

Cities Myanmar

## A Trail through Vintage Yangon

Exploring Myanmar's past through architectural relics.



*The Yangon City Hall is a blend of traditional Burmese and European architectural styles, with a tiered roof and Burmese temple motifs. Photo by: Ashit Desai/Moment Unreleased/Getty Images*

BY Kalpana Sunder POSTED ON April 18, 2019

It reminds me of Kolkata in the sixties. The streets are lined with grand fin-de-siècle buildings in a variety of styles: pastel stucco facades, and red brick buildings with wrought iron balconies covered with grime and mildew, plants sprouting from their bricks. Some lie under scaffolding, others are covered with blue tarpaulin. To stroll through the streets of Yangon (erstwhile Rangoon), is to turn back the pages of its history. The phantoms of the past seem to linger around every corner.

Myanmar's largest city was laid out by British military engineers Alexander Fraser and William Montgomerie in 1852, as a garden city in a geometric grid around the Sule Pagoda. Because of the dictatorship that lasted until very recently, and the country's forced isolation, many colonial buildings remain intact, showcasing a wealth of architectural styles from art deco, to Queen Anne, to neoclassical with Asian motifs and influences.

I'm on a heritage walk through the port city's downtown area with Wai Linn of Yangon Walks. "British rule till 1948 gave rise to many grand edifices that mixed colonial styles of architecture with local materials, like Burmese teak," Wai says. "Today, Yangon has the densest concentration of colonial era buildings in Asia."

The city had a multicultural merchant population—Armenians, Jews, Indians, English, Scots—and they have all left their mark on its urban fabric. "The best materials from across the world, like marble from Italy and iron columns from Manchester, were imported to construct buildings," Wai adds.

We start our walk from **Maha Bandula Park**, with its greenery and giant obelisk commemorating Myanmar's independence from the British in 1948. Flanked by City Hall, the Sule Pagoda, and the red-brick High Court, the garden was originally a reclaimed swamp and was called Fytche Square, after a chief commissioner of Burma. Today children play on the lawns and couples sit on benches, taking selfies.

Across the road is the sprawling **City Hall**, on the site of what was once the British Ripon Dance Hall. The City Hall was redesigned in 1926 by Burmese architect Sithu U Tin with a tiered roof in a blend of traditional Burmese and European styles. It incorporates motifs from local temples, such as peacocks, Naga serpents, and columns.

Next to City Hall looms the classic **Rowe and Company building**, built in 1910. One of the glitziest supermarkets of its era, it was called the "Harrods of the East," and sold the latest fashions, crockery and glassware, cutlery, watches and clocks. Today it houses the AYA bank, and is one of the city's best maintained heritage buildings.

On the other side of the park is the Queen Anne style **High Court**, built in 1914, with stone and bricks, towers and turrets. The clock tower is lit up at night. I hear from my guide that there are plans to open a museum and a national cultural theatre for puppets here.

We walk past tiny kiosks selling condensed milk tea, sugarcane juice and exotic fruit, to the Edwardian **Government Telegraph Office**, designed by architect John Begg in 1917. The office revolutionised communication in the country, but building it on swampy ground was a challenge, and piles of timber had to be sunk across the foundations. Inside, under creaking ceiling fans are wooden windows for transacting business, as well as a small exhibition of vintage equipment like typewriters and cash registers.

A few blocks away, at the intersection of Bo Aung Kyaw Road and Thein Phyu Road is one of the city's most stunning colonial buildings, despite being wrapped in barbed wire. The turreted red-brick **Secretariat**, with its massive courtyards, an atrium and Victorian wrought-iron staircases, is a time capsule of history. The building opened in 1905 and occupies an entire city block. "Major events in the country's history have happened within its walls," says Wai. After the British left, this was called the Minister's Office, and it was the scene of the assassination of General Aung San, the hero of Myanmar's independence, along with six of his ministers. Fenced off from the public for many years, the building is now being restored, with plans to convert it into a museum and cultural centre by 2019.

Not all buildings have been so lucky. Since 1990, many structures in downtown Yangon have been gone under the developer's ball. Many buildings that used to house government departments have been vacant since 2006, when the regime moved the capital to Naypyidaw and put them up for sale. "In the past few years, with the efforts of bodies like the Yangon Heritage Trust, restoration attempts are on," says Wai.

We walk back to **Pansodan Road**, lined with some of the city's most iconic buildings. "Stretching north from the busy port, it was here that sailors would visit shops, banks and other offices when they first arrived," explains Wai. One building that really evokes the cosmopolitan character of old Rangoon is the domed **Lokanat Building** (originally called the Sofaer Building) with its Corinthian columns and balustrades, on the corner of the Pansodan Street and Merchant Street.

The building was commissioned by Isaac Sofaer, a Jewish immigrant from Baghdad in the early 1930s. Sofaer traded in luxury goods from around the world—from German beer to English candy. The building had a Viennese coffee house and a Filipino hairdresser. It had steel beams from Scotland and the city's first electronic lifts.

Today, it houses a guesthouse, a few government offices, and residential apartments. I walk up the old teak staircase, past laundry drying on carelessly strung lines and a makeshift tea shop, to the **Lokanat Art Gallery** on the first floor. Under my feet are the original ceramic tiles, with patterns of green, gold, and lapis lazuli imported from Manchester, England!

One of my favourite structures on this stretch is the stately **Inland Water Authority building** with its colonnaded facade, built by the Scottish-owned Irrawady Flotilla Company, which once had the largest fleet of steamers in the world. Wai points out the doors and windows hidden behind columns, designed to keep the building cool.

Further up is the grand **Agricultural Development Bank**, an art deco beauty from 1930 that looks like a vault, with an imposing bronze door, gargoyles on the roof, and a curved canopy ceiling lined with mirrors. I turn into Yangon's riverfront boulevard, Strand Road, which is lined with the stately Custom House and the Strand Hotel. The latter was opened in 1901 by the Armenian Sarkis brothers, who owned the Raffles Hotel in Singapore.





It is speculated that the former High Court (top left) might be converted to a museum; General Aung San, the hero of Myanmar's independence, was assassinated at the Secretariat (bottom right); An obelisk (top right) at Maha Bandula Park commemorates Myanmar's independence from the British; The Strand Hotel (bottom left) has hosted famous literary and royal guests. Photos by: Lisa Strachan/iStock/ Getty Images (high court), Tuomas Lehtinen/shutterstock (obelisk), Luca Invernizzi Tetto/AGF RM/ Dinodia Photo Library (painting), Ulana Switucha/agefotostock/Dinodia Photo Library (hotel)



The Government Telegraph Office revolutionised communication in Myanmar. Photo by: Phuong D. Nguyen/shutterstock



With a buzzing market scene (top left) and rickshaw pullers (top right) manoeuvring down the streets, Yangon feels like Kolkata in the sixties. Photo by: Nathalie Cuvelier/robertharding/ Dinodia Photo Library (market), Athikhom Saengchai/shutterstock (man)

The **Strand Hotel** has hosted celebrities through the ages, from Somerset Maugham to Rudyard Kipling and Noel Coward. It was restored in the 1990s to its original state, with teak wood and marble floors, sparkling chandeliers, mahogany furniture and Victorian style bathroom fittings.

I finish my walk and head to the nearby **Rangoon Teahouse**, which opened in 2015 in a refurbished colonial building on Pansodan Street. Against a chic black-and-white backdrop, the teahouse offers an upmarket take on the local tradition of tea and snacks. Over my cup of strong tea with condensed milk, I watch trendy youngsters and suit-clad expats. History and the present seem to segue effortlessly in Yangon.

([www.freeyangonwalks.com](http://www.freeyangonwalks.com); Regular walks are free, customised walk from \$20/Rs1,400.)



**Kalpana Sunder** is a travel writer, blogger, and a Japanese language specialist from Chennai. In her search for a good travel story, she has snowmobiled in Lapland, walked with the lions in Zimbabwe, and flown in a microlight over the Victoria Falls.

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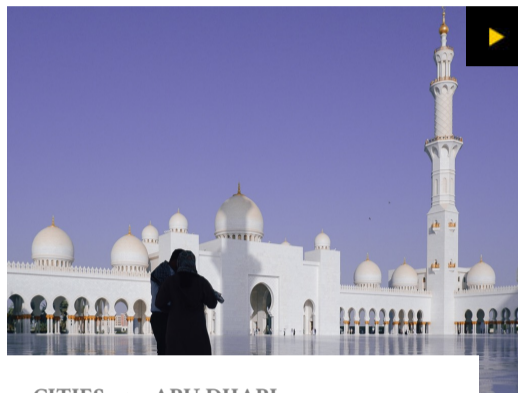
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