



Sittwe & Mrauk U

Highlights

Located on an island in the combined deltas of three rivers, Sittwe is the state capital of Rakhine and a historical hub for marine transportation at the locus of the geographical

and ethnic divide between Bengal and mainland Southeast Asia.

The road trip north from Sittwe follows the sealed road around the maze of tidal creeks in the lower Kaladan Valley, passing old historical sites on the way.

The main destination is Mrauk U, a small market town set amid the archaeological heritage of a once great Buddhist capital that dominated the region and rivaled the capitals of central Myanmar in the 16–17th centuries.

About this Guide

This guide is designed to make self-drive touring in Myanmar easier and must be used together with an online navigation application—though we recommend Google Maps® in general, Maps.me using OpenStreetMap data also provides useful information for the Sittwe area. This guide uses Google Maps® spelling conventions for names and distances, but actual distances from those shown in this guide may vary (\pm) by 2.5kms depending on starting point.

Tip: Google Maps is not always as up-to-date as their satellite imagery. Revert to the satellite view for road networks when such is missing from maps, or try Maps.me.

Use media such as Lonely Planet's Myanmar guide or Travelfish.org, or hire a guide for detailed information—this guide only lists sights. Suggestions for restaurants, hotels (upscale USD75+ /mid-range USD30–60+) are given on pages 3 & 5.

Before You Arrive & Drive

Valid Driver's License

To legally drive in Myanmar, you must have a valid international driver's permit or ASEAN driver's license.

Smart Phone and Navigation Application

Your smart phone should be preloaded with Google Maps® or other navigation applications.

Myanmar Sim Card

Getting a Myanmar sim card on arrival (essential for Google Maps®) is recommended—wifi in mid-range hotels is often inoperable. MPT coverage is good.

Removable Device Holder

Bring a detachable holder suitable to attach your device to the windscreen for driver's ease of vision and minimal distraction from the road.

Contents/Planning Your Drive

Average journey speeds will be reasonable on the main highway, which, except for where the road continues to be upgraded in the vicinity of Kyauktaw, is a new two-lane concrete highway for much of the distance. Away from the main road, however, road conditions are likely to make travel slow.

The \pm 140-kilometer drive to Mrauk-U need only take around 3–4 hours, but it will take longer if visiting places along the route. Kyauktaw is a typical market town similar in size to Mrauk-U, but without the historical heritage and hills in close proximity.

Obtaining a copy of “**Mrauk – U A Guide: An Ancient City of Rakhine, Myanmar**” by Tun Shwe Khine (M.A.), 1992 is essential for in-depth sightseeing (available with illustrations on scribd.com or as a text only file on archive.org). A freely accessible but far less detailed online guide for sites all around Mrauk U is at: <http://mrauku.blogspot.com/2015/08/mrauk-u.html>

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Warning! Police roadblocks on minor side roads may prevent access to “sensitive places” in the Sittwe–Mrauk U area.

Driving in Myanmar

All Yomacarshare rental vehicles are left-hand drive (right-hand shift) for **driving on the right** in Myanmar.

Traffic Speeds are relatively slow. Myanmar drivers are usually polite and often give way, especially outside of major cities like Yangon and Mandalay.

Due to old policy, more than 80 percent of vehicles are right-hand drive vehicles. This may contribute to uncertainty and greater caution. Approach intersections and circles cautiously and you will get through.

Lane discipline approaching intersections is strict. Drivers do not enter empty left-turn lanes and then cut back in—they may pass on the inside (right side)!

Sealed main roads are generally good, but uneven road surfaces and abrupt gradient changes are common—do not drive faster than the speed limit of 100 kph! Narrow one-lane provincial highways require extra care; drivers must slow and put offside wheels on the hard shoulder to pass oncoming traffic!

Tolls are common on Myanmar's roads and usually vary from MMK 200–1000+. Keep plenty of small notes of Myanmar currency to hand in your vehicle.

Night Driving should be avoided since unlit vehicles and other hazards raise the accident risk factor.

Gas Stations: Please only top up your tank at new gas stations near large towns. These are less likely to serve contaminated fuel from old storage tanks that can lead to a breakdown of your vehicle!

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Section 1

Sittwe

Sittwe's status as the capital of Rakhine State is due to its strategic maritime location in an area where an entrepôt between the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia had served trading vessels since the times they used to sail near the coast rather than across the open seas of the Bay of Bengal.

Historical sources refer to it as Akyab, but the importance of Sittwe's present location during the height of Mrauk-U's influence in the 16-17th centuries, when Ponnagyun to the north may have served as the base for the Arakan Kingdom's then considerable fleet, is uncertain.

After the first Anglo-Burmese War in 1826, it became an administrative headquarters in then British Lower Burma and an important port of commerce for coastal and river traffic north along the Lemro, Kaladan and Mayu rivers. In recent times, ethnic and racial issues that have long bedeviled the region have compromised the city's history.

Sittwe's location has made towns like Pauktaw and the increasingly important port of Kyaukpyu to the southwest much more easily reached by boat than by journeys on land. With the failure to construct a bridge carrying an otherwise completed rail link to Kyauktaw over the main channel that creates the island upon which Sittwe stands, the city's connection to the manland is by a single road. Unsurprisingly, water-borne means of transport remain important.

Sittwe's **downtown market** is next to the port area and along the town's two main roads. The population of less than 200,000 has not encouraged the growth of big retail stores. Shops in the city are small, many being little more than stalls under the common roof of the central market. This and the fish and rice markets immediately to the north of the port are the centers of commercial activity—wander through the fish market onto the pier to see the small boats crowding the pier and beach (not recreational) to the north.

The **Rakhine State Cultural Museum** is within walking distance of the market and is adjacent to the Jama mosque (built in 1859 but closed since 2012). The museum provides a useful introduction to Mrauk-U. The surrounding area contains most of the city's hotels as well as trees where its famed fruit bats hang.

A car becomes useful to go to places outside this central downtown area. The main street south of the

city goes around two kilometers to the city's **recreational beach** and point with a sunset view. The beach is well suited for a stroll around sunset followed by a visit to local restaurants near the Royal Sittwe Resort.

The remaining places to visit in Sittwe are **Buddhist sites** on the main road out of town north—the **Lawkananda Pagoda** and a **Buddhist Museum** (see Section 2).

Dining & Overnight in Sittwe

Most restaurants likely to offer a pleasant meal are located on ShuKhin Tha Street, the road along the waterfront south of the general hospital. The **River Valley Restaurant** is the most established of 3–4 places along this road.

This guide recommends but two upper mid-range hotels (USD 50+)—the **Memory Hotel**, which has restaurant on its top (fifth) floor that serves a good breakfast (by the standards of Myanmar's mid-range hotels), or the **Strand Hotel** nearby. Both are within walking distance of the central market area and the restaurants of ShuKhin Tha Street (\pm 1 km).

Another possibility for a meal is the **Global Restaurant**, which has an English menu and is among the local restaurants at the back of the beach by the Royal Sittwe Resort. The pricier **Royal Sittwe Resort** has a beach location and large rooms, but the latter do not look as modern as those in the hotels suggested above.

Section 2

Sittwe – Mrauk-U (\pm 140 kms)

The road out of Sittwe is wide and good, becoming for most of its length a recently upgraded two-lane concrete road. Views along the route consist of low hills to one side, and prospects over the villages and paddy of the Kaladan River delta to distant hills on the other. Going up to pagodas atop low hills to get panoramic views should be rewarding.

The route includes two narrow road-rail bridges (trains are very infrequent) and at least one narrow wooden bridge yet to be upgraded. There may be roadworks in the vicinity of Kyauktaw.

00 kms: New Clocktower circle, Main Rd., Sittwe

\pm 1 km: **Lawkananda Paya**

The cavernous interior is a cool space for students from the nearby university, who sit in small groups

and study. Those who study English or other languages may be grateful for an opportunity to talk with foreign visitors.

- ± 2 kms: **Maka Kuthala Kyaungdawgyi Museum**
This contains an eclectic mix of colonial and Buddhist artefacts in an old colonial-era building.
- ± 2 kms: T-junction: turn left for **Sittwe Airport**
± 700m to the airport parking area
- ± 3 kms: **Gas stations**
Top up your tank here before dropping your car on departure.
- ± 3–4 kms: **Police Checkpoint**
Be ready to show passport and car documents (the police seldom check driving licenses) at the police checkpoint if requested.
- ± 19.5 kms: Junction
The highway turns sharply northeast; the minor road continues to a ferry station.
- ± 24 kms: high bridge over channel
- ± 28 kms: Junction—minor lane east
Access to the start of the railway to Kyauktaw
- ± 34.5 kms: Junction—**Uritetaung Pagoda**
A road goes northwest, passing the entrance to the pagoda (± 3.5 kms). Situated on a low hill, the pagoda should be a good viewpoint over the delta.
- ± 35.5 kms: Road-rail bridge
- ± 37 kms: **Ponnagyun**
- ± 48 kms: Yeoya Village
The road skirts several villages on the route north.
- ± 72 kms: Railway crossing
- ± 80 kms: Z bend and pass over a low ridge
- ± 85 kms: Railway crossing
- ± 86 kms: Apaukwa
- ± 91 kms: Road-rail bridge
- ± 99 kms: Junction: **Kyauktaw**
The main road goes east to cross the Kaladan River on a high bridge—bear left to visit Kyauktaw.
- ± 100 kms: **Kyauktaw Mountain Pagoda**

Kyauktaw Pagoda (± 1 km)

Turn left onto a side road ± 300m from the bridge, drive round the southwest foot of the hill and then up on the sealed road to a car park on a lower terrace north of the pagoda. Vendors sell food for the roaming macaques at the foot of the

covered stairway from the car park—be wary of the macaques grabbing things!

This site also appears to be the **Salagiri Hill** archaeological site referred to by Tun Shwe Khine.

- ± 109 kms: the road turns south around **Mahamuni Mahamuni Pagoda**

Located at the northeast corner of the former royal palace of an early principality known as Dhanyawaddy, the Pagoda is on one of Myanmar's oldest Buddhist sites. A Buddha image said to be a likeness of the Buddha himself is thought to have resided at this site since it was cast in antiquity. The image was taken by King Bodawpaya back to his capital near present-day Mandalay when he captured Mrauk U in 1785. Bodawpaya also took the Khmer bronzes that the Arakanese themselves had taken from Pegu in 1599.

The main Kyauktaw image appears to be a Rakhine crowned image, but the small stone image to the right appears to be more highly revered. Its provenance may date back earlier than the 2nd or 3rd centuries C.E.

- ± 123 kms: **Lim Mhwe Taung Pagoda**
- ± 129 kms: Narrow bridge near Tein Nyo
- ± 133 kms: Junction - east to **Vesali** (Vaisali)

Vesali

The founding of Vesali predates that of Mrauk U by around 1000 years. By the junction with the minor road to the two villages inside the old perimeter (the latter is clearly seen on satellite imagery) are the reconstructed foundations of a gate similar to those found in ancient Pyu sites. The northern village straddles the site of the old palace. According to Than Shwe Khine, ruins are found at several places, but a guide may only take you to the Great Vesali Image and a collection of standing figures reminiscent of Vedic gods. The entire site has a pleasant rural ambience.

- ± 137 kms: junction for **Tin Gauk Taw Pagoda**
Located on the hill (± 1800m from the highway), the pagoda is the site of a festival usually held in December according to the lunar month. The minor road is the southern exit from Vesali.
- ± 145 kms: north turn to main historical area (± 200m) of **Mrauk U**

Section 3

Mrauk U

Mrauk-U is a fascinating place. Sometimes referred to as Mrohaung (in Burmese, the latter is said without the final 'ng' being voiced), it straddles the southern tip of a narrow north-south line of ridges in a location difficult to reach by land due to a maze of creeks and rivers—at first glance it might seem an unlikely site for a once great capital.

Tidal creeks made the site accessible to shipping while providing protection, and the steep ridges formed natural walls around a small valley. This led to the resurgent Rakhine (Arakan) King Naramekhla choosing the site for his capital around 1429.

Modern Mrauk U's market area and commercial streets are wedged between waterways and the site of the former royal palace. To the north of the market, there are pleasant residential streets where a couple of restaurants and most hotels are located.

The Portuguese missionary Sebastien Manrique, who stayed in Mrauk U in the 1630s (reproduced in Tun Shwe Khine cited on page 2), described the city as follows: “the greater number of its streets [were] navigable for different kinds of craft, big and small, the vehicular service, public and private, depending mostly on these.”

The **Mrauk U Archaeological Museum** in the grounds of the former palace may or may not be open; otherwise the site of the former palace consists of an open ground surrounded by walls.

Though historical sites surround the town within the fortifications that used to protect it, the main religious sites and the heart of the sightseeing area is less than a kilometer to the north of the market.

Foremost of the religious sites are the **Shittaung Paya**, and the **Andaw Thein**, **Htukkan Thein** and **Lay Myet Hna** Pagodas, which are within easy walking distance of each other. The ridges to the east of these temples are where visitors congregate for the iconic sunset view of pagodas amid misty surrounds.

Of the sites outside the main ones within the core-fortified area, the **Koe Thaung Pagoda** east of the town is foremost. It is reached by a rough, unsealed road that is slowly being upgraded (by hand).

Though lanes in the main areas visited by tourists are sealed and smooth, a comfortable air-conditioned vehicle is most useful, especially to venture to any of the more peripheral sites within the ancient fortified area or beyond.

Visitors wanting to take a serious look at Mrauk U must obtain Tun Shwe Khine's written guide, which has detailed historical and archaeological information (and illustrations) for sites within and beyond the core area (for sightseeing in local villages, organizing a local guide through your hotel is recommended).

Dining & Overnight in Mrauk U

Mrauk U is fairly small and does not have many restaurants. The **Happy Garden** and **Moe Cherry Restaurants**, and possibly the **Shan Noodle Tea Shop**, are the first to try.

Most of the hotels are within a few hundred meters of the market and Shittaung Pagoda. Of the mid-market hotels, the **Mrauk U Hotel** and the **Mrauk U Palace Hotel** offer fair value, good locations and reasonable parking. The **Prince** is also recommended as a pleasant, family-run hotel.

Alone and far above the rest in terms of facilities and price is the **Mrauk U Princess Resort**. It has a pool seemingly floating in a lotus pond and rooms in individual lodges with Myanmar-style tiered roofs—the walk-in rate is more than USD 200. The approach by road is on poorly graded unsealed lanes through a suburb south of the market.

Around Mrauk U

East to Koe Thaung and the Lemro River (± 7 kms)

Immediately before the main road south crosses the river to the east of the market, the unsealed Koe Thaung Hpaya road goes 1500m to a fork junction by the Peisi (Pisai) Taung. The left fork goes 250m to Koe Thaung and then another five kilometers on a concrete lane to a village and boat landing on the Lemro River. The south fork takes an unsealed route of similar length to another jetty for boat trips to Chin villages upstream on the Lemro.

Boat Trips to Chin Villages

A ± 3-hour-boat trip up the Lemro is a pleasant way to get to Chin Villages. These are home to women older than 50 years who were born when tattooing faces was still the custom in their community. The

return journey takes most of the day but also allows sufficient time for visits to Koe Thaung and other sites to the east. Boat trips must be organized through a guide or your hotel in advance.

South to Minbya (± 34 kms)

Few tourists go farther south of Mrauk U than a few local villages where guides will introduce people involved in betel nut production from Areca palms.

The main road south goes via Myaung Bwey to a junction (± 28kms, unsealed in villages), where the coastal highway to An and Taungup turns sharply south to a bridge across the Lemro. The two-lane concrete surface south beyond the bridge extends for ± 20 kilometers before reverting to a narrow sealed road with uneven surfaces and frequent potholes.

Continue west (straight) at the junction for Minbya (± 34 kms from Mrauk U), a less-visited small market town on a creek. The pagoda on the hill provides another viewpoint overlooking the town and surrounds. The road south to Pauktaw (± 64 kms) may not be in good condition due to the latter's proximity across water to Sittwe.

Happy & safe driving!

Rakhine (Arakan) before 1826

Prior to Mranma migrations across the Rakhine Yoma from around the 10th century, the Arakanese are thought to have been similar to the people of Bengal. Considered to be Mranma people today, the people of Rakhine have a noticeable Indian genetic heritage.

Arakanese chronicles suggest a principality known as Dhanyawaddy existed from more or less the time of the Buddha in the sixth century B.C.E, but while polities of some kind had probably long existed in the area, archaeological and epigraphic evidence does not predate the middle of the 4th century C.E., when the Buddhist state known as Vaisali was the capital—Buddhism was established in Arakan long before it reached the interior of Myanmar. Vaisali had trading and political relations with both the Pyu in the Ayeyarwaddy basin and with kingdoms in Bengal.

King Anawrahta of the Bagan dynasty conquered the kingdom in the mid-11th but left its hereditary kings to rule as vassals. When Mongols invaded Bagan in

1283, Arakanese kings enjoyed independence until 1404, when a king of Ava retaliated for an Arakan raid into central Myanmar, forcing the Arakanese king into exile in Bengal. Around 1428, this king reclaimed his throne with the aid of a Bengali king, and then founded Mrauk U around 1430.

Subject to frequent raids, the Arakanese became skilled in marine warfare, in which Portuguese freebooters ably assisted by helping them raid neighbors in turn.

A high rainfall that facilitated fresh water storage in areas penetrated by tidal creeks allowed sufficient rice to be grown both for export and to support the population and manpower necessary for warfare.

Mrauk U's favorable trading situation attracted a cosmopolitan population that included Dutch, Japanese, Muslims and Portuguese. By the 17th century, Mrauk U's reputation was that of a golden Buddhist capital

Yet its wealth was partly built on the slave trade. Mrauk U's regular slave raids into Bengal—they exported slaves and rice to the Dutch in Batavia—were to anger the Mughals. In 1663, the Mughal's failed in an attempt to rescue three royal Muslim hostages held in Mrauk U. This incited Mrauk U's king to execute his hostages and slaughter many Bengalis and Muslims in his capital.

When Portuguese helping Arakan's fleet switched sides in 1666, Mughal forces destroyed Mrauk U's fleet, initiating a long, slow decline in Mrauk U's power. Though Arakanese raiding continued periodically, internal strife weakened the kingdom. In 1785, King Bodawpaya's forces captured Mrauk U, forcing half its people to flee into Bengal (now Bangladesh).

Bodawpaya military ambitions were to clash with those of British India, eventually leading to the first Anglo-Burmese war in 1825, and the absorption of lower Myanmar and Rakhine as a British colony.

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