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IN-DEPTH FEATURES AND TRAVEL ADVICE FROM THE EXPERTS **PLUS** READERS' TIPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS telegraph.co.uk/travel



A NEW DAWN FOR BURMA

A river cruise to Mandalay is the perfect introduction to a country showing the first signs of change, says **Tim Jepson**

We rise before dawn, leaving the air-conditioned chill of the boat for the silky warmth of the Burmese night. The sky is star-filled and the distant banks of the river a dark shadow. We clamber into a smaller boat, the current strong and silent at its sides. Minutes later, we are climbing into a patched-up Second World War truck, left by the British in 1948, and driving along rutted, dusty tracks towards what will be one of my most memorable experiences in 25 years of travel.

The sky lightens pink in the east to reveal a verdant plain, part-covered in stands of palm and tamarind. Rising from the green canopy are temples, dozens of them, hundreds of them, beautiful, other-worldly silhouettes in the shimmering dawn haze.

We pull into a clearing and meet Lee Hooper, a Bristolian, and the man who is going to show us the temples of Bagan, temples which, simply put, are one of the world's greatest sights; a sight to rival Machu

Picchu or Angkor Wat – but without the visitors – built by the kings of Bagan between 1057 and 1287, when their kingdom was swept away by earthquakes and Kubla Khan and his invading Mongols.

Some 2,230 of the original 4,450 temples survive, a legacy of the Buddhist belief that to build a temple was to earn merit. Yesterday we had hired bicycles to explore part of the vast site, wandering at will into dim, cave-like temples where 1,000-year-old statues of Buddha, sandstone reliefs and other equally venerable artefacts lay undocumented and unprotected.

But Lee eschews bicycles. Balloons are his thing, and in no time we are rising with the sun above the plain. The morning air is dewy and fresh, mist mingling and rising with the smoke of fires from scattered villages. In the far distance the faint outlines of distant mountains frame the great sweep of the Ayeyarwady river, and on all sides the sun-burnished domes of countless temples rise from the

CONTINUED OVERLEAF



WELCOME TO DISCOVER



Kipling described Burma as “quite unlike any land you know about”. For years most of us have had to take his word for it. But now at last we can follow in Kipling’s footsteps, and, indeed, in those of Hillary Clinton, the first US Secretary of State to visit in more than 50 years. Is Burma still unlike any land we know about? In our cover story this week, Tim Jepson gives a taste of what to expect. Our readers’ guide, meanwhile, is to Christmas markets. Turn to p4-5 to find out which are the best and why.

Maggie O’Sullivan
Discover editor



ALAMY/PETER STUCKINGS

It is the East as it was, straight out of

deep green of bush, jungle and fields. It is a sublime experience, to say the least.

Lee and his company, which employs 100 local people full-time, are exemplars of the “corporate responsible tourism” that – in the light of an apparent recent rapprochement with the military regime – is now welcomed by Burma’s pro-democracy leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, and her NLD party.

So, too, is Orient-Express. At the small jetty after we return from our balloon ride, a group of around 80 people waits patiently outside one of several clinics and schools Orient-Express has built, helped by contributions from its passengers. The ship’s doctor, Hal Tun, conducts a

surgery on the three days a week the boat is docked.

Orient-Express’s Road to Mandalay cruise between Bagan and Mandalay, 110 miles to the north, is the perfect introduction to Burma, not least because it allows insights – such as the clinic – over and above the chance to experience some of the highlights of the most fascinating country in South-east Asia.

I warm immediately to the vessel that for four days is to be our window on a small part of this extraordinary lost world, a former Rhine cruiser, which is luxurious without being gaudy, and, with just 42 spacious and recently refurbished cabins, pleasingly intimate and uncrowded. I warm, too, to the almost



Into the unknown: the Road to Mandalay boat on the Ayeyarwady

entirely Burmese crew and staff, who, like all the Burmese I meet, are friendly, gentle and utterly charming.

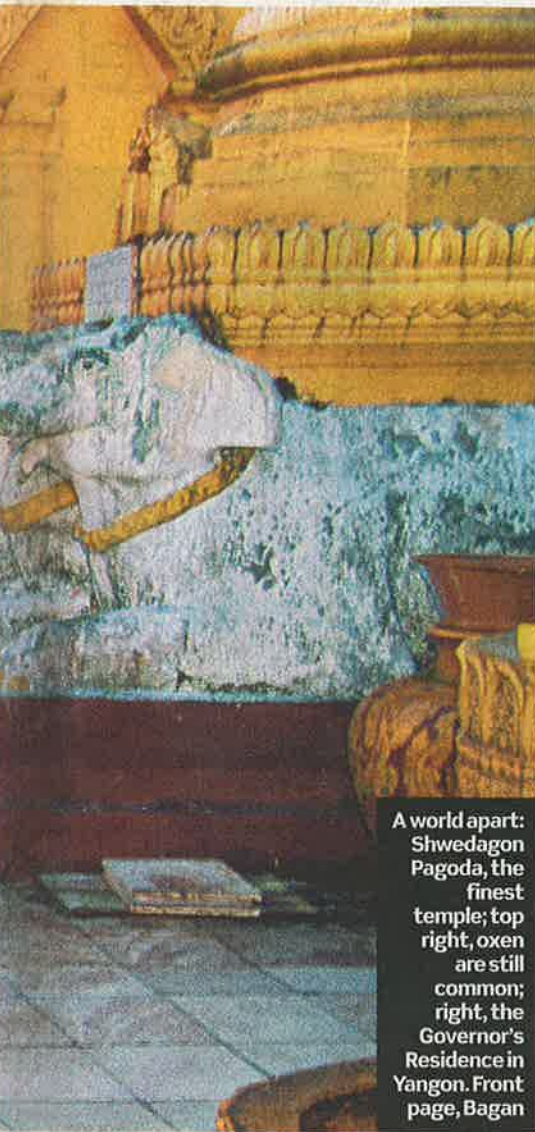
After our departure from Bagan we slip into a relaxed regime. Breakfast and lunch on the open deck; (excellent) dinner downstairs, with local or Western options; afternoon tea in the library; evening talks; and the chance to read, swim in the on-deck pool or, in my case, and many others’, simply to become quietly mesmerised by the majesty of the Ayeyarwady.

The Ayeyarwady, or Irrawaddy, has always been Burma’s lifeblood, navigable for 1,000 of its 1,240 miles and linking the north and south of the country. It is one of travel’s hoariest clichés to suggest somewhere cannot

have changed in 50 years or more, and a cliché that on the ground inevitably reveals itself to be untrue.

Not here. Burma’s military regime has held back what was once one of South-east Asia’s most dynamic countries, and one that, with its vast natural resources and resilient people, could be again. But whatever the government, it is hard to imagine that much would change on the banks of the Ayeyarwady.

A motorised boat, maybe, or the odd motorcycle, but otherwise there is nothing to sully the river’s timeless vignettes. No pylons, no masts, no hoardings, no fences, no roads, no cars. Just pristine jungle, paddy fields, distant mountains, -



A world apart: Shwedagon Pagoda, the finest temple; top right, oxen are still common; right, the Governor's Residence in Yangon. Front page, Bagan



Somerset Maugham

villages of teak and thatched bamboo, men fishing, children swimming, women carrying water, the billowing dust from oxen carts and the occasional golden dome rising above canopied trees.

The evening talks add substance to the fleeting images of the day. Among other things, I am delighted to learn that Burma has eight days in a week, Wednesday being split in two, midnight to noon being Bohdaha, the day Buddha was born; and that, according to the Buddhist calendar, we are in the year 2,554, calculated from 543BC, the year Buddha achieved Nirvana.

On our second evening, a demonstration of different ethnic dances and costumes by members of the crew

charmingly illustrates Burma's diversity. The country is just a little larger than France, but has 135 ethnic groups, with eight distinct "nationalities", dominated by the Barmar (or Burmese - hence Burma), who make up around 70 per cent of the total 47 million population.

On our fourth day, all too soon, we dock at Mandalay, as evocative a name as any in Asia. The Chinese are here, though - the border is just 300 miles away - and the city is booming, mainly, it is said, on the back of rubies, jade and heroin. Fancy jeeps and gaudy new houses proliferate.

But it is also a pleasing place, especially on the river, where men fish from the front of small boats as their

wives paddle gently at the stern; where the lakes are full of the scented pale mauve of water hyacinth; and where the Mandalay Palace and ancient Mahamuni Buddha, covered by the faithful over the centuries in layers of gold leaf now six inches thick, still hark back to the old Burma.

Mandalay appeals, but Yangon, formerly Rangoon, to which we fly for our return flight, completely beguiles. No other city in South-east Asia comes close. This is the East as it was, straight out of

Somerset Maugham; languid, peaceful, romantic, sultry; full of crumbling, colonial-era buildings; a river that flows slow and lazy; and a vivid and visceral street life.

And lots to see - Shwedagon Pagoda, Buddhism's oldest temple, is the most spectacular sight, but our last visit, to the Taukkyan Second World War Cemetery, is the most moving. It contains the graves of 6,374 Allied soldiers and a memorial to 27,000 soldiers with no known grave. "What he died for let not others cast away lightly", reads the epitaph of Private W Bright, who died in 1944, aged 21. In a country like Burma, so beautiful but still so burdened, this already sad, sombre place, swirls with added poignancy and irony.

Have you been to Burma? Send your comments to yoursay@telegraph.co.uk or post them on our website at telegraph.co.uk/travel

YOUR SAY

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE

Orient-Express's Road to Mandalay (0845 077 2222; orient-express.com) offers a range of itineraries along the Ayeyarwady. Three-, four- and seven-night cruises between Bagan and Mandalay are regularly available plus four 11-night voyages each year to Bhamo, when river levels allow (August to early September), in the remote north of the country. All itineraries can be combined with stays in Yangon, Inle Lake or Ngapali on the Indian Ocean.

A three-night voyage starts from £1,560 per person, including all table d'hôte meals and accommodation on board, based on two sharing, economy class internal flights to and from Yangon, transfers and sightseeing.

PACKAGES

Abercrombie & Kent (0845 618 2214; abercrombiekent.co.uk) has excellent on-ground staff and guides in Yangon, and can organise a wide variety of itineraries across the country.

A seven-day tour, including two nights' b & b at The Governor's Residence in Yangon (see "The Best Hotels" below) and four nights' full board on the Road to Mandalay, cruising from Bagan to Mandalay, costs from £2,795 per person based on two people sharing. The price also includes international economy flights to Yangon on Thai Airways via Bangkok (020 7491 7953; thaiairways.com), domestic flights, transfers and guiding. A visa is required for UK citizens, which can be arranged through Abercrombie & Kent, but forms must be completed in person by individual visitors.

WHETHER TO VISIT

Since May this year, Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy have officially welcomed visitors "who are keen to promote the welfare of the common people and the conservation of the environment and to acquire an insight into the cultural, political and social life of the country while enjoying a happy and fulfilling holiday in Burma".

THE INSIDE TRACK

● The best time to visit Burma is between February and March, when there is least rain (often none at all) and kinder temperatures. It is winter in Bagan, which means 75F (24C) by night and 86F (30C) by day. In summer, it can reach 110F (43C). Yangon is always a little cooler. The Road to Mandalay boat is air-conditioned and the river often has pleasant breezes. ● Balloon (and other) tours can be booked as part of Abercrombie & Kent's package (see "Packages" above) or through Orient-Express and the Road to Mandalay cruise; or you can book direct with Balloons Over Bagan (0095 1 652809; easternsafaris.com/balloonsoverbagan_home.html; \$310/£195 per person). Tours run October to March and are weather-dependent. ● In Yangon, visit Shwedagon Paya, preferably at dawn or dusk; drink cold beer at Junior Duck (Pansodan Jetty, off Strand Road), and watch the sun set over the

WHAT TO AVOID

- Dollar tips: the local currency has recently strengthened against the dollar. Unless things change, tip in kyats.
- Shoes in temples, and, if sitting, don't point your feet at anyone, and certainly not at any statue of Buddha.
- Mobile phones - they don't work.
- Gem purchases, unless you know what you're doing; note, too, that registered dealers are forced to pay levies to the government. Stick to small producers of silk and lacquerware.
- Avoid relying on credit cards. Often outlets simply can't process payments.
- No need to avoid using Burma for Myanmar or vice versa - locals use both.

river; take a trishaw and train ride; and explore Kon Zay Dan market, more fun than the better-known Bogyoke Aung San. ● Luc Besson's film of the life of Aung San Suu Kyi, *The Lady*, starring Michelle Yeoh and David Thewlis, is released on Dec 30. ● Rangoon (or Taukkyan) War Cemetery (cwgc.org) is seven miles north of the airport (40 minutes' drive from the city centre) between Myienegone and Manthawaddy roundabout, off PYI Rd (formerly Prome Rd).

DID YOU KNOW?

Rudyard Kipling immortalised Mandalay in *The Road to Mandalay* but never actually visited the city

THE BEST HOTELS

Thiripiytsaya Resort, Bagan £

You will not need a hotel in Bagan if you are taking the Road to Mandalay cruise, but if you want to spend more time here (and you could and should), this is a traditionally styled 76-room resort hotel beautifully set in 24 acres on the banks of the Ayeyarwady (0095 616 0048; thiripiytsaya-resort.com; double b & b from \$70/£44).



Hotel by the Red Canal, Mandalay £

Cruises allow for almost a full day's sightseeing in Mandalay, but, as in Bagan, you may want to extend your stay. This modern but traditionally styled hotel is minutes from the central Mandalay Palace and other sights (268543; hotelredcanal.com; from \$75/£47). For something more sumptuous - bordering on the gaudy -

consider the Mandalay Hill Resort (235638; mandalayhillresorthotel.com; double b & b from \$140/£63).

The Strand, Yangon ££

This is Yangon's classic, historic hotel, the one that dates from, and best evokes Yangon's (Rangoon's) British colonial era. Built in 1901, it was one of the most opulent and celebrated hotels in the Empire, with a roster of guests that has included Kipling, Maugham, Lord Mountbatten and, latterly, Sir Mick Jagger. Sensitively restored, with just 30 rooms, but its position, while central, is spoiled by the ugly and busy road that separates it from the river (124 3377; ghmhotels.com; double b & b from \$198/£124).

The Governor's Residence, Yangon £££

First choice in Yangon; a traditional-looking and romantic colonial-style hotel from the Twenties; intimate, with lots of teak, tropical silks and cottons, fan-cooled verandas and spacious, modern and air-conditioned rooms; in a quiet residential district northwest of the centre; delightful staff, wonderful pool and a verdant garden (122 9860; governorsresidence.com; double b & b from \$285/£179).

THE BEST RESTAURANTS

Happy Cafe & Noodles, Yangon £

Part of a modern, five-outlet chain, but none the worse for that; pretty garden setting in a quiet semi-residential district; excellent noodles, of course, but plenty of other well-prepared Burmese staples (104-B, Inya Road; 153 6985).

50th Street Bar & Grill, Yangon £

Lovely teak and brick interior, with a mixture of Western dishes and snacks (including pizzas from a wood-fired oven - Burma's first) and great Burmese curries, *hta minnkyawith* (Burmese-style fried rice) and smoked buttered fish (off Merchant Street; fccambodia.com/50th_street).

Shwe Kaung BBQ & Hot Pot, Yangon £

Hot pots are freshly cooked, with meats and vegetables (you can choose) in broth; tasty, nutritious and very cheap (near the Shwedagon Pagoda on Kabaya Pagoda Road). Also on Kabaya Pagoda Road, near the Sedona Hotel, is Shwe Li, perfect for beer and Chinese barbecue.

Queen Restaurant, Bagan £

Lovely varied Burmese and pan-Asian food, served in the traditional lacquer dishes for which Bagan is renowned; good service and pretty garden (Wetkyi Inn Village, main road south of Nyaung U).

Black Bamboo, Bagan £

French restaurant, good food and a great garden atmosphere; wonderful coffee, too (off Restaurant Row-FIT Road).

San Kabar, Bagan £

The puppet shows here won't be to all tastes, but the Italian and Chinese food will be; it's also a pleasant spot for a drink (616 0483; Nyaung U Main Rd, near Shwezigon Pagoda).