

A Burmese River Cruise Aboard the *Road To Mandalay*

PERHAPS FITTINGLY FOR A RIVER SHIP IN a devoutly Buddhist country, the *Road To Mandalay* has led a life of change and rebirth. Built in 1964, the *Nederland* cruised the Rhine for three decades before settling into a comfortable senescence as a floating hotel outside of Dresden. Then along came Orient-Express, which was in the market for a dependable shallow-draught vessel to ply Burma's Irrawaddy River between the spectacular pagodas of Bagan and the storied city of Mandalay. Soon, after an extensive refurbishment, this stately German retiree found herself in the Far East with a new name.

Almost two years ago, catastrophic Cyclone Nargis destroyed the ship's interior, but after another restoration effort (this time compliments of an understanding insurance company), the *Road To Mandalay* returned last August.

Working with a small army of local craftsmen, Laos-based architect Francois Greck has created a surprisingly airy, welcoming environment that is deftly appointed with teak wall carvings, Jim Thompson fabrics and Raj

prints. Eighty-two passengers (down from 108) can now enjoy this flawlessly designed and eminently hospitable 43-cabin vessel.

Thailand welcomed around 14 million visitors last year, while Burma received just over 200,000. There are several obvious reasons for this. Burma has languished under a military dictatorship for 40 years, and while it is safe for foreigners and has a number of perfectly respectable hotels (particularly at Inle Lake and Ngapali Beach), there is no outside cell reception, the local airlines are prone to delay, and credit cards and ATMs are nonexistent. And understandably, many people don't like the idea of indirectly supporting a corrupt and wicked regime.

Sadly, the money the regime gains from tourism is a small percentage of the revenue it earns from Burma's vast natural resources, so the potential for leverage is minimal. As a result, more governments and NGOs have spoken in favor of constructive engagement. And opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi has reportedly eased some of her previous objections to private tourism.

Certainly, the Burmese people we met — not all of them involved in the tourism trade — welcomed the opportunity to share their country. We found it to be a serenely beautiful place blessed with a warm and resilient civil society.

Our cruise aboard the *Road To Mandalay* left us with indelible memories of many sights: stupas glowing like burnished brass at dusk; river villages rustling to life on a chilly dawn; shy smiles from novice monks. But it is the image of the ruined ninth-century capital of Bagan at sunset, with its thousands of roseate pagodas scattered across a dusty plateau, that will stay with us forever. (Do not repeat our mistake of forgetting to book an early-morning hot-air balloon ride. Several of our fellow passengers raved about the experience over lunch as we quietly stewed over our tea-leaf salads in regret.)

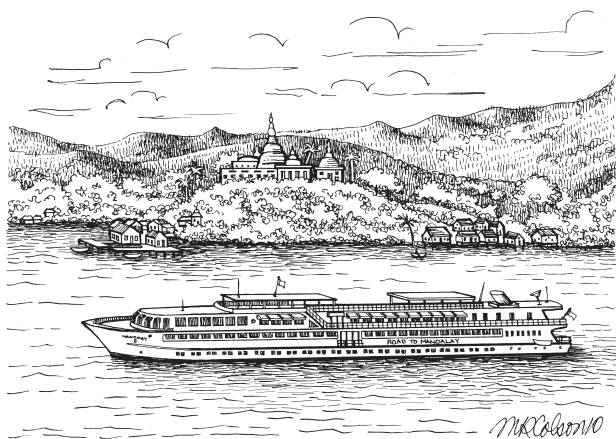
Our journey began at **THE GOVERNOR'S RESIDENCE**, the Orient-Express property in Rangoon. This spacious and extremely comfortable teak mansion is set in the diplomatic quarter, not far from the American Embassy's popular public library. It has one of the best formal dining restaurants in the city, a top-floor veranda that is perfect for a quiet read, and cozy hardwood guest rooms.

On the first day of our cruise, a one-hour flight by Air Bagan twin turboprop brought us from Rangoon to the



center of the country. There, the climate was refreshingly brisk and sunny. Our group, which consisted mostly of Europeans, was promptly whisked by bus from Bagan's sleepy little airport to meet our handsome 1,900-ton ship for the 128-nautical-mile journey upriver to Mandalay.

Given just 200 square feet to work with, it is hard to imagine how anyone could have contrived anything better than our Deluxe Cabin, one of 16. It was a snug but soothing space that made clever use of its confines. A small writing table sat between a comfortable queen bed and a flat-screen television. A single teak cabinet absorbed all of our luggage, and the jade tile-lined bath



Road To Mandalay on the Irrawaddy River

featured a single vanity and a surprisingly large walk-in shower. The three windows just above the waterline didn't exactly afford sweeping panoramas, but they were a marked step above standard portholes.

The 18 higher-priced State Cabins packed an armchair and an ottoman into their extra 50 square feet, along with separate toilet facilities. And the single Governor's Cabin featured a small lounge area. Overall, however, it was difficult to see a significant difference in the cabin types, and we were quite happy with our choice.

A warmly accented restaurant shared the main deck with a cozy piano bar, a gift shop and a spacious reading lounge. And a small fitness facility on the lower deck sat opposite the massage treatment rooms. However, the near-perfect weather constantly beckoned us topside.

The majority of our waking hours were spent on the observation deck, a shaded teak expanse scattered with steamer chairs and cane sofas adjacent to a small swimming pool. We passed our time reading, chatting with our enthusiastic fellow passengers, consulting a house astrologer, and enjoying the ceaselessly captivating spectacle of life along the Irrawaddy.

Beginning in the Himalayas and ending in the Andaman Sea, the Irrawaddy is Burma's longitudinal

lifeline: Farmers harvest along its rich alluvial banks, and villages hum with trade and transport. River traffic consists of bamboo fishing boats, lumbering teak barges and double-decker ferries festooned with drying laundry. Along the shore, white-painted pagodas sit serenely amid clusters of palms.

After an evening berthed in Bagan, two days spent following a winding channel between broad sandbanks and a crumbling shoreline brought us to Mandalay. The city's legendary palace citadel was largely destroyed by bombing during World War II, but some treasures still remain. In particular, the gorgeously detailed Golden Palace provided an experience akin to exploring a huge, intricately wrought teak sculpture. And the inordinately photogenic U Bein Bridge, a half-mile row of teak columns poised along a shallow lake, contributed to another memorable sunset. We also paid a private visit to the Zeyar Theingi Nunnery, a warren of friendly domestic activity, where the pink-robed nuns, ranging in age from eight to 92, received us with amused smiles.

Our own guide was a fount of entertaining details on daily life, from Burmese television-viewing habits (English soccer is big) to the unique facial powder seen on women and children (ground sandalwood mixed with water to ward off the sun).

The only drawback to this otherwise wonderful experience was the standard of the food aboard ship. Breakfast and lunch were very good, the latter including a number of delicious Asian salads, but almost every evening, dinner brought a course that was either bland (dry duck breast laid in state on a concrete galette) or just plain odd (a bright orange grouper served with neon-green rice balls). The curiously inconsistent quality of the cuisine was a source of bemused commentary among many of the passengers, several of whom were longtime Orient-Express patrons.

We must give credit, however, to a smartly edited wine list, favoring New World bottles in the \$30 to \$50 range, and warm, unobtrusive service throughout. We have no doubt that the management has already received a litany of complaints about the middling food, and the issue should soon be resolved. ✈️ **92** *Deluxe Cabin, five days/four nights, \$3,150 per person. Three-, four-, and seven-night itineraries are available between Bagan and Mandalay, with longer excursions to the northern city of Bhamo three times a year. www.orient-express.com*

From November to May, the weather is dry. Daytime temperatures in the recommended winter months average 82 degrees. Note that the shore excursions can require some physical exertion.