



**Susan Cunningham** Contributor

*I cover Southeast Asian business news not yet on the global radar.*

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## Myanmar: 45 Million Mobile Phones And The \$19 3G Smartphone



*Only in Myanmar: the \$19 3G smartphone*

The photo above shows a shiny new \$19.44 smartphone for sale in Yangon. When I saw this in small corner shop on Anawrahta Road near Pansodan a few weeks ago, the 23,000 kyat (at 1,183 kyat/US\$1) price included one SIM card. As you can perhaps see, it's 3G capable and has slots for two SIM cards.

I later saw the same Thai brand, complete with Thai packaging, among the familiar and strange brands of phones being sold on sidewalk tables, like the ones in the photo below. Since bargaining comes with the territory and these phone aren't being sold in a shop with overhead costs and, could they cost even less than \$19? Such a low price for a new phone must also affect the pricing of secondhand smartphones, regardless of brand.



*Phones, dumb and smart, on a Yangon street stall sport a variety of brands, strange and familiar.*

Myanmar has three [mobile](#) carriers: the government's MPT and the two private carriers: Qatar's Ooredoo and Norway's Telenor. Two years ago this month, Ooredoo became the first company in the country to introduce 1,500 kyat SIM cards; before that, MPT cards cost about \$300. A decade ago, SIM cards were in the \$1,500 range. Some Myanmar people now have two phones, each with a different carrier, because coverage varies in different parts of the country. And since a SIM card costs less than \$2, why not?

A few days before I came across the True phone, I had interviewed Jes Pedersen of a local tech community organization, [Phandeeyar, for Digital News Asia](#). The astounding growth in the past two years of both mobile users and smartphone users was an inevitable topic. He said that today there are 45 million active SIM subscriptions—up from only 3 million or 4 million two years ago—and 60% to 80% of those are for smartphones.

Most of these people are first-time phone owners since, as in neighboring countries, residential landlines are scarce. More than half of those 27 million-plus smartphone owners are regular data users, Pedersen told me, who check into Facebook daily and the [Viber messaging](#) and VOIP app almost as frequently.

### **Top brands: Vivo and Oppo**

How can so many people afford phones when the average wage is \$3 a day? Bear in mind that the recently released statistics from the 2014 census put the Myanmar population at about 52 million, including a million Rohingya. Well, Pedersen said, there are \$25 “no-name Chinese imports” in the Myanmar marketplace.

Snooping around in the sidewalk tables farther down Anawrahta Road, south of Bogyoke Market, I did see a likely suspect with “horse” in the name. And in the street stall photo above,

there are some phones with the “Honor” brand. I could tell that some of the secondhand iPhones on the street stalls were fakes because the edges were a bit rough.

If I had to guess the best-selling brand right now, I’d choose [China-made Vivo](#) based on the sheer extent of advertising, with Oppo, another China brand, a close second. Oppo is a very prominent brand all over Southeast [Asia](#). But who knows? Who isn’t selling phones in Yangon? The electronics stores in the 30’s blocks in the vicinity of Anawrahta . The shops and stalls in the new and old malls. The street-side vendors with tables of secondhand remotes, gimcrack battery chargers, copy watches and/or plastic toys often have a few basic mobiles and Blackberrys in the mix.

(I know it will be very disappointing to the tourism industry, bloggers and drop-in media that persist in presenting Myanmar as freshly cracked Juche-ian alt-world, unchanged and unspoiled since the seven-day tourist visas or 1948 or colonial times. But, yep: long before the cheap SIM card era, many Myanmar people, often not particularly affluent, had Blackberrys or Chinese brands, despite the SIM card prices. And even small towns had, and still have, internet shops full of teenagers with curious hair playing tedious video games.) The stores in the photo below are in the Hledan area of Yangon, about 7 or 8 kilometers north of downtown and the Bogyoke Market and just south of [the Hledan Centre](#), near where Pyay and Insein roads intersect.



*In Hledan, nearly every store is a smartphone store*

As for that \$19 True phone: while True isn’t one of the two private carriers in Myanmar, it is in Thailand (About six months ago, True did open a comfy, quiet and spacious coffee shops with free WiFi in Yangon and plans to open many more.) I’m guessing that back in Thailand, True mobile customers using this phone got it either free or

very cheaply—but they then discovered, as I did with AIS, that the phone was “locked” and only useful in Thailand.

When you traipse around Asia, you become accustomed on arrival to a new country to buying a new SIM card for a few dollars, slipping out your customary card from your GSM phone (and trying not to lose such a small item), and slipping in the new SIM. Be aware, though, that shops in some countries—Myanmar is one them; Thailand hasn't been—are strict about getting your passport number before a sale. I suppose street stalls might be a little more flexible.

On the heels of smartphones came mobile money, as you can see advertised on the awning of the Hledan restaurant stall below.



*When smartphones arrive, mobile wallets (and ads) soon follow.*

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