

EMPOWERING YANGON

Experiences | Yangon



OVERVIEW

With strained coffers and an urgent need to invest more into the country's public services, healthcare and education systems, Myanmar's government is unable to spend as much as it would ideally like on matters such as social welfare reform, recycling and gender inequality. Not wanting to rely on handouts and keen to grip the reins of their own future, we're now witnessing the rise of some extraordinarily smart entrepreneurs, many of whom have chosen to invest their brains, time and money into establishing equally generous social enterprise projects. With the aim of giving you a small taste of this phenomenon, and to ensure your money goes towards a good cause, this leisurely full day tour focuses on visiting a small number of these social businesses and meeting with some of the fascinating individuals behind them.



PACE

Easy going



TOUR PERIOD

Full day



HIGHLIGHTS

- Take the ferry across to Dala and get a true sense of suburban Yangon life.
- Learn about how one company is turning rubbish collected from Yangon's streets into recycled crafts.
- Shop at Hla Day, an organisation that works with disadvantaged groups and small local businesses (such as Chu Chu) to design, develop and sell quality handmade products with a contemporary twist.
- Eat lunch at Linkage, a training school where street and marginalised youth are trained to become chefs.
- Shop at Pomelo, another small enterprise helping to bring socially beneficial arts and crafts to market.
- Walk two blocks to the Yuwaddy Centre, a community centre that provides vocational training and employment to underprivileged women from / in the post conflict areas of Thandaungyi.
- Drive to Flame Tree Weaving, a social business based in Bahan that trains disadvantaged women and street kids in the art of sewing.



ITINERARY IN DETAIL

Meet with your guide in the lobby of your accommodation at approximately 09:00 this morning; the later the better as we ideally want to avoid rush hour. We'll then drive to Pansodan ferry terminal in time for the next ferry departure to Dala. Bustling with thousands of river commuters from dawn until dusk, a visit here's a great way to experience a side of Yangon very few international travellers get to see.

Despite the township being a stone's throw away from Yangon's bustling downtown hub, Dala is still largely rural and undeveloped; this is due to it only being accessible by ferry, or a two-hour car journey. There are plans to build a USD168 million cross-river bridge, which the government hopes to complete by 2021; when this happens, the township's likely to urbanise rapidly.

Once across the river, the guide will flag down a tuk tuk (or rickshaw) driver who'll speed us away to Chu Chu's workshop; hidden on a quiet residential street, this has been partially constructed using plastic bottles and old car tyres. Chu Chu, which got its name from the Myanmar word for a plastic bag, is a social enterprise venture set up by Cesvi, an Italian NGO keen to find treasure in the heaps of trash that litter Yangon's alleys and gutters. By upcycling this discarded material and turning it into colourful crafts, the business aims not only to clean up the streets, but also to provide training, employment and a regular source of income to the otherwise disadvantaged families involved.

As per Chu Chu's website, "Production is family based, allowing an integrated work approach. Each family takes the responsibility for the production of specific items and shares the tasks between members or additional employees. Families are then selling their items through Chu Chu, with every family being part of a decision-making board."

With the majority of Chu Chu's workers residing in Dala, any purchase made here, whether it's a wallet, beach bag, pencil case, or wine bottle cover, will directly benefit the families in question and help to reduce the amount of plastic that ends up in Yangon's landfill sites.

To boost their market reach, Chu Chu works closely with non-profit organisations such as Hla Day and Pomelo, both of whom have outlets in downtown Yangon. More than just providing a sustainable market place in which Chu Chu and similar local producers can sell their products, these businesses also offer skills training and creative design input. We'll head back over the river to explore these shortly, but before we do, it's worth using the tuk tuk (or rickshaw) to quickly explore some of Dala's highlights. As you'll be sure to notice, the undeveloped southern suburb has spent most of the modern era chronically overlooked by politicians and city planners; this'll be sure to change with the installation of the aforementioned cross-river bridge.

Returning back across the river, pay a visit to Hla Day, where it won't take you long to find some of Chu Chu's colourful upcycled plastic items on display; these have long dominated the social enterprise's floor and shelf space. You may be surprised to see the notable jump in price, but please remember that any profit Hla Day make is constantly reinvested back into their suppliers, many of whom are struggling to overcome disability, exclusion and poverty. Some of our favourite items on sale here, excluding the items made by Chu Chu, are the paper mache Myanmar dinosaurs, Turquoise Mountain jewellery (an NGO founded by HRH the Prince of Wales), the nativity set handcrafted by a Buddhist potter and multi-coloured neckties made using a range of ethnic longyi (sarong) materials.

For lunch, we'd like to recommend you eat lunch at Linkage training restaurant. This cosy little eatery, which also doubles up as an art gallery, sits on the first floor of a narrow, crowded and gaudy looking downtown apartment block; we understand the description of that's unlikely to whet anyone's appetite, but we promise the food will more than make up for it. Serving a mixture of Chinese and Burmese cuisine, the restaurant's run by a non-governmental volunteer group that provides training to street kids to boost their chances of finding employment in the country's burgeoning hospitality industry.

NOTE: This is a recommendation only and the price of lunch is not included.

Next, we will visit Pomelo, a Fair-Trade marketplace similar to Hla Day, stocked with the products of the same and some different suppliers. Keep an eye out for the reclaimed teak candle holders crafted by former street children trained in traditional carpentry and the handmade soap fashioned and scented by refugee women in Kachin State.

From Pomelo, we'll then walk or drive a couple of blocks to the Yuwaddy Centre on Bogalay Zay Street. Set up by the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), this small social business provides training and employment for underprivileged women in the post conflict areas of Thandaungyi in Karen State. The products the ladies in question craft can be found inside the small shop; these range from pots of honey, freshly ground coffee, fashionable drawstring bags and hand-stitched bracelets. Schedule permitting, during your time here, we'll also try to arrange a meeting with one of the ladies in charge; this'll provide you with the opportunity to ask questions about the business and learn more about where any profit made goes.

Before leaving Bogalay Zay Street, we'd recommend taking a quick look inside the YWCA building next door. Well over a century old, it is still today one of Myanmar's leading organisations to help advance the development of women and disadvantaged in society. Projects throughout the country include child labour protection, home care for senior people and mobile clinics for AIDS patients. But Yangon YWCA is perhaps best known for its excellent vocational training courses that provide fundamental skills for women to progress in the workplace such as computer, sewing, flower arrangement and business administration.

Leaving the crowded and packed nature of downtown Yangon behind, we'll then drive 30-minutes north to Flame Tree Weaving, our final stop of the day. Founded by Sabrina, a bubbly, bright and extremely ambitious entrepreneur, this socially responsible business teaches unemployed and disadvantaged women (of all ages) the art of sewing. Between them, the close-knit team has designed and tailored a successful line of traditional cushions, purses, placemats, jewellery, bags and children's clothing. Seeing as Flame Tree work exclusively with Pomelo, there's a good chance you will be familiar with most of the stock already.

To give you a better understanding of Flame Tree's core values, along with the challenges and rewards associated with running a grass roots business such as this, we'll try to arrange a meeting with Sabrina herself.

NOTE: We don't want to get in the way of Sabrina's work, so we cannot guarantee the opportunity to meet. It will be entirely dependent on the entrepreneur's schedule.

Having said your goodbyes to the Flame Tree team, make your way back to your accommodation, or a place of your choosing.

To finish the day in style, you may wish to consider making a dinner reservation at Shwe Sa Bwe. Founded by Francois Stoupan in early 2013, Shwe Sa Bwe is a hotel and restaurant training centre which aims to provide training to financially disadvantaged Myanmar youth looking to pursue a career in the country's fast-growing hospitality industry. The restaurant setting is small and intimate, the service first-class and all of the ingredients used are of the freshest and finest quality. Don't let the fact it's a training centre put you off; Shwe Sa Bwe is more than capable of going head to head with some of Yangon's most popular fine dining establishments in a taste off.

NOTE: Taking a local taxi will be the most cost-effective way of reaching Shwe Sa Bwe, alternatively you may wish to book a private transfer through Tour Mandalay.



INCLUSIONS

- Transportation to/from hotel in an air-conditioned vehicle
- English speaking tour guide (for other languages, please enquire)
- Dala ferry
- Drinking water and hand towel



EXCLUSIONS

- Any meals



NOTES

- We'll try our best to arrange meetings with the featured entrepreneurs, but this will be entirely dependent on their schedules. They all have important jobs to do and we do not want to get in the way.
- Lunch at Linkage is not included. This is a reservation only and you of course have the option to change.
- Dinner at Shwe Sa Bwe is a recommendation only.
- Should you require a private transfer for Shwe Sa Bwe, please be sure to inform Tour Mandalay in advance.

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