

Rolling down the River - The Nation

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MYANMAR



The 'real' Myanmar emerges on a slow boat to Mandalay, the Strand Cruise

The Romance of old Mandalay all but dissipated when the Chinese moved into the former capital to seek their fortunes in jade and other gemstones excavated from Myanmar's mines. Once home to King Thibaw, Burma's last monarch, and a home away from home for British writer George Orwell, Mandalay is today little more than a satellite of China. Yet there is still romance to be found - all you have to do is board a boat and take to the Ayeyarwaddy River.

As our Strand Cruise skates over the surface of the water, chaos gives way to calm and the effect is almost spiritual. Here, along the Ayeyarwaddy River, or the Irrawaddy as it is sometimes called, both the land and the people are authentic. Now and then, we see Myanmar women negotiating the muddy paths as they balance earthen pots on their heads. The air is thick with the fragrances of cheroots and betel, the view from the boat composed of remote villages, gilded pagodas, tier-roofed monasteries and old palaces.

"When we leave Mandalay tonight, we will follow the river downstream to Bagan," begins Neville, who is acting as cruise manager, as he briefs us at the bar on the sun deck. "When night falls, we will moor in a remote district."

The Strand Cruise gets its name from its sister - the iconic and legendary Strand Hotel in Yangon. This luxurious new ship began plying the waters early in 2016 taking passengers on stylish river cruises on the historic section of Ayeyarwaddy River. The Strand Cruise is geared towards adventurous culture buffs, the

kind of people who want to walk through the villages to search for the Myanmar spirit and heritage but also appreciate a spa treatment and glasses of chardonnay when they get back.

The expedition takes four days travelling from Mandalay to Bagan and five on the return journey.

On our first day onboard, we stop at Mingun and Sagaing to admire the unfinished pagoda and big bell of Mingun and the whitewashed Hsinbyume Pagoda, whose melancholy tale is similar to that of the Taj Mahal. We return to the ship in time for a sunset cocktail and a delightful dinner of traditional Myanmar dishes, all of which are excellent.

Built locally, the Strand Cruise offers 27 cabin suites and 24 hour butler service. The luxurious ship also hosts a spacious pool deck, wellness centre and wine tasting corner as well as gourmet a la carte cuisine in a restaurant with panoramic views of the river. In short, it's a floating and compact version of the legendary hotel.

My cabin, 201, is on the main deck. Luxurious as it is stylish, there is plenty of room to move. The wall is adorned with black-and-white photos of old Burma, including a beautiful portrait of a young Burmese woman. Every evening, as the passengers share travel tales over the dining table, the housekeeper slips into our cabins to turn down the beds and leave a Burmese puppet or another delightful souvenir.

We reach Ava on the second day. Nestled on the left bank of Ayeyarwaddy River, Ava or Inwa is the ancient imperial capital of Burmese kingdoms from the 14th to 19th centuries. Ravaged by war and natural disasters over the years, Ava today is scarcely larger than a rural backwater dotted with ruins, monastic buildings and stupas. We explore the remains of the abandoned kingdom by horse cart before taking a break at a roadside café for sweet tea and bean cake.

Back on board, the Strand Cruise resumes its journey towards Bagan.

With the bar, books and board game, the Upper Deck is understandably the most popular spot with passengers. You can bury yourself in a sofa with George Orwell's "Burmese Days", or take a glass of wine out to the sun deck for panoramic views of the historic river.

Also known as the "Elephant River", the Ayeyarwaddy begins at the top of the snow-capped Himalayas then flows for roughly 1,550km passing through the centre of Myanmar before throwing itself into the Andaman Sea. Thousands of temples, stupas as well as royal capitals stand on its banks.

Water levels in July and August are high and it is sometimes impossible to tell the riverbank from the sky. Both - water and sky - look grey. As we sail downstream, we can see the widespread flooding that has left hamlets and pagodas under water. In the distance, people in small sampans bob up and down on the river.

On the second night, the Strand Cruise is moored at Pakokku - a remote township 30 kilometres northwest of Bagan. From my cabin, I can see Myanmar's longest bridge spanning the river.

About 7.30am on the third day, the very first Myanmar Empire comes into view. From the sun deck, I can clearly see a large white pagoda sitting on the left bank. The tips of other pagodas gradually come into view,

shooting up over the mist that lies thick over the forest. As the ship gets closer, the valley of Bagan reveals itself with many more pagodas in different shapes and colours, varying from white bell-shaped pagodas to betel-spit red with a gilded umbrella on top.

"From the plain-looking pagoda of the common man to the gilded pagoda of the kings, the valley of Bagan has more than 2,000 pagodas," Tin Tin Aye, a member of the Bagan Heritage Trust explains before we disembark for our pagoda visit.

Tucked away in the country's uplands and nestled along a bend of the Ayeyarwaddy River, Bagan was the capital of the Kingdom of Pagan - the first kingdom to unify on the Ayeyarwaddy Plain. The city enjoyed its glory for two-and-a-half centuries before falling to Kublai Khan's raiders.

You need a week or more to see the 2,000 pagodas from different angles. Unfortunately, we have only one day in Bagan so we pick the most important. Shwezigon Pagoda of King Anawrahta, Gubyaukgyi temple with its fresco, and of course the famous Ananda Temple are on our list.

I fall in love with the fresco at Sulamani Temple. The corridors inside the temple, which is dimly lit by the daylight, leads us to the murals, which illustrate the lives of the Lord Buddha. Dominated by red complemented by yellow, green and a hue so dark that it could be black, the fresco is from the 12th century. Naung Naung, our guide in Bagan, takes us to the dark corridor before shining her torch on a painting of a Buddhist praying scene.

"We believe this is a scene of Siam," says Naung Naung. "The hairstyle, the elegant postures and the slim bodies are not so common in Myanmar."

Nuang Naung and Tin Tin Aye from the Bagan Heritage Trust believe that the Burmese were influenced by Siamese art, pointing out that following the fall of Ayutthaya, artists were most likely among the Siamese brought as hostages to Burma. Ayutthaya art, they say, could well have played a part in the restoration of Sulamani Temple in the 18th Century.

Back on the ship, we find the crew has arranged a cultural show complete with traditional Myanmar dance for our farewell night.

Not too formal an event, the traditional music and performance set against the backdrop of a pagoda valley transport us, at least spiritually, to the days of old Burma.

IF YOU GO

[Bangkok Airways](#) operates flight from/to Bangkok and Mandalay. All inclusive 3-night cruise (Mandalay - Bagan) starts at US\$1,782 (double Occupancy) and \$2,673 (single occupancy) per person. For more deals, visit www.thestrandcruise.com.

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