

GONE FISHING

Ngapali, Burma, offers sugar-sand beaches, glimpses at the old ways, and little else—for now. By Diana Hubbell



Fishing may not be my calling in life.

I'm out at sea on a hand-hewn Burmese vessel painted a cheerful shade of green. Kyi Kaung, a boy of maybe 13, snoozes across the prow, his skinny adolescent limbs draped over the edge. Captain Zayar sits on the starboard side with a tin spool of baited thread, waiting.

After a few minutes of peering through clear waters straight at the ocean floor, I abandon my crude lure for flippers and a snorkel mask. It's mesmerizing below the surface, where I see blizzards of damselfish and opal-iridescent parrot fish swim languidly along.

By the time I pry myself away from the underwater spectacle, Zayar has rounded up the first of several fat groupers we'll have for lunch. We have to throw my first catch of the day back to Davy Jones—"Very poisonous!"—but Kyi has roused himself and reels in a few white snappers. Our trophies flop frantically in the hull, shimmering, doomed, delicious.

We head to a speck of sand too slight to justify the term "island," to a few umbrella-shaded tables that could barely be called a "restaurant." Known as **Lobster** (95-9/421-756-777; cooking fee K4,000), the place consists of a bare-bones kitchen and a healthy supply of rum. Like **Angel** (95-9/250-896-816; dinner for two K11,000) and **Green Umbrella** (95-9/421-753-814; dinner for two K12,000) both back on the mainland, it's one of several eateries I encounter with suspiciously tacky names and incongruously excellent food. For about four bucks, the staff grill and deep-fry our catch. I sip from a freshly cracked coconut and wish I could be marooned.

Even as Rangoon erects shopping malls and Inle Lake scrambles to build hotels, this palm-freckled coast has somehow stayed sleepy. Yes, resorts increasingly line the bay, but the islands just offshore remain craggy, densely green and wild. The people of Teik Taw and other fishing villages can't be bothered with tourists; they have real work to do. The men sail out for three weeks at a time with a pair of boats, one rigged up with 40-watt bulbs to lure prey from the deep, the other, a net. The women, their faces smeared with golden *thanaka* and their longyi salt-crusted from wading, man the land. There's a



Clockwise from top left: Traditional fishing boats rigged with lights to attract their prey; women at prayer with *thanaka*-streaked faces; the view from Ngapali Bay Villas & Spa; preparing rice the old way; Neptune's bounty makes for excellent eating.



COURTESY OF NGAPALI BAY VILLAS & SPA (5)

timelessness to this place, a rhythm of life that is only now, only reluctantly, beginning to change.

“This is what Thailand must have been like 20 years ago,” says Gilles Flores, general manager of **Ngapali Bay Villas & Spa** (ngapalibay.com; closed May 15–October 1, 2015; villas from US\$275), where I’m staying. There’s no need to hide on the beautiful bespoke teak- and antique-filled resort with that sweeping sandscape lacking the usual tourist trappings or, indeed, any bothers at all.

Still, it’s hard to turn down a coconut-sea-salt scrub and a *thanaka* facial at the spa. The former leaves my skin glowing for days, while the latter makes it clear why women here have been using this fragrant ground bark for 2,000 years. When I try to take it off, my masseuse shakes her head, “beautiful,” and points to her own gilded cheeks.

Local traditions influence more than just the wellness here. From the 400-plus pieces of pottery fired in Rangoon to the curtains handwoven in Pakokku to the bronze works forged in Mandalay, almost everything has its roots in Burmese craftsmanship. Even the 108 oil paintings scattered throughout are specially commissioned works by Khin Maung Yin, one of the country’s most influential abstract artists, completed shortly before his death last year.

And then there’s that vast natural canvas. All 32 villas face west, a fact you don’t appreciate until you’re confronted with enormous ocean-facing windows. It means sunrises are gentle, a pale creep of lavender into the sky, and sunsets shame every filtered Instagram imposter.

After I watch my final one collapse into burnished reds and oranges below the horizon, I head up the street to **Min Thu** (95-9/250-604-859; dinner for two K13,000) for supper. We are three, but we order for an army. A quintet of salads—tomato; slick-ripe avocado; pale papaya; a tangle of black octopus tentacles; and fermented tea-leaf—then coconut prawn curry, Rakhine-style. Finally, a snapper of Jules Verne proportions in all its sweetly charred glory.

“I never buy fish that’s already dead,” the charismatic owner Min Thu says. “I get up when it’s still dark to get to the market as soon as the boats come in. You have to know the right guys in order to get the good stuff—and I do.”

Everything is cooked the day it’s caught, often only an hour after it stops twitching. Recently, Min Thu has made a few modest concessions to modernization. He’s on TripAdvisor, where as of this writing he occupied Ngapali’s No. 1 spot; he’s added drink fridge and plans to spruce up the kitchen. When asked if he’ll switch to gas instead of his charcoal-fueled clay stoves, he’s appalled.

“Never.” It’s nice to know that some things won’t change. +