Myanmar celebrates its diversity, unity

Today, Jan. 4, 2011, Myanmar celebrates the 63rd anniversary of its Independence Day.

Myanmar is a union of about 135 ethnic groups with their own languages and dialects. The major races are Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Chin, Bamar, Mon, Rakhine and Shan.

Such diversity helps to make Myanmar a land of festivals and there's one for every month of the year. Most festivals are cultural and religious. The majority are celebrated nationwide while a few are distinctly regional. The dates of the festivals and special events are determined by the lunar calendar.

Land of adventure

Myanmar sits at the crossroads of Asia's great civilizations — India and China — and looks out onto the vast Indian Ocean next to Thailand. One of Southeast Asia's largest and most diverse countries, Myanmar stretches from the sparkling islands of the Andaman Sea in the south right up into the Eastern Himalayan mountain range.

To this day Myanmar remains one of the most mysterious and undiscovered destinations in the world. It is a land of breathtaking beauty and charm.

Royal lineage: Mandalay Royal Palace was the first palace built in Mandalay by King Mindon when he moved his capital from Amarapura in 1861 to fulfill a prophecy.

What can the casual visitor therefore expect upon arrival and why should one embark on such a journey in the first place?

Myanmar offers all the traditional delights of Asia in one fascinating country. Virgin jungles, snowcapped mountains and pristine beaches, combined with a rich and glorious heritage spanning more than 2,000 years.

Ancient relics: Bagan contains over 2,000 edifices, temples and pagodas representing the rich cultural heritage of the 11th-13th century.

Spectacular monuments and ancient cities attest to a vibrant culture that is home to 135 different ethnic groups.

The country's tourism infrastructure boasts five-star properties, intimate boutique hotels and family guesthouses in all the major centers, as well as stunning mountain and beach resorts. Myanmar also boasts one of the lowest tourist crime records in the world, so visitors can rest assured their holiday will be carefree from start to finish.

Wherever you go in Myanmar, whether it be cruising down the mighty Ayeyarwady River in style, drifting high above the ancient city of Bagan in a hot-air balloon or searching for that elusive tiger on the back of an elephant, there is always a feeling of adventure.

With modern domestic airlines upgrading and expanding their networks, new and exciting destinations off the beaten track are gradually being opened. From mountain trekking and rafting in the far north to world-class diving in the Mergui Archipelago. But above all, Myanmar offers the warmest welcome in Asia.

Eco-tourism, adventures

Myanmar retains approximately 50 percent of its natural forest cover, and with strictly enforced protection is on the way to becoming a haven for eco-tourism and true adventure travel.

In the far south in the Mergui Archipelago, great care is being taken to preserve one of the last untouched tropical underwater paradises, which is attracting attention as a world-class diving destination. Meanwhile, right at the other end of this amazing land of contrast, cool temperate forests dramatically give way to pristine snowcapped mountains and a land of dwindling hill tribes, and rare and exotic wildlife.

Yangon

Yangon, the cosmopolitan capital of Myanmar, maintains its colonial charm with wide tree-lined avenues, tranquil lakes and gracious turn-of-the-century architecture. The magnificent Shwedagon Pagoda dominates the city skyline while at street level Yangon is a paradise for hunting out a variety of exotic arts and crafts.

Of particular interest in the many shops of Bogyoke Market (previously known as Scott Market), and of world renown, are Myanmar's precious stones — rubies, sapphires and jade. At night, Chinatown comes alive with its pungent aromas and delicious street food.

Mandalay

The principal cultural and economic city of upper Myanmar, and former royal capital, Mandalay evokes images of a romantic bygone era. The royal palace and its impressive surrounding moat sits at the foot of the imposing Mandalay Hill. Positioned on the banks of the mighty Ayeyarwady River, Mandalay lies within easy reach of former colonial hill stations, ancient cities and other cultural attractions.

Inle Lake

Just a short flight from Yangon in the cool green highlands of Shan State and yet seemingly worlds apart from the rest of Myanmar, lies Inle Lake in an area of outstanding natural beauty.

The lake sits at a pleasant 880 meters above sea level, and is famous for its leg rowers, floating markets and prolific bird life. In this unique wetland environment, whole villages sit on floating islands on the lake. Colorful hill tribes inhabit the surrounding fertile valleys and forested mountaintops, and their hand-woven silks are a specialty of the region.

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Golden landmark: Shwedagon Pagoda, a 98-meter-high, gilded stupa in Yangon, is a major tourist attraction in Myanmar. MYANMAR EMBASSY

Working toward a democratic nation

Myanmar has been exerting sustained efforts to achieve greater development over the years. With the successful holding of the multiparty general election Nov. 7, 2010, it is hoped that Myanmar will emerge as a modern developed democratic nation in the very near future.

Congratulations

to the People of the Union of Myanmar on the 63rd Anniversary of Their Independence Day

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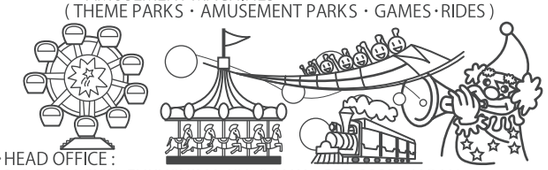

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