

Myanmar river cruises take in delights of Yangon, Bagan, Mandalay



A Myanmar local passes the Belmont Orcaella, a deluxe four-decked floating hotel.

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THE STRAND CRUISE

Passenger Capacity: 54

Route: Four nights from Bagan to Mandalay; three nights in the opposite direction. The Strand Cruise operates the shortest sailings on the Irrawaddy, designed as time-effective samplers and partnered with stays at The Strand in Yangon, which are complimentary add-ons with some packages. As per most operators, cruises are available from January to April and July to December, avoiding the monsoon months.

Onboard Experience: Just shy of a year old, and already a market leader, this 61m-long cruiser is an extension, as it were, of The Strand in Yangon, reopening next month after extensive refurbishment. The two are book-end experiences of style and comfort and the ship echoes the hotel's dark timbers, pukka afternoon teas with scones and cream plus 24-hour butler service and nostalgic references to the golden age of travel. Cabins with polished teak decor feature all the expected five-star trimmings, with quality bedding, flat-screen TVs, floor-to-ceiling windows, fresh flowers and good lighting. The ship's most convivial perch is the top-level sun deck where lunch is an Asian buffet plus barbecue, pizzas, carvery and pasta station. The setting is stylish, with peacock-tail cane chairs, clusters of sofa seating, ottomans and daybeds on which to recline, summon another Strand Sour cocktail and idly observe the scenery.

Best Ports: World Heritage-listed Bagan, of course, its scrubby plains dotted with casuarinas, tamarinds and palms amid more than 2000 religious monuments. At riverside Mingun, a former capital, we view "the world's oldest uncracked hanging bell" and there's the obligatory visit to one of Myanmar's most-photographed attractions, the U-Bein Bridge, which spans Taungthaman Lake near Bhamrapura and is the oldest and longest teak bridge in the world. At Ava, 20km south of Mandalay and capital of successive Burmese kingdoms from the 14th to the 19th centuries, passengers progress aboard pony carts along dusty roads to mossy temple ruins of ineffable beauty.

Highlights: One evening, the captain moors The Strand Cruise on a mid-river sandbank and we go "ashore", as it were, sinking barefoot along sand pathways bordered by candle lanterns for a French-inspired dinner at tables dressed in white with twinkling glasses and shiny cutlery. Fish plip-plop almost at our elbows, and the scene seems as surrealistic as a film set. Guides and lecturers are first class and excursions feel intimate and not too scripted, with plenty of latitude for passengers to request special inclusions.

More: thestrandcruise.com; hotelthestrاند.com.

Susan Kurosawa



Spacious cabin on The Strand Cruise, Myanmar.

CRUISECO EXPLORER

Passenger Capacity: 58

Route: Eleven nights between Yangon and Mandalay.

Onboard Experience: Launched in late 2014, Cruiseco Explorer's cabins are large at almost 27sq m with floor-to-ceiling windows; those on the upper deck have balconies. Decor is colonial chic in soothing pastel hues with panelled walls, ornate gilt mirrors and large prints of 19th-century Burmese life. Comfort is key to life aboard and the large Orwell Lounge and Bar has loads of sofas and cosy corners to read in or enjoy a cocktail; this space also hosts nightly lectures, movies and performances. In the Kipling Dining Room, a busy kitchen team offers a varied Western and Asian selection; dinner is four courses and the buffet lunch includes local dishes. A small gym and tiny day spa are tucked away on the upper deck. After the daily dusty shore excursion, the large sundeck is the perfect spot to whistle up a cold drink, sit back and watch river life slip by: women pounding washing, the sunset silhouette of a bullock-drawn plough and golden-capped pagodas too numerous to count.

Best Ports: Bagan, naturally, but I am also bewitched by sleepy Salay, where the tamarind tree-shaded streets are lined with crumbling colonial villas and women dry chickpeas on the bumpy footpaths. The dimly lit Youqson Kyaung teak monastery is a place outside time, crammed with gilded Buddha statues; nearby temple lions guard a field of stupas.

Highlights: Decked in crisp white uniforms, the 32 crew members form the heart of this cruise. Nothing's too much trouble: washing our dusty shoes every evening, on hand with a chilled Bagan Breeze cocktail or pot of piping hot English Breakfast with homemade biscuits and a cheery greeting. They are there to help us scramble along makeshift gangplanks, holding white umbrellas aloft to shield us from the belting sun, and up at dawn scrambling eggs and flipping pancakes for breakfast. Special mention must be made of the erudite guides who lead excursions and Captain Mg Mg, who not only expertly navigates rapidly dwindling late-season waters, but dances Gangnam style at the farewell party.

More: cruising.com.au.

Christine McCabe



Sanctuary Ananda in Mandalay.

SANCTUARY ANANDA

Passenger Capacity: 48

Route: Four-night round trip, the cruise component of Abercrombie & Kent's Myanmar in Style itinerary; follows the Irrawaddy from Mandalay, a 90-minute flight from Yangon (domestic flights and transfers included).

Onboard Experience: Sanctuary Ananda, launched in late 2014, was locally built following traditional Burmese riverboat style. Satiny-teak interiors, richly coloured local fabrics, lacquered tables and bamboo-frame waxed-paper umbrellas, all bathed in the warm patterned light of suspended lanterns, create an air of genteel intimacy. Staterooms are spacious and quietly elegant, with comfortable beds, good bathrooms and full-wall sliding windows for river watching. There is a health spa, small gym and outdoor plunge pool. The upper sundeck (used for early morning yoga and meditation) adjoins a lounge with panoramic windows; both are perfect for viewing stupendous sunsets. Buffet and a la carte meals offer Burmese and international dishes and French house wines.

Best Ports: On-shore visits range from ancient temples, golden pagodas, gold-robed porcelain Buddhas and the beautiful teak-wood monastery in Salay, to tiny villages tucked between paddy fields, with dirt tracks, motorbikes, ramshackle buffalo carts and occasional monkeys. Not far out of Mandalay, we visit a monastic school and the

turquoise-tiled Soon U Ponya Shin Pagoda in the Sagaing Hills. At Pakokku, buying for an on-board cookery demonstration, we visit the village market with the ship's chef, who leads us around stalls of elaborately arranged fruit and vegetables, while villagers shop and dogs lie in the dust. An hour out of Bagan, we lunch surrounded by precipitous valley views, at elegant, elevated Popa Mountain Resort, the menu sourced from its organic farms and high garden terraces.

Highlights: Bagan's religious monuments are scattered across a vast, wooded plain. Built under the 9th-13th century Pagan dynasty (Bagan's original name), these buildings are of hand-made, dark-red brick, crumbling and mossy, some with stepped facades and labyrinthine, high-ceilinged, frescoed stone interiors. We explore two and climb to the high terraces of another to watch a fiery sunset. The following day, we leave our river home before dawn for an optional tour well-worth every cent, to float 300m above the temple plain in a hot-air balloon. We drift up as the sun rises, illuminating an occasional gilded stupa studding the dark trees.

More: abercrombiekent.com.au; sanctuaryretreats.com.

Judith Elen



MV Katha Pandaw on the Irrawaddy.

RV KATHA PANDAW

Passenger Capacity: 32

Route: A 14-day, 1000km voyage via the Irrawaddy and Chindwin rivers between Yangon and Homalin in northwest Myanmar, returning by air to Yangon.

Onboard Experience: This understated, floating gin-and-tonic palace is a descendant of the grand Irrawaddy Flotilla steamers. It sports pedigreed brass, polished teak and much more, but the clincher for me is the simple declaration: "No TVs in the staterooms [and] no captain's table or other such inanities." My kind of river tub, indeed. Thereafter, add passenger camaraderie, good food and excellent guides. Between excursions ashore we pass many enjoyable hours on the shaded upper deck, scanning the ever-changing riverscape as it morphs from verdant fields to teak forests to villages and then back to jungle.

Best Ports: The "off-board" experience of twice-daily excursions amid market towns and ancient temples is similarly exceptional. On the Upper Chindwin River, where today's Myanmar slips back into old Burma time, we ramble ashore through towns where main streets are still likely to be called The Strand and old forts, abandoned colonial mansions and even an 1890s golf course evoke a mothballed past. Raintrees shade the banks at Kalewa, our penultimate northern river port. Here, as in other towns, in a waterfront chai shop we chat in broken languages and universal laughter with local folk.

Highlights: Among memorable moments, pirogues drift past, their maroon sails stitched from the old robes of monks. Bagan is like an Asian version of Vatican, Chartres and Benares, all rolled into one. "Are you stupa-fied yet?" quips our guide as we reboard Katha Pandaw after our visit ashore. Further upriver, the bizarre Thanbodi Temple at Monywa, home to the country's tallest standing Buddha and longest reclining Buddha, has been described as "a Burmese Buddhist Disneyland". Then there's the village of Masein, where a flight of 28 white pagodas climbs a riverside ridge like a prayer ascending.

More: pandaw.com.

John Borthwick

BELMOND ORCAELLA

Passenger Capacity: 50

Route: From Bagan south to Yangon for seven nights on the Irrawaddy; 11-night itineraries available; Belmond also operates the popular Road to Mandalay cruiser. Flights from Yangon to Bagan and transfers included.

Onboard Experience: The snub-nosed Orcaella, named for a species of river dolphin, is a four-decked floating hotel with deluxe cabins, staterooms and suites over two levels; all configurations are well-designed chambers with good storage and petite ensuites with powerful showers. Dining and leisure facilities are on the upper two decks, and there's an open sun area, small pool and lovely little day spa curtained into several treatment nooks. The velvet-and-chrome lounge bar could have been lifted from a chic nightclub, but otherwise it's all light and bright, with pale timbers, polished surfaces and substantial artworks in the public areas.

Best Ports: Aside from the feted and fantastical Bagan, no town or village stands out but rather the overall scale and volume of Buddhist monuments in rural Myanmar; the whole gilded panoply leaves me dazzled and humbled. Even in bed, watching the river parade from a perch of lie-down luxury, the Irrawaddy mesmerises, with pagoda spires peeping above palms like golden hats. There are banana groves and rice paddies, river gypsy villages on stilts, women carrying vegetables in baskets atop their heads, their faces streaked with powdered bark paste, or thanaka, and in the gloaming they look as eerie as ghosts.

Highlights: Orcaella is moored each night (no swell or sway to disturb a river rover's slumber) and shore excursions are great fun and a tad more adventurous than the sedate norm. Expect outings to produce markets with Orcaella's chefs and cooking classes to follow; a range of transport from tuk-tuks to bullock carts; well-informed guides and a back-up brigade of Belmond's logistical staff whispering into walkie-talkies. Passengers return to the embrace of Orcaella and the prospect of ice-cold towels rolled like temple offerings, shot glasses of fruit smoothies and the prompt offer of shoe removal and cleaning. Spicy, substantial cuisine ranges from tofu hotpots and an abundance of big prawns from clear, cold lakes to the north to lemongrass-scented fish soup and pennyworth salad. And then there's the occasional on-shore event, such as a barbecue buffet in a village setting surrounded by crumbling walls, like an ancient amphitheatre. Balanced on tiny stools, female gymnasts perform with hula hoops and juggling rings while efficiently kicking cane balls, nary missing a beat.

More: belmond.com.

Susan Kurosawa

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