



# The lady on the lake

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“It is not surprising to think while riding out to the lake: “Does it even exist?” The marshes and wetland that surround the lake blend into the edges when you look at it from afar. “Surely I should be able to see it!” And then as you come around a final corner, there it is in all of its glory

If there is a ‘holiday’ destination in Myanmar, Inle Lake is it. Situated southeast of Mandalay, it sits among winding narrow roads that fall away to one side, almost stopping your heart as you look out the bus window. The scenery is green and the hills are rolling, and at the centre of it all is the famous lake.

Staying in Nyaungshwe to the north of the lake was a bit like living in the Wild West, with horse carts, wide dusty streets and little wooden tables and chairs on the pavement. The pub on the main street is like something out of a Clint Eastwood movie, with the men smoking, chewing tobacco and staring at the strange foreign woman sitting in the corner looking out of place.

Still, the town is more set up for tourists than most of Myanmar, with guest houses able to organise almost anything you need. And unlike many other more ‘developed’ Asian destinations, haggling is still barely existent in this country. Why say a price if it’s not the real price? Why indeed.

In addition to the lake, most visitors are keen to see the five day market. Because the size of the lake makes it difficult for residents of the area to get to a market, the market instead comes to them.

Moving every day, the market folk take their produce and wares from town to town, including hosting a floating market at one of the locations.

But the lake is what the tourists all come to see. It is imposing in its presence – 21km long and 10km wide. Surrounded on two sides by mountains and countless little villages, it is almost postcard perfect. The



downside is that it isn’t within easy walking distance from Nyaungshwe, meaning no lolling around lakeside watching the world float by.

To really experience just how big this lake is, you need to get out onto the water. A five-seater longtail style boat will set you back around US\$18 (B570) for the day, and will take you to all the main sights.

During both morning or afternoon there is a steady stream of traffic in both directions. Boats carry sacks and crates of produce almost spilling over the sides, most with tomatoes as more than 80 per cent of Myanmar’s tomatoes are grown here. Women sit under umbrellas to shield them from the harsh sun, and men sit on the bow gazing out across the water.

And then of course there are the famous one-legged rowers, making their way across the lake with one legged wrapped around an oar. They make it seem effortless as they kick their leg out, yet it must take years of practice to perfect the technique.

Added to the scenery are the local fishermen who smack the water with an oar to bring the fish to the surface, enabling them to be caught. At one point during our trip, two fishermen swimming in the lake stood up in unison to move their conical nets, just like synchronised swimmers. The perfect photo opportunity if you are quick enough.

Most boat trips will take you to some great sights, with a little bit of shopping thrown in along the way.

If you don’t feel like shopping, the guide is more than happy to skip it – something that would be unheard of in Phuket and other Asian destinations.

The lake feels as huge as it looks, taking more than an hour to get to Insein (also known as Inthein) the location of old ruins.

Situated in the south of the lake, it is only accessible by a small canal.

It almost feels like you need to duck down in your seat as the reeds hit the side of the boat along the way, then the canal opens up to reveal a village on stilts complete with shops and a school.

The ruins themselves are beginning to be reclaimed by the forest, but at the top of the hill is a huge area of reconstructed pagodas of all shapes and colours, and great views down to the lake.

If you want to take in the beauty of the surrounds up close, then biking is the best option. Bear in mind that the roads around parts of the lake may just jar every bone in your body while you do it.

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Unless you are a keen cyclist the lake is too big to cycle the whole way around. It’s best to put your bike on a boat and cross to the other side and then head to the winery. Yes, a winery!

Red Mountain may not be the most famous brand around, but it is one of only two Myanmar wineries and a welcome relief from drinking cheap bottled brews.

The view from the top of the mountain means you can easily spend a couple of hours here soaking it all up. The view that is! Although as they say, when in Rome...

Hayley Mill was a former volunteer with Phuket charity Phuket Has Been Good To Us. She is now travelling throughout the world collecting adventures. She writes a travel blog at [mshayleyj.blogspot.com](http://mshayleyj.blogspot.com)



Clockwise from top: men out on Inle Lake; traversing the water with bikes on board; farmer out walking his water buffalo; produce for sale at the market.