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Cities of Myanmar

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Introduction

Myanmar's cities form the vibrant heart of a nation defined by centuries of history, extraordinary cultural diversity, and breathtaking landscapes. From the bustling streets of Yangon to the ancient temple fields of Bagan, and the tranquil highlands of Taunggyi, these urban centers encapsulate both the complex legacy and enduring allure of Myanmar—also known as Burma—at the crossroads of Asia. For centuries, cities in Myanmar have served as royal capitals, mercantile ports, spiritual sanctuaries, and gateways for travelers seeking to understand the country's multifaceted soul.

The evolution of Myanmar's cities mirrors the shifting tides of the country's political fortunes. Dynastic capitals rose and fell, British colonialism radically transformed urban life, and successive governments reimaged urban space—sometimes on a monumental scale, as in Naypyidaw, the modern administrative capital. Yet, amid all this change, the cities have retained a strong sense of identity, shaped by unique religious traditions, ethnic diversity, and architectural heritage.

Visitors to Myanmar's cities encounter a world where gleaming golden stupas stand side by side with colonial-era mansions, crowded markets overflow with the scents and sounds of daily life, and waterways form the arteries of commerce and culture. These urban centers are resilient: despite natural disasters, warfare, and periods of isolation, the cities have continued to adapt and thrive, bearing witness to both tumult and renewal.

Today, Myanmar's cities are home to dynamic communities—Bamar, Mon, Shan, Karen, Kachin, Chinese, Indian, and many others—each contributing their customs, cuisines, languages, and beliefs. This living mosaic animates city streets, temples, mosques, and churches, and lends every destination its distinct rhythms and flavors. Nowhere else in Southeast Asia does the urban environment so vividly reflect the interplay of history and community.

Yet Myanmar's urban development is not without challenges. Rapid population growth, environmental pressures, strained infrastructure, and political unrest test the limits of city planning and governance. Many cities face difficult questions: How to modernize while preserving heritage? How to welcome visitors and new residents yet maintain social harmony and environmental sustainability? How to recover from the scars of conflict and look to the future with hope?

This book invites readers to embark on a journey through the great cities of Myanmar, exploring their past and present, their landmarks and daily lives, their joys and

dilemmas. Whether you are a traveler seeking practical guidance or a curious reader eager to grasp the spirit of Myanmar, "Cities of Myanmar" opens a window into the beating hearts of a remarkable nation.

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CHAPTER ONE: Yangon: The Garden City of the East

Yangon, once known as Rangoon, stands as Myanmar's largest city and its primary commercial and cultural hub. With a population exceeding five million people, it's a bustling metropolis that serves as the country's main gateway, handling over 80% of its foreign commerce. Until 2006, Yangon also held the distinction of being Myanmar's capital before administrative functions were officially relocated to Naypyidaw. Despite this shift, Yangon remains a dynamic and vital center, often referred to as "The Garden City of the East" due to its numerous lakes, expansive parks, and abundant tropical greenery.

The city's origins can be traced back to the early 11th century (c. 1028–1043), when it was founded by the Mon people as a small fishing village named Dagon. Initially centered around the revered Shwedagon Pagoda, Dagon grew into an important pilgrimage town. The Mon people, who inhabited Lower Burma, were instrumental in its early development. Over centuries, Dagon's cultural significance far outstripped its size, even as it remained on the periphery of the more commercially dominant city of Thanlyin (Syriam) across the Yangon River.

In 1755, King Alaungpaya, the founder of the Konbaung dynasty, captured Dagon and renamed it Yangon. The name Yangon is derived from the Burmese words "yan" (enemies) and "koun" (run out of), which collectively translate to "End of Strife." He expanded the settlement, adding areas that would later become some of Yangon's key townships. This marked a pivotal moment in the city's history, transforming it from a pilgrimage town into a significant port city.

The British presence in Yangon began in the 1790s with the establishment of an East India Company factory. However, it was during the 19th century that British influence truly reshaped the city. The British captured Yangon during the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824–26) but returned it after the conflict. Tragically, a fire destroyed much of the city in 1841. It wasn't until the Second Anglo-Burmese War in 1852 that the British permanently seized Yangon and all of Lower Burma, subsequently moving the capital of British Burma from Moulmein (present-day Mawlamyine) to Yangon.

Under British rule, Yangon underwent a radical transformation. The British military engineer Lt. Alexander Fraser designed a new city on a grid plan, bounded by the Pazundaung Creek to the east and the Yangon River to the south and west. This meticulously planned urban layout, with the Sule Pagoda at its center and the Shwedagon Pagoda to the north, was characteristic of British city planning principles. The British constructed extensive infrastructure, including roads, hospitals, and universities, turning Yangon into a thriving commercial and political hub. It was during

this colonial era that Yangon earned its moniker "The Garden City of the East," with its spacious parks, lakes, and a blend of modern buildings and traditional wooden architecture.

By the early 20th century, Yangon boasted public services and infrastructure comparable to London, showcasing the extent of its development under British administration. The city's downtown area became home to the largest collection of colonial-era buildings in Southeast Asia, with over 2,000 properties dating back before 1950. These impressive structures, many with grand ceilings and spacious rooms, reflect the Victorian architectural style and the economic success of the period. Notable examples include the former High Court, the Secretariat buildings, and the iconic Strand Hotel.

Yangon's cosmopolitan past meant that, before World War II, approximately 55% of its 500,000 residents were of Indian or South Asian descent, with only about a third being Bamar (Burman). The remaining population comprised Karens, Chinese, Anglo-Burmese, and various other groups, creating a vibrant melting pot of cultures and religions. Today, Yangon remains a diverse city with significant communities of Indians, Southeast Asian Burmese, and Chinese Burmese individuals, alongside the majority Bamar descent. Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam are the most widely practiced religions, contributing to the city's rich cultural tapestry.

Following Myanmar's independence in 1948, Yangon was designated as the capital of the newly independent nation. Many colonial-era street and park names were changed to more nationalistic Burmese names. However, the military government officially relocated the capital to Naypyidaw in 2005-2006. Despite this, Yangon has remained the economic and commercial powerhouse of Myanmar, serving as a crucial trading hub for all types of merchandise, from foodstuffs to manufactured goods.

The city is a vital center for finance, trade, and logistics, handling a substantial portion of the country's foreign commerce through its main air and sea ports. The Thilawa Special Economic Zone (SEZ), situated 25 kilometers south of Yangon, plays a significant role in attracting investments in light industries and manufacturing, further bolstering the city's economic importance. Yangon's economy is a major contributor to Myanmar's GDP, consistently demonstrating robust growth.

For visitors, Yangon offers a captivating blend of historical grandeur and contemporary life. The Shwedagon Pagoda, a shimmering golden stupa considered Myanmar's national pride and one of Asia's oldest pagodas, is a must-see. Other significant religious sites include the Sule Pagoda, a 2,000-year-old octagonal stupa in the heart of downtown, and the Botataung Pagoda. Beyond the glittering pagodas, the city's colonial-era architecture provides a fascinating glimpse into its past, with walking tours offering a great way to explore these historic lanes.

Yangon's natural beauty, characterized by its clear blue lakes, shady parks, and lush tropical plants, earns it the "Garden City" moniker. Kandawgyi Lake and Inya Lake are popular spots for leisurely strolls and offer breathtaking reflections of the sunset. The Bogyoke Aung San Market, a historic market, is an excellent place to shop for traditional crafts, jewelry, and clothing. Exploring the city on foot allows visitors to fully immerse themselves in the vibrant street life, bustling markets, and the everyday rhythms of Yangon.

Despite its charm and economic vitality, Yangon faces a number of significant urban development challenges. Compared to other major Southeast Asian cities, its infrastructure is often considered inadequate. The city grapples with issues such as road congestion and the growing number of private cars, which contribute to air pollution. Furthermore, Yangon is particularly susceptible to annual flooding during the monsoon season, a problem exacerbated by its original wetland foundation and poorly managed drainage systems.

The preservation of Yangon's extensive colonial-era architecture also presents a complex set of difficulties, encompassing challenges in policy, ownership, technical expertise, and overall management. Many of these historic buildings are in various states of disrepair, and while efforts are being made to protect them, striking a balance between modernization and heritage conservation remains a delicate act. Ensuring access to basic municipal services like 24-hour electricity and regular garbage collection for all residents is another ongoing challenge.

Yangon's transport infrastructure, while comprehensive, is also an area of concern. The city is the hub of Myanmar's railway system, connecting to various destinations, but travel times can be slow and rides bumpy. Buses are the primary mode of transportation within the city, though the system continues to evolve to meet the demands of a growing population. The Yangon International Airport serves as the main international gateway, linking the city to the rest of the world.

In essence, Yangon is a city of intriguing contrasts—ancient pagodas stand amidst decaying colonial grandeur, bustling markets thrive alongside tranquil lakes, and a rich cultural heritage coexists with the pressures of modern urban development. It is a city that continues to evolve, constantly balancing its past with the aspirations of its future, making it a compelling destination for anyone seeking to understand the heart of Myanmar.

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