

In search of paradise

Sailing along the Irrawaddy gives an unusual perspective on this lovely yet troubled country, discovers **Jon Bryant**



Way to go

Orient-Express offers a five-night journey to Burma (three nights cruising the Irrawaddy and two nights at The Governor's Residence in Yangon) with departures throughout the year.

From £2,010pp, including flights. It also offers longer cruises. Optional land extensions include time on the coast at Ngapali resort or a three-night trip inland to Lake Inle.

From £670pp, including internal flights. (0845 077 2222; www.orient-express.com)

Dizzy heights: hot air balloons soar above the Burmese landscape; inset, the Road to Mandalay sails the Irrawaddy; below, lunch on board; a temple at Amarapura

The khaki-coloured waters of the Irrawaddy which run through the heart of Burma may be a surprising choice for a river cruise, yet as more and more tourists seek a unique travel experience, it offers a world almost unseen by foreigners for more than 40 years.

Burma (Myanmar) appears magically unspoilt and virtually untouched by Western globalisation, in part because the ruling military regime has kept the country behind closed doors, repressed any voice for change, murdered demonstrators and seized foreign aid. Should visitors go at all? You cannot avoid funding the government through visas, airport and hotel taxes, but by going there tourists can engage with the people and support the private sector. Last year even the opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been held under house arrest for 14 years, declared that tourism could help draw attention to the country's plight.

Bordering the three giants of the region, China, India and Thailand, Burma is incredibly rich in natural resources and it was the Irrawaddy river, with its gilded royal barges and colonial steamers, that truly shaped the country's history.

Orient-Express runs several cruises along the Irrawaddy aboard the Road to Mandalay, in a whirl of colonial-style elegance. The longest cruise is an 11-day journey from Mandalay to Bhamo, near the Chinese border. Optional extensions include trips to Ngapali on the coast, and Lake Inle.

I took a five-day trip, including three days by cruise from Mandalay to Bagan. The cabins are all teak and discretion: leather writing cases, a flat-screen

television behind sliding panels and jade tiles lining the bathroom.

Carefully navigating the ever-changing sandbars and the occasional rogue teak log, it's hard to imagine that this great river was once one of the busiest in Asia. In the mid 19th century,

the Glasgow-based Irrawaddy Flotilla Company had a fleet of more than 600 vessels carrying nine million people annually, as well as teak, cotton, rice and oil, up into China. During the three-day trip, we saw fishing canoes but only a handful of pleasure boats.

The Road to Mandalay has a pool on the top deck, a piano bar and a lounge where you can try on a traditional wraparound *longyi* or have some *thanakha* – golden powder made from ground tree bark – rubbed onto your cheeks. The sand banks, gilded pagodas and thatched bamboo huts drift into thicker forest, giant palms, flame trees, tamarind and frangipani, all hiding bandside monasteries.

Buddha is everywhere. In Mandalay, we visited a street of white marble Buddhas all being carved and sanded. We were rowed under the 200-year-old teak footbridge at

Amarapura and sat at a tea house where young boys served us *laphet ye*, condensed milk with tea strong enough to draw the dentine from your molars.

Back on board for a green tea leaf salad, spicy breakfast soup or mild curry (there's a full Western menu as well), it's hard not to slip into a colonial state of mind, especially at meal times. In Burma, you don't say, "Hello, how are you?", you say "Hello, have you had your curry?"

Once a week, the ship's kitchen provides food for the local monks, who queue up with their bowls in order of age, with shaven heads and turmeric robes. It's a "genuine" sight, not an attraction.

Every traveller ends up in Bagan, the capital of the first Burmese empire and a mesmerising location. A private company, Balloons over Bagan, took us up at daybreak, directly from the town's football pitch, to drift over the spires of Bagan's 2,000 pagodas and temples.

Watching the smoke from a thousand cooking fires waft up over the stupas (Buddhist monuments) like snuffed-out candles is astonishing to see. You can return at dusk on a bicycle, riding along tracks past the crumbling shrines and

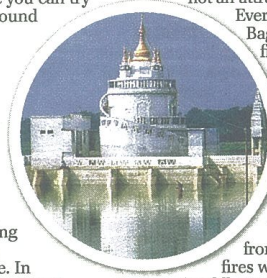
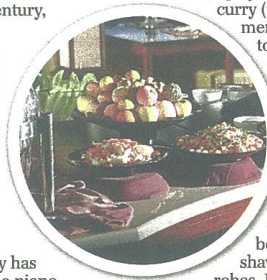
human-sized *chinthas* – half-lion, half-dragon statues that guard the temples.

Flying back to Yangon and the glorious Governor's Residence hotel (also owned by Orient-Express), the pace is faster but the Buddhists are just as devout. At the vast Shwedagon Paya stupa, you can fan a 20 metre-high Buddha with a clever series of levers and ropes as a small "service" to cool him down. The 2008 Cyclone Nargis caused huge plates of solid gold to fly off the golden dome and land on terraces and tabletops all over Yangon. It was all handed back within a few days.

Couples aren't allowed to kiss in public and motorbikes have been banned in Yangon since 1989. It feels odd to be in an Asian city without the gunfire-popping of a strapped-on exhaust pipe beneath chicken baskets and grandchildren. Cars are also astronomically expensive due to a massive government tax, so buses are crammed for short journeys, usually with a young monk riding on top in what the locals call "air-conditioned, upper class".

It's strange to be in a country where Western mobile phones and the internet don't work, but where one can shop for sapphires, jade and gold. Where vast colonial-style houses are being built behind spindly cages of bamboo scaffolding and where most of the population is buying garlic by the clove and taking lifts on ox carts.

While the decision whether or not to travel to Burma is a complex one, it is an entrancing country. Added to this, the Orient-Express group provides jobs for several hundred locals as well as helping in medical and education programmes.



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