

Burma for beach bums

Come for the temples and pagodas, stay for the paradise seaside of Ngapali



Making waves: pristine Ngapali Beach won't be deserted for long

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I was on a perfect two-mile lick of beach, toes buried in sand as soft as cappuccino froth, looking at a sea that was working its way through various shades of cerulean before melting into the sky. It was also deserted. Because I was in Burma — and who goes to Burma for the beaches?

Answer: me. I did. And I loved them.

Over the past five years, it seems everyone and their mother-in-law has been going to Burma. Hotel rooms in the honeypots are full. The cruise lines can't

send enough ships along the Irrawaddy. If you've not been, you'll probably have friends who've shown you their snaps of Inle Lake, the fairy-tale temples at Bagan or the jewel-encrusted Shwedagon Pagoda in the capital, Rangoon. You should see all of those, of course — it's a long way to go and not do so — but after the culture, be sure to factor in some unexpected seaside R and R.

I'd do it in Ngapali. There are 1,200 miles of beach to choose from in Burma, starting at the southernmost sliver of Bangladesh and swishing through to the Thai border. Backpackers tend to make a beeline for Ngwe Saung, a six-hour drive from Rangoon, but since the 1990s, the city's well-heeled have been weekendening at Ngapali. I took a 50-minute flight.

Ngapali occupies a peachy spot on the Bay of Bengal. By Burmese standards, but not by many others' standards, the resort is built up, with a couple of dozen low-rise hotels, hidden by casuarina and palm trees, and a smattering of souvenir stalls and restaurants strung along the only road. It peters out at Jate Taw, a time-warp village where a strong smell betrays the main industry — fishing.



Pineapple express: roaming sellers will bring fresh fruit to your sunlounger
GETTY

I arrived late afternoon at my hotel, the Amata, dumped my bag and skipped the few steps from my room to the sand for the main event: sundown. To my left was a jungle-clad islet; to my right, a rocky outcrop marked the beach's northern limit. In between, the sky was turning from blue to blush, deepening to lavender scored with cerise and fuchsia.

After dark, I felt perfectly safe strolling on my own to a row of makeshift restaurants set back from the water's edge. I liked the chartreuse deckchairs of the Green Umbrella, so stopped there for a delicious crab curry — for £1.80. Some monks ambled past, taking selfies with iPads: not the sort of tablets I normally associate with holy orders. My waitress was adamant that they must be visiting from Rangoon, as the local monks live a simpler life.

Life is fairly uncomplicated for foreign tourists, too. On the beach, fruit sellers giggle, but wouldn't dream of hassling for sales; the girls offering al fresco massages for £3.50 snooze in the shade, rather than touting for business. Otherwise, you can nod to the farmer taking a shortcut across the sand with his ox cart, or swim and snorkel in warm, clear water.

There are three pagodas up on the mountainside. From the ground, they don't seem much. The best way to see them is through tendrils of early-morning mist on the only must-do excursion: a hot-air-balloon ride. As we floated overhead, mothers stopped tending their babies, kids stopped teasing their piglets and farm workers stopped what they were doing to wave up at us.

Insomniacs couldn't keep their eyes open beyond 10pm in Ngapali. Only the night fishermen see in the small hours. After some mouthwateringly fresh squid and a salad of pickled tea leaves and peanuts laced with chillies at the family-run Min Thu restaurant, I watched their lanterns bob in the blackness.

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**The Burmese drive on the right
in right-hand-drive cars.
Overtaking is an experience**

I turned out the next morning to welcome them home and followed the fish to market, passing dusty lanes of one-room wooden shacks where life is played out on the veranda.

One man in a traditional longyi brushed his teeth, spitting into a bowl; a woman, bark paste on her cheeks as protection against the sun, bathed her baby; another hung out washing.

I met two British charity workers who have lived in Rangoon for years. They assured me, almost teary-eyed, that Ngapali is the old Burma, and an antidote to the rapid change going on elsewhere in the country. While the couple lamented that great tracts of the capital have been bulldozed to make way for “lifestyle shopping malls”, and that security guards were needed when the first KFC opened last summer, they approved of most of the development on the coast. Since democratic reforms began in 2011, the roads have been significantly upgraded. (The motorists, however, have not. They drive right-hand-drive cars on the right-hand-side of the road here. Overtaking is an experience.)

Out at the seaside, mobile phones were notable by their absence, and technology generally is a work in progress. The Amata's receptionist wrinkled her forehead when I asked when the internet might be working again. "Maybe this afternoon? Or tomorrow?" Otherwise, the hotel, set in five acres of lush gardens, was stylish and comfortable, though definitely not five-star. Aung San Suu Kyi stayed in one of its two-storey teak cabanas while on the campaign trail last year, and declared it the best spot on the beach.

The Burmese are incredibly gracious, generous and, right now, full of optimism. Everyone from an entrepreneur recently returned from self-imposed exile in Singapore to gnarled grannies readily declared their love for Suu Kyi. There's always one, though. I asked a boy who his hero was, expecting him to answer: "The Lady." "Jamie Vardy!" he piped up. Burma surprised me to the end.

Susan d'Arcy was a guest of Cleveland Collection, which has two nights in Rangoon, two in Bagan and three in Ngapali from £1,375pp, B&B, including flights and transfers (020 3111 0807, clevelandcollection.co.uk)