

# Yangon's Strand Hotel branches out into luxury river cruises



Lee Tulloch Jun 10 2016 at 1:00 PM

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The Strand Cruise Sundeck. Photo: blaboup@gmail.com+66(0)81344310

**SHARE** The best cruise ships are like sumptuous floating hotels, so it's not much of a stretch to understand why some luxury hotel groups have entered the cruise business, launching their own ships.

In fact, it's quite a trend. Aman Resorts sails Amandira, a 52-metre yacht, in Indonesian waters. Alila charters the Purnama in the Komodo Archipelago. Oberoi Resorts cruises the Nile on its river ships, the Zahra and the Philae. Belmond sails The Road to Mandalay and the Orcaella on the Ayeyarwady in Myanmar.

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In December last year, the venerable Strand Hotel in Yangon launched its own ship, The Strand Cruise, which offers three and four-day itineraries

along the tranquil Ayeyarwady from Bagan to Mandalay and the reverse.



The Strand Cruise Sundeck pool.

For the Strand, which has occupied its prestigious riverfront location since 1901, The Strand Cruise is a way to connect guests of the colonial-era hotel to heritage sites beyond Yangon. The chic new river ship also brings some new energy to a much-loved but slightly fusty landmark.

"We are true hoteliers," says Olivier Trinquand, vice-president of operations, who believes the floating hotel is a logical extension of the services the Yangon hotel brings guests on land. The Strand's management company, GCH, had closely watched the success of Belmond's Orcaella and, when a sister ship became available, jumped at the opportunity. "We thought we could bring something new to revive our brand," Trinquand says.

The cruise was launched with pzazz – a concert for government officials and military top brass, starring the Lady Gaga of Myanmar, Phyu Phyu Kyaw Thein, who happens to be a doctor as well as a popular singer.



Kaunghmudaw pagoda, Myanmar. Photo: Alamy

The Strand Hotel was equally fashionable when it opened. It was built by a British entrepreneur and acquired in 1901 by two Armenian brothers, the Sarkies, who owned the Eastern Hotel in Penang and Raffles in Singapore. It was in a class of its own with a turbaned doorman, electric lighting and fans, and a French chef. It became so popular with leisure travellers that an annex was built in 1913. That's now the Australian Embassy.

The hotel's history is as turbulent as Burma's. Its glass roof was bombed during the Japanese invasion of World War II and the hotel fell on particularly hard times in the 1970s, when it was described as a "rat-infested fire trap". Backpackers could sleep in a single room for \$5 and the Grill's lobsters were \$2.50 for two. Guests recall bats, and tepid brown water from the bathroom taps.

When Burma changed its name to Myanmar in the late 1980s, the hotel was extensively renovated, in a joint venture with the government. The rabbit warren of rooms and corridors was turned into 31 handsome suites and wide hallways, and 100 tonnes of teak was brought in to repair the floors and ceilings. It has recently closed for an expensive refurbishment and will reopen in November in time for the next cruising season.



The Strand Cruise Deluxe Cabin.

When I visited in January, it was obvious that the hotel could do with refreshment. The last time it was renovated was 20 years ago and it showed. The famous Grill, once the epitome of fine dining in the days when Rangoon was the third-largest trading port of the British Empire, was almost empty, as was the rather down-in-the-dumps Strand Bar.

But the bones of the hotel are beautiful and the enormous suites have high ceilings, teak floors, spacious sitting areas, luxuriously large bathrooms and baths, serviced by 24-hour-on-call butlers who sit at desks on each floor and attend with lightning speed. It's the kind of hotel that has you in two minds about changing it. I liked its comfortable staidness and hope it doesn't get too jazzed-up.

The river ship is quite a different creature altogether. It's hip, contemporary – the sort of ship you might expect a lifestyle brand to launch – with a spacious sun deck graced with white peacock chairs, a small pool with elegant striped daybeds and cabins with leafy tropical print fabrics. Its decor is light and airy, pale grey with dashes of citrus, the nods to the hotel's heritage coming from the Burmese teak used throughout, the traditional touches in some of the furnishings and, of course, the famous Strand Sour cocktail served at Sarkies Bar.

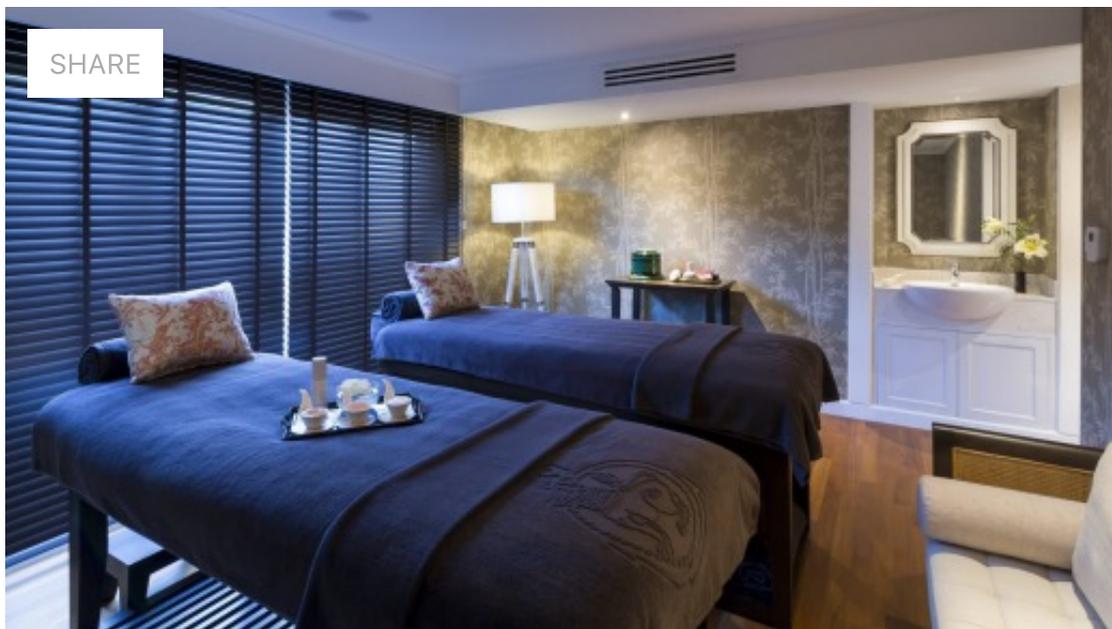


The Strand Cruise.

Cruise guests can stay in Yangon for a night or two before the sailing. On the day of our cruise, The Strand butlers wake us at 4am with cups of tea because we're on the 6am flight to Bagan. Yangon domestic airport kick-starts us, even if the tea hasn't quite. It's insanely busy even at this hour, although Yangon Airways is efficient. "You're safe with us" is the airline's reassuring motto: we were.

At Bagan, we're collected by mini-bus and served breakfast in the gardens of one of the oldest lacquerware houses in the region, before a quick tour of a couple of of the 2500 Buddhist monuments in the old capital city. It's frustratingly brief and I make a note to self: hire bikes next time and cycle around.

The Strand Cruise is moored on the bank of the Ayeyarwady outside a village where children play noisily on the riverbank and much of the village's social life seems to be carried on while clothes are washed in the river. The river itself is a surprise – wider and calmer than the busy Mekong, it is edged with sandbanks, which in some places are so barren one is reminded of Oman or Egypt.

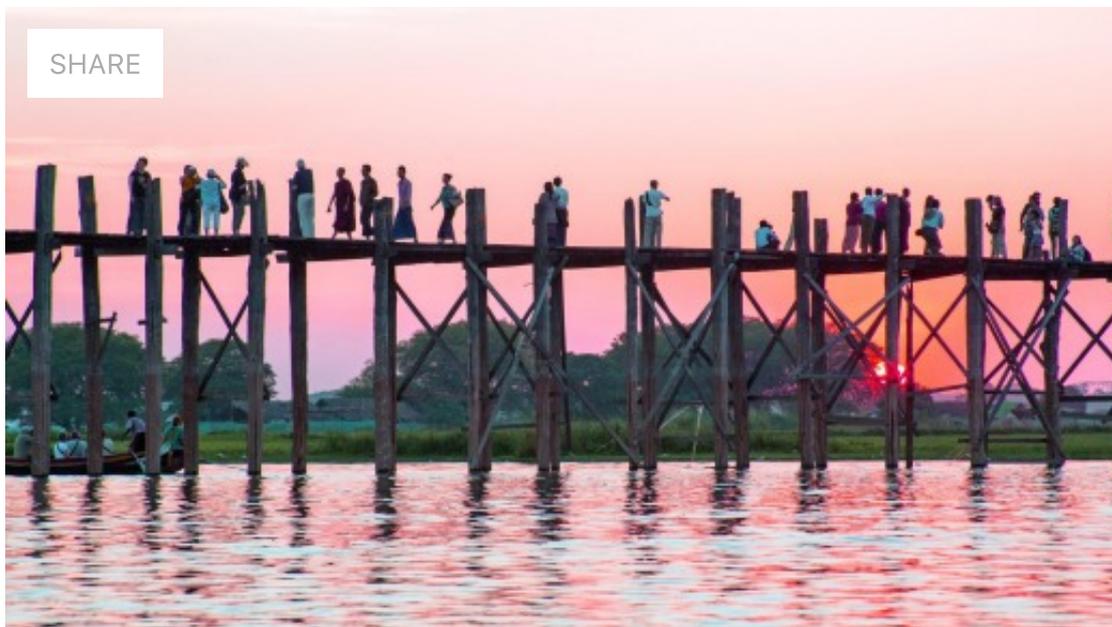


The Strand Spa.

I'm shown to suite number 208, which is cleverly designed around the curve of the ship, with a curved sofa and residential-style polished floorboards. Two sets of floor-to-ceiling windows bring in lots of light but the "Juliet" balconies are the kind you can't step out onto. There's plenty of wardrobe space, a high, plush, king-sized bed, a desk and still enough room for a cleverly compact bathroom with products by Roger & Gallet.

As it happens, I spend more time than I would like in this bathroom, as I contract a virus in Yangon and it hits me like a runaway elephant after dinner the first night on the ship. I know every tile on the bathroom floor before the cruise is over. But I also find out how attentive and caring all the housekeeping and room service staff are: five stars from me for that.

If you're going to be horribly sick on a trip, I suppose there are worse places to find yourself. The bed is comfortable, the scenery that floats by outside is fascinating and my recovery is speeded along by copious pots of ginger tea. I feel like Cleopatra on the Nile, albeit with dysentery.



The extraordinary wooden U-Bein Bridge, spanning Taungthaman Lake near Mandalay, is one the sights on the Strand Hotel Cruise. Photo: Alamy

When I finally recover, there's the "Sagaing Voyage" massage in the ship's small spa to soothe away the last of my queasiness.

I've been too ill to enjoy the buffet of desserts or the foie gras. Menus have a French twist, with international dishes such as pizza, pasta, roast chicken and charcuterie served at lunchtime buffets on the sun deck, and more formal meals at dinner in the traditional-style signature restaurant.

The highlight is a candlelit dinner served on a sandbank in the middle of the river. The guests wear bare feet on the soft sand and we're fed lobster, strawberry mille-feuille, washed down with Moët. On the opposite bank, the locals are making bonfires to burn rubbish, but the sparks fly up into the night sky as prettily as if they'd set off fireworks for us.

On the last evening of the cruise, guests are treated to a banquet of Shan-style local cuisine, based around pumpkin, chicken and fish curries, and eaten family-style. It's delicious and I would have liked more food of this kind, although I can hardly complain – while I was sick the kitchen went to great trouble to make hearty broths and plain rice dishes for me. The kitchen will cater to individual guest's tastes and confer before the cruise. Even once it's under way, they will adapt, as far as is possible.

I have missed a few activities, such as visiting the unfinished pagoda at Mingun, an on-board puppet show and afternoon tea on the deck. Most cruises along the Ayeyarwady offer similar highlights, such as a visit to the silver and gold pagodas of Sagaing, the extraordinarily long, teak U-Bein Bridge which spans the Taungthaman Lake near Mandalay, and optional

ballooning over Bagan. When we hop on rickety horse carts to bump along unmade roads to Ava, the ancient imperial capital – an adventure that's obviously standard on the tourist trail – we are joined by 30 or so guests of another river ship.

The trick for The Strand Cruise is to offer a level of service and comfort that differentiates itself from the other cruises following the same route. Olivier Trinquand says his team does this by offering guests choices "a la carte", by being fluid enough in scheduling to cater to individual wishes.

This flexibility is evident one morning, when we're touring the U-Bein Bridge and three of us decide to skip yet another shrine on the schedule and go shopping at the market in Mandalay, which is bursting with great buys, from brightly woven plastic baskets and patterned rugs to ingeniously handmade kitchen tools. A car is arranged and within half an hour we're off to the market with guide.

Similarly, a bus is arranged to take a few guests to the mountaintop illuminated "disco" buddhas at Sagaing. Fortuitously, it's the day of the World Buddhist Peace Conference and the roads are lined with thousands of pink-clad girl and orange-robed boy monks, waiting for the arrival of Myanmar's then-president Thein Sein.

Our driver pulls over by the side of the road and the keen photographers in the group are able to spend half an hour off-schedule getting priceless shots of the sea of giggling children. We're accompanied on many of these excursions by the cruise's gentle historian, April, who is startlingly honest about her country and the challenges it is facing.

There is much poverty in Myanmar, impossible to hide from tourists' eyes. Floating by on your luxury barge without acknowledging Burma's past and difficult present is an option only for the self-absorbed. April's lectures give much-needed context. Her optimism about Myanmar's future is muted. "We can hope for the good," she says, "but we can't hope for the best yet."

One other aspect of The Strand Cruise that sets it apart is the presence of an on-board "magician", whose role, in Olivier Trinquand's words, is to "disrupt". That disrupting includes dropping in on conversations with card tricks and going along on excursions as a sort of comic chorus.

Perhaps French people love having a "bouffon" or buffoon with them every minute, but we three Australian women found it distracting. When we were ill, there seemed to be no doctor on board to assist, but we discover later that the bowler-hatted magician also doubles as nurse.

So many aspects of The Strand Cruise are thoughtful, but they overthought the entertainment, for us at least.

## **THE STRAND CRUISE**

Four-day Bagan to Mandalay cruise: low season from \$US1976 (\$2680) per person double occupancy in a deluxe cabin, includes meals, soft drinks, local beer and house wines, activities and English-speaking guides and Wi-Fi. [thestrandcruise.com](http://thestrandcruise.com)