

AN EXTINCT VOLCANO OF SPIRITS

Experiences | Bagan



OVERVIEW

Perhaps one of Myanmar's most intriguing indigenous traditions is the worship of nats. Divided between 37 Great Nats, these are the spirits of notorious individuals whose time on earth ended with a not so pleasant death. Venturing 50 kilometres southeast of Bagan, you'll learn everything you need to know as we explore the extinct volcano where Myanmar's patron saints can be found enshrined. There will also be opportunity to stop at a palm toddy plantation en route.



PACE

Easy going



TOUR PERIOD

Half day (and a bit)



HIGHLIGHTS

- Spend the day exploring the ancient capital's sparsely populated outskirts.
- Visit a toddy farm to learn about the versatile nature of this tropical tree.
- Climb to the summit of an extinct volcano, where a glorious 360 degree panoramic awaits.
- Learn about one of the least documented religious practises in the world.



ITINERARY IN DETAIL

This morning we'll drive 50 kilometres southeast of Bagan to Mount Popa, an extinct volcano that juts out from the region's mostly flat surrounds at 1518 metres above sea level.

Breaking up the journey, we'll stop briefly at a toddy plantation to learn about the versatile *arecaceae* palm tree. More famously known for the production of palm wine, an alcoholic beverage made from the tree's sap, the tree can also be used for the production of jaggery, furniture, baskets, mats and roofing. The female tree even produces a fruit, the seeds of which can be mashed into a juice to make a type of custard. To learn more about these varied production techniques, we'll meet with one of the entrepreneurs behind this thriving local business and sample the palm wine for ourselves.

Continue driving until we reach the base of Taung Kalat, a sheer-sided rocky outcrop, which rises 657-metres above sea level. Sitting peacefully on top is a Buddhist monastery, which can be reached by climbing the 889 stepped stairways that wrap around. Confusingly, Taung Kalat is often referred to as Mount Popa, but the real Mount Popa is the tall mountain that looms over it nearby. The hill itself is what is known as a volcanic plug, an object created when magma hardens. Due to the frequent misunderstanding, the volcano is sometime referred to as Taung Ma Gyi, or 'Mother Hill', which we guess makes sense seeing as it effectively gave birth to the landform.

Just opposite from the monastery's entrance you'll find a small museum, where deities of the 37 'Great Nats' can be found enshrined. Formalised by King Anawrahta (1044-1077), these have been worshipped in conjunction with Buddhism for over one thousand years and are believed to be the spirits of notorious individuals who all met violent deaths.

One of the most popular nats is U Ko Gyi Kyaw, or Min Kyawzwa. Although there are several interpretations of his life and death, the most popular depicts him as a drunk, gambler, cock fighter and skilled horse rider who is believed to have been killed by the spirits of the two men he murdered. A lot of Burmese (especially in rural areas) believe that spirits such as U Ko Gy Kyaw grant favours to those who show respect, or make life difficult for those who do not; this explains why you'll find many bottles of rum and cigarettes at his shrine.

Having learnt the stories of a select few nats, proceed to the entrance of the monastery, where we'll begin our ascent up the 889 steps. En route, there will be opportunity to stop at various shrine and catch your breath.

Whilst Taung Kalat is famed for being the home of the 37 Great Nats, these sacred spirits also share the mountain with hundreds of wild macaques. These furry locals may look cute and friendly, but their overly inquisitive nature means they're likely to target any loose items that may be on display (especially cameras, glasses, food or bottles of water). Our advice would be to hide these and stay well clear of the babies, as tempting as it will be to take a photograph. There is also a chance they may leap on your shoulders; if this happens, it is imperative that you remain calm and continue walking as normal. They will be sure to jump off eventually.

Another downside when it comes to keeping monkeys as pets is cleaning up the large amount of excrement they leave behind. At one time, the Buddhist hermit U Khandi (1868 – 1949) is said to have maintained the entire stairways, but now that arduous task is shared by full-time volunteers. As you make your way up, it is likely these individuals will target you for money, but having already paid an entrance fee, we feel there is no need for you to pay any extra. When asked for a “donation”, please smile politely and make your way towards the next flight of steps. Due to the large number of volunteers, it is likely you will be asked a few times.

Once Taung Kalat’s summit has been reached, catch your breath whilst taking in a magnificent 360-degree panoramic of the surrounding countryside and Taung Ma Gyi; on a clear day, it is possible to see as far as Bagan and the Irrawaddy River. There are also a labyrinth of shrines to explore, which offers a great chance to brush shoulders and naturally interact with local pilgrims as they go about paying respects.

Having surely worked up an appetite, we’ll make our way back down the mountain for a spot of lunch (the cost of this is not included). There are two options; local, or European. With no shortage of tea shops and beer stations around the base, the first option is easy. The second will require us making a reservation at Mount Popa Resort, which is easy to do but you will end up paying a premium. Saying that, we you consider the resort gives you access to one of the best views of Taung Kalat (that doesn’t involve a six to eight hour return hike up Taung Ma Gyi!), we feel the price is more than justified.



INCLUSIONS

- Transportation to/from hotel in a shared vehicle
- English speaking tour guide (for other languages, please enquire)
- Mount Popa entrance fee
- Drinking water and hand towel



EXCLUSIONS

- Any meals
- Accommodation
- Bagan zone fee
- Any other service not mentioned



NOTES

- The Mount Popa Nat Festival takes place a few times each year; the exact date tends to change and this is largely dependent on the amount of funding raised. We will advise of this this as soon as we know. In the case your tour coincides, please be warned that it will be extremely busy and we may be required to make alterations to the suggested arrangements.
- Taung Kalat is home to hundreds of wild macaque; we would advise hiding items such as food, drinks, cameras, mobile phones, hats and glasses.

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