

## Pandaw Cruises - The Road to Mandalay

By Petra O'Neill

The Irrawaddy Flotilla Company, established in 1865 by Scottish merchants, became the largest privately owned river fleet in the world, with 602 vessels by the 1930's. George Orwell, William Somerset Maugham and Rudyard Kipling all undertook journeys by paddlesteamer in Burma. Tragically, all were destroyed during WWII.

In 1995, Paul Strachan, a Scottish Historian who had travelled to Burma since the 1970's to research the company his grandfather had worked for, found and set about rebuilding one of the original paddlesteamers and established Pandaw Cruises. Since then, several more Pandaw ships have been built, based on the original plans. All are beautifully crafted, handfinished in brass and teak, with rattan furnishings, and an informal colonial ambience reminiscent of the original IFC paddlesteamers.

Pandaw Cruises now offers several cruises on the Chindwin and Irrawaddy Rivers and once a year, a 14 night journey from Yangon to Mandalay. While the saloon bar, dining room and staterooms of the RV Pandaw II are comfortable and spacious, most of my time was spent on the observation deck, watching life pass by on the river and pagoda after pagoda come into view.

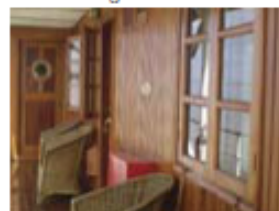
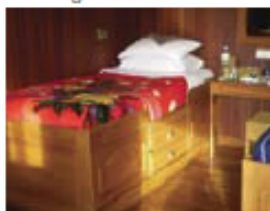
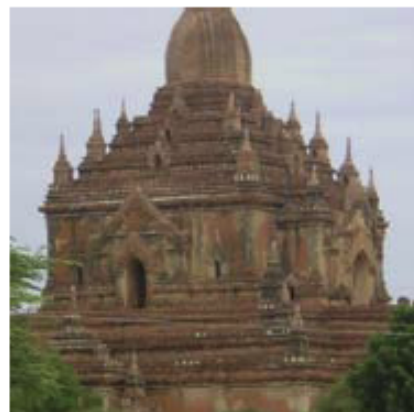
All onshore excursions are interesting and many of the places visited were by special arrangement. We visited Twante village to observe the famed clay water pots being made, wandered through river towns with colonial buildings and visited busy, colourful markets. At Prome, we viewed a 5th-8th century archaeological site and museum of early Buddhist artifacts. We visited the forts of Mingha, and many spectacular pagodas, including the Myathalon Pagoda, built with solid gold bricks. Two days are spent



exploring the most renowned of the 3,000 pagodas and temples at World Heritage Listed Bagan, the capital city of Burma from 1044 until 1287. I enjoyed visiting villages, including Theingone and Yandabo to observe daily life and visit schools supported by Pandaw Cruises. In Mandalay, the last capital of the Burmese Kings, we visited pagodas, Shwe-imbun teak carved monastery and the splendid Mandalay Palace.

The highlight for me was the wonderful sleepy town of Salay, with a beautiful teak museum, monastery and pagodas, and colonial architecture. It was here that an impromptu band began playing using rudimentary instruments and an old gramophone connected to a car battery for amplification. A crowd soon formed and the music was mesmerising. While I enjoyed the company of my fellow passengers, I also appreciated the free time we had to explore the towns and markets to engage with the local people. The crew onboard were exceptional. All were genuine in their eagerness to please, and the Purser, Win, endeavoured to allow us to make a connection with Burmese culture. He would buy exotic fruit and vegetables from the market and arrange

cooking demonstrations and greeted us each evening for our briefing with a friendly Mingalabar or hello. It is no wonder that many onboard had been on several trips before with Pandaw Cruises. While I have tried to recreate Win's Ginger Salad to his exacting standards, it's not the same. Ben a fellow passenger from Brisbane and I are already debating which Pandaw Cruise should be done next.



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John Molinaro, general manager of Unworld Boutique River Cruises said,

"In collaboration with our sister company, Red Carnation Hotels, Unworld continues to elevate the standard in elegant river cruising. The combination of our companies' expertise in hotel and hospitality management along with decades of superior nautical experience has created the ultimate river cruise for travellers visiting Egypt".



Visit to Gallipoli