

## **INTERNATIONAL TOURISTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT OF MRAUK-U, RAKHINE STATE, MYANMAR**

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### **Abstract**

Myanmar has encouraged the development of tourism since the early 1990s. Following the introduction of the reform policy after 2011, international tourist arrivals to Myanmar increased from 0.38 million in 2010 to 1.3 million in 2018. While the main tourist attractions are located in the “classical quadrangle” of Yangon, Mandalay, Bagan and Inle Lake, remote sites are rarely visited. Among them is the ancient capital of Rakhine, Mrauk-U, which was given the status of a cultural-heritage zone in Myanmar in 1996. The literature assumes that if a destination can identify and satisfy the needs and aspirations of tourists, then people will probably make repeated visits and spread positive news of the site by word of mouth (Gnanapala, 2015). This highlights the important role of tourists and their perceptions in direct relation to the tourism development of a destination area. Against this background, this study aims to investigate international tourists' perceptions and satisfaction on visiting Mrauk-U in order to improve the services and management of the tourist industry. Understanding the perceptions of international tourists further enhances marketing strategies, reducing negative impacts and implications to enable better destination management. A questionnaire survey was conducted in 2018 for the research project. A total of 58 questionnaires were collected (more than 50% response rate) and qualitative interviews with international tourists (seven interviews of between 15 and 40 min.) and local tour guides (four interviews of 60 to 100 min.) were also conducted. Some of the interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed. A situation analysis was applied and suggestions for tourism development and the better destination management of Mrauk-U given.

**Keywords:** international tourist, perception, tourism, situation analysis

### **Introduction**

Tourism has become an important global economic activity, contributing to the economic development of countries and regions across the globe. In many countries, it provides a basis for development and economic growth; tourism and regional development are strongly linked. It is believed that tourism is an important driver of regional and local economic development, particularly when it is linked to other sectors such as agriculture, industry and services. Particularly in developing countries, tourism has gained considerable socio-economic importance (United Nations, 2007). Some suggest tourism as a strategy that may contribute to poverty alleviation (Turingan, 2006).

The quality of the attraction has a positive influence on the tourists' perceptions of and satisfaction with a destination (Gnanapala, 2015). According to UNWTO (2007), the key elements of a tourist destination are classified as: attractions, services and facilities, accessibility, image, price and human resources. All these collectively create the perceptions and satisfaction of the tourists. If the quality of tourist attractions and other supportive products and services at a destination are improved then the tourists' perceptions and satisfaction will be improved, which in turn might attract more tourists. Thus, it seems necessary to understand the perceptions of tourists in order to enhance the numbers of tourists and to improve planning and management of the tourism sector at a site. According to Pavlovic *et al.* (2016), tourists usually see a destination

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as a whole, thus all basic elements of a destination need to be improved: attractiveness and environment of the destination; destination facilities and services; the accessibility of the destination; the image of the destination; and the price to the consumer (Pavlovic *et al.*, 2016: 856).

### Definitions

*The UNWTO defines tourism as a “social, cultural and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes” (UNWTO n. d.).*

An international tourist is “any person who travels to a country other than that in which s/he has his/her usual residence but outside his/her usual environment for a period not exceeding 12 months and whose main purpose of visit is other than the exercise of an activity remunerated from within the country visited, and who stay at least one night in a collective or private accommodation in the country visited” (OECD n.d.).

Perception is defined as a process in which individuals organize and interpret their sensory impressions in order to give meaning to their environment. Tourists perceive tastes, quality and nature through their five senses, but perception may be different from one person to another (Gnanapala, 2015: 8). Tourists’ satisfaction is a feeling that is generated through the cognitive and emotional aspects of tourism activities. It is mainly based on the tourists’ expectations, destination image, perceived quality, and perceived value of experience and impression.

### Tourism in Myanmar and Rakhine State

In many Southeast Asian countries, tourism has grown rapidly over the last three decades, contributing substantially to economic development. Similarly, in Myanmar, tourism has become a major social and economic driver, especially since the introduction of a market-oriented economy in 1989 (Häusler/Kraas 2016). The government has encouraged the rapid development of tourism in order to improve the economic development of the country. Hence the tourist industry has developed immensely in comparison to the previous decades. The main tourist attraction sites in Myanmar are Yangon, Mandalay, Bagan and Inle Lake of Shan State.

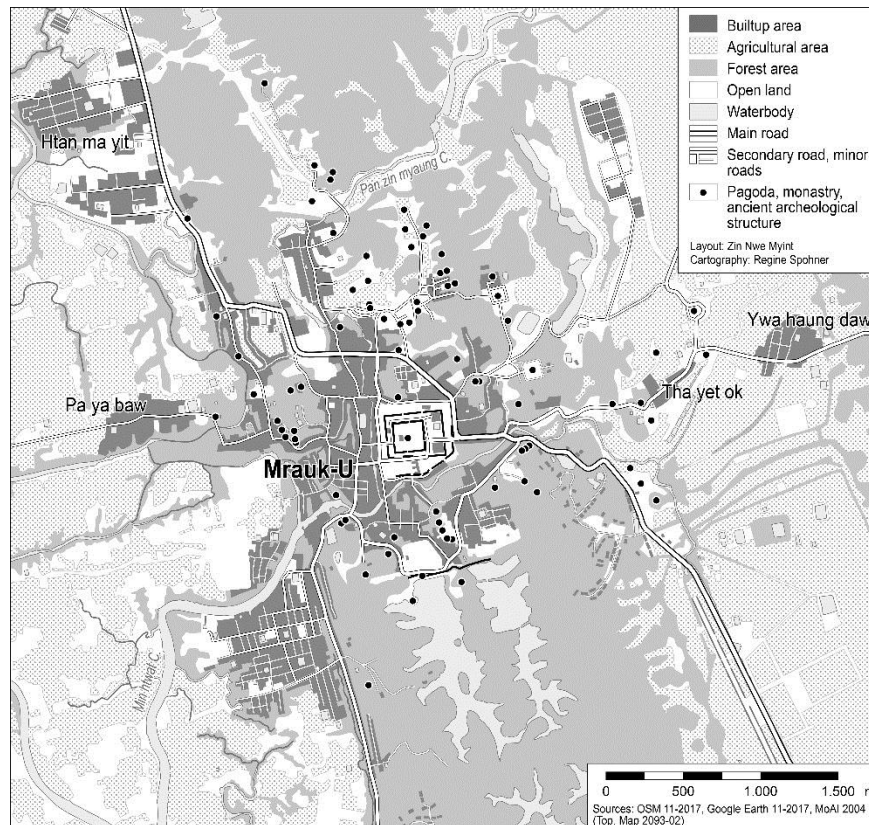
Unlike in the main tourism destinations, the figures for total international tourist arrivals in Rakhine State remain comparatively low, with numbers growing from 55,140 in 2014-2015 to 68,449 in 2016-2017. During the 2014-2015 fiscal year, total income from hotels and guesthouses in the four main Rakhine cities and towns, Sittwe, Thandwe, Mrauk-U and Kyauk-phyu, totalled US\$ 4.47 million; in 2016-2017 it rose to US\$ 7.79 million (all figures: Rakhine State Government Report, 2018). It is obvious that international tourists substantially contribute to economic development in Rakhine State. This holds true particularly for the ancient city of Mrauk-U.

Two types of tourists can be distinguished, namely, domestic and international. While the figures on international arrivals can be obtained from official statistics, the numbers of domestic tourists are difficult to estimate, as they tend to stay in free-of-cost accommodation, for example with relatives or in monasteries. Since there is also no collection of zone fees, it is impossible to derive their numbers indirectly. For international tourists, a zone fee of 5000 Kyats (about 4

USD) per person is collected, regardless of their length of stay in Mrauk-U. Furthermore, the numbers of international tourists are officially recorded by the hotels and guesthouses.

### Study Area Mrauk-U

Mrauk-U is a small town in the northeastern part of Rakhine State, about 65 km upstream and northeast of Sittwe by waterway, and 143 km by motorway. It was the capital of the last Rakhine Kingdom, which flourished during the period between 1430 and 1785 AD. Today, Mrauk-U Township has an area of 1,271.63 sq. km. The town itself is composed of seven urban wards with an area of 13 sq. km (GAD, 2018) (Fig. 1).



**Figure 1** Urban land use and distribution of ancient sites within Mrauk-U Town

In 1996, the Myanmar government designated Mrauk-U as an archaeological site. In 2009, the historic area of Mrauk-U, comprising 51.8 sq. km, was declared a cultural heritage zone by the Department of Archaeology, Ministry of Culture. In September 2019, the Ministry of Culture submitted a draft application to the UNESCO, seeking for Mrauk-U to become a World Heritage site (Interview, 2019; Zue Zue, 2019). This clearly indicates the enormous importance of the existing cultural and historical monuments of Mrauk-U as “assets” for the tourism industry. The area has a high potential for tourism-related income generation.

However, the local and regional economy does not yet benefit much from these assets and the local people are still poor. Traditional agriculture is the main economy and faces many difficulties, such as insufficient road infrastructure, a lack of knowledge and experience of modern agricultural techniques, a lack of market access and capital investment, a shortage of sufficient labour due to high out-migration, salt water intrusion to paddy fields and flooding (Zin Nwe Myint et al., 2016). Tourism based on existing heritage resources could therefore be an

important alternative economic opportunity which could integrate other economic sectors in comprehensive regional development planning. In order to promote tourism development, one of the many necessities is to understand the perceptions of the tourists. This could contribute to an improved planning, management and marketing strategy for Mrauk-U.

### International tourist arrivals at Mrauk-U

According to the data from the Ministry of Hotels and Tourism, the Department of Archaeology in Mrauk-U, and the Central Statistical Organization (CSO), international tourist arrivals in Mrauk-U started from very low levels in 1996, i.e. 516 tourists, and rose to 7,451 in 2017-2018 (Table 1). In that year, tourism in Myanmar was promoted by the campaign “Visit Myanmar Year 1996”, embedded in the newly introduced market-oriented economic policy. In comparison with the total number of foreigners arriving in Myanmar at the two main international airports of Yangon and Mandalay, the shares of tourists visiting Mrauk-U annually have been very low (Table 1).

**Table 1 International tourist arrivals in Mrauk-U**

Years	Arrivals at Yangon and Mandalay by air (with tourist visas only)	Arrivals in Mrauk-U	Tourist arrivals in Mrauk-U (% of Yangon and Mandalay entries)
1996-1997	110,038	518	0.47
1997-1998	117,490	609	0.52
1998-1999	119,159	861	0.72
1999-2000	113,940	1,042	0.91
2000-2001	121,016	1,203	0.99
2001-2002	118,325	1,604	1.35
2002-2003	132,468	1,940	1.46
2003-2004	122,940	1,747	1.42
2004-2005	156,015	1,968	1.26
2005-2006	144,628	2,064	1.43
2006-2007	191,979	2,499	1.30
2007-2008	131,784	2,125	1.61
2008-2009	100,439	1,568	1.56
2009-2010	164,000	2,024	1.23
2010-2011	385,655	3,325	1
2011-2012	592,131	4,815	1.25
2012-2013	887,205	543	0.06
2013-2014	1,058,995	3,313	0.27
2014-2015	1,112,092	4,144	0.37
2015-2016	1,287,748	6,769	0.53
2016-2017	1,208,531	7,361	0.61
2017-2018	1,303,929	7,451	0.57

**Source:** CSO, 2005: 175, CSO, 2010: 493, Archaeology Department of Mrauk-U, 2015 Department of Hotel and Tourism, Sittwe, 2019, [www.myanmar-tourism.org](http://www.myanmar-tourism.org)

The highest percentage of total international tourist arrivals coming to Mrauk-U was recorded during 2007-2008, with 1.61%. This share dropped to less than 0.6% in 2017-2018, due to the impact of the internal conflict in the northern part of Rakhine State.

### **Aim and Objectives**

Against this background, the objective of the research project is to gain a deeper understanding of the international tourists' perceptions of Mrauk-U in order to improve services, management and planning for the future development of the tourism sector. Moreover, it aims to identify the relationship between the international tourists' perceptions about the destination-related factors and their effect on tourist satisfaction. The objectives are:

- To understand the perceptions of international tourists with regards to the attractiveness of Mrauk-U,
- To examine the international tourists' perceptions of the accessibility of Mrauk-U, and
- To understand the particular expectations and needs of tourists during their stay in Mrauk-U.

### **Methodology and Data**

Data collection was difficult because of problems accessing the area after the communal conflicts in northern Rakhine State in 2012. Since then, the number of international tourist arrivals has declined. Due to continued conflicts in early 2018 there have only been a few arrivals of both domestic and international tourists recorded (own interviews, 2018). Thus, field observation and rapid appraisal methods were used in the first stage of the investigations. Later a questionnaire was developed. The quantitative questionnaire survey on international tourists' perceptions was conducted in November 2018. The questionnaires were distributed to international tourists through hotel and guesthouse managers based on convenience sampling. Out of 350 questionnaires distributed, a total of 58 were usable.

The questionnaire was composed of 19 main questions on international tourists' perceptions of accessibility, duration of stay, attraction, accommodation, food services, the internal transport situation, the urban infrastructure of Mrauk-U, and their overall assessment of their visit to Mrauk-U.

Furthermore, field observation and informal talks were conducted with local tour guides. A situation analysis was applied to shed light on the relationship between the international tourists' perceptions about the destination-related factors and their effect on tourist satisfaction. Finally, suggestions for adapted tourism development management in Mrauk-U were formulated.

### **Analysis and Findings**

The findings of the questionnaire survey are summarized in the following paragraphs.

#### ***Reasons to visit Mrauk-U***

84.5% of the international tourists were visiting Mrauk-U for the first time. They mainly got to know about Mrauk-U through internet websites or guidebooks and pamphlets, 29% and 27% respectively. The main reason to visit Mrauk-U was cultural interest, as recorded by 50.5% of the participants; the second most popular reason was curiosity about the place, as stated by 30% of the tourists. This shows that marketing through web pages focusing on Rakhine culture and tradition has been effective in promoting tourism in Mrauk-U.

### ***Attractions and entertainment***

As tourist attractions are the major determinant encouraging tourists to select a destination (also known as the pull travel motives of tourists), tourist satisfaction is strongly connected with them. With regards to Mrauk-U, 60% of all international tourists travelling in the region were very satisfied, and furthermore 34% were satisfied with the original character and authenticity of Mrauk-U. 90% were satisfied with the uniqueness of the site and 88% enjoyed the local culture. However, concerning shopping opportunities, only 36% were satisfied (own questionnaire survey, 2018).

Concerning the local culture and living style of the local people, 50% answered that they were very satisfied and more than 30% responded that they were satisfied. Only 7% were very satisfied with the night life and entertainment. In general, international tourists judged Mrauk-U as a touristic site positively: 29% responded they were very satisfied and 40% were satisfied (own questionnaire survey, 2018).

### ***Travelling to Mrauk-U***

Concerning the accessibility of Mrauk-U, 41.4% used a highway bus or a car and only 15.5% used the waterway to travel from Sittwe to Mrauk-U. This indirectly indicates that 57% of the international tourists who visited Mrauk-U used the airway to Sittwe. Only 1.7% of the total respondents used the highway bus from Yangon and 22.4% used the bus from Mandalay to Mrauk-U. Less than 50% were satisfied with the overall travel situation. With respect to the condition of vehicles, i.e. mainly bus transportation from Sittwe to Mrauk-U, only 43% responded that they were satisfied (Table 2).

**Table 2 Perceptions of international tourists related to the accessibility of Mrauk-U**

<b>Travelling issues</b>	<b>Very satisfied (%)</b>	<b>Satisfied (%)</b>	<b>Acceptable (%)</b>	<b>Somewhat dissatisfied (%)</b>	<b>Very dissatisfied (%)</b>	<b>Don't know (%)</b>	<b>Total (%)</b>
Travelling situation	7	48	31	10	3	0	100
Vehicle condition	7	43	38	9	2	2	100
Availability of seats	19	45	12	3	2	19	100
Cost of transportation	17	28	21	9	9	17	100
Service	28	52	12	3	0	5	100
Safety facilities	9	41	26	12	0	12	100
Punctuality	17	40	17	10	3	12	100

**Source:** Own questionnaire survey, 2018

In an interview with a group of international tourists, it was mentioned that the travelling time by bus from Mandalay via Magwe was too long, more than 20 hours, and that the roads were bumpy (own interview, 2018).

### ***Accommodation in Mrauk-U***

Concerning perceptions of the accommodation services in Mrauk-U during their stay, 41% are very satisfied with the cleanliness of the hotels and guest houses, 43% said they were satisfied. With respect to the quietness of the rooms, only 36% answered they were very satisfied; 34% were satisfied. 38% were very satisfied with the facilities of the rooms. 64% responded that they were very satisfied with the friendliness of the staff. As regards the room

rate, only 26% were very satisfied. According to one interview, the room rates in Mrauk-U are almost as high as the room rates of the hotels and guest houses in neighbouring countries. However, the standards and facilities provided in the rooms and the cleanliness levels are far lower (own interview, 2018).

### ***Quality of food and service in Mrauk-U***

In every tourist destination, high quality food and drinks play a vital role. The tourists' perceptions and satisfaction with respect to quality and taste, variety of food, reasonableness of food prices, and serving are important components which influence the overall perceptions and satisfaction of international tourists (Gnanapala, 2015: 14).

**Table 3 Food services in Mrauk-U**

Food issues	Very satisfied (%)	Satisfied (%)	Acceptable (%)	Somewhat dissatisfied (%)	Very dissatisfied (%)	Don't know (%)	Total (%)
Variety of restaurants, café, etc.	14	39	27	11	5	4	100
Number of local restaurants	17	31	28	9	7	7	100
Quality of food and drink	19	54	18	5	4	0	100
Quality of service	19	57	19	2	3	0	100
Standard of the restaurants	10	38	34	7	2	9	100
Hygienic situation	11	35	37	16	2	0	100
Offer of local cuisine	22	43	24	2	3	5	100
Price of dishes and drinks	24	39	24	6	0	7	100

**Source:** Own questionnaire survey, 2018.

With respect to the quality of food and the food services, few respondents were very satisfied. The variety and number of restaurants, cafés and bars was judged to be disappointing: only 14% assessed the variety as very satisfying. The standards of restaurants were rated extremely low in comparison to other destinations outside Myanmar by the international tourists; only 10% of the total respondents were very satisfied. The hygienic situation of the restaurants was rated very low; only 11% said they were very satisfied (Table 3).

### ***Internal transportation and infrastructure of Mrauk-U***

For international tourists, opportunities to travel within the Mrauk-U urban area in order to visit the monument sites is important. Only 9% of the international tourists assessed the internal road situation to be very satisfactory. Only 15% of the total respondents answered that internal transport within Mrauk-U town is convenient.

**Table 4 Internal transportation within Mrauk-U**

Internal transport issues	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Acceptable	Somewhat dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Don't know	Total (%)
Convenient situation	15	41	19	9	4	13	100
Cost of transport	15	35	24	6	0	20	100
Local services	15	40	21	4	2	19	100
Condition of vehicles	11	43	24	6	2	15	100
Accessibility from surrounding area	19	37	32	5	0	7	100
Road situation	9	25	38	16	11	2	100

**Source:** Own questionnaire survey, 2018.

The future development of tourism depends on the infrastructure in Mrauk-U. Finally, inquiries were made into the tourists' perceptions and satisfaction regarding the urban infrastructure situation. In particular, assessments of the availability of tourist information, banking services, healthcare services, telecommunication facilities and accessibility of public places were asked for (Table 5). In every respect, except access to public space, the level of satisfaction of international tourists with the infrastructure was very low. Only 7% of the international tourists were very satisfied.

**Table 5 Infrastructure situation in Mrauk-U**

Infrastructure issue	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Acceptable	Somewhat dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Don't know	Total (%)
Availability of tourist information	7	32	34	13	5	9	100
Telecommunication	7	21	22	26	17	7	100
Money exchange service	7	17	26	4	6	41	100
Health care services	7	11	19	2	7	54	100
Access to public space	15	24	20	11	2	28	100
Urban infrastructure	7	21	39	25	7	2	100

Source: Own questionnaire survey, 2018.

### Overall assessment

In order to obtain a deeper understanding of the international tourists' general view on Mrauk-U as a tourism destination, questions allowing an overall assessment were asked (Table 6).

**Table 6 Overall assessment of international tourists on visiting Mrauk-U**

Items	Absolutely agree (%)	Agree (%)	Acceptable (%)	Disagree (%)	Completely Disagree (%)	Total (%)
1. Visiting Mrauk-U has been very valuable to me	70	25	5	0	0	100
2. I gained a lot of new knowledge and experience	57	33	10	0	0	100
3. Visiting Mrauk-U is worth the money I spent	47	35	16	2	0	100
4. I will recommend my friends visit Mrauk-U	63	28	7	2	0	100
5. I have decided to visit again	26	35	26	11	2	100
6. Heritage resources are highly valuable	55	38	5	0	2	100
7. Tourism development potential is high	43	32	20	5	0	100
8. It is an international tourist destination	39	32	25	5	0	100
9. Local people are very friendly	72	23	5	0	0	100
10. Personal safety and security is high	63	28	9	0	0	100
11. Overall cleanliness of the town	9	19	58	12	2	100
12. Mrauk-U can be reached easily	4	21	40	25	11	100
13. My perception of Rakhine State has positively changed	24	53	18	4	0	100
14. Overall satisfaction of my stay in Mrauk-U is high	40	49	9	2	0	100

Source: Own questionnaire survey, 2018.



An important assessment is related to whether it was valuable to visit Mrauk-U: 70% of all respondents absolutely agree and 26% declared that they would be likely to visit the site again. The question concerning personal safety and security is also important. Surprisingly, 63% of the total respondents answered that they felt safe and secure during their visit to Mrauk-U. Thus despite the current instability of the situation in northern Rakhine State, this perception is very positive. 63% agreed they would recommend visiting Mrauk-U to their friends. Also perceptions of the local people are very positive: 72% agreed with the statement that local people were very friendly.

### **Discussion and Recommendations**

According to the questionnaire survey and the qualitative interviews, the ancient culture and the local traditions of the local people in Mrauk-U are the main attractions for international tourists. These should be well maintained for the future in order to perpetuate the successful development of international tourism.

Marketing requires attention. As international tourists pointed out that they received most of their information about Mrauk-U from the internet, it is important to further enhance media and website information and representation, at best using the official site from the Ministry of Hotels and Tourism. Comprehensive, transparent, fair and correct information should be a self-evident prerequisite. The uniqueness of the ancient sites and current Mrauk-U culture and tradition deserves adequate representation.

The analysis shows that Mrauk-U needs to improve urban infrastructure. As compared with the situation in 2009, the electricity supply is much improved today. The urban roads should be upgraded. But as Mrauk-U is a heritage zone, the construction, upgrading and extension of roads should be undertaken with great care in order not to negatively impact on authentic features of the ancient city.

It is, furthermore, necessary to improve flood prevention infrastructure as floods strongly endanger the ancient monuments. The 2015 flood severely damaged the ancient monuments and the socio-economic situation of the local people (own interviews, 2018). Proper action to improve the cleanliness of the town is urgently needed (own observations and interviews, 2019).

Moreover, entertainment and recreational activities require attention, as an enjoyable nightlife in the town of Mrauk-U would appeal to international tourists. There is currently no evening entertainment available, such as a regular cultural show during the tourist season. Such attractions need to be developed carefully, in order to not interfere with local people's lives.

Public places require urban infrastructure, such as benches, waste bins, electric light and public toilets, with sufficient standards. This would be beneficial for both the local people and domestic and international tourists. Upgrading the quality standards of the hotels, especially of the rooms, would help to increase the satisfaction of the international tourists. Concerning the room rates, the price levels in Mrauk-U are much higher than in other Southeast Asian and neighbouring countries and the accommodation standards are much lower (own interviews, 2018).

The hygienic situation of restaurants and the service urgently need to be improved. Special training and capacity enhancement are required. As the prices for food are higher in Mrauk-U than in other tourist sites in Myanmar (own interviews, 2018), it is recommendable to

explain to tourists that good quality rice, vegetables and meat need to be imported from other areas of Myanmar which naturally contributes to higher prices. According to interviews with officials from the Agricultural Products and Consumer Survey Department, Mrauk-U, there is great potential for the Mrauk-U area to be transformed into an organic agricultural zone (own interviews, 2010 and 2015). Those products have the potential to further enhance the attraction of Mrauk-U.

As security is the most important issue for any tourist, transparent, correct and easily accessible information about the current security situation is essential.

Finally and most importantly, a comprehensive tourism master plan and proper tourism management is urgently required. In order to achieve a truly sustainable development of Mrauk-U as a home for local people and a tourist destination of global value, careful tourism is indispensable. Fundamental knowledge and understanding of the local communities' and the tourists' perceptions alike are the basic preconditions for proper tourism development. The same holds true for public participation in the process of developing a proper master plan; the integration of sustainable consumption and production patterns in tourism policies (UNWTO 2019) should be a self-evident prerequisite.

### **Conclusion**

Understanding the perceptions and satisfaction of international tourists will help to improve tourism development in Mrauk-U. Most important, though, is the proper, transparent and sensitive development of an adequate tourism vision and strategy involving the collaboration of all the stakeholders involved.

The current conflict-ridden and complicated political situation of Mrauk-U does not favour tourism. Business-as-usual policies are not recommendable. Proper and comprehensive regional development for the benefit of all – local, national and international – stakeholders requires time, transparency and trust. Circumspect planning for tourism development in Mrauk-U should be embedded in holistic general socio-economic achievements. Priority should be given to peace, reconciliation and poverty alleviation. Further research on Mrauk-U is required, such as on tourism as a tool for peace, on a cost-benefit analysis of tourism business, on the development of (organic) agricultural support, on the prevention of natural disasters, and on effective cultural heritage conservation and management.

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