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Should tourists
return to Myanmar?

Ruled by the world's last military junta, Myanmar is shunned by both governments and tourists. Yet its people are crying out for contact. What's the ethical traveler to do?

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Above: A fly lands on the face of an illegal immigrant child from Myanmar. Below: The view from the Mingalarzedi Pagoda in Bagan, Myanmar. Bagan, once the capital of the first Myanmar Kingdom, is home to over 2,500 Buddhist monuments built between the 10th and 14th centuries.

PHOTOS: REUTERS AND APF

ON the boat to Mandalay the same thoughts kept turning in my mind. The red orb of a full moon appeared, casting streaks of gold across the placid water of the Irrawaddy river, but even this beauty failed to displace the questions that haunted our two-week stay earlier this month. Why were we in Myanmar? Was our trip giving comfort to the country's military dictatorship, by common consent one of the world's worst regimes?

Myanmar never has been a popular destination, and after the bloody suppression of the monks' protests in September 2007 and the government's delay in helping hundreds of thousands who lost everything in Cyclone Nargis the following May, the tourist trickle almost dried up. Only 47,161 people came from Europe last year, mainly from France and Germany, making Myanmar the country least visited by British people anywhere in Asia (with the exception of North Korea).

So was our party of visitors wrong to buck the trend? Not if you go by the number of people who eagerly approached us to practice their English and, after a tentative start, wanted to say what they thought of their rulers. "They're mad," one driver told us as he steered his creaking banger past a crush of Chinese bicycles and motorbikes, the commonest form of transport on Myanmar's rutted roads.

In decades of reporting I have generally stuck to journalism's rule number one: don't quote taxi drivers. But in a few places (Manhattan, Havana, and now Myanmar) you meet such a variety of characters forced to earn a living behind the wheel that their opinions offer a broad range of views. This driver had trained as a computer engineer before serving in a Myanmar embassy in a Western country. "Life is not improving here," he said. "Most people don't like the government. We have no legislative body. We have no democracy." (Apologies for breaking journalism's rule number two: don't use anonymous quotes if they are pejorative. In Myanmar, critical sources deserve protection.)

Another driver was making political comments within five minutes of our hiring him from Yangon airport into town. Asked if it was our first trip to Burma, I said yes, and then added, "I see you call it Burma." "Burma good name, Myanmar new name," he replied mischievously.

The one good thing he found to say of the regime was that it had allowed English to be taught again in primary schools. "For a time they stopped it. The army doesn't like English, but now it's OK again."

That certainly seemed to be true. Yangon's main shopping street is brimming with cramped bookshops, full of English grammar and vocabulary manuals. Similar titles were

laid out on the pavements alongside food stalls and fruit-drink stands.

Myanmar is multi-ethnic and, until the military coup of 1962, was open to the world. For decades its elite spoke good English and even today most people in Yangon and Mandalay have a smattering. Keenness for contact with foreigners is strong, for its own sake and as resistance to enforced isolation.

Of course, some friendliness is commercially driven. Vendors with bright smiles and the chat-up line "Where are you from?" can turn into leeches at some sites. But genuine curiosity is more common. In the hour before sunset, when tourists routinely climb the thousand or more steps to Mandalay Hill, young monks emerge to engage in conversation, especially delighted to meet someone who speaks "real English."

The regime itself uses English for a few publications. Who buys them is hard to say, except perhaps the diplomatic community. They offer a dreary diet of ministerial visits to new hydroelectric projects, with the one benefit of reminding you that Myanmar is the last country in the world ruled by a military junta: the minister for information is a brigadier-general; the minister for construction is a major-general. More bizarrely, so too is the minister for culture.

One copy of the government-owned newspaper *New Light of Myanmar* that I picked up showed the ministers of culture of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam at a recent conference. In full military dress and medals, Myanmar's minister looked eccentric beside his three conventionally suited counterparts.

The junta wants to shed its anachronistic image. Elections announced for this year are intended to give the regime a civilian face, of a sort anyway. The new constitution provides for a presidential system with 14 regional governments. Sizeable blocks of seats will be reserved for the army, and the commander-in-chief will have extraordinary powers. Aung San Suu Kyi, the icon of the opposition National League for Democracy — which won the last elections in 1990 but was prevented from taking office — is of course still under house arrest. But even if she were not, this new constitution bars her from standing for president. The poll will be tightly controlled in other ways and opposition groups are unlikely to have much room to campaign, although election regulations have not yet been finalized.

While people's willingness to give foreigners their opinions was the biggest surprise of our trip, the amount of access people have to dissenting views also ran counter to our preconceived picture. The BBC's Burmese radio service is widely heard. An Oslo-based exile TV station, the Democratic Voice of Burma, can be picked up by satellites that are easily available. Yangon

and Mandalay have numerous Internet cafes, which are invariably full. When I clicked on the BBC Web site in Burmese it came up promptly.

To resist this, the regime makes the feeblest of propaganda efforts. For a flavor, take the instructions that appear under the bizarre headline *The People's Desire* in newspapers and on occasional roadside hoardings: 1. Oppose those relying on External Elements, acting as stooges, holding negative views; 2. Oppose those trying to jeopardize the stability of the state and national progress; 3. Oppose foreign nations interfering in the internal affairs of the state; 4. Crush all internal and external destructive elements as the common enemy.

The fourth of these points encapsulates the junta's preferred strategy for handling criticism — repression. The country has around 2,100 political prisoners, including many of the monks who led the 2007 street protests from Yangon's majestic Shwedagon Pagoda. Dozens were shot and killed during those protests, and public assembly is still severely restricted. The authorities are so determined to prevent crowds gathering that they have even fenced off a corner of the vast concourse, full of minor temples and Buddha statues, that surrounds the Shwedagon's golden stupa in Yangon. This corner contains a monument to student demonstrators killed by the British in 1920, and the regime wants no parallels drawn or flowers placed in memory of more recent deaths.

Where there are faint signs of hope for Myanmar is in the aid field. Thanks to an international boycott, Myanmar receives less help than any other country in the world. This is one reason for the catastrophic rates of infant mortality and child malnutrition. But in recent months Western governments have started to think again, since the denial of assistance hits only Myanmar's poorest. Foreign donors are stepping up development aid on top of the emergency grants supplied after Cyclone Nargis, which left an estimated 140,000 dead or missing.

The junta's initial reaction to the cyclone was to refuse international help. It carried on with a referendum on the new constitution, as though Nargis had not happened. This further blackened its image. But under pressure from governments in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the junta changed its line and international aid agency officials now say the regime has been working well with the UN and ASEAN in agreeing programs, priorities and relief projects, and allowing donor money to reach people. Foreign aid workers get permits to enter the affected areas in the Irrawaddy delta. Big Western non-governmental organizations such as Oxfam and Save the Children are well-established in Myanmar, with a network of local staff.

As tourists, we were allowed to spend a day in Twante, one cyclone-affected area about 30km out of Yangon. A driver whom we found independently invited us home to lunch where his wife and other women relatives were feeding two-dozen monks, a gesture the family makes about twice a year, he said. The temples played a key role in collecting clothes, food and money for cyclone victims. Private companies funded the rebuilding of many houses and schools.

After the disaster, Burmese students and other young people poured into the area to help. Some were so moved that they later set up aid projects and small NGOs without government obstruction, we were told. As a result, according to a Western aid worker who travels regularly to Myanmar, Cyclone Nargis has resulted in a broadening of independent civil society activity.

Optimists argue that the institutional changes enshrined in the new constitution will also enlarge the space for progress. There may be a clampdown in advance of the poll, one observer said, but the fact that the country will have legislative bodies at national and local levels for the first time in more than a generation gives scope for wider debate. The International Crisis Group, which often reflects the views of the liberal wing of the Western diplomatic elite, takes a similar line. "Even assuming that the intention of the regime is to consolidate military rule rather than begin a transition away from it, such processes often lead in unexpected directions," it wrote in an analysis of the pre-election scene.

The group suggests Western governments suspend their travel bans on junta members, resume normal contact and push the message that political prisoners must be released and election campaigning be allowed to go ahead freely. The Obama administration has also announced a shift in US policy on Myanmar towards engagement rather than isolation, though without specifying any concrete steps.

According to articles on the online opposition Web site *Irrawaddy*, Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy, is involved in a tough internal debate over whether to take part in the elections. It might back certain candidates even if, as is assumed, it is barred from competing in its own right. Taking part would allow the party's supporters to revive their networks and contacts.

Meanwhile, the Western investment boycott has left the field open to Chinese companies. They are especially visible in Mandalay, which has a large mall called the Great Wall Shopping Center. "People respect the Chinese — they think they're cleverer than Burmese," said a young man who studied briefly in another ASEAN country. "They don't like Indians because Indians were the main agents of the

British occupation. But the Chinese are taking over. They're close to the regime. Each side helps the other. It's like a mafia," he added.

Back, then, to the nagging question: should we have toured a country with so bad a regime and such little prospect of improvement? This young man had no doubt. "Bring in tourists who can spread the word from the outside world and also tell people in their own countries about Burma," he said.

In Britain, the Burma Campaign UK criticizes tourism and investment and publishes a "dirty list" of firms that do business with Myanmar. This includes travel companies as well as the Lonely Planet guidebooks. The campaign's Web site contains a December 2002 quote from Suu Kyi: "We have not yet come to the point where we encourage people to come to Burma as tourists."

Two other exile lobbies, Voices for Burma and Free Burma Coalition, which used to support a tourism boycott now take the opposite view. Voices for Burma also enlists Suu Kyi, though its sourcing is flimsy. Its Web site says: "According to a close acquaintance, not yet identified but reportedly from her party, the National League of Democracy, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has been quoted as saying that travel to her country can now be encouraged, provided arrangements are made through private organizations. She now believes that tourism might be beneficial, should the result of the visit draw attention to the oppression of the people by the military junta."

While favoring engagement, Voices for Burma and the Free Burma Coalition urge tourists to do as much as possible to help private Burmese citizens and not put money in the government's pocket, and in fact it is possible to do so now as a tourist. Some fees, such as the entrance ticket for the ruined city of Bagan, the visa charge and airport departure tax, cannot be escaped. But in 2003 the government dropped the requirement that every tourist change US\$200 at an official exchange place. Instead of going on a package tour company that inevitably has contacts with the government, visitors can travel on their own by picking one of the many family-owned Burmese travel agents that work from tiny offices in Yangon. You make your arrangements either on the spot or by e-mail in advance. There are also numerous family-owned guesthouses and restaurants and thousands of private souvenir-makers and sellers. Thanks to the Web, details of how to plan your trip are readily available.

The big decision is whether to go at all. No one should imagine tourism is automatically going to make Myanmar a better place. But can anyone credibly argue the tourism boycott has made it better either?

