1996', a massive campaign they believed could bring legitimacy to the battered government *and* a growing source of income. The government used forced labour to build up its tourism infrastructure – rebuilding tourist sites such as Mandalay Palace, re-paving roads, and

building airports and runways. Some say hundreds of thousands of locals were uprooted from their homes and sent to ‘new towns’ dozens of kilometres outside city centres (evident in Yangon, Mandalay and Old Bagan). The government, meanwhile, eased travel restrictions; from the 24-hour visa and the seven-day visa, to 14 days in 1990, and then 28 days in 1994. The government’s tourism campaign ushered in the tourism boycott. Eventually, the campaign had to be delayed by a few months and the government revised its goal from 500,000 tourists to 200,000, but eventually even that mark was not reached.

## THE DEBATE

Activist groups outside Myanmar – some made up of exiled Burmese – fight for international pressure to be applied to force the military junta to transfer power to the NLD. However, some supporters of the NLD stand on opposite sides regarding how the boycott should be applied. There are really two debates raging at present – one regarding tourism and the other concerning business dealings or aid.

### Aung San Suu Kyi

For many would-be travellers the most compelling reason to support a total boycott is that Aung San Suu Kyi says so, and most boycott supporters frequently quote her. Most of what she’s said on the issue dates from 1995 or 1996 – not surprising as, since before the 1990 election, she’s spent most of the time under arrest and unable to make statements. In 1995 Suu Kyi asked travellers to ‘visit us later’, insisting that visiting at that time was ‘tantamount to condoning the regime’. In 2002 she reportedly said

#### TO GO OR NOT TO GO?

##### Reasons Not to Go

- Aung San Suu Kyi has asked tourists not to come.
- The government used forced labour to develop tourist-related sights and services.
- International tourists can be seen as a stamp of approval for the Myanmar government.
- It’s impossible to visit without some money going to the military junta (eg US\$20 for a visa, US\$10 departure fee, 7% to 10% tax on services and purchases).
- Activists claim that tourism dollars help fuel government repression directly.
- The government forbids travel to many areas, particularly in areas inhabited by minority groups, due to unrest.

##### Reasons to Go

- The vast majority of locals want you to come.
- Tourism remains one of the few industries accessible by ordinary locals that offers an income and communication with the outside world.
- Human-rights violations are less likely to occur in areas where international visitors are present.
- The government has stopped requiring that foreigners change US\$200 into Burmese notes upon arrival.
- The majority (possibly over 80%) of a careful independent traveller’s expenses goes to the private sector.
- If tourists stop coming, the government may step up the oppression of its people.

the ‘situation has not changed’. That year, Suu Kyi told the BBC that ‘the people of Burma, in general, do not depend on...foreign visitors to bring them information’; instead they obtain knowledge of the international world via incoming radio broadcasts such as BBC, Radio Free Asia and Democratic Voice of Burma.

One of Suu Kyi’s chief concerns of that time was that the country wasn’t ready for tourism because locals, so long isolated and crippled economically, hadn’t ‘had a chance to develop self-confidence’, as she told Alan Clements in *The Voice of Hope* (1997). ‘At such a time it is too easy for young people to grab at foreign ideas and values, simply because they think foreigners are better...and more successful.’

Despite her stance, Suu Kyi has noted the positive side of travel to Myanmar as well. She said during an interview in Yangon in 1995, ‘Visitors to the country can be useful, depending on what they do, or how they go about it.’ But she also expressed concern that tourists who ‘go around in air-conditioned taxis’ don’t see anything that’s going on in the country. She understood that, boycott or not, tourists will come, and even suggested that ‘an alternative guide’ be produced. We found this sentiment echoed to us at Lonely Planet in 2005 by members of the proboycott Open Society Institute’s Burma Project, and the pro-informed (ie protourism) organisation Voices for Burma. The London-based Burma Action Group (now called Burma Campaign UK) actually published *Burma: The Alternative Guide* in tandem with the government’s campaign, but the guide was more a detailed manifesto against any tourism, without any practical information for those who did go.

Some quotes of Myanmar residents presented in this chapter, and throughout the book, are not attributed in order to protect their identity.

## Activist Groups

Many proboycott activists interpret any visitor – whether they are either part of a package-tour group, a backpacker staying in US\$4 guesthouses, or meditating in a monastery – as a symbolic and financial endorsement of the military junta, which built some tourist infrastructure and services off the backs of many locals through forced labour and prison labour. Some estimates put the figure of forced labourers as over one million, though in 2005 Amnesty International reported that forced labour, in general, had decreased over the last decade. Burma Campaign UK states on its website, ‘Nowhere else in the world have human rights abuses and tourism been so closely linked.’ Also the group doubts that travellers can make much of a contribution to the wellbeing of locals, saying only a small percentage of locals ever come in contact with travellers.

### BURMA OR MYANMAR?

While questions are being raised on whether to visit, the very name of the country is another doozy. In 1989 the government changed the official name from the Union of Burma to the Union of Myanmar. The country has in fact been called ‘Myanma’ in local parlance since, at least, the time of Marco Polo in the 13th century. The term ‘Burma’ is a British-made moniker, based on the majority ethnic group, the Bamar (or Burmans or Burmese). Essentially all prodemocracy groups outside the country – as well as the NLD – still call the country Burma. The government, at least on the surface, prefers ‘Myanmar’ because it’s more inclusive of the many ethnic groups. More importantly, it distances the country from the colonial period. At the same time as the country was renamed Myanmar, many town and street names were changed as well (eg Rangoon returned to its precolonial name of Yangon).

In this book we use ‘Myanmar’ for the country (in line with the locals’ usage and preference), and ‘Burmese’ for the language, food and the Bamar people.

Other groups against tourism suggest that the government's restrictions on travel prevent access to trouble spots – places where insurgents fight the military, where forced labour lingers, and where poverty is strongest. Some locals worry that travellers who only see Yangon's Shwedagon Paya will leave thinking the 'whole country is covered in gold'.

Proponents for travel point out that the majority of locals want independent international visitors – and travellers hear this often during hushed conversations in temples, taxis and teashops. Also, protravel advocates point out that the probability of human-rights abuse shrivels in places that foreigners frequent (one activist group suggests that tourists should expand the international influence by focusing on off-the-beaten-track areas). A popular question asked by some, is why antitourism advocates don't include Tibet, Vietnam, Cuba, China (particularly) and even the USA in a boycott. Tibet shares some similarities with Myanmar – though travel in Tibet is actually more restricted – as the Chinese hope to gain legitimacy to their occupation of that country through positive reports from tourists. Tibet's spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, however, encourages travellers to come and interact with the locals there. Canadian writer Karen Connelly took a passive role with Myanmar: 'I just want to write about what I see here. That's all. That will do whatever it can do.' Thai monk Mettanando Bhikkhu believes first-hand accounts can be powerful catalysts for change, as he wrote in the *Bangkok Post* in 2005: 'Tourists to Burma...are natural witnesses to events in that country, the eyes and ears through which the world is able to monitor the kinds of abuse that Tony Blair wants to sanction.'

**'More isolation won't fix the problems and sanctions push us backwards'**

Residents of other impoverished or boycotted nations provide an interesting perspective. A local in Cambodia pleaded with one Lonely Planet author, 'Please don't boycott Burma. We know what that's like. The poor get poorer and the rich keep driving in their fancy cars.' A Romanian filmmaker says that the boycott is a 'no brainer', recalling the days when he craved outside contacts during Ceaucescu's dictatorship in the 1980s.

While most Myanmar people love 'the Lady', many offer varied opinions on the issue. A one-time aide to Suu Kyi, who spent three years in Insein Prison in Yangon, wrote in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* in 1998:

[Suu Kyi's] approach has been highly moral and uncompromising, catching the imagination of the outside world. Unfortunately, it has come at a real price for the rest of us...More isolation won't fix the problems and [business, tourism, aid] sanctions push us backward... We need to be a part of the world.

*Ma Thangeni*

Dr Zarni, the director of the Free Burma Coalition and a one-time proboycott activist, did an about-face in 2003 on this issue. On his online blog, he described the 'absurdity and meaningless of further isolating and punishing the country'. He said, 'We are burning down the barn

#### **THE REGIME'S LINE**

For a fascinating glimpse into the world of propaganda (if not outright self-deception), check out the government's take on Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD. On the 'information sheet' link on [www.myanmar.com](http://www.myanmar.com), there are frequent dicta updated – labelled as 'The Truth' – to see. In their 70-page *Political Situation of Myanmar and the Role of the Region*, available in Yangon, the government defends its motto ('everybody's friend, but nobody's ally') and makes an effort to blame the deaths following the 1988 marches (see p43) on the NLD.

### ACTIVIST WEBSITES

Many groups have websites that outline Myanmar's prodemocracy movement as well as provide details on human-rights abuses sustained since 1988.

- **Amnesty International** ([www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org)) Regular updates on the status of 1300 political prisoners behind bars.
- **Burma Campaign UK** ([www.burmacampaign.org.uk](http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk)) One of the more outspoken proboycott groups, which has written numerous articles.
- **Burma Project** ([www.burmaproject.org](http://www.burmaproject.org)) It is proboycott, but stops short of saying travellers fuel human-rights abuses; its website has many links to other sites.
- **Free Burma Coalition** ([www.freeburmacoalition.org](http://www.freeburmacoalition.org)) Reversed its proboycott stance in 2003; the online blog has many updates and links to Burma-related news and opinions.
- **Voices for Burma** ([www.voicesforburma.org](http://www.voicesforburma.org)) Protourism, with many suggestions on how best to visit.

because we couldn't catch all the mice.' In 2004, Moustache Brothers' leader Lu Zaw told us of his comedy troupe (p241), two-thirds of whom have been imprisoned for political jokes: 'We are alive because of tourists. We want tourists to come. We want a Trojan horse.'

Exiled author Pascal Khoo Thwe, who narrowly escaped the clutches of the army via Thailand following the 1988 demonstrations, told us in 2004, 'I follow the policies of Aung San Suu Kyi, but if travellers feel they can help, they should go...It's been many years; we need people to really work – now – rather than keep arguing [about the boycott]'. Another opinion:

From the point of view of ordinary Myanmar youth, boycott methods don't work any more and they don't affect the dictators much directly.

If the country becomes isolated, can any exiled politician promise that we'll be free?

*Member of the anonymous rap group Myanmar for Future Generations (MFG), 2005*

## TOURISM & THE ECONOMY

### Travellers' Input

Some observers have wondered what makes a bigger impact: the estimated US\$200 spent per backpacker, for example, that feeds mostly into the private sector on a two-week trip, or the US\$65 of this amount that goes to the government through taxes, entry fees and the cost of a visa? It's a difficult conclusion to make. The CIA reports Myanmar's GDP per capita in 2003 was US\$150 per month. The majority of locals are happy to get half that; in 2005 the *Economist* suggested that rural households in Shan State earned no more than US\$400 per year.

Aside from the resource leases, building permits and bribes that are all part of doing business in Myanmar, the government does get some money directly from tourists. For starters, it's US\$20 for a tourist visa, US\$10 for departure tax, plus the 7% tax collected by restaurants, and 10% tax from guesthouses and hotels. Entry fees to some sights and the use of some services (see the list on p23) add more to the pot. One of the 'least ambiguous links' between tourism funding the government, as described by proboycott author Jeff Greenwald, was the requirement that foreigners exchange US\$200 into local currency upon arrival in the country. Fortunately, the government stopped this practice in 2003. Of course, there are some bills to pay too. But sometimes the government

**'If the country becomes isolated, can any exiled politician promise that we'll be free?'**

### TOURISM NUMBERS

- In 1994, 62,000 tourists visited Myanmar (including family visits and business travellers).
- In 2004, 202,000 tourists visited Myanmar.
- About 61% of Myanmar's tourists come from Asian countries (the top four being nationals of Thailand, Taiwan, Japan and China).
- Approximately 34% of Myanmar's tourists travel independently, while 27% come on package tours.
- In 2003, US\$116 million was brought into the country from 'tourism' (US\$17 million more than in 2002).
- About US\$25 million of 2003's tourism revenue came from Western independent and package tourists.
- In general about 12% of the money collected by the private sector from tourism funds the regime, according to the Minister for Hotels & Tourism (source: Altsean, 2003) – this equates to potentially US\$3 million in 2003 (ie 12% of US\$25 million) coming from Western independent and package tourists.

doesn't always get a windfall; insiders have suggested that ticket fares for Myanma Airways are unlikely to cover the government airlines' costs.

Looking at other government sources of revenue as a comparison, tourism is something of a general store among skyscrapers. It's not known exactly what the government receives or spends in total – on foreign investment, tourism, oil and illicit trade (in gems, timber, heroin) across its borders. Myanmar earned US\$655 million in 2003 in gas exports alone (according to *Doing Business in Burma*), and tourism drew US\$116 million in 2003 (including the contributions of nearly two in five visitors who were business travellers or there to visit families). Comparatively, Myanmar is last among Southeast Asian countries in terms of the number of tourists, with roughly half of Laos' draw and 1.4% of Thailand's.

Read [www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?index=991221173&Language=EN](http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?index=991221173&Language=EN) for an overview on how the government's 'tentacles' poke into most facets of the local economy.

### Foreign Businesses

Following Aung San Suu Kyi's third arrest in 2003, the USA and EU enforced full sanctions against Myanmar, prohibiting trade. But – unlike apartheid-era South Africa, which Tony Blair has likened Myanmar to – Myanmar's neighbours didn't follow suit, thus providing 'leaky borders' to the flow of cash and goods. If anyone or anything sustains the government, it's China. Dr Mohan Malik of the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies estimates that China controls 60% of the Myanmar economy; the annual trade exchange is in excess of US\$1 billion. For example, China pumped in US\$200 million to improve Myanmar's infrastructure, not for tourism but with eyes on Myanmar's offshore oil reserves.

Yet sly General Than Shwe played the flirt by making the first Myanmar head-of-state visit to India in 25 years, the *week* after the ousting of pro-China prime minister Khin Nyunt in 2004. A few months later, Myanmar and Bangladesh signed an agreement to build a highway, ultimately to link Yangon with India (with whom Myanmar has already traded half a billion dollars). Thailand, Singapore and Japan are also dollar-sign chums.

Some critics point out that while sanctions against North Korea, Cuba, Haiti and Iraq have hurt these countries' economies – in no instance have sanctions (on their own) changed a regime. Jai Singh summed it up in an article on *Slate* ([www.slate.com](http://www.slate.com)) in 2005, 'We're stuck with Washington and Brussels trying one approach and much of Asia trying the other'.

## GOVERNMENT FEES

### Entry Fees

Many places in Myanmar are free to enter and explore, but some places – including whole towns – require the payment of fees, as dictated by the Ministry of Hotels & Tourism in Yangon or local authorities. But, although fees go directly to the government, the situation is often not black and white; in some places, such as Bagan or Mrauk U, the fees are split with the apparently earnest Department of Archaeology, the only present means of preserving ancient temples and artwork. Here are the main fees:

**Alaungpaya Palace**, Shwebo (K50)

**Amarapura** See Mandalay Archaeological Zone

**Bagan Archaeological Zone** (US\$10)

**Bago sites** (US\$10)

**Chin State** Must take MTT (government) tour; two-day tour US\$300 per person

**Golden Rock**, Kyaiktiyo (US\$6)

**Hpo Win Daung Caves**, near Monywa (US\$2)

**Inle Lake Zone** (US\$3)

**Inwa** See Mandalay Archaeological Zone

**Kachin State Cultural Museum**, Myitkyina (US\$2)

**Khamti** Must take MTT tour; US\$670/920 from Mandalay/Yangon

**Mandalay Archaeological Zone** (US\$10) Includes entry to Inwa and, technically, Amarapura; see p229

**Mingun** (US\$3) Includes Sagaing Hill

**Mogok** Must take MTT tour; US\$300

**Mon Cultural Museum**, Mawlamyine (US\$2)

**Mrauk U** (US\$10)

**Putao** Must pay government fee

**Rakhaing State Cultural Museum**, Sittwe (US\$2)

**Sagaing Hill** (US\$3) Includes Mingun

**Shwedagon Paya**, Yangon (US\$5)

**Taungoo elephant camp** Involves some government fees

**Thanboddhay Paya**, near Monywa (US\$3)

**Thayekhittaya ruins**, near Pyay (US\$4)

**Yangon museums** (US\$2 to US\$5)

**Youqson Kyaung**, Salay (US\$3)

### Services

Apart from the 7% tax on restaurants and 10% on accommodation, the government benefits from each of the following services:

**Beer** Myanmar Beer is a joint-venture operation

**City buses** From K5 a ride

**Golf** Many courses are government controlled

**Inland Water Transport (IWT)** Government ferries

**Internet** As with electricity, post and telephone, the dial-up service is government-controlled; the broadband

Bagan Cybertech was formerly run by Khin Nyunt's son

**Liquor licenses** Require steeper payments than alcohol-free restaurants have to pay

**Myanma Airways** Dodgy domestic airline

**Myanma Railways**

**Myanmar Travel & Tours (MTT)** Government-run tourist information service

**Newspapers** *Myanmar Times* (K500) and *New Light of Myanmar*

**Post & Telephone** All calls and faxes run by Ministry of Post & Telecommunications; international calls of US\$5 or US\$6 per minute

## IF YOU GO

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Don't come in with your camera and take only pictures. We don't need that kind of tourist. Talk to those who want to talk. Let them know of the conditions of your life.

*Pro-NLD Yangon resident, 2004*

**'Don't come in with your camera and take only pictures'**

Lonely Planet suggests that visitors to Myanmar should try to maximise the positive effects of a visit among the general populace, while minimising any financial support of the government. It's pretty clear that, in general, the less you spend, the less goes to the government. If you're used to five-star comfort, consider settling for a little less when you're here. We encourage everyone who goes to Myanmar to be an 'informed tourist' – read at least a couple books about recent events and look deeper into the argument. We do not encourage travellers to use a trip as an outright vehicle for political change, though. Those who have – by handing out leaflets – have been arrested; see p337 for more. We also ask that visitors treat locals with respect and p49 lists some basic do's and don'ts to follow in Myanmar. The following measures outline how best to travel in the country.

### AVOID GOVERNMENT HOTELS

As much as possible, government-run hotels and higher-priced joint-venture hotels are flagged throughout this book. See p332 for more on how hotels work in Myanmar. Here are ways to further help you identify government-run hotels:

- Government hotels are often named after the city or sight (eg Sittway Hotel, Mrauk U Hotel, Kyauktiyo Hotel).
- Private hotels are less likely to have a Myanmar flag flying in front.
- Staff at government hotels are pretty upfront about ownership if you ask.
- Cheaper guesthouses and most midrange hotels are less likely to have government ties than more plush locally run hotels or joint-venture hotels.

### SPREAD YOUR MONEY

Critics of independent travel argue that travellers' spending usually congregates at select places, even if those spots are privately run. Familiarity can be reassuring – such as your trishaw driver buddy, or the plate of noodles that didn't get you sick – but try to mix it up a bit.

- Don't buy all of your needs (bed, taxi, guide, rice) from one source.
- Be conscious that behind-the-scenes commissions are being paid on most things you pay for when in the company of a driver or guide; it doesn't always affect your price, but if all travellers follow the same lead, the benefits only go to a select few; see p321 for an example.
- Minimise expenses that go to foreign-operated businesses.
- Mix up locations where you catch taxis and trishaws – and try to take ones from guys not lingering outside tourist areas.
- Try to eat at different family restaurants; if you're staying at a hotel, eat out often; eg in Ngapali Beach, local restaurants are just across the road from the beach and hotels.
- Either buy handicrafts directly from the artisans, or, if not, don't get all your souvenirs from one private shop.

### WHERE THE MONEY GOES

Travel costs (and other economic transactions) in Myanmar come in many forms. This table gives estimated average breakdowns of how much the government actually gets from each type of traveller. Government taxes such as a visa, fees and a taxes on all purchases have been factored into these figures.

Amount of money	Type of economic input
US\$0	The amount the government receives from potential tourists staying at home and reading about Myanmar
US\$65	The part of a shoestring's US\$250 to US\$275 budget over a two-week trip (sticking with family guesthouses and public buses, and skipping fees at Shwedagon Paya, Bagan and Inle Lake)
US\$85	The part of a shoestring's US\$275 to US\$300 budget, as above, but paying government fees at Shwedagon Paya, Bagan and Inle Lake
US\$150-275	The amount of a traveller's budget of US\$1100 to US\$2000 for a two-week trip that includes using a hired private car and staying at midrange hotels
US\$300-500	The amount for a one-week trip – total budget US\$2500 and up – staying at higher-priced hotels, taking several guided day trips, eating at hotels and taking three domestic flights
US\$450	The part going to the government from a MTT-guided, three-day trip to restricted Chin State from Bagan
US\$500 & up	The amount from a tourist on a seven- to 12-day luxury cruise on the Ayeyarwady – at a cost of US\$3000 to US\$4000
US\$25 million	The total amount spent that reached both the government <i>and</i> private sources, by Western international package-tour and independent tourists in 2003
US\$655 million	The amount the government raked in from natural gas exports in 2003 (source: International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, 2005)

### DON'T COMPROMISE LOCALS

In a country that imprisons its people for disagreeing with the government's line, or sends them to forced labour camps, travellers need to ensure that they don't behave in a way that will lead to locals being compromised in the eyes of the junta.

- Don't raise political questions and issues in inappropriate situations; let a local direct the conversation and don't come out with something like 'did you protest against the government?' anywhere where there are other people – even if you are riding on a trishaw. One exiled person suggested, 'If you have questions for the NLD, don't ask in the country – [the locals] could get imprisoned; try to ask NLD outside Burma.'
- Asking a taxi driver to take you by Aung San Suu Kyi's house or a NLD office could implicate him.
- Exercise care in handing over anything to a local that could carry political overtones (such as the *New Yorker* or the *Economist* or Myanmar-related books).

## DIY VS PACKAGE TOURS

If you want to go, go. I just try to discourage people from taking package tours. Nothing goes to the people. I encourage people to go individually.

*Pascal Khoo Thwe, author of Land of the Green Ghosts, 2004*

### 'I encourage people to go individually'

Presently no tourist gets more criticism from probocoycott and protourism activists than one who goes to Myanmar on a package trip. We're not going to bad-mouth them, but independent travellers are usually able to ensure that less money makes it into the government's pockets. Even if you're looking for ease and comfort – having a ride waiting for you at a bus station or airport, and some confidence in your day's agenda – you *can* do it without a package tour. You'll not only save money, but spread your budget across more people. Many travellers in Myanmar follow roughly the following steps to set up some sort of itinerary.

- Pad the beginning of your trip with a couple of 'research' days in Yangon.
- Stay at a family-owned guesthouse in Yangon, where you can get some good info – but don't depend on them alone for all your needs.
- Visit a few Yangon-based private travel agents (p89) and ask each for a list of good budget or private midrange hotels in Yangon they can recommend, as well as transport options.
- Tell travel agents clearly what you want, including avoiding any services run by the government, and try not to pay all fees up front, but ask to pay directly to hotels and other services.
- Talk with fellow travellers who've used particular travel agents.
- Visit the government-run MTT office for information on listings and costs so you can compare suggested hotels and transport fares with other travel agents, and listings in this guide.
- Consider sleeping with a few less amenities and a bit less style than you would go for in, say, Thailand, because the government is more likely to have its tentacles in upmarket hotels.
- Instead of flying, consider hiring a private driver for all or a portion of your trip; see p365 on tips on finding the right car.

If you simply have to take a package tour of Myanmar, be sure to ask any prospective tour company what it does to minimise the amount of money going into the hands of the government.

## BACK AT HOME

Your trip to Myanmar doesn't end once you're back home. Alert us and fellow travellers via the Thorn Tree discussion board ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) if you've stumbled onto a new or changed government-operated service or have a suggestion on how to minimise money going to the government. Write to your local Myanmar embassy to express your views about the human-rights situation there; see p339 for a list of embassies.