



All about **Myanmar TEA**

With a special focus on Southern Shan State

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Acknowledgements

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Foreword by ITC

We welcome the publication of this booklet about Myanmar's unknown, but vibrant tea culture. As an international organisation with mandate to support the development of Micro, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises, it is part of our work to support the development of the sector towards one that promotes competitiveness and quality, while being solidly grounded in tradition.

With its long history reaching back for centuries, tea in Myanmar is an excellent example of how a home grown, traditional crop is crucial for the development of rural economies - not only as a commodity, but also as a tool to develop agro-tourism products. Why? Because in both ways it is very beneficial for the local communities, and for the long-term sustainability of the region.

The work of ITC in Myanmar seeks to support rural economies to become more sustainable. ITC supports developing countries in building their capacity to benefit from trade. In Southern Shan State, tea has the capacity to be a driver for economic growth through export sales and integration into "tea tours" for tourism.

As an important tea-producing area in Southern Shan State (and more and more for coffee as well), Ywangan has a high potential in developing agro-tourism products. And this booklet is an excellent way to showcase the potential of tea in agro-tourism by illustrating the long history of tea in Myanmar. It also shows the diverse role of tea in Myanmar's society - for consumption (drinking and eating), but also as part of local customs and rituals.

We hope you enjoy reading this booklet.

Xuejun Jiang

Chief
Office for Asia and the Pacific
International Trade Centre

Foreword by the Embassy of Switzerland in Myanmar

Tea in Myanmar has a long history and is deeply rooted in local cultures and traditions. The consumption of tea in various forms - as a beverage, snack or salad - is popular all over the country. Tea shops are a Myanmar institution.

Most of Myanmar's tea production comes from Shan State, with Ywangan as one of the major producing areas. The Swiss State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO) is supporting the sustainable economic development of the Southern Shan State, through the SECO-UN Cluster on Trade and Productive Capacity project. Specifically, it seeks to improve the livelihoods of local communities and contribute towards poverty reduction by enhancing horticulture productivity and sustainable tourism development.

Tea is an important crop in Myanmar, not only for consumption but also for its contribution to domestic and international trade. For that reason, enhancing both the productive capacity of tea and supporting tea-focused agro-tourism activities are vital elements of the project. By covering all aspects related to tea in Myanmar, this booklet aims to increase knowledge about this important crop and to promote it to a wider readership - domestic and international alike.

The Swiss Embassy would like to thank ITC and the project at large for writing this tea booklet to showcase Myanmar's vibrant tea culture. Myanmar has the potential to be on the map as a tea producer and tourism destination and to be as well-known as Assam or Sri Lanka.

We hope you enjoy reading!

Gabriella Spiri

Minister
Head of Cooperation/Deputy Head of Mission
Embassy of Switzerland in Myanmar

“

Of all the fruit, mango is the best; of all the meats, pork is the best; and of all the leaves, laphet is the best

MYANMAR PROVERB

Think about Sri Lanka, and you might remember your last cup of the famous Ceylon Tea. Think about Japan and green tea will pop up in your mind. Or think of colourful India, and the smell of a sweet Chai will tickle your nose. But Myanmar? Hardly anyone will link this wonderful place to tea - or laphet, as it is locally known. Who knows that Myanmar is one of the original homes of the tea plant? But wherever you travel, you will encounter a vibrant tea culture. You drink bitter-sweet milk tea in crowded tea shops, sip green tea after a heavy curry lunch and taste

fermented tea leaves during a chat with friendly locals in their house.

But where does the tea come from? If you ask this question on the street, people will point towards the Shan State. “The chief special crop is tea. The plant appears to be indigenous, and wild tea shrubs are found all over the hills” notes Sir James George Scott, the renowned Scottish journalist and colonial administrator in the early 1900s. One of the main growing areas is the north and east close to the Chinese border. Another stronghold are the hills surrounding

Ywangan, Pindaya and Pinlaung in Southern Shan State.

Especially in Ywangan the local planters want to make their place a brand name for high quality tea and coffee. With the support of the International Trade Centre (ITC), Ywangan has been put on the tourist map with the focus on agro- and outdoor-tourism. This booklet hopefully will help, that in future, whenever you think of Myanmar, you will remember the fine taste of tea.

Camellia sinensis

GORGEIOUS CAMELLIA

EVER HEARD OF GEORG JOSEPH KAMEL?

Born in 1661, Georg Joseph Kamel was a Jesuit brother from Moravia (today part of the Czech Republic) and is the name giver of the famous Camellia plant family. The Catholic Missionary became well-known for his work as a pharmacist and a naturalist in the Philippines, where he studied the local flora.

Until today up to 300 Camellia species are known. Many of them are famous for their beautiful blossoms like the **Camellia chrysantha** and **Camellia sasanqua**. Others for health reasons like **Camellia japonica**, known for its oil, and **Camellia sinensis**, the botanical name for the tea plant. Of all them, Camellia sinensis was especially successful in making a world career for itself. From its original home between Southwestern China and Assam in Northeastern India, it went global, becoming one of the most traded plants in history.



Köhler's Medizinal-Pflanzen in naturgetreuen Abbildungen mit kurz erläuterndem Texte, Gera-Untermhaus 1889

ONE PLANT, MANY NAMES



The British call it “Tea”, the Korean “Cha” and the Indians “Chai”. And when we look in other languages, we can find varieties of these three words. The Germans say “Tee”, the Portuguese “Chá”, the Vietnamese “Trà” and the Arabs “Shay”. Already the French pharmacist Philippe Sylvestre Dufour was aware of these different names. In his study about “Chocolate, Tea and Coffee” from the year 1685 he writes: “Tea is a leaf that comes to China and Japan. The Chinese call it Thee, the Japanese & the Indians Cha or Tcha, the Tartars and the Persans Tay or Tzay, and the Europeans Thé.”

What he did not know: The different terms derive from one single Chinese character: 茶 which translates into “bitter herb”. However, this character has been spelt differently in various Chinese dialects. In Mandarin and Cantonese it is called “chá” or “chàh”. Many people in the Fujian province

speak the Southern Min-Chinese dialect and say “tê”. And from wherever tea has been traded, the spelling has been adopted. For example, the Fujian province saw Spanish and Dutch merchants, so they started to say “Té” or “Thee” and the term has been inherited by other European languages.

The Portuguese, in contrast, with their colony in Macau, adopted the Cantonese spelling “Chá”. Via the trade routes the name “cha” reached India, Persia and the Arab world. Here we can find varieties of “chay” or “shay”. But not only are the names many - also the way of drinking: Some like it black and strong, some green and refreshing, others brown with spices and milk.

“With one hand LEGENDARY LAPHET

There are many stories about Alaungsithu, long-term ruler of the kingdom of Bagan (from 1112/13 to 1167), especially related to his legendary journeys. According to one tale he travelled on his magic barge to the Palaung principality of Tawng Peng in the far north of Shan State. There he built two pagodas: the Taung Me Pagoda and on the top of the mountain Loi Lawl Sai the Taung Yo Pagoda. At the latter two Palaung paid him respects during a festival. As a present the king gave them tea seeds which he had obtained from a bird and ordered them to plant the seeds near the pagoda. Because the Palaung held out only one hand to receive the gift, the name laphet (“one hand”) was given to the seeds. To this day, a tea tree at Loi Lawl Sai, thought to be more than one thousand years old, is linked to this legend and highly revered by the Palaung.



Another explanation of the Myanmar name for tea is based on the ancient custom, that tea pluckers used to climb the big tea trees to remove the leaves with one hand while holding on to the trunk with the other hand. From there the term let ta phet (“one-hand to pluck leaves”) was derived and later, over the years, evolved into laphet.

ETHNIC GROUPS USE OTHER NAMES FOR TEA

ETHNIC GROUP	TEA	PICKLED TEA
Palaung	Om Myam	Myam Om
Shan	Nam Nae Kom (green) Nam Nea Wan (black)	Naeng Yam
Pa-O	Nane Sean	Nane Sor

the higher the better

From the PLANT TO THE DRINK

It is fascinating to see how different, and more refined, methods for processing tea have been developed over the years. Besides green and black tea one can find white tea, Oolong tea and Pu'er (or Brick) tea. But at the beginning there is always the same method of plucking: One leaf and the bud. What happens afterwards is a highly sophisticated process of withering, rolling and drying:

The *Camellia sinensis* species is an evergreen shrub or tree, growing up to 9m in the wild. Its first home was in the hills of Southwestern China, Myanmar and the Indian state of Assam. Here the nights are cool and the days sunny and warm, the climate not too dry and not too humid.

Today two major varieties are cultivated in nearly 50 countries worldwide: *Camellia sinensis* var. *sinensis* and *Camellia sinensis* var. *assamica*. The first variety is growing in the majority of tea countries, the latter mainly in Assam in Northeastern India. The taste and quality of tea not only depend on the way of processing but also on the altitude of planting.

Lowland tea grows faster and has bigger leaves. For example, the variety from Assam benefits from heavy rainfall during the monsoon season and higher humidity for most of the year. The result is a brisk, malty taste and popular as bright-coloured breakfast tea all over the world.

Highland tea generates its best quality at an elevation of 1,200m and above. The leaves are smaller and the growth process is slower. This creates a stronger taste with a fine aroma.



“

For good tea leaves, let the Palaung take their time up the hills

MYANMAR PROVERB

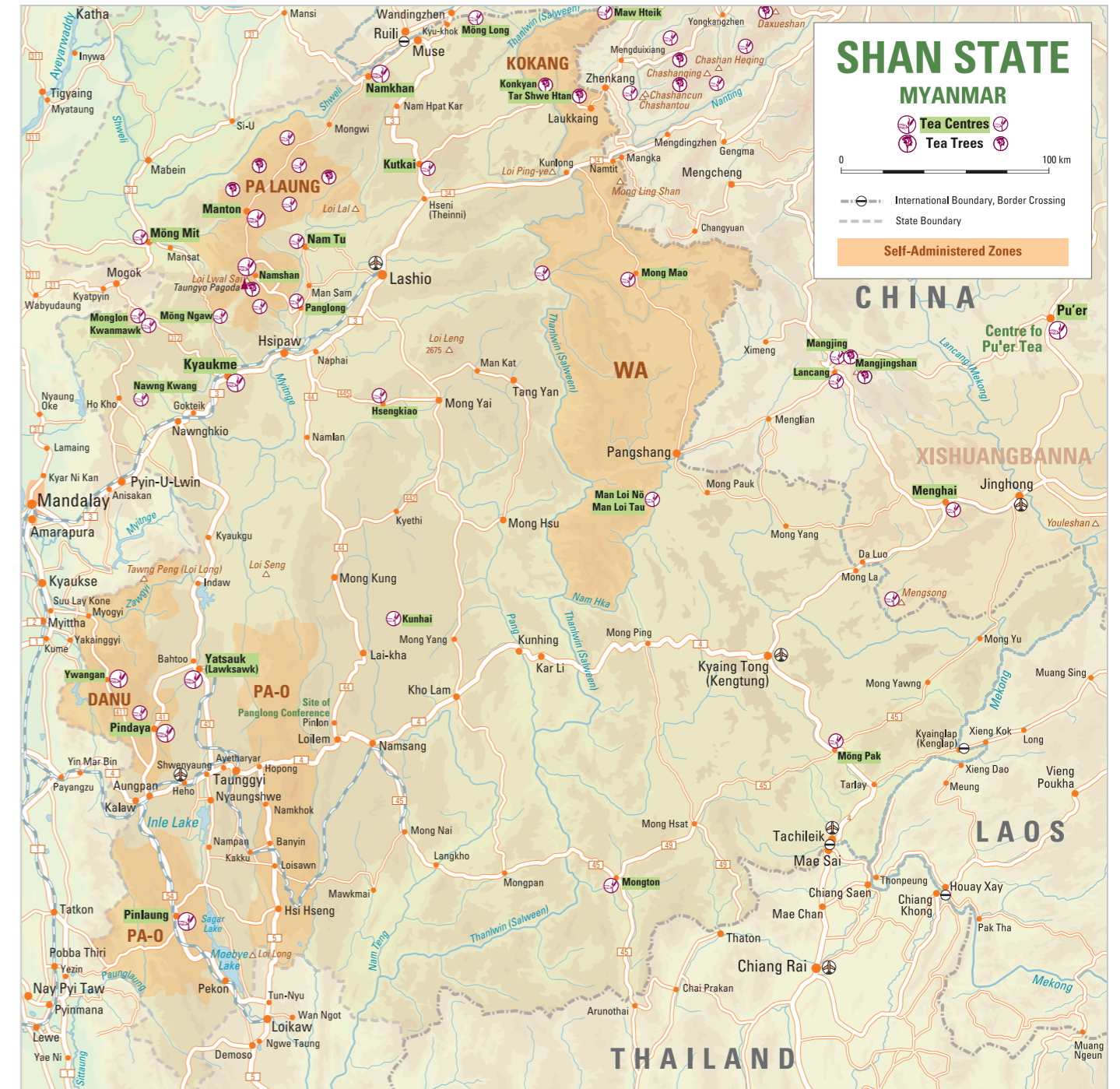


From the Shan hills to the tea shop

Ask any local in a tea shop about the origin of the tea in their cup, and they will most likely say it comes from Shan State. And that is true: Of the roughly 960km² of cultivated tea in Myanmar, more than 85% comes from there. Other tea-growing areas include the hills of Sagaing and Mandalay Regions as well as the states of Chin and Kachin. Here, in the high altitudes of at least 1,300m above sea level, the plants find excellent soil conditions, an ideal climate and industrious people to work the fields.

Namhsan, Manton, and Kyaukme in Northern Shan State along with Pinlaung, Pindaya, Yatsauk and Ywangan in Southern Shan State, are the main tea production areas in Myanmar. Also the Kokang Self-Administered Zone bordering China in Eastern Shan State is known for good quality tea. The production is mainly in the

hand of ethnic groups like the Palaung in the North, the Pa-O and Danu in the South and the Kokang in the East of Shan State. Their methods of tea processing are still traditional: After harvesting the leaves are roasted in a deep pan, taken out and rubbed, and then taken out to dry in the sun. However, more sophisticated methods are being adopted and this has led to production increasing from 94,595 tons in 2013 to more than 104,000 tons in the 2020s. With the support of international organisations like the International Trade Centre (ITC) or local entities such as the Myanmar Tea Association (MTA), tea made in Myanmar is becoming a household name among tea lovers abroad. That said, the epicentres for home grown tea are, and will remain, the many tea shops around the country.



Nine months harvest

High altitudes, hilly slopes and good quality soil - the Shan State has it all. And these are perfect conditions for growing tea. Nearly 60% of the tea production takes place in the northern part, around one quarter of the production in the southern part of the state. There are only few issues of diseases or pests, and since the tea plants require some shade, many farmers plant Australian silver oak (*Grevillea robusta*) on their plantations.

Tea leaves can be plucked nine months a year. The harvest starts around mid-March, continues during monsoon and ends in November. The high season lasts for the first six months, with low season for the subsequent three. The tea is named after the harvest time.

Shwe Phi Oo: The term means “very first harvest” and is also known as “Spring Tea”. The leaves are picked from the middle of March to early April and are famed for their strong taste and higher quality.

Shwe Phi Moe Lut: Meaning “early harvest just before the rainy season”, these leaves are picked twice a week between mid April and mid May. This harvest is also considered high quality.

Kar Kant Oo: With the start of the rainy season, tea plucking takes place three times a week from the middle of May to the middle of June.

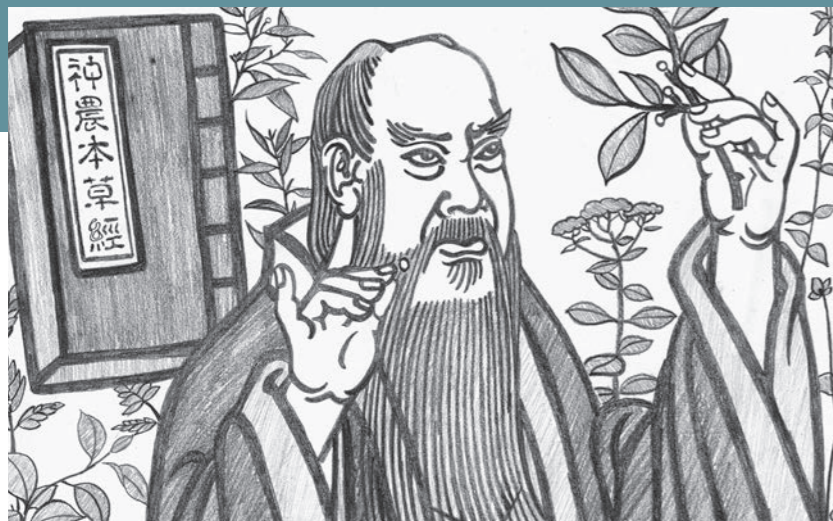
Kar Kant Lar: Picking time is twice a week between mid June and the end of August. Since the leaves are harvested during the rainy season, they require greater care in handling and storage to prevent rotting due to mould.

Hnin That: Harvest time is twice a week between early September and the middle of November.

A harvester can collect up to 22-33kg of tea leaves a day, depending on the location and height of the plants. The hired tea pickers earn between 1 and 1.5 USD per kilogramme and receive one meal per day. Some farmers offer half of the harvested tea leaves to the plucking group.



Tea - glimpses of the past



If one drinks tea regularly, one will be more physically active, be contented of mind with a strong determination and focus in work

SHENNONG (2737–2697 BCE)

A legendary beginning

Poems, stories, ceremonies - tea is not only an age-old beverage. It has been inspiring generations of people who developed the production, and way of drinking tea, into an art form. With regard to the history of tea, one has to look first towards China, where tea is not only a tasty drink, but has also been a way of life for thousands of years. Its origin is linked to the legendary Emperor Shennong who, according to sources, lived from 2737 BCE to 2697 BCE. One story related to the "Divine Farmer" (the meaning of the emperor's name) recounts what happened during one of his journeys. While taking a break, a servant was boiling water for him to drink when a leaf from a wild tea tree fell into the pot and turned the clear water into a brownish drink. Without noticing it the servant presented it to him. Shennong found the hot brew surprisingly tasty and refreshing. He later recommended it as a herbal medicine: "If one drinks tea regularly, one will be more physically active, be contented of mind with a strong determination and focus in work", he is cited in the famous "Classic of Tea" (Cha Jing), written by the scholar Lu Yu in the 8th century. Thus tea came into being.

Tea from the tomb

Historical evidence of the existence and importance of tea dates back 2,200 years. Archaeologists discovered tea as a burial object in the tomb of a Chinese emperor who ruled during the Han dynasty in the 2nd century BCE. The tomb near Xi'an not only revealed that this emperor loved drinking tea, but also that tea had already been traded as far as Tibet, 4,000km away. In a tomb there the remains of tea have also been identified. During that period the ancient capital of Xi'an was the starting point of the famous Silk Road.

Originally, tea leaves were used as a medicinal herb and often chewed for detoxification. It was not until the Tang dynasty (618-907) that it gained popularity as a beverage. Tea drinking was now for pleasure and relaxation, which people enjoyed during formal tea gatherings with a strict code of etiquette. And so a new cult was born: Cha Yi, the Art of Tea Drinking.



Tea is a magnificent tree growing in the South. Tea trees range from one or two feet to tens of feet tall. In Bashan and the river gorges of Sichuan there are tea trees growing to such a size that it would take two people hand in hand to embrace their circumference

LU YU (733–804)

Tea trees and tea mountains

The "Cha Jing" or "Classic of Tea" is a historical treasure trove for tea lovers. Written by famous scholar and tea enthusiast Lu Yu between 760 and 762, this book is the first systematic work on cultivating, making and drinking tea. "If one is not familiar with the horticultural skills needed to tend tea trees and the trees are not thriving, then one should cultivate them like melons. Three years later, the leaves can be harvested. Wild tea leaves are superior to those cultivated in plantations." This is just a sample of the prolific advice Lu Yu offered in his book.

Wild tea trees, which Lu Yu mentioned, can still be found in the mountains of Southwestern China, especially in the provinces Sichuan, Yunnan and Guizhou. Yunnan boasts the largest area of wild tea tree communities and ancient tea plantations. The largest amount of old and wild tea trees can be found along the Lancang River (better known as Mekong). Many of them are more than 10m tall.

Steamed, fried, pounded

Over the centuries the Chinese developed a variety of techniques for processing tea. During the Tang dynasty (618-907), the tea leaves were first steamed, then pounded and pressed into bricks. Later, during the Song dynasty (960-1279), the loose leaves were steamed and dried. A powdered form of tea also emerged. The tea industry developed. Not only the nobles and scholars, but also common people got access to tea. The green leaf became a commodity: "Every household has seven daily necessities: firewood, rice, oil, salt, soy-sauce, vinegar and tea", the poet Wu Zimu (1275) wrote in his book Mengliang lu. In addition the way of preparing and drinking tea changed: "Dian cha", pouring water several times on tea powders or leaves became popular. Before, people boiled the tea.

From the 13th century onwards, the fresh plucked tea leaves were first pan-fried, then rolled and dried. In this way the tea remained green. In the 15th century, oolong tea, the process in which the leaves were allowed to partially oxidise before pan-frying, was developed.

“

Seven steps up, you have to rest. Eight steps down, you have to rest. Eleven steps flat, you have to rest. You are stupid, if you don't rest

TEA PORTER SONG



The ancient tea-horse route

With increasing popularity, tea became a regional commodity. It was also a sought-after drink, for example in Tibet. Nobody knows exactly when the tea trade with this Himalayan state started. Tradition links it with the year 641, when the Chinese Princess Wen Cheng married Songtsen Gampo, the great ruler and unifier of Tibet. Over the centuries a sprawling web of trails developed, connecting Southwest China with Northern Myanmar, India and Tibet. One of the main branches of the “chamadao” (Tea Horse Road), as the Chinese called the trail network due to the barter trade of tea and horses, led from Pu'er in southwest Yunnan, passing through Dali, Lijiang, Shangri-la and Qamdo to Lhasa. Another started in Sichuan's ancient tea centre Ya'an. But there were caravan routes branching off for example, from Dali via Baoshan and Muse to Bhamo and Myitkyina, all the way up to the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh.

Eighty kilos on the back

Especially the 3,000m climb to the Tibetan plateau was extremely challenging. Depending on the area the caravans used horses, mules, yaks or humans for transport. Paid according to the weight of the loads, gaunt sandal-wearing porters, women and men alike, marched narrow paths along deep gorges, climbed windy snow covered mountain passes and crossed wild rivers over aged suspension bridges. Laden with tea bricks weighing 70-80kg they carried their loads from Sichuan or Yunnan to Tibet in exchange for horses, silver and salt. The food of the porters was often only a few pieces of cornbread and occasionally a bowl of bean curd. In the 13th century a Chinese trader could receive one full grown horse in exchange for 65kg of brick tea. Exchanging goods was still common in the early 1900s. “The trade is largely one of barter”, observed plant collector Ernest H. Wilson, who travelled the region during that time. With an improved infrastructure the Tea Horse Road became irrelevant in the middle of the 20th century. But numerous traces are left as a reminder of a bygone era.





“
The growing and drying of
tea is their [Palaung] chief
occupation. All tea drunk by
Shans and Burmans comes
from their gardens

LESLIE MILNE
(SHANS AT HOME, 1910)

Myanmar tea since ancient times

Like in China and other Asian countries, in Myanmar tea cultivation is a centuries old tradition. For the Palaung, an ethnic group living mainly in Northern Shan State, tea cultivation has been one of their main incomes for ages. Royals were among their customers from the early days. According to U Ponnya (1812-c.1867), one of Myanmar's greatest poets, tea leaves were part of the royal cuisine during the Bagan era (11th to 14th century). As he writes in his “Messages of Friendship”, Myitta-sa: “In the days of King Sithu, when the summer days are a coming, the leaves and buds of the Thandar tree abundantly, gracefully emerge, as a monk rising from long meditation. The Shwephi tea leaves, the jewel of all nine sides, blossoming before the first rains is prepared in gold teacups to serve the golden kings every year.”

Michael Symes (1761-1809), a British diplomat serving the East India Company, describes the popular tea custom during his mission in the year 1795: “Here the inhabitants get their livelihood by selling Lsepac [laphet], or pickled tea leaf, of which the Birman are extremely fond. The plant, I was informed, grows at a place called Palong-miou [Palaung], a district to the north-east of Ummerapoora [Amarapura].” This “beverage highly palatable to all ranks of Birman” as Symes notes, has been apparently an important trade commodity in the 18th century.

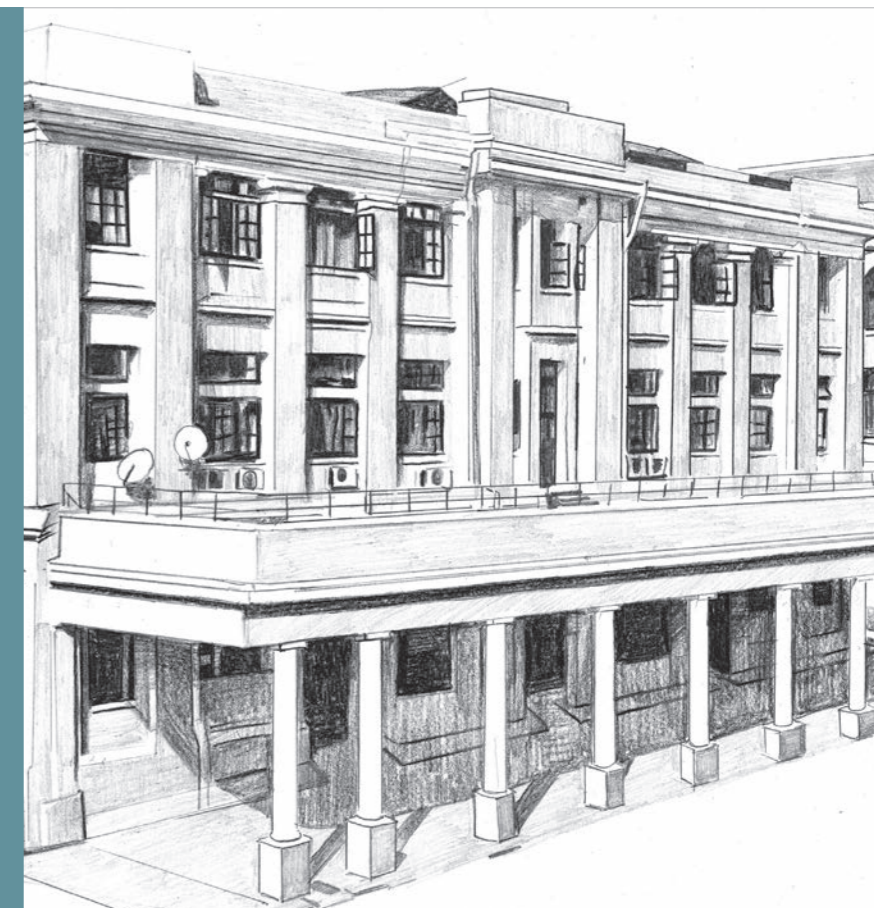
Flourishing trade

Besides in Shan State, tea flourished all over the slopes of steep hills rising from narrow valleys in many parts of the states of Chin and Kachin, and in the Sagaing Region. Unlike the cultured tea plantations in Assam, Darjeeling or Sri Lanka, tea in Myanmar has been grown rather randomly. Plots with tea plants were planted by the villagers and considered common property. At harvest time, all the village inhabitants participated. Depending on the area caravans of bullocks or mules, or boats brought the sacks with tea leaves and other crops from the hills down to the market towns for sale. During the reign of King Thibaw (1878-1885), domestic tea trading was under royal monopoly.

“

During the descent from the
pass the Shans brought me
branches of the tea-plant,
which was growing wild in
the hills. Its long narrow
leaves reminded me of the
willow. The men told me
that it was likewise found on
the route from Maulmain
to Eaheng, as well as in
the ranges to the north of
the pass right up to China.
Some of the plants were
fully 15 feet in height

HOLT SAMUEL HALLETT (1890)



No tea time with the British

“We may in return obtain large supplies of tea, the produce of the Shan Districts, beside China goods”, wrote Scottish Captain William C. MacLeod (1805-1880) with some optimism, after he travelled around the Shan State in 1836/37 in order to explore trade opportunities there. But Myanmar tea never became a significant export commodity under the British. And there was a reason: The protectionist trade policy in British India. Even after the East India Company lost its monopoly status in 1833, major businesses were strictly controlled in the colony. For example tea by the 1903 Indian Tea Cess Act. Those who paid this tax levy

(known as cess), received a licence to sell under the label “Indian Tea”. Although Myanmar was part of British India, tea from Shan State never received this licence. The Sawbwa of Tawngpeng tried from his seat in Namhsan many times to participate in the colonial tea trade. However, despite the good quality of tea from Tawngpeng State, he never got the permit to export it within the Empire. In 1939, when Burma became a separate colony, the Bombay Burma Trading Corporation set up a tea factory in Namhsan and monopolised tea export from Shan State, but then the Second World War began.

Facts & figures of tea in Myanmar

3

kinds of tea species can be found in Myanmar: *Camellia sinensis* var. *sinensis*, *Camellia sinensis* var. *assamica*, and *Camellia irrawadiensis*

types of tea are produced in Myanmar: pickled tea, green tea and black tea

3.5

kilogrammes of fresh tea leaves can be plucked from one healthy tea bush each year

6

months maximum are needed to make pickled tea soft. The leaves are stored in baskets and placed in underground containers

9

months of harvest time a year: Shwe Phi Oo is picked from mid March to early April, Shwe Phi Moe Lut until mid May, Kar Kant Oo from mid May to mid June, Kar Kant Lar until the end of August, and Hnin That between early September and mid November

44

percent of total production in Myanmar is for pickled tea

80

percent of tea is grown in Shan State, mostly on high altitudes of at least 1,500 metres above sea level

1,500

years is the life span of a tea tree

1,500

metres above sea level and more provides the best conditions for tea

4,000

hectares of land is used for tea cultivation around Ywangan. More than 60 villages are involved in it

96,000

hectares of land is used for cultivating tea in Myanmar



LAPHET

at a Wedding

“

They [bride and groom] are also supposed to feed one another, in love-bird fashion, but the chewing of betel and salad tea, let-hpet, by the parents on both sides - the national way of ratifying any contract, legal or commercial - is the really effective rite

SIR J. GEORGE SCOTT, BURMA: A HANDBOOK OF PRACTICAL INFORMATION, LONDON 1906, P. 83



The art of eating tea

Surely you have already drunk many cups of tea. But have you ever eaten tea? If not, then it's time to try it. And Myanmar is more or less the only place in the world to do that. When you are visiting a private home, paying respects to Buddhist monks in a monastery or looking for handcrafts in a traditional shop - it is likely that you are offered pickled tea (laphet-so). Often it is served in a beautiful lacquerware tray together with various peas and peanuts, fried garlic, toasted sesame and crushed dried shrimps. You take a spoon or use your right hand, mix the tea leaves with the other ingredients and eat it. The taste is a little bit bitter. This way is called Ahlu-laphet ("almsgiving tea") and in daily life primarily served after a meal or as snack.

Making peace with pickled tea

However, Ahlu-laphet is more than a snack. It is a symbol of generosity, goodwill and hospitality. Engagements, house-warming ceremonies, funerals - pickled tea is always part of it. As a proverb says: "Offer pickled tea to gain favours", it plays a significant role in social life. There is hardly any official function or cultural ceremony, where pickled tea leaves are not given. Parents of the wedding couple send parcels of pickled tea to their relatives and friends to invite them to the marriage ceremony of their children.

In the past the leaves were even a peacemaker: Kings offered Ahlu-laphet to their enemies as a gesture of willingness to end a battle. If the opponents accepted this gift, a truce was very likely. The same was true with court cases. Before the judge announced his verdict, the conflicting parties had to eat fermented tea from the same plate. This meant that both sides accepted the judgement.

TEA

Recycling

“

The Dutch sailors had their own way of eating tea leaves. As Dutch missionary, Fr. Philippus Baldæus (1632-1671) observed: "The Tea [after being used in water] was reused by our people for salad, together with vinegar, oil and pepper, and it is not of a bad taste at all"

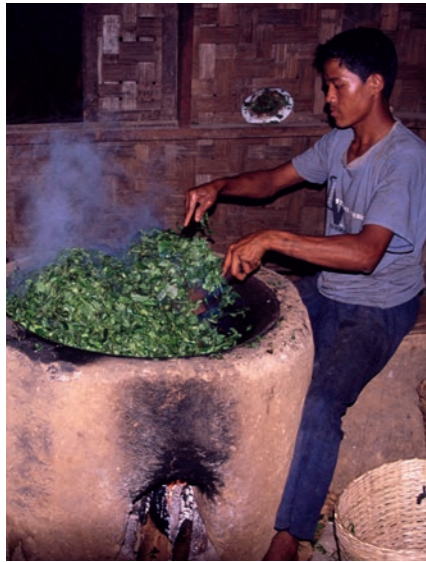
A great salad

But there is another way of eating pickled tea: as salad. Typical ingredients for laphet-thoke, as this dish is called, are fermented tea leaves, mixed with fresh, thinly sliced tomatoes, garlic, green chili, dried prawns, sesame or peanut oil, and lime juice. As Myanmar writer Ba Than describes it: "No party nor feast, nor even a formal festivity is complete in Burma without Laphet-thoke." (Myanmar's Attractions and Delights, Yangon 2003).

You can find varieties of fermented tea salad like the spicy and sour chinsat laphet-thoke, danyhin thee laphet where jengkol peas are added, or pyaung phoo be-ou laphet-thoke where the tea leaves are mixed with corn and duck eggs. Today you can find fermented tea leaves in quite a number of dishes - together with rice, dumplings, sushi and even as a topping added to pizzas.



Traditional way of making laphet-so



Steaming the leaves

This is done in a wooden strainer, which is placed over the mouth of a large cauldron of boiling water for a minute or two only, so as to moisten and soften the leaves. This process enables them to be easily and quickly rolled with the hands on a mat, whilst another batch is being steamed on the cauldron. Steaming helps preserve colour and flavour. Besides softening the leaves, it also reduces their bitterness.



Fermenting the leaves

After steaming the leaves are rolled into a pulp, put into baskets and left till the next day. Then the baskets are put into compressors or pits in the ground and covered by plastic sheets with heavy weights on top. There they are left during the entire fermentation process. It is important to have stable climatic conditions with rather cool temperatures. The whole process takes at least three months and ideally upwards of six months. It is completed when the pulp changes from green to yellowish green, the leaves soften, and acidity is reduced.



Grading and sorting

Following fermentation, the tea is removed from underground, checked for quality and sorted. Any sticks and other unwanted materials (like leaves which became very dark in colour) are removed. Fermented tea that is yellowish green in colour is an indicator of good quality.

Making a tasty tea leaf salad

Given the very unique taste of tea leaf salad, it is easy to get addicted to it. No problem! You can also make this dish at home. Here we show you how to do it:

Ingredients for the laphet:

- 1/3 cup vegetable oil
- 200g plain green tea leaves
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 1 1/2 spoons lime juice
- 1 handful garlic, coarsely chopped
- Some crushed chillies

Make the laphet:

- Remove any hard leaves or stalks
- Wash the tea leaves gently in warm water
- Knead them with salt
- Gently squeeze the leaves to remove the bitter taste. Repeat this four times
- Mix the leaves with garlic, lime juice, salt and a little vegetable oil
- Put them in a glass bowl and pour the remaining vegetable oil over the tea
- Leave it for 24 hours

Arrange the other ingredients:

- 1 cup crispy fried chickpeas
- 1 cup crispy fried lablab beans
- 1 cup fried garlic
- 1 cup roasted peanuts
- 2/3 cup roasted sesame seeds
- 1 cup roasted and peeled pumpkin seeds
- 2 spoons vegetable oil

Next prepare them:

- Gently heat a little vegetable oil in a wok
- Fry the peanuts and stir them constantly in hot oil
- Lower the heat and add the fried beans and fried garlic. Fry them for another minute
- Add the roasted sesame and pumpkin seeds
- Continue to gently fry the mix for a few more minutes
- Cool everything down and store it in a sealed container

Combine all the ingredients

- Take your tea leaves, and cooled fried ingredients, combine everything in the glass bowl
- According to your taste and preferences, add fresh, thinly sliced tomatoes, fresh crushed garlic, green chilli, dried prawns, lime juice, and sesame or peanut oil
- Mix together well

Now it is ready to eat.
Bon appétit!



Tea shops – Myanmar’s living heritage

Low wooden stools around a short square table, with some longyi-clad men sitting on them sipping cups of tea. This is a common sight in traditional tea shops all over Myanmar. Tea shops are ubiquitous and come in all shapes and sizes. Some are wooden huts with simple plastic stools and knee-high tables, others are fancy halls with big TV screens to show the latest soccer game. But the atmosphere is everywhere the same: A smooch like sound catches the attention of the young waiter. And moments later he serves a cup of steaming laphet yay - boiled black tea served with evaporated and sweetened condensed milk. If you are looking for some typical dishes your server might propose that you try some pae pyote nan pyar (naan bread with chickpeas), e kyar kway (a Chinese-style breadstick) palata (roti with sugar or boiled peas), or samsosa (a triangular shaped fried snack, filled with potatoes, cabbage, onion and peas). To wash down the heavy sweetness of the laphet yay, there is always a pot of yay nway chan (plain tea with green or black leaves) on the table. Here you can see the strong influences of both India and China.

A place for all

Laphet Yay Sai, as the Myanmar people call their beloved tea shop, is a place for everyone. People from all walks of life are welcome here - be it a retired teacher catching up with his former colleagues, students sharing their homework before classes or a smart businessman having an early breakfast before starting his business trip. One of the reasons is that the drinks and meals are quite affordable.

Tea shops provide a space to exchange opinions, solve problems, share hopes and express dreams. Contracts are discussed, conflicts resolved and political ideas exchanged. Important tasks start at tea shops. Here government officials and company staff often share their opinions over a cup of tea before they go to formal meetings.



An endangered species

Tea shops in Myanmar are many things in one: a place to chat, flirt and discuss. Traditionally, this is where you can indulge your thoughts and make plans. In a way tea shops are a kind of parliament of the common people. But things are changing. Instead of people talking to each other, you find them more frequently sitting quietly together, each staring at their smartphones, watching video clips and chatting via their social media channels. In bigger cities, the young in particular prefer spending their leisure time in shopping malls, fast-food chains or coffee shops.

In order to keep their customers, many tea shops install TV screens to show football matches, TV shows or foreign movies. Or they extend their menus and add freshly brewed coffee, ice-cold smoothies or Chinese dim sum. Some try to be more appealing by upgrading their décor, installing flashy neon signs or providing air-conditioned rooms. A few try a fusion between Western-style bars and traditional tea shops. An example of this is Rangoon Tea House in Yangon, where you can get cocktails as well as all kinds of Myanmar tea.

But despite the changes and growing competition, the tea shop culture is strong enough to remain. Why? Because there are sufficient people around the country who just love this unique atmosphere: to sit and chat while sipping a cup of laphet yay.



Ywangan

Tea centre in Southern Shan State

Today if you ask locals about Ywangan, their eyes will start brightening. They will tell you about the tasty coffee roasted there, the excellent tea growing in the surrounding hills, the shimmering, turquoise Blue Lake nearby, the caves in the forests and the beautiful villages. Twenty years ago people would have shrugged their shoulders and asked: “Ywangan? Where is that?”

How times have changed! And the living standards of the people as well. Thanks to better road conditions Ywangan became a popular stop for people travelling between Mandalay and Pindaya. Lying on a plain at an altitude of 1,070m, the area to the west of the town is hilly and well-watered by the Panlaung river. Known among the Shans as “Yengan” the residents of the town are a mix of Danu, Pa-O, Shan and Palaung. If you would like to meet and mingle with some of them, join the five day market in the city centre.

The attractions can mainly be found around the town, where you can visit tea and coffee plantations. A while ago the farmers preferred to grow opium up in the mountains, like in many other regions in Shan State. However, with the help of global organisations like the International Trade Centre (ITC) they turned to tea and coffee production as their main source of income.

Coffee plantations help maintain the community forests as coffee needs to grow under a shaded canopy of trees while most of the tea is growing beautifully on the mountain slopes, preventing topsoil erosion. With 64 villages involved in tea planting, harvest season is from mid-March to end of November. The farmers are mainly families who produce green tea and fermented tea for the famous laphet-so.

Tea tourism in Ywangan (supported by ITC)

In the following pages we describe some great ways to explore the tea culture around Ywangan:

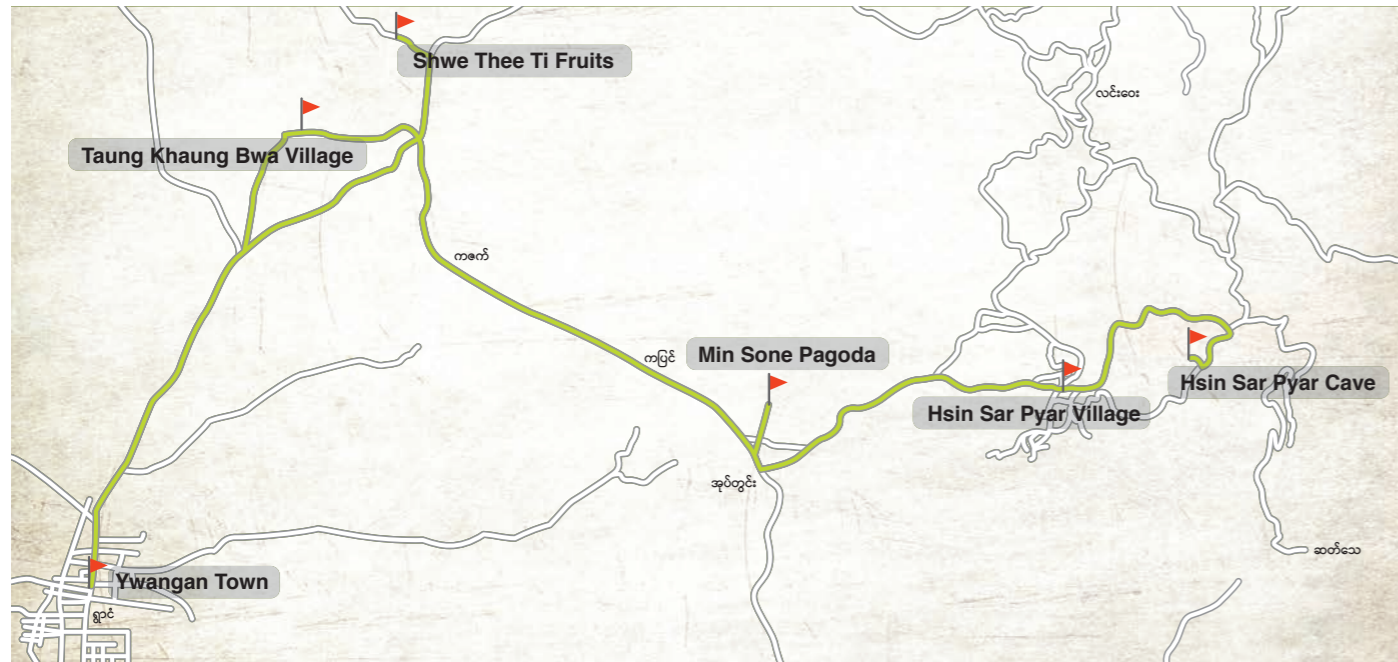
Tour 1: Caves and mountain tea

This day trip will introduce you to the karst or limestone mountain landscape of Ywangan. Karsts are known for developing many caves, grottos, and underground streams and rivers. They are also a sacred part of our culture.

You'll discover our most famous cave, still in its natural state, as well as visit more remote, mountainous villages where we produce tea on our family-run farms.

Tour highlights

- Explore the caves and limestone mountains of Ywangan
- Experience the life of tea and coffee producing families
- Discover and taste local tea grown in the mountains
- Visit a community-run tea factory



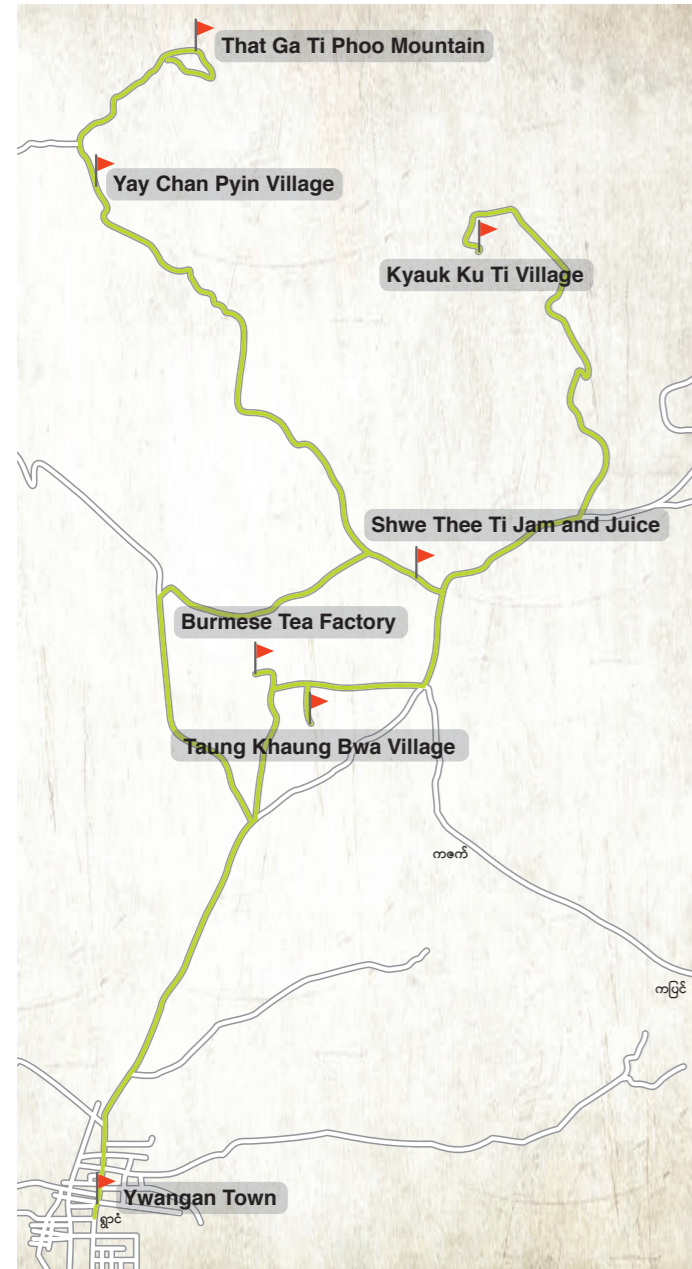
Tour 1 (cont.):

Itinerary (ca. 6 hours)

- After breakfast, we will drive for about one hour to enjoy the landscape from Min Sone Pagoda. If you're lucky to visit in March there's a famous horse riding competition
- Along the way, we'll stop off to visit some small, family-run tea plantations in Kyauk Ngat Village to see how tea is produced in the region
- Following this we'll stop to visit Hsin Sar Pyar Park, a short walk from the road to enjoy beautiful views on the karst mountains, as well as a local snack
- Next we'll pass through the village to Hsin Sar Pyar Cave. We'll visit an orange plantation on the way, as well as the Community Tea Factory
- Then we'll experience a local village-style lunch at a family house in the village, enjoying traditional Danu food
- We'll continue to Hsin Sar Pyar Village to visit their view point, before travelling to Kyauk Ngat Village for exploring local family-run coffee and tea farms, and learn more of tea production at the community tea factory. We'll walk around the Taung Khaung Bwa village, sample fruit cordials and jam at Shwe Thee Ti, enjoy the scenery from the view-point and visit a local black tea producer
- Finally we'll return to Ywangan. If there is still time, we'll head to the Tofu maker's house



Tea tourism in Ywangan (supported by ITC)



Tour 2: Introducing Ywangan's tea mountain

This is a great, full-day introduction to the mountain tea and coffee growing areas of Ywangan. It is a wonderful way to experience local life which is so different in the villages. We'll enjoy a two-hour return trek to the top of That Ga Ti Phoo Mountain, where on clear days we can see across the plains of the lowlands towards Mandalay. We'll work up an appetite for some delicious local village-style food at a mountain village. We'll also learn about tea production in the hills and of course have some tea tasting in a family garden.

Tour highlights

- Enjoy stunning views across to the lowlands of Upper Myanmar and Mandalay
- Trek through mountain tea plantations
- Experience the life of mountain tea producers



Tour 2 (cont.):

Itinerary (ca. 6-7 hours)

- After breakfast, we'll drive for about 30 minutes to Yay Chan Pyin Village where they mainly grow tea, but also orchids and medicinal herbs
- Here we'll explore the village and meet some local families in their tea farms. They will show us how they prepare tea for the market. We will enjoy tea sampling in their home garden with their lovely hospitality, traditions and culture of the Danu people
- Next, we'll trek for about one hour to That Ga Ti Phoo Mountain with a stunning view of the whole region
- After walking down from the mountain, we will have a traditional Danu village-style lunch at Kyauk Ku Ti Village
- Then we'll visit Shwe Thee Ti, a local manufacturer making jam and cordials from local fruits
- On the way back to Ywangan we'll visit more tea farms, some with tea trees that are over a hundred years old



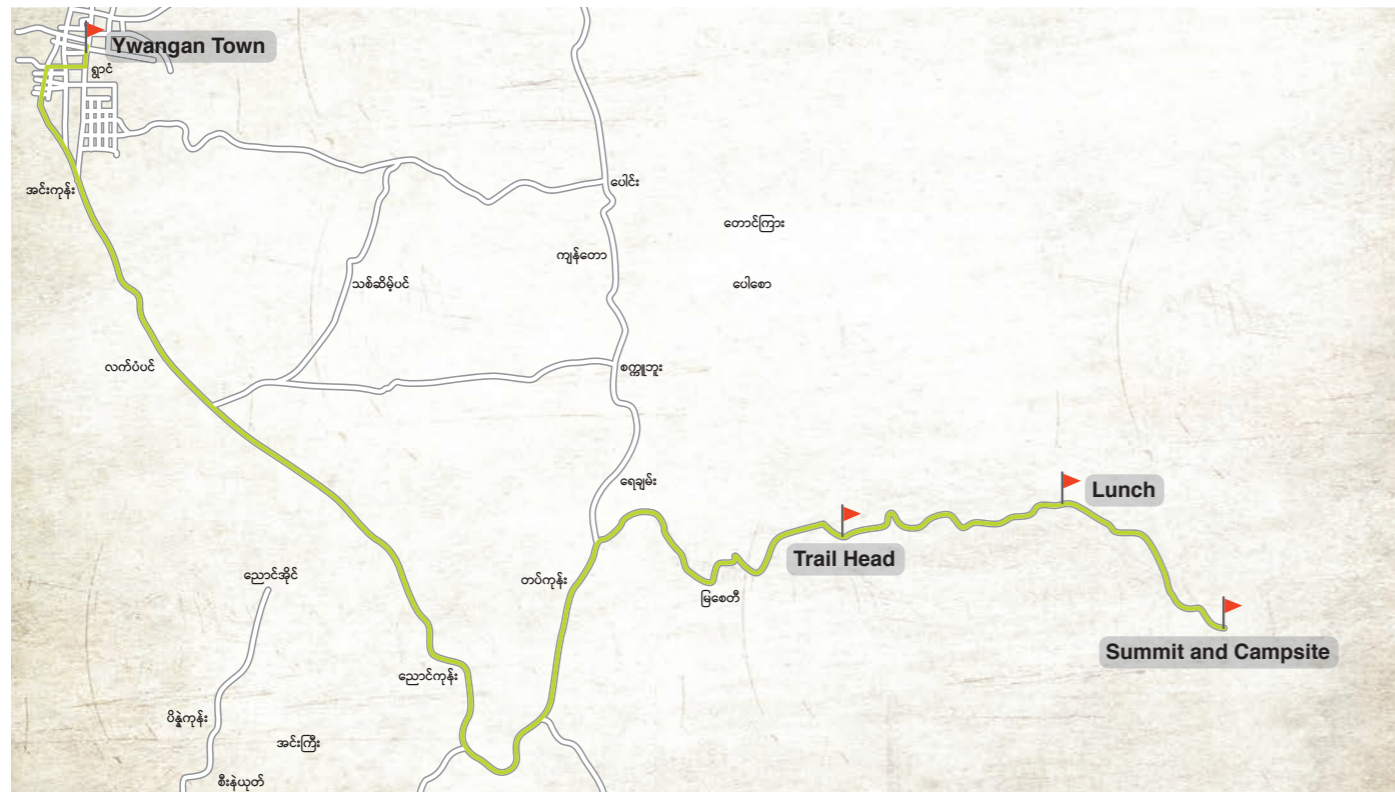
Tea tourism in Ywangan (supported by ITC)

Tour 3: Mountain tea trekking

This is an energetic overnight trek with a stay at a campsite in the beautiful tea-growing mountains around Ywangan. The first day is a full-day trek in the mountains through some tea villages and a rhododendron forest. We'll enjoy a picnic with some campsite cooking under the stars, as well as a delicious village-style Danu dinner. We'll also experience the local tea growing culture of the Danu people, and can pick some local organic tea.

Tour highlights

- Experience a beautiful campsite with amazing views
- Trek through tea plantations and a rhododendron forest
- Have a picnic with some campsite cooking under the stars



Tour 3 (cont.):

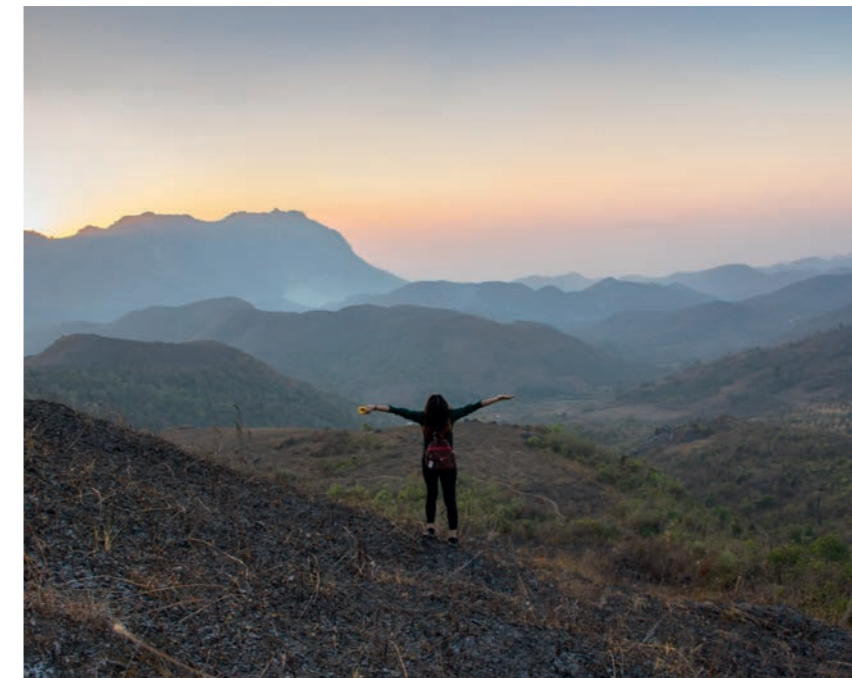
Itinerary (ca. 6 hours)

DAY 1

- After breakfast it is an hour's drive to the base camp village. We'll explore the village, visit family-run tea plantations and farms before starting our trek
- The trek leads up the mountain, the second highest in Southern Shan State. Along the way we will have a traditional Danu picnic lunch
- Following lunch we will pass some tea farms and walk through a beautiful rhododendron forest. Once we arrive at the summit (at 7,752 feet or 2,362 metres) we will have plenty of time to enjoy the sunset
- Our day ends at the campsite with an outdoor dinner under the stars

DAY 2

- After breakfast our way leads down the mountain and offers some beautiful scenery along the way
- Back in the base camp village, we'll visit a solar-powered tea drying mini-factory and learn about the local tea making process. There will be also time for some tea tasting
- We'll enjoy a traditional Danu village-style lunch before returning to Ywangan





Teatime for the Buddha



If you want to overcome your difficulties, offer a cup of green tea to the Buddha and then drink it

ASTROLOGER'S ADVICE FROM
AN ANCIENT SCRIPTURE



The tea-farmers of Pain Ne' Pin

The scenery is typical for the Southern Shan State: A dirt road winds through the mountains, stunning views open up over and over again. But Ma Swe Swe Aung from the village of Pain Ne' Pin doesn't have leisure time to enjoy this rural idyll, she is busy harvesting tea. It is a sunny November morning. The sky is clear and the air still chilly - at around 1,500m above sea level the temperature can drop below 10°C at night. On the leaves the morning dew shines like pearls in the sunlight.

With baskets made of rattan on the seat Ma Swe Swe steers the moped along narrow paths to her tea field in the hills. And soon she starts with light hands: two leaves and a bud here, two leaves and a bud there. It is hard to follow her quick movements. This way she works one bush after the other, her baskets fill up quickly. After a while the 22-year old returns to her home with her moped packed full. As the sun is slowly reaching its peak, she spreads the tea leaves on bamboo mats placed on the ground around her house to dry her harvest. And then it is time to prepare lunch for her family.

A family affair

As Ma Swe Swe explains, “My grandparents grew tea only for themselves, but since my father’s time, producing tea is our main family income”. She is not alone: There are about 260 families living in Pain Ne’ Pin, most of them belong to the Palaung tribe, and all of them cultivate tea. Some supplement their income with orange too, like Ma Swe Swe whose fields are dotted with orange trees between the tea bushes. A generation earlier it was different. Back then, most families were planting mainly Thanaq-hpeq trees (*Cordia dichotoma*) whose round leaves are used as wrap for the cheroots.



“

My grandparents grew tea only for themselves, but since my father’s time, producing tea is our main family income



A life for tea

The daily routine in Pain Ne’ Pin is visibly dominated by tea, which farmers can harvest nine months a year. Only between December and early March do they have more free time, used for example for their biannual meditation retreats in a Buddhist monastery nearby. Their days are not only filled plucking the leaves, but also by roasting, grinding and drying (green tea) or putting the leaves in bags (for wet tea fermentation). This is mainly done in their homes.

Obviously the making of tea is quite a laborious matter, yet somewhat profitable. For example Ma Swe Swe Aung can

produce nearly one tonne of tea per season, which she either sells as green tea for 2,500-3,800 Kyat per kilogramme, or as pickled tea for 1,250-2,200 Kyat per kilogramme.

However, the yield depends a lot on the weather. If it is too hot and dry, the leaves will not grow; if it is too wet, the leaves will quickly start to rot. Like everywhere in the world, weather extremes have increased in the Southern Shan State over the years, making the farmers more vulnerable. Climate change is clearly felt. Sometimes the only thing that helps is prayer.



Tea instead of Thanaq-hpeq

Since the age of twenty, 54-year old Daw Sein has cultivated tea at her 0.8 hectare field along with her family. “Previously our main income was made selling Thanaq-hpeq leaves to the cheroot manufacturers, but getting firewood became more and more difficult due to deforestation”, Daw Sein remembers. Since the leaves for the cheroots are steamed in order to become smooth, a lot of firewood was needed. “Therefore we changed to grow tea and oranges, and these are now our main income”, she explains. It helped that the tea business became much more profitable, with two trading hubs - Kalaw, just 7.5km south and Aung Ban - within easy reach. Today most families own a motorbike which makes transport much easier. Also the habit of drinking and eating tea grew among the Myanmar people over the years meaning higher demand for the tasty leaves.

Tea for the spirits

How deeply rooted tea is in the Palaung culture and religion can be seen at many occasions. For example at the beginning of a new season. This is when the villagers from Pain Ne’ Pin put some rice and tea leaves in the corners of their fields. In doing so, they hope that the nature spirits will take care of the field and spare them from crop failure and disease. Similar rituals are applied when a family member gets sick; the villagers wrap some rice and tea in banana leaves and put the offering either in the forest or a special place outside the village. By practising this custom they hope that the sick person will quickly recover. Tea is also used for the annual prayer ceremony for good weather and health. And to solve any kind of problem, the village elders have this advice: make a cup of tea, offer it to the Buddha, meditate for a while and then drink the cup of tea.



Processing tea, proposing to girls

In pre-smartphone times at nights there were not many choices for leisure in Pain Ne' Pin. Back then, the evenings were usually filled with sitting around the fireplace in the kitchen, sorting the tea leaves according to size and quality, and chatting with friends. And it was the perfect opportunity to meet girls or boys, talk to them - and to maybe fall in love. No wonder that tea became an important element for the various dating and wedding rituals. For example, when a young man visits the house of a girl for whom he feels some affection. There he will be offered tea. And if she likes him as well, she will put tea leaves tenderly into the palms of his hands. A small package of tea is offered as a wedding invitation to guests, especially to elders, in exchange for their blessings. And when the guests finally arrive at the wedding, they are greeted and receive a spoon of tea leaves into their hands. By eating it, they send their best wishes to the bridal couple. That the young couple leads a happy and healthy life might also be thanks to tea. As a proverb from Mandalay says: "If you drink tea again and again, you will gain respect".

“

If you drink tea again
and again, you will gain
respect

A PROVERB FROM
MANDALAY

Glossary

Ahlu-laphet: "Almsgiving tea"; fermented tea, offered together with peas, peanuts, fried garlic, toasted sesame and crushed dried shrimps.

Camellia sinensis: Tea plant species, which belongs to the genus "Camellia", and is distributed worldwide in the two dominating sub-groups "var. sinensis" and "var. assamica".

Camellia irrawadiensis: Tea plant species, which is mainly distributed in Northern and Eastern Myanmar as well as in the Chinese province Yunnan.

Cheroots: Burmese cigar, wrapped with either Thanaq hpeq or corn leaves and filled with tobacco.

Danu: Ethnic group, which lives mainly in the area between Kalaw, Heho, Pinaya and Ywangan; mainly Buddhists, they belong to the Tibeto Burman language family.

Laphet-so: Pickled tea.

Laphet-thoke: Salad with fermented tea leaves and other ingredients.

Laphet yay: Boiled black tea served with evaporated and sweetened condensed milk.

Laphet Yay Sai: Myanmar term for tea shop, which is a cultural and culinary institution all over the country.

Palaung: Ethnic group known by the Shan name "Palaung", also called "Ta'ang" and Deang-zu (in Chinese). As part of the Mon-Khmer language family, they are found in various sub-groups and clusters around Shan State, but also in the Chinese province Yunnan and northern Thailand. Being Buddhists, they developed a strong animistic belief system.

Shennong: "Divine Farmer"; legendary Chinese emperor and inventor of tea, who lived according to tradition from 2737 to 2697 BCE.

Thanaq hpeq: Cordia dichotoma; tree growing in the Shan State, whose round leaves are used as wrap for the cheroots.

Yay nway chan: Plain tea with green or black leaves.

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