

Responsible Tourism

The message for tourists and visitors to any country could be similar to that given to physicians: “Do no harm”, and that admonition can be taken several steps further with this one: “Always be on your best behavior.” Too often, travelers take the definition of ‘holiday’ to mean freedom from restrictions; do what you like since nobody will stop you. This attitude is not only irresponsible – it can be very dangerous.

In almost every situation where tourists have gotten a bad name for themselves and their native country, it’s a result of the group mentality. British and American tourists are both unfortunately ranked in the “obnoxious” category, but every nationality is guilty, it seems, when they go about in large numbers and behave as if they own the territory. Ignoring the local customs and traditions is rude and non-productive. Be considerate, keep an open mind and make your travel experience a pleasure for yourself and your host.

The first thing you should do when planning a trip to another country is a little research. Find out as much as possible about the area you intend to visit, even if your stay will only be for a few days. The more you know about the lifestyle and culture, the more you’ll enjoy the experience. Learn at least a few phrases including ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ in the language of the country, and use them – the results will be amazingly gratifying.

There are many things you should consider to make your presence in the country a positive factor for the local economy and environment. Try to use a booking agency that uses local personnel and offers training programs for this purpose. Once you reach your destination, opt for public transport, try hiring a bicycle, or walk instead of always heading for the nearest Avis or Hertz. You’ll be contributing to the local economy *and* the air quality, plus you will have more opportunities to meet and get to know the residents.

Observe the local laws and regulations at least as carefully as you do at home. Waste disposal is a major problem and expense in many countries, so leave any new packaging material for recycling before you leave home, and of course *never* be a litterbug. Along these lines, you should also be conservative with resources such as water and electricity. Bring your own water bottles and refill them with boiled water; don’t keep buying new bottles. Help preserve the environment; don’t pick the flowers or smash the coral; don’t disturb the wildlife.

When you go shopping, look for locally made products for your own use and for souvenirs, but be very careful not to purchase those made from an endangered species or otherwise illegal source. Check out the official restrictions and prohibitions in the area and keep them firmly in mind, or you could easily wind up in trouble with customs and/or local authorities.

A few notes on drugs: drug trafficking is now a major problem world wide, and the penalties for even accidental involvement are severe to extreme. If you need to take prescription drugs, keep the doctor's prescription with your other identifying documents. Do not carry packages for someone you don't know, never leave luggage unattended and *never* try to purchase illegal drugs – you could be looking at imprisonment and in some cases a death penalty. It's not worth it, ever.

Travel is meant to be a rewarding experience, and that includes much more than seeing the sights and enjoying the climate. Getting the most from your travels means learning something about different cultures and traditions, interacting with the local population, broadening your 'world view' and hopefully leaving behind nothing more or less than a good impression and a (sincere) "come back soon" from those you've encountered.

Burma or Myanmar

When Rudyard Kipling wrote about Burma from his experience as a British soldier in the 1890's he mentioned sunshine and palm trees and temple bells, amongst many other charms. Back in London after his sojourn in the exotic East, he bemoaned the soggy 'English drizzle' compared to his memories of 'a cleaner, greener land'.

Today there are travel agencies quoting his poetry in their advertisements, and they are not exaggerating – but this is a new development. For the past 50 years or so Burma, now commonly known as Myanmar, has been very much out of the loop as far as international travel is concerned. Just in the past few weeks the country has seen some dramatic changes, and it appears inevitable that more are on the way.

Everyone interested in checking out the attractions of this ancient land, rich in culture and natural beauty, should try to learn all they can about the past and present situation before booking a flight. This article cannot provide even a fraction of that information, but a few notes might be useful.

Burma's name was changed to Myanmar by the SPDC (State Peace and Development Council) in 1989, but many including the U.S. and UK still use the old name in support of an ongoing but still contested move towards democracy and human rights that has been taking place for many years.

In what has been hailed as an historic event, David Cameron became the first Prime Minister to visit Burma/Myanmar since Britain granted its independence in 1948. Just last week he met with President Thein Sein and with the leader of the pro-democracy movement, Aung San Suu Kyi to discuss the political and economic outlook, with encouraging results. However, the road is still rocky and most observers feel that much more needs to be accomplished.

In a very small nutshell, Myanmar is a symbol of repression and clashing factions that is just now tipping the balance towards individual and cultural freedom for its citizens. The Burma of 'olden days' that Kipling fell in love with is still there, with its friendly people and stunning landscapes that range from pristine tropical beaches to the snow-capped Himalayas.

The country is bordered by India, China, Laos and Thailand, with shores on the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea. A couple of Burma's landmarks include the tallest mountain in Southeast Asia, Hkakabo Razi, with nary a ski lift or lodge to its name, and Ngapali Beach on the Bay of Bengal, with nary a host or a hoard to be seen, not yet.

At this point in time, Burma aka Myanmar is probably the epitome of adventure travel destinations. While there are a few places such as Yangon (formerly Rangoon) where the tourist industry has taken a small hold, the country for the most part is undeveloped by any Western or European standards.

Visitors are welcomed by the vast majority of Burma's population, but they are not allowed to travel freely in the country. Check with your embassy for updates, as conditions are changing by the moment. So far the changes are pointing towards a new and booming travel market for this complex and compelling 'golden land'.