In spite of a slow down, annual tourist arrivals to Myanmar are close to exceeding an all-time high: this is partly thanks to a successful government drive—when you consider numbers alone—to attract more visitors from China, Hong Kong, Macau, South Korea and Japan. What we’re still seeing however is an overwhelming reliance on Yangon, Bagan, Mandalay, Inle Lake and Ngapali. For the whole country to benefit from tourism, it is essential that we, as responsible travellers, start to think about developing and promoting destinations outside of the so-called “Big Four”.

This will in-turn provide major socioeconomic benefits to some of the country’s poorest and most inaccessible regions: benefits such as the creation of jobs; increased focus on education and hospitality training; the development of new industries; the upgrading and maintenance of existing community infrastructure; access to clean, reliable and safe utilities such as water and electricity; the possible avoidance of a brain drain effect; a renewed appreciation of traditional practises, beliefs and skills; the chance to meet and interact with people from all walks of life… and the list goes on.

Due to the fragile nature of these typically more remote destinations, it is vital that any development is carefully managed and the community’s way of life is not compromised as a result: no thanks to issues such as poorly-serviced accommodation and transportation facilities; a lack of established industry professionals; waste management problems and ethnic conflict, this is much easier said than done.

Rather than rushing in to create a ‘pop-up’ community based tourism project—which in most cases will have been set up without proper community involvement or consultation—we (the industry) must seek to reach out, take advice and work closely with organisations that have experience in dealing with such sensitive developmental matters; organisations such as the International Trade Centre (ITC) for example, who have a proven track record in stimulating socioeconomic development in remote regions through their in-depth, well-thought out and expertly coordinated inclusive tourism programmes.

Get community involved with ITC

(Featured image: a community-based guide in Htay Ko)
ITC’s inaugural project in Myanmar was Kayah State, a region that rarely blipped up on the tourist radar, but showed high potential for development, especially when it came to cultural and community-based touring. Starting roundtable talks with government officials, Kayah-based tourism entrepreneurs, guides and local community members in early 2014, the once sleepy state now has a strong offering attracting domestic, regional and international tourists with its products, services and a well-organised setup.

As a direct result of ITC’s involvement, Kayah State has seen:

- Eight new products developed, including six cultural tourism tours and two creative experiences
- International tourist arrivals to Kayah State increase by 130% from 3,900 to 9,000 and domestic tourist visits more than doubled from 14,000 to 33,500 between 2015 and 2017
- Tourist spending in Kayah State increase by 400%
- Kayah tourism and tourism-related enterprises increase their overall income by 83%
- From 2016 to August 2018, a yearly average of USD 8,000 of extra income was generated in Pan Pet and Hta Nee Lah Le
- Jobs increase by 11% among Myanmar tour operators and Kayah SMEs – additionally, the project created around 90 part-time jobs in Kayah communities
- Peace brokered between the Tatmadaw and the region’s multiple armed ethnic groups: by facilitating dialogue and cooperation between ethnic groups and government authorities, the project has played an important role in bridging differences, building on and thereby ensuring income generation through tourism

(The information above was sourced from www.intracen.org)
To help this project succeed, Tour Mandalay has chosen to book all of our Kayah State services through a local tour operator, 9 Generation Force. Founded by a young, Loikaw-based entrepreneur, U Nay Moe Aung, this helps to ensure that all of our travellers are accompanied by a regionally-based guide, as opposed to one that’s travelled in many hours from a neighbouring state. These regional guides are then employing the services of a community-based guide, who are, in effect, the gatekeepers of the villages we recommend: rather than turning up unannounced, they carefully coordinate each visit, helping to ensure the encounter is natural and unforced. As an added bonus, they even speak the local dialect, which is essential if you’re planning to have an engaging conversation: even the Loikaw-based guides find it impossible to understand, so you can only imagine how difficult it would be for a guide that’s been assigned from out-of-state.
Using Kayah State as a model, ITC is now extending their support to Dawei, Tanintharyi’s regional capital. The ambitious plan will complement the current image of the Tanintharyi region as a coastal tourism destination, by developing community-related fishing experiences in the scenic village of Tizit; expand the perception of Tanintharyi as a high quality ecotourism destination, by developing CBT in Ka Lone Htha, an inland community with spectacular, forested mountains and rivers; and develop and promote historic Dawei’s rich potential for hands-on, cultural tourism activities.

At the same time, and by once again mirroring best practise gleaned from Kayah State, ITC met with 30 tourism stakeholders from Chin to host a study tour, in a move that, it hopes, will encourage the beautifully wild state to pioneer its own sustainable tourism development. As per Intracen’s website, “As a complement of the study tour, ITC tourism experts and Kayah Trainers of Trainees (ToT) will travel to Chin to check on progress and provide specific training on community trust building, tourism awareness raising and community study: the first steps of the CBT development cycle”. Once the tourism products reach an adequate standard, ITC will include them in its international promotion and marketing communication.
If you would like to get behind ITC’s work in Myanmar, you can do so by booking onto the following experiences:

**Artisans and Animists (Kayah State)**
Enjoy an action-packed day of sausage making, traditional weaving, animist culture, musical instruments and an oxcart ride at sunset to the scenic Seven Lakes.

**Finding Pan Pet (Kayah State)**
Famous for the Padaung matriarchs, whom decorate their necks with brass coils, the village of Pan Pet is an anthropologist’s treasure trove. Aiming to take you beyond ‘the rings’ and into the hearts of this close-knit community, this full-day tour features a range of activities including: cotton spinning, jewellery production, a jungle picnic, a mountain top pagoda hike and a good old-fashioned sing-a-long.

**A Colourful Wilderness (Kayah State)**
Travel deep into the mountain ranges south of Loikaw to the remote village of Htay Ko. Predominantly inhabited by the Kayaw tribe, easily distinguishable thanks to their brightly coloured pink garments, a trip here will be sure to suit the real adventure enthusiast, or those simply looking to get off the beaten track.

**Orchards, Forests and Rock Pools (Tanintharyi)**
Spend the day exploring Ka Lone Htha, an inland orchard community, nestled amidst verdant forest and rivers. Enjoy various community-led experiences including a short nature trail through luscious forest, a locally sourced riverside picnic, a ‘barefoot forest spa’, and a refreshing dip in a crystal clear, hidden rock pool.

**Time Out in Tizit (Tanintharyi)**
Accompanied by a community-based guide, try your hand at various traditional fishing techniques (tide dependant), before tucking into a locally prepared beach-side picnic under shade. With refreshing ocean waters just a stone’s throw away, packing a bathing suit and towel comes highly advised.