

Ngapali Beach – Waves of Change

By **Ben Hopkins** - October 26, 2016



As the monsoon season draws to a close, I fling aside my umbrella and set the controls for Ngapali Beach, a one-hour flight north west of Yangon in the Bay of Bengal, Rakhine State.

Touted as Myanmar’s premiere beach destination, I was half expecting a neon lit strip of garish resorts, jet ski outlets and bars playing bad music. What I find is tranquillity in a coconut shell: Two dozen or so evenly spaced, single floor boutique resorts tracing a 3.5 km stretch of smooth sand and rocky outcrops.

For now, at least, Ngapali Beach sits in a time capsule where tradition holds sway. Waves fit for surfing crash against a generous stretch of beach where ox carts occasionally wander by, local kids play football and fishermen set out their nets at dusk. Banana boats are mercifully banned and beachfront hawkers don’t really hawk, they just smile from a distance and point at the bucket of fruit balanced on their head or the shawls dangling from their arm.

When I arrive at my chosen destination, German run Bayview Resort, I’m greeted by the Resident Manager, Daniel Mista. “In early October the tourist season is still beginning,” says Daniel, by way of explaining why it’s so quiet, “the bookings will increase through November”.

That’s fine with me, my head’s still rattling with the clatter of Yangon. Bayview provides spacious bungalows so close to the crashing waves they almost spray the front veranda, there’s also a decent size swimming pool, spa and one of the few beach side restaurant bars on Ngapali Beach. Those looking for rock ‘n’ roll around the clock will be disappointed, Ngapali Beach is a tranquil getaway from the bustle of Yangon.



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The resort’s executive chef, U Tin Tun, offers to lead me on a guided tour of the local market in the town of Thandwe, nestled in low lying hills three miles inland. Rain bounces off the tarpaulin covered market as we enter. The air is pungent with fish paste and the shelves are laden with fruit, veg, herbs and spices. In one corner a team of old men split betel nuts with fearsome clippers designed for the task, while in another a corpulent fishmonger spreads the guts of this morning’s catch across the stone floor. “We don’t buy our fish here,” U Tin Tun assures me, much to my relief. “It’s delivered straight from the boat”.

Later that night, in Bayview’s seafront restaurant bar, Tin Tun conjures up a bowl of his legendary Rakhine Fish Soup, blending the herbs and spices of the market with some of the finest seafood I’ve ever tasted. On the southern tip of Ngapali Beach sits the fishing village of Gyiek Taw. Every night fishing boats set sail to return their catch at dawn. What the restaurant’s serve up is very often that day’s catch – seafood lovers will be hooked.

It’s no secret that Rakhine State continues to suffer the blows of ethnic unrest but in Ngapali Bay, for the most part, the waters have remained calm. In the morning I hop on a bicycle and pedal to the fishing village of Gyiek Taw. The recently paved lane meanders through swaying palms that occasionally open up to reveal the crashing waves from the Bay of Bengal. Many of the resorts I pass are coming out of monsoon hibernation, pruning their plants and flinging open their doors.

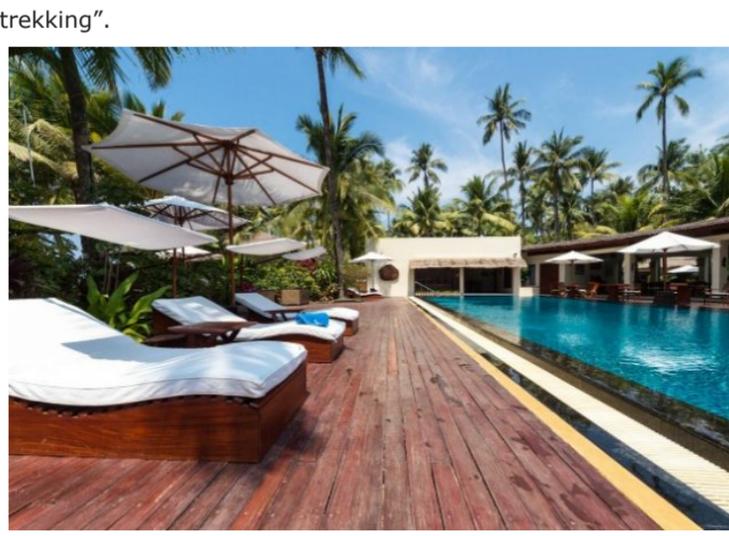


Kids play football on Ngapali Beach at dusk.

The fishing village of Gyiek Taw offers a glimpse of local life. Women with umbrellas aloft pedal elegantly through town while kids play football and dogs slobber in the shade. Arrive at dawn and I’m told the sight of fisherman bringing home their catch is a sight to behold. At midday the sun is melting the tarmac and the action slows down somewhat. In one stretch a canny pharmacist has cleverly placed his dispensary between a whisky shack and betel nut stall – bad liver, gum disease and a possible cure all wrapped into one.

Later that night I meet Gunther, a 42-year-old Costa Rican chef who married a local and has made Ngapali Beach his home for the past four years, setting up Ngapali’s first and (up till now) only independent eco-tourism adventure company, called Ngapali Concierge.

“This place reminds me of my home when I was young,” he says over a beer in Bayview’s restaurant bar. In the late 80’s, tourism in Costa Rica began to boom and is today considered a model of eco-tourism. Gunther, who also has a young son is hoping Ngapali tourism will follow the same path, but stresses it can only happen if locals and hoteliers work together. “There are hills for trekking and mountain-biking, rivers and lakes for kayaking and rafting and an hour out of town elephant trekking”.



Luxury at Bayview Resort

In the past year or so blue print plans outlining proposals for tourism in Ngapali Beach have been circulated online, proposing rows of 10 to 15 story buildings. No doubt delivering a bounty for local landowners and jobs for the community but sending a chill down the spine for people who care about the environment.

At present, nothing has been officially confirmed concerning Ngapali’s future development but one thing is for certain, the waves of change have arrived and barring unforeseen events tourism will continue to boom. What hangs in the balance is what direction it will take – toward one of ecotourism where the locals prosper and nature is preserved or an all-out drive for high rises and a quick buck for the select few.

Right now, Ngapali Beach is tranquillity personified – catch it while you can.

For more info on Bayview go to: www.bayview-myanmar.com