

# Myanmar

Britannica Elementary Article

## Introduction



Flag of Myanmar



The instrumental version of the national anthem of Myanmar.

The south-eastern Asian nation of Myanmar is known for its strong Buddhist culture. Once called Burma, Myanmar was ruled by Britain from 1885 to 1948. For much of the period after gaining independence, the country has been controlled by strict military governments. For many years the capital was Yangon (Rangoon). In 2006, however, the government moved the capital north to Naypyidaw, a site near the town of Pyinmana.

## Geography

Myanmar is bordered to the south and south-west by the Bay of Bengal, the Gulf of Martaban and the Andaman Sea. Bangladesh and part of India are to the north-west. China, Laos and Thailand lie from north to south on the eastern border. The southern portion of the country is a long, narrow strip of land that runs down the Malay Peninsula.

Myanmar is a mountainous country. The Kumon Range in the north contains the country's highest peak, Mount Hkakabo at 5,881 metres (19,296 feet). The western part of the country consists of a series of lower mountain ranges. Eastern Myanmar is covered by the Shan Plateau, where some peaks rise higher than 2,600 metres (8,500 feet). Lying between the Shan Plateau and the western mountains are the central lowlands. In this region is the densely populated, fertile deltas of the Ayeyarwady (Irrawaddy) and Sittang rivers. Myanmar has a tropical climate. Most of the country receives heavy rainfall, almost all in summer.

## Plants and Animals

Forests cover about half of Myanmar. Evergreen rainforests are common in the regions where rainfall is greatest. Areas with less rainfall have forests made up of trees that lose their leaves during the dry season. Teak is the best known of these trees.

Animal life is plentiful in Myanmar. The rainforests support a variety of birds, snakes

and mammals such as gibbons and monkeys. Tigers and elephants are important though endangered animals. Bears live in the hills.

## People and Culture

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People known as Burmans make up the majority of the population in Myanmar. The country's other ethnic groups include the Shan, Karen, Rakhine, Mon, Chin and Kachin. Many Indian and Chinese people also live in Myanmar. Burmese is the official language, but minority groups have their own languages.



Ruins of ancient Buddhist temples stand in Bagan (or Pagan), a city in central Myanmar.

Most of the people of Myanmar practise Buddhism. The religion is reflected throughout the country's culture. Myanmar is especially well known for its beautiful Buddhist temples and monasteries.

Myanmar is a land of villages. Almost three quarters of the people live in rural areas. The country's few large cities include Yangon (Rangoon), Mandalay and Moulmein.

## Economy

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Myanmar is a poor country. About two thirds of the workforce is employed in agriculture. The main crop is rice. Sugarcane, pulses, peanuts (groundnuts), corn (maize) and cotton are also grown. Cattle, pigs, goats, buffalo and poultry are kept as livestock. Fishing is important as a source of both food and exports. Teak and other hardwoods are also exported.

Industry is only a small part of Myanmar's economy. Cement, processed foods and fertiliser are among the main manufactured goods. Myanmar has rich mineral deposits, including copper, lead, tin, tungsten, silver, jade and gemstones. Oil and natural gas are also produced.

## History

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People have lived in the Myanmar region for thousands of years. About 2,000 years ago a group of people known as the Pyu began establishing cities in the north. To the south lived the Mon people. In the 800s the Burmans developed a powerful kingdom centred on the city of Pagan in the central part of the country. By the mid-1000s the Burman ruler Anawrahta had united much of what is now Myanmar into a single kingdom. The kingdom became a centre of Buddhist culture. An invasion by the Mongols led to the breakup of the kingdom in the 1200s.

## British Control

In the mid-1700s a king named Alaungpaya united Myanmar once again. When the kingdom tried to expand, it came into conflict with the British, who ruled India at the time. In the 1800s Britain and Myanmar fought three wars known as the

Anglo-Burmese Wars. In 1885 Britain took control of the whole region. From 1886 to 1937 the British governed it as a province of India. They called the province Burma.

The Japanese occupied Burma during World War II. After Japan was defeated in 1945, Burma returned to British rule. Britain granted Burma independence in 1948.

## Independence

Military officers seized control of Burma in 1962. The general behind the military takeover, Ne Win, became the country's leader. He brought most of the economy under the government's control. He also encouraged the development of industry. His policies were unsuccessful. By the late 1980s Burma was one of the world's poorest countries.

These problems led to protests against the government. The military stopped the protests with force. In 1988, however, Ne Win resigned from office. The next year the government changed the country's name from Burma to Myanmar. The change was an attempt to quiet protests by ethnic groups other than the majority Burmans. Political parties opposed to the government won elections in 1990, but the army refused to hand over power. Struggles between the military government and opposition groups continued through the 1990s and into the 21st century. In 2006 the government decided to create a new capital city. The new capital is about halfway between Yangon and the second largest city of the country, Mandalay.

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