**Destination:** Kayah State

**Destination Climate:** Mild - generally warm & temperate

**State Borders:** Shan State, Kayin State & Thailand

**State Size:** 11,670 sq km / 4,506 sq miles

**State Capital:** Loikaw

**State Population:** 296,627 (2014)

**Destination Lineage:** 9 different tribes including Kayah, Kayan and Kayan (Padaung), but primarily inhabited by the Kayah group (also known as Red Karen), a Sino-Tibetan people

**Destination Languages:** Kayah Li, Myanmar/Burmese & limited English

**Religions:** Christianity (mostly Catholicism & Baptism), Buddhism & Animism

**How To Get There:** Kayah, Myanmar’s smallest state, is packed with diversity and potential for ‘off the beaten track’ experiences. To the north, Kayah borders Shan State; to the east, Thailand; to the south, Kayin/Karen State; and to the west, Kayin State. Newly opened to tourists, most visitors arrive in Loikaw, the state capital, by air from Yangon; by boat or road from Hpakant; or by road from Heho airport.

Myanmar with its cities and neighbouring countries
Places
Closed for over half a century, recently opened to tourists, and finally accessible by air and road, Kayah is one of Southeast Asia’s last frontiers for inspiring, authentic travel. Its tranquil yet appealing capital, Lokaw, is usually the base for visitors whereas local villages and hamlets offer the perfect opportunity to understand the traditional, tribal way of life. While visiting the museum depersonalizes knowledge of indigenous artifacts like the frog drum and tribal costumes, spending time with locals against a natural backdrop of forests and mountains enriches the soul. Visitors will enjoy breathtaking, unspilt views, especially in the south.

People
Kayah was known as Kamni State until late the 1990s, before it was renamed Kayah State. Its various tribes and clans also spread into neighbouring states, this, coupled with its remoteness and invisible ethnic texture has endowed Kayah and its populace with a fascinating heritage of historical intrigue. Myanmar’s smallest state is quite probably the most culturally diverse. Tourists can choose to simply enjoy local hospitality or delve deeper into its unique history by taking part in community-based tourism activities. Developed in select villages, they aim to enrich the visitor while also sustainably preserve the indigenous cultural heritage.

Traditions
Visitors will find Kayah’s lush landscapes and weave of cultures visually enchanting but what truly sets the destination apart is the opportunity to experience the enduring warmth of the people, their sense of humour and passion to share their rituals, crafts and music. Immerse yourself in their traditions by going to an animist temple, visiting totems, seeing a hunting shaman and shrine, shooting a catapult or tasting some local wine and sausages. A forest trek is a must; the state is rich in tea and bamboo so such natural resources are often used to make musical instruments, cooking utensils, household items and handicrafts.
PLACES

Take the road less travelled and experience local hospitality

Whether you enjoy visiting established, cultural sites, or heading “off the beaten track” to explore market towns and villages, rubbing shoulders with local folk Kayah’s colour and diversity will keep you interested. The joy of Kayah is its simplicity, authenticity and rich ethnicity.

Take time to slow down and watch the world go by, soak up the town’s relaxed atmosphere or meet village people. Be sure to sample some traditional delicacies like rice wine and sausage at the markets and local eateries. Alternatively, you can enjoy the countryside by trekking, having a jungle picnic or a Kayah barbecue at 7 Lakes.

LOIKAW

The capital of Kayah state, Loikaw (known by the Shan people) describes the dividing point between two mountains: Shwe Taung and Thi Thaung. Loi means mountain and Kaw means separate. The town’s most iconic site is Taung Kwe Pagoda, also known as Broken Mountain, which offers stunning panoramic views of the urban area and surrounding mountains. The reclaiming Buddha, the colourful, bustling market, the museum, churches and traditional craft and product workshops are also worth visiting.

VILLAGES

Exploring local communities is, for most visitors, the highlight of their trip to Kayah. Hta Nee La Lein and Pan Pet offer vibrant contrasts of customs, costume, languages and local dishes. Villagers can be shy at first but take time to share in their way of life and you find they are gentle, fun-loving and friendly folk. Hta Nee La Lein (45 min from Loikaw) and Pan Pet (1 hr from Loikaw) offer amazing insights into the Kayah and Kayan ethnic tribal culture.

NATURE

Kayah’s landscape is a tapestry of fields, rolling hills and lush forests. Visitors can now enjoy soft adventure trekking, accompanied by local guides. These inspiring people have lived with the forest since childhood. Their deep knowledge of wild foods, natural dyes, herbal medicines, and local legends helps to bring the relationships between nature and local people alive, adding insight to adventure. Additionally there are scenic lakes, waterfalls and caves to visit many of which remain very rural and untouched.
PEOPLE
A rich, colourfully authentic fabric woven from diversity and hospitality

Kayah state is home to nine distinct ethnic groups, which diversified and evolved from Karen culture. The biggest groups are the Kayah, Kayan, Brr, Lahta, and Yinbaw. Many tribes still practice their indigenous customs, handed down for centuries and dress in their traditional costumes. The Kayah are well known for their bright, red attire. The Kayan are one of Southeast Asia’s most recognisable ethnic groups, due to the practice of wearing bright, brass neck-rings. Today this practice continues but is becoming a rarer occurrence.

The people of Kayah were traditionally animists. They paid respect to spirits, through sophisticated ceremonies and rituals known in Kayah as “khephoo”. In return for protection, and to appease these spirits in the event of misfortune, villagers offered animals and food. Nowadays, it is more common for families to follow faiths like Catholicism, Christianity, Baptism and Buddhism. This religious diversity means tourists can observe local festivities, including Animist harvest festivals, Christmas, Easter and Buddhist New Year and Lent.
TRADITIONS
Discover customs preserved by isolation, rugged terrain and pride

For travellers seeking a deeper connection, Kayah’s charm is experienced in the warmth, friendly curiosity and passion of the people who are proud to share their fascinating traditions and way of life including local crafts, artistry, music and tribal costumes. There is a rich heritage of beliefs known as “Ka’oobsu” and legendary forest skills around which activities revolve.

Follow the “trail of the ancestors” with local villagers as guides and sample local cuisine at a “jungle picnic” or a Kayah barbecue by the scenic lakes. Any trip to the state gives visitors the opportunity to enjoy rare cultural insight and experiences as well as encourage locals to continue to preserve their long-held customs.

HANDICRAFTS
Handicrafts play an important role in domestic, artistic and spiritual life. Bamboo is a basic raw material for local communities in Kayah. Several unusual musical instruments are crafted from bamboo and other woods. Villagers are skilled, not only at creating woven bamboo items like baskets, but also at weaving traditional fabrics on the loom. Visit the local workshops to see how indigenous products are made and purchase souvenirs. Many items are for sale, while others (like the frog drums) are considered highly sacred, and only played on special occasions.

FOOD
Kayah’s cuisine is simple, fresh and healthy. Enjoy exploring the vibrant wet markets selling fresh, local produce and try local dishes and snacks. Small producers also make a variety of specialties of which Kayah sausage is the region’s most famous. These tasty, meat sausages are seasoned with Kayah pepper, which is harvested in the surroundings of De Maw Soe and Pan Pet villages. The peppper’s unique flavour imparts the sausages with a fragrant aroma of herbs and spices. Millet wine (known locally as “rice wine”) is definitely worth trying too.

FESTIVALS
There are two kinds of traditional Kayah festivals; some are social festivals, while others are related to spirituality. The most important festival is “Ka’oobsco Taguingding”, held annually in April. On this occasion traditional offerings are made to the spirit guardian. This festival is held to request “peace for the region, fair weather and a successful, bountiful harvest, free from all dangers”. In October “kawthiuk” festival (glutinous rice wrapping) takes place. Other important festivals are held for hunting, house-warming and funerals.