

Novice monks at Shwe  
Han Thar Monastery.  
OPPOSITE: Sanda Muni  
Phara Gri Kyaung Taik  
monastery and temple.

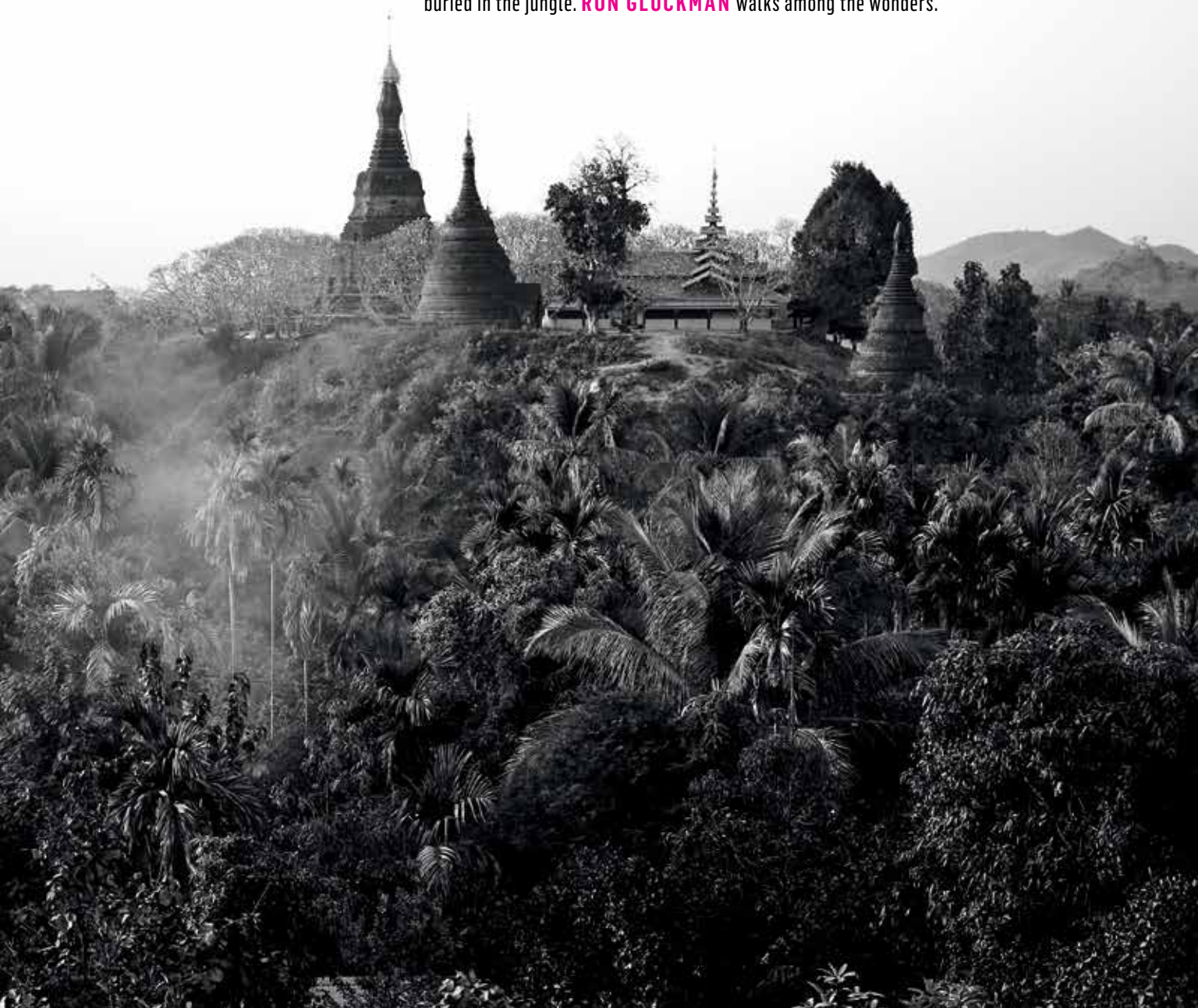




PHOTOGRAPHED BY **JONATHAN POZNIAK**

# *Secret Kingdom*

Far in northwestern Burma was the ancient civilization of Mrauk-U, filled with majestic temples and a little-known history still buried in the jungle. **RON GLUCKMAN** walks among the wonders.







CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: River prawns are a Rakhine staple; carvings at Koe Thauang Temple; an astrologer's book at Mahamuni Buddha Temple in Kyauktaw Township; Mrauk U Princess Resort; a fisherman with his haul on the Lay Myo River; Shitthaung Temple; Sanda Muni Phara Gri Kyaung Taik.







# FIRST VIEWS OF MRAUK-U HAVE A MIRAGE-LIKE

quality, whether the brown stone pagodas and bell-shaped stupas gradually materialize from the mist as you boat up the murky Kaladan River, or pop up suddenly like unexpected treasure in a jungle clearing, after one bounces wearily along the new road from Sittwe in northwestern Burma. Either way, dozens of breathtaking relics pack a lush riverside valley, with more monuments dotting hillsides in every direction, marking this as one of Southeast Asia's great ancient kingdoms.

Burma's Bagan, to the east, and Cambodia's Angkor are older and more famous, but Mrauk-U has immense Indiana Jones appeal, crumbling temples and unexplored mounds abounding for kilometers around this lost city. And there are massive bragging rights for the fewer than 5,000 foreign visitors who ramble to this remote site in Rakhine State each year. With more than two million tourists annually, Angkor sees more visitors on an average day.

Photographer Jonathan Pozniak and I have magical Mrauk-U mainly to ourselves, except for giggling, resplendently robed novices who share sunrises at hilltop monasteries, stray cows, locals pumping water from public wells and students in crisp uniforms cycling home from class—all unaffected by the evocative monuments surrounding them.

Borobudur may be more elegant, Angkor Wat more immense, but nowhere in decades of travel around Asia have I encountered such an eclectic array of ancient temples. There are many quixotic creations, like Htukkanthein, a bulky complex of bell-shaped stupas set atop what looks more like a fortress than religious structure. Scant excavation has been done, but some estimate as many as 700 ancient structures remain around Mrauk-U, most unexplored. We hike to forlorn pagodas atop grassy hilltops that seem untouched in centuries, guarded by stone dogs and other animals.

**MOST VISITORS START AT MRAUK-U'S** northern group, which has the most structures, including Shitthaung, a true tour de force layered with several terraces. On the first sits a row of stately bell stupas, identically precise, like carved chess pieces, each taller than a man, composed of tonnes of stone. Higher above are even larger stupas, surrounding Shitthaung's centerpiece, a gorgeous pagoda also bell-shaped but topped with the complex's sole spire, pointing skyward. Shitthaung





***It's **ethereal**, more  
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Koe Thauung stupas.  
OPPOSITE: A Chin woman  
in Panpoung village, with  
traditional face tattoos.





(built in 1535) is perched on a hill overlooking the major plain at Mrauk-U, and its back wall boasts exquisite arch cutouts, today perfect for framing pictures of the valley and temples below. We could spend hours marveling at the architecture.

But don't forget that Shitthaung means not only "Temple of Victory," but also "Temple of 80,000 Buddha Images." Inside are chamber after chamber of beautiful Buddha renderings, set in niches above meticulously detailed stonework. After spending hours in this artistically designed complex, Jonathan has shot hundreds of pictures, and we happily compare images of what we agree must be an unrivaled architectural gem.

And then we reach distant Koe Thaung Temple. The name—"Temple of 90,000 Buddha Images"—says it all, almost in an ancient one-upmanship of devotion. Alone, at the end of flat, dusty track, Koe Thaung (built a few years later in 1553) looks fort-like at first view, a massive building layered with terraces, atop rows of stone columns. Moving closer, we discover the columns are rings of hundreds of Buddhist stupas. There is only one large pagoda on this imposing structure, but inside is a treasure trove: Buddha images in every size and grouping.

How fleeting are our affections. Shitthaung is quickly upstaged. I like Koe Thaung's inner chambers, a series of idyllic stone gardens. Sculptures, each carved with fascinating facial details, sit in niches, moldy greenery adding a timeless quality. Sunlight flickers atmospherically from above: locals say there were formerly nine terraces, but they collapsed over the centuries from the weight of all the statues. I'm so mesmerized by the stone heads that at first I miss how even the walls are carved: hand-chiseled stone wallpaper of images of Buddha. It's ethereal; more so considering it's totally deserted, except for us, and the man carving stone statues outside. That's another Mrauk-U marvel—only one trinket vendor in sight.

Mrauk-U can seem desolate, but in a special way, and rarely for long. As we depart, a motorbike pulls up: a young couple hops off, and snaps selfies. A workman slowly ambles past, long pipe wobbling on his shoulder. Behind him appears a woman, basket of vegetables on her head. Returning to the main temple area, we pass rice fields, blazing green amid yellowing grass and baked orange clay roads. Then Jonathan dashes off to photograph wrestlers practicing Kyun, a sport unique to Rakhine state. A bit like sumo or Mongolian wrestling, it's celebrated in a big yearly festival, and Kyun figures can be seen on ancient carvings at some Mrauk-U temples.

That's another wonderful contrast to abandoned sites like Burma's iconic Bagan, with its sprawling mass of temples. Mrauk-U is not only more compact, but bounded by villages. And, while the majesty of Mrauk-U may have been buried for centuries, life has returned, even as the mysteries remain.

**THOSE MYSTERIES ARE ENORMOUS.** During its heyday 500 years ago, Mrauk-U had a navy of 10,000 small, fast boats that dominated the Bay of Bengal coast to

Chittagong in Bangladesh, and down to Tenasserim in southeastern Burma. A major trading port, Mrauk-U welcomed dignitaries from Europe, employing entire battalions of Japanese and Portuguese mercenaries. One of the world's great cities in its prime, Mrauk-U's stately temples, intricate stone carvings and evocative architecture put it on a map of regional capitals like Bagan, Ayutthaya and Angkor.

All rose to greatness, but were eventually sacked or abandoned. Yet only Mrauk-U vanished with virtually no trace, and little record.

"It's an amazing story," says Jacques Leider, a renowned Burma scholar and one of the world's few experts on Mrauk-U. "In the first millennium, we see remains north of Mrauk-U: coins, carvings, very sophisticated items. People were living there, and nobody really knows who they were.

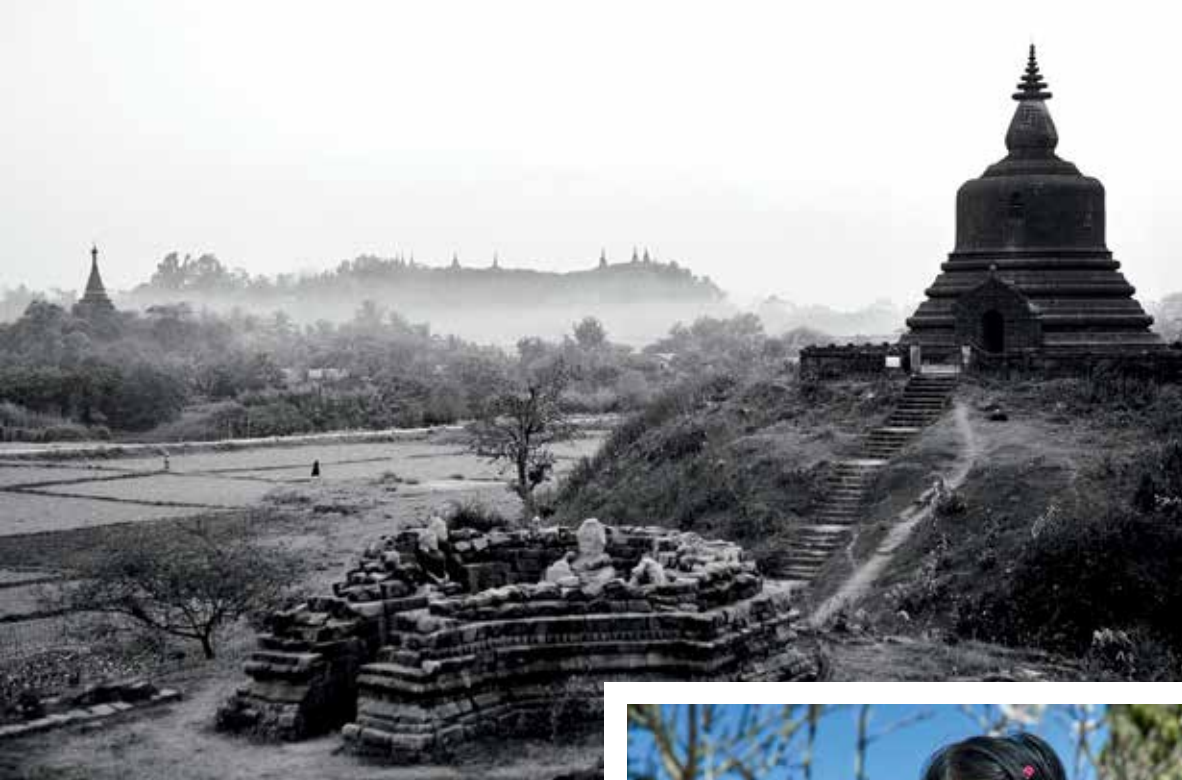
"There has been no major archeological work done in Mrauk-U," adds Leider, from the French Institute of Asian Studies in Rangoon. "It's like taking a spoon and scratching the surface. There is so much to be done."

Rectifying and redefining Mrauk-U's role in the region has been on the agenda of a wide range of local heritage advocates, national officials, and academics, but restoring Mrauk-U to glory has been a convoluted process. Despite official policy to promote tourism, Mrauk-U has more often than not been closed to visitors in the two decades since it first opened to tourism. My own effort to visit Mrauk-U had been stymied for years, though not always because of government restrictions. Riots and mass burning of Muslim villages became headline news in 2012—many called it genocide. Yet ethnic conflict in this turbulent region predates Burma's independence. While fighting has never spilled over to Mrauk-U, in August the conflict flared up again in Rakhine state.

To further complicate matters, as I found in my visit, there is little agreement among officials, academics and local heritage groups







CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Myatazaung Pagoda; girls at the Guwa Temple of carved Buddhas; Mrauk U Princess Resort; fishing is a family affair on the Lay Myo River; blue eggs at Mrauk-U Central Market.





about exactly what form the promotion of Mrauk-U should take, or even the genuine storyline of its incredible history. All of this only adds to the allure.

Left in ruins and rubble, and covered by jungle, the site sat abandoned until its rediscovery in the 1960s, according to guide and local historian Kyaw Hla Maung. Although 62 years old, he wears his hair shoulder length, sports tank tops, and is greeted by everyone like a local rock star. So, it's no surprise that when he meets us in the Rakhine capital of Sittwe, he says: "Call me Rocky."

Like most around Mrauk-U, he proudly proclaims himself an Arakanese. These are the people who populated the kingdom that included Mrauk-U, along with a variety of even older sites going back thousands of years more. They trace their origins to Dhanyawadi, an early Arakan kingdom that dates to 3500 B.C. Near Mrauk-U, it had brick walls and a wide moat, parts of which remain visible. Legend says Buddha visited around 554 B.C., and the defining Arakanese treasure is the Mahamuni. Arakan King Sanda Thuriya had an image cast of Buddha—among only five reportedly made in Buddha's lifetime. Two are in India, two supposedly in paradise, and the last was moved to Mandalay.

This could be a parable for the uneasy relationship between the Arakanese and the ruling Burmese. The Arakanese represent perhaps 5 to 6 percent of Burma's population, and complain about a lack of recognition for their history and culture. Local heritage groups decry the poor preservation at Mrauk-U, and being shut out of the process. "This area is filled with history, but there has

been little study and excavation," says Than Myint of the Mrauk-U Heritage Trust. "And what little restoration has been done includes so many mistakes."

Daw Khin Than, a curator, and wife of the former head of the local government archeology department, says contractors with no supervision simply slapped concrete on temples, altering architectural integrity. "There has been so much damage by people with no knowledge," she says. "There are so many things in Mrauk-U to show the world: not just the temples, but ancient city walls, and moats. We could dig it up, if they let us." The ethnic issue unquestionably stymies progress. "The government doesn't support us."

**THE STORY OF UNIFIED BURMA,** and a grand civilization centered around ancient cities like Bagan, is challenged by a different kingdom that actually outlasted Bagan. And the Arakanese not only built grand Buddhist temples, but also forged a prosperous multi-ethnic society that included Indian Muslims and Christian traders.

We visit a couple sites that, half-a-millennium ago, hosted large European settlements. Little remains at Daingri Phet, the former port, but Bhaung Dwat still has stone walls where the Dutch had offices and a large settlement in the 1600s. Few visit the ruins, and likewise Vesali, where a magnificent Buddha image from the year 329 sits only six kilometers from Mrauk-U.

Around Mrauk-U are numerous attractions, most hosting even fewer visitors than the temples. One popular daytrip is a boating expedition to Chin villages. One of the major ethnic groups in Burma, the Chin are famous for women sporting massive earrings, and tattoos, often covering their faces. The explanations vary from protecting local women, of renowned beauty, from being stolen away, to avoiding incestuous liaisons.

These days, few women opt for the traditional tattoos, but several old-timers pose for pictures in a village where weaving is also sold.

## ***Legend says Buddha visited in 554 B.C.***



Wrestlers outside  
Lay Myet Hna pagoda





Early morning on the Kaladan River.

Much of it seems incongruously designed for tourists, but the journey itself is worth the price of passage, on a long-tail boat that slowly winds upriver through bustling villages where life remains unquestionably authentic.

We keep passing long lines of connected bamboo rafts, and I speculate on what they are transporting. All seem empty. Rocky solves the riddle: “They have wood underneath, in the river. They are taking it to building sites, but if the government doesn’t see it, they cannot tax it.” These don’t fit the profile of pirates. Everyone we pass is uniformly friendly, eager to engage. As we putter alongside a pair of shirtless men, for example, one reaches into his boat and pulls up huge river prawns, posing proudly for photos.

“This is definitely a highlight of the entire trip,” says Dave, a visitor from Sydney who we meet in a Chin village. “I’ve been to Burma many times before, but it’s so

nice to get away from the tourists and see how people live.” Moving beyond the well-trod tourist track of Rangoon-Mandalay-Bagan is a major appeal of Mrauk-U, says Gerben Bloemendaal, managing director of destination management company ASIA DMC Myanmar. The company offers a variety of trips that include Mrauk-U, from private boat tours to a grueling eight-day trek from Bagan. “Most people are looking to do something different,” he says.

Reaching this majestic, mythical kingdom represents a personal milestone for me, the culmination of a nearly five-year quest exploring the long coast of Burma. Much of the journey was along wonderful stretches of beach and unvisited islands, in the first months after travel restrictions were being lifted. After 25 years of travel around this remarkable country, I found it refreshing to visit so many places untouched by tourism, where the local welcome was as boisterous as on my first visits, but Mrauk-U was still off-limits at the time.

We watch our last sunset from a hilltop, and as golden light sweeps over the temples, shadows lengthen and shift, as do my questions. I’m reminded of those first views of Mrauk-U, filled with disbelief as the intriguing stupas emerged from the mist. Even after touring this mesmerizing site, I feel the myths remain buried like treasure, just waiting for the time to reveal all. +

## THE DETAILS

### GETTING THERE

An airport has been planned for Mrauk-U, but for now the only option is to fly first to Sittwe, via one of a half-dozen daily flights from Rangoon. From Sittwe’s dock, boats leave daily at 7 a.m. for the seven-to-10-hour river journey. The cheap public boats are atmospheric with intriguing insights and aromas of local life, but they are rickety, so you might want to splurge for one of the private wooden boats provided by travel agencies. Travel agents can also arrange pickup service from the airport, and it’s now only three hours by the new road from Sittwe all the way to Mrauk-U.

Most visitors to Burma require a visa, which can be obtained in advance from embassies or through travel agencies. As part of the recent reforms, Burma now offers reliable **online visa service** ([evisa.moip.gov.mm](http://evisa.moip.gov.mm)), with approval generally given within one to two days.

### HOTEL

Tourist facilities are basic in Mrauk-U, with one sumptuous exception: **Mrauk U Princess Resort**. A member of the Secret Retreats collection, two-dozen spacious wooden villas are set around a lotus-filled lake. The resort offers packages that include pickup from Sittwe (by

private boat or vehicle), touring and pack lunches for the temples. The restaurant is fantastic; go off-menu and ask the Shan chef to whip up spicy Shan specialties. [mraukuprincess.com](http://mraukuprincess.com); villas from US\$240.

### TOUR

**Sens Asia Myanmar**, a bespoke-tour company with offices around Asia, arranged this trip. The package included pickup from Sittwe; guided service around the temples by Rocky; side trips to the old Dutch settlement and other ancient towns; and the boat trip to the Chin village. [sensasia.com](http://sensasia.com); a three-day tour is US\$350 per person based on a two-person booking.