

# THE ITINERARY



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### FOLK ON THE WATER

Encounter floating markets and schools while cruising on Myanmar's Inle Lake

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# FOLK ON THE WATER

A CRUISE ON MYANMAR'S INLE LAKE WILL MAKE YOU ENCOUNTER FLOATING MARKETS, PRIMARY SCHOOLS AND EVEN TRAFFIC JAMS **TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHARUKESI RAMADURAI**

It is my first experience with a traffic jam in the middle of a lake. It is late afternoon and life on Inle Lake in eastern Myanmar's Shan State is almost at a standstill. My husband and I are nodding off on the boat, drowsy after a heavy lunch of crunchy, fermented tea leaf salad and rice with green tamarind leaf curry.

All of a sudden, a buzz breaks out over the calm waters of the floating Pauk Par village, as dozens of boats appear out of nowhere, and the air is filled with the excited chatter of children. A primary school—tethered to the water by strong bamboo poles, like the other buildings here—has just closed for the day, and mothers have arrived to fetch their children. Except, instead of school buses or rickshaws, they are all in narrow boats and canoes.

A dozen boats crisscross a tight stretch of lake. Like typical kids anywhere, the students cannot wait to rush home to start playing with their friends. Harried mothers identify their own children from the boisterous crowd and then several others, in a complex system of “boat pooling,” before herding them all into their own craft. For a few minutes, it is a scene of utter chaos on the makeshift school pier, a scene unlike anything I have ever seen.

But then, this cruise on Inle Lake itself is not something I have experienced before. Here, fishermen manoeuvre oars with one leg while standing on their boats, women weave rainbow coloured shawls with lotus fibres in workshops, houses on stilts line the banks, and entire villages including schools, shops, and gardens,

all float on the water. Close to the town of Nyaungshwe, the lake is part of UNESCO's World Network of Biosphere Reserves, and the only way to explore its attractions is by taking a day cruise on an open boat.

I am usually wary of such organised tours, especially if they begin at seven in the morning. However, our guide Aye is a bundle of enthusiasm and strikes the right note when she meets us at the hotel by declaring that we can decide what to see and what to skip. As we glide onto the lake, we are greeted by its most famous residents, the Intha fishermen. They perform an impressive balancing act, standing on their narrow boats on one leg while rowing with the other. This leaves both hands free to fish with their conical nets. Many of them now make a living posing for



Unlike city dwellers, the locals living on Inle Lake use narrow boats and canoes to commute.



The ancient pagodas at Inthein village (top left) have carvings of gods, animals, and the leogryph *chinthé*; The local Intha fishermen regularly perform a delicate balancing act with one leg on their boats (top right); Weaving fabric from lotus stem fibres (bottom) is a craft unique to Inle Lake.

photographs. And why not, given that their movements are nothing less than a graceful ballet on the water.

Our first stop is the village of Inthein, which has a forest of crumbling pagodas, reminiscent of the temple circuit of Siem Reap from several decades ago: untamed and not touristy. The boatman turns away from the main lake and navigates narrow creeks to reach the settlement.

Aye leads us briskly, through a cluster of broken stupas known as Nyaung Ohak. The prize awaiting us at the top of the hill, after much huffing and puffing, is the Shwe Inn Thein Paya, a complex of 1,054 pagodas from the 17th and 18th centuries. The pagodas are in various stages of restoration and the work has been a long-drawn out process. Some have been restored to their former gilded glory, while others are left in a state of ruin. The contrast has us awed and disconcerted in turn.

We float on—is that a post office I see?—until we fetch up at a lotus weaving centre in the village of Inn Paw Khone. I can hear the clackety-clack of looms as I step out of the boat towards the dilapidated buildings. Inside, sunlight pours into spacious rooms through the bamboo slats on the windows. Women of all ages are busy at work, their eyes sharply focussed on the rhythmic movement of the looms. A few of them sit on one side, patiently removing the fine thread of the lotus plant, before weaving them into intricate patterns of fabric. Lotus fibre is unique to this part of Myanmar, as the shallow waters of Inle Lake provide the ideal growing conditions for the plant. The fibres are finer and softer than silk, making it much more expensive. The workshop's gift shop has a stunning collection of scarves, shawls, dresses and the Burmese *longyis*, but for once there is no hard sell.

On our way back to Nyaungshwe, we see the famous floating gardens of Inle Lake, where locals grow fruit and vegetables for everyday use and for the market, which changes location depending on the day of the week. Tomatoes, eggplant, chillies and cheery flowers sway in the mild afternoon breeze, but the rice fields are hidden from sight. These gardens and fields are anchored by bamboo poles and resistant to flooding since they rise and fall with changes in the water level. Dusk falls slowly upon Inle Lake, a signal to the Intha fishermen to return home. We cross a boat with young local girls, with cooling *thanaka* paste on their cheeks to protect them from sunburns, ferrying huge baskets of vegetables. “Mingalaba!” They call out the traditional Burmese greeting and giggle as we wave at them. □



## ESSENTIALS

**Getting There** There are regular flights between major Indian cities and Myanmar's Yangon International airport, with one stop at a Southeast Asian gateway city. Nyaungshwe is the closest town to Inle Lake. From Yangon, visitors can take a bus or taxi to the town (600 km/10 hr north), or fly to Heho airport approx. 30 km/1 hr northwest of Nyaungshwe and then take a taxi to the town.

**Visa** Indian travellers need a tourist visa to travel to Myanmar and can apply for an e-visa ([evisa.moip.gov.mm](http://evisa.moip.gov.mm); single entry; \$50/₹3,220).