

The Golden Triangle

The Golden Triangle is not really a geographic triangle, but a loosely U.S.-defined area that covers eastern Myanmar, northern Laos, and scattered parts of northern Thailand. Under the rigid management of the Chinese (ethnic, gangster, and expat), this region is now number two in opium products. Protection is provided, of course, by the numerous "rebel" armies controlling the region. In smack boomtowns like Mong La, you can find Chinese hookers, Russian dancers, and Australian tourists, all crowding the modern casinos and air-conditioned hotels. Nonstop, high-stakes gambling, ethnic shows featuring Padaung tribeswomen (the giraffe people, as they are called), and side trips to Wa villages are becoming the main attractions. It's not just poppies that fuel this excess. The big news is the shift to chemical drugs like meth, a 400 percent increase over 4 years. You can make a better living through chemistry, according to Thai police. Fifty new *yaba*, or meth factories, have been set up in Myanmar in the last year and another 10 in Laos cranking out 600 to 700 million *yaba* tablets at a street price of 50 baht or \$1.14 each. Who needs poppies with margins like that?

After reading all the info provided by the CIA, and seeing the industrious efforts of the Chinese in the Golden Triangle, you can't help but wonder how such a destructive industry is so analyzed yet so unfazed. The government of Myanmar says it has nabbed \$45 million worth of smack headed our way and over 828 local law enforcement officials have lost their lives in battles with drug lords. It's all part of their 10-year plan to eradicate drugs. So the future of heroin looks good. Over the last 10 years, opium poppy production has been reduced by 17 percent, but the availability and amount of raw opium has increased by 10 percent.

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Cocaine and Crack

In America, heroin is old school; the new drug of choice is cocaine-based crack. It's cheap, available, and delivers what cigarettes, beer, and soft drinks can only hint at. Smoke it, and you may get a good high or you may turn into a ruthless brute. Crack is big dollars, big profits, and big trouble. Law enforcement credits much of the blame for the count in the inner cities to gangs fighting over turf to sell the evil stuff. You only have about 5 years to wring every nickel out of the United States's 2.1 million coke and crackheads before they die.

If cocaine hydrochloride [HCl] is the BMW of drugs, then crack is the Yugo. Cocaine costs a lot (about \$100 to \$150 a gram) and goes

Crack, well, it just makes you crash a lot. Cocaine users tend to be male, white, and in their 30s. Crack is an inner-city, young-kid product with a drive-thru clientele. Crack is cocaine you can smoke, but it is typically cut with anything that grandma left in the cupboard, usually baking soda or sugar. But it can also be cut with pain relievers, such as Novocaine, Anbesol, hell, sometimes rat poison (now that's a pain reliever!). Unlike heroin, which will give you 10 years of hell, cocaine and crack are more addictive and more destructive.

Crack and cocaine enter the United States by the ton. A kilo of cocaine will sell wholesale for between \$10,500 and \$40,000. But a gram of crack cocaine goes for \$20 in Miami and \$250 in Honolulu. In order to create low-price entry points, crack even comes in "crumbs" and "kibbles and bits" that sell for around \$3 to \$5. The cocaine business aims to please, because customer satisfaction is what keeps you coming back, again, and again, and again, and again . . .

Cocaine wasn't always an ugly gutter business. The South American Indians use the coca leave (in a disgusting mixture of lime and betel nut) to keep them alert. But then the German pharmaceutical company Merck discovered that you could make a more refined, potent form of cocaine for medicinal purposes—Sigmund Freud used it on people (including himself)—and the rest is history. The coca bush takes two years to mature, at which point the leaves are picked and ground up. A hectare of mature coca bushes can yield around 2.7 metric tons of dry leaf, which in turn yields about 7.44 kilos of cocaine. It takes about 363 kilos of dry leaves to yield 1 kilo of cocaine. The amount of pure cocaine in the goods depends on the alkaloid level of the leaf. For example, coca leaves in the Chapare region of Bolivia are 0.72 percent alkaloid and you can buy bags of them for pennies. Not much bang for your buck. By the time it is stepped on, or diluted, cocaine goes for about \$100 a gram on the street in the United States.

The big players in the cocaine business are the Colombians, along with minor contributions from Peru. Bolivia and Ecuador funnel as much as they can up our noses. The Mexicans have taken over the transportation business and things don't look like they are going to slow down any time soon.

Since coca is used as part of tea, for chewing, and for traditional ceremonies, 12,000 hectares of cultivation are allowed legally. The best coca leaves come from Yungas, while almost all coca grown in the Chapare region is for illegal purposes. Despite efforts to spray the coca bushes into submission, Colombia's potential coca production leaped to 768 metric tons in 2000, forcing local syndicates to expand distribution into Poland and the Czech Republic. Most Colombian cocaine is shipped in huge multiton sea cargo or 8-ton shipments to Mexico, Central