

SPRING 2010

# PANDAW

---

MAGAZINE





# CONTENTS

<b>The Pandaw Story</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Borneo</b>	<b>6</b>
- A Rajang River Recce	
- Up the Rajang River by Steamer	
- Going Deeper	
- The Great Orangutan Project	
- Brooke Raj and Hornbills	
<b>India</b>	<b>14</b>
- Birds of the Ganges	
- On the Ganges	
- The Ganges: A Celestial River	
<b>Burma</b>	<b>20</b>
- Back to the Irrawaddy	
- Return to Burma	
- Discovering Burma on the Irrawaddy	
- The Thiri Island Project	
- Where the Old Flotilla Lay...	
<b>Mekong</b>	<b>34</b>
- L'Indochine – Art & Culture of the Mekong	
- Mekong Charity Projects	
- Mekong Voyage	
- The Great Idea	
<b>The Pandaw Charity</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>New Developments</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>Pandaw News</b>	<b>48</b>

Front cover image courtesy of Brent T. Madison



# THE PANDAW STORY

Pandaw River Cruises now has six ships and by 2009 will operate in five countries with over two hundred employees. A big investment to get this going you might think. No! In 1994 Paul Strachan launched the business with \$100 in start up capital.

That was the total cost to photocopy a flier, buy stamps and send a notice to the Burma buffs on my mailing list. Paul had been a publisher and specialised on producing academic and art books on Burma. His mailing list included five hundred Burma enthusiasts – all people who for one reason or another loved Burma. He wrote to them and asked if anyone would be interested in sharing the charter of a new river boat called the *Irrawaddy Princess*.

In 1994 on a field trip Paul was invited to the launch of the *Princess*. Accommodation was basic but the best available for a river trip. The owner had put a lot of energy into the project. When asked how he proposed to fill the boat he was dumbfounded. Burma was still just beginning to open its door and the ever optimistic Burmese assumed that foreign tourists would be queuing up to get in. They had yet to learn about marketing. Paul undertook to try and find some people, really because he was keen to retrace a river journey he had made in 1986 as far as Shwegu.

That flier created quite a stir. The phone never stopped ringing. Some people were incredulous. One old boy told Paul he was mad. There were veterans of the 14th Army and old colonials; people born in Burma but forced to flee from the Japanese; people kicked out by Ne Win in the sixties; their children and grandchildren – all keen Burma watchers, long barred from return 'home' to that distant land of sweet memory. Everyone wanted to come! One ten day charter was not enough and six departures ran that first season. Before he knew it they were running a business, calling it in honour of Scot's predecessors, 'the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company'.

Prior to starting up Paul and his Spanish wife Roser booked a Nile river cruise and made a long list of all the does and don'ts. Mainly don'ts as they found the whole experience pretty horrendous – though not the sight seeing of course. Thus the Pandaw philosophy was born – make the experience totally different!

The Strachans soon discovered that running river cruises is not as easy as it seemed. Three jobs merged – running a ship, running a tour company and running a hotel. Three nightmares in one. Add in the fact that you are in Burma with a Neanderthal government and no body, including Paul and Roser, had had any experience of hotels and tourism – and you get the picture. What they did have was lots of energy and enthusiasm – something the Burmese shared - and that made up for many a shortcoming.

Each day was spent fire fighting, as soon as one blaze was extinguished another would combust. Generators would go down, loos over flow, plagues of termites, cockroaches, rats, etc. One day the galley, a strange wooden box that hung off the stern fell off into the river – no lives lost. Another, the ship nearly sank when the main deck flooded and cabins had two feet of water in them after a freak rain storm (understanding passengers transferred for the night to the bar and lounge). Meals would mysteriously burn prior to service. Roser would be madly chopping away with the crew for an impromptu fried rice. Whilst Paul rushed around with a spanner fixing things. The local manager was incredibly stingy with fruit. Once Paul had an argument about banana rations and the local manager brandishing a machete chased him down the corridor. Roser took over in the kitchen and devised simple practical menus that both cooks and passengers could cope with. As many of the guides had little knowledge outside of the main tourist centres, Paul ended up taking over the guiding and gave talks about history and culture in the bar each evening.



What held the whole thing together were the passengers. These were by no means ordinary people. Back then mainly British, an amazing bunch of people came with a variety of interests – the war, Buddhism, botany, ornithology, artists and writers, all were bound together by a common love and interest in Burma. It is always said that it is the people who make a great Pandaw expedition - not the country and not the boat - and this remains true to this day. Passengers were forgiving as disasters escalated in this floating Fawltly Towers.

At the end of the season, a rather burnt out Roser and Paul found that they had actually made some money. This was as surprising as the fact that no one had sued then and if anything even more people wanted to come the following year, such is the power of ‘word of mouth’. The *Princess* was done for – six months of charter had aged her six years and the cabins were collapsing all about us. Paul looked for another vessel and was offered by Inland Water Transport a very ugly modern cargo cum passenger vessel called the *Myat-thanda*. Built for IWT as part of Burma’s then burgeoning special relationship with China, it too was very shoddily put together though the important bits like the engines worked well. However things like hot water and shower drains did not. The dining room was over the engine room so was very hot and very noisy. The *Myat-thanda* was decorated in best possible Chinese taste: there were chandeliers everywhere and wonderful pink net curtains.

Terms, unfavourable to the IFC, as the company became known, were agreed after numerous terrifying meetings with various extremely scary generals. The main thing was to keep a boat running whilst trying to find a real ship of their own. Roser and Paul managed to redecorate and refurnish the boat, scouring the Rangoon markets for antiques and commissioning new furniture from local carpenters. By the end of it the *Myat-thanda* did not look too bad. Not able to repeat the previous year’s juggling act, Mr Crammond, a professional hotel manager was hired. A number of crew followed from the *Princess*, and fifteen years later several are with us still. Mr Crammond was an ex-merchant navy cook and insisted on wearing the most elaborate of uniforms, elevating himself to the rank of captain judging by the amount of scrambled egg on cap and epaulets. When flying up and down to Rangoon he insisted on wearing his finery and would be saluted by airport staff and security thinking he was a high ranking naval attaché. Mr Crammond would theatrically salute back.

Confident in Mr Crammond’s managerial talents, Paul and Roser left him to set up and train a crew they had selected carefully. However, after just a day half the crew walked off: Burmese do not take kindly to be shouted at. Rushing back new crew had to be hired on the spot in Prome. Pandaw’s long standing head chef, Saw Tha Gay, then aged sixteen, served up a rather good fried rice in the local Chinese restaurant and was hired on the spot.

IWT, the ship’s owners, insisted on a full complement of over thirty men to take care of our twenty passengers. These included first, second, third, officers and first, second, third, engineers, etc. None of these were hotel trained, so in addition the IFC had their own team to take care of the passengers – bringing the crew up to 40! The problem was where to put the many ship’s officers as they insisted on being given the ten passenger cabins. When it was patiently explained that these were for passengers the issue became political. IFC were imperial aggressors depriving the Burmese officer class of their rights. Eventually a compromise was struck with IFC paying for a cluster of prefabricated cabins to be built on the cargo deck to house these many officers. That, and the promise of great riches. Needless to say the officers were all pretty useless, the sons and nephews of senior IWT officials granted sinecures on this their most prestigious vessel. They all had paper degrees but no practical knowledge and it was the gnarled old sailors and oily mechanics who ran the show.

The captain, a small yet spright Karen in his sixties, spoke excellent English and ran a tight ship mainly dedicated to extracting as much cash from us as possible in return for a minimum amount of co-operation. For so small a man he was exceedingly virile and had at least three wives, each situated in a different port down the river. As they docked in different ports, the sight of a waiting wife, surrounded by a cluster of children, became not uncommon. On one voyage he made a further proposal to a bouncy German spinster...



Irrawaddy Princess 1995



Myat Thanda crew 1996



Myat Thanda 1997



Paul and Roser 1995



Pandaw I cruising



Pandaw I Bridge



Pandaw I Sundeck

Paul ran the *Myat-thanda* for two years (1996-98) but with only ten cabins found it hard to make ends meet. He learnt a lot though, about ships and about people, and the time was not wasted. He had become fascinated with the old ships still plying the river. A number of former Irrawaddy Flotilla vessels were still operating including a batch delivered just after the war. In Mandalay, laid up on the river bank, Paul found the *Pandaw*. Built by Yarrows of Glasgow in 1948, stripped of every bit of brass (melted down to make Buddhas), pigs running free on the main deck, and the cabins home to a despondent, unpaid and clearly hungry crew and their families.

He approached the owners, IWT who laughed at him. Why would he want a dirty old broken down ship when they could have the spanking new *Myat-thanda*? Would a foreigner actually be stupid enough to pay for her, and in dollars too? A deal was struck and the vessel handed over. Paul did one of my back of envelope sketches (all Pandaws to this day are designed on the back of envelopes) and a contractor found to do the conversion work. First to come off was the armour plating – these ships were veterans of the Kachin wars and were often fired upon by insurgents, one even was lost to mortar fire in the 2nd Defile. Paul knew exactly how he wanted it – studies had been made of the old IFC ships from original drawings and old photographs. The only real changes would be mod cons like en suite bathrooms and air conditioning. A year later in 1998, the ship was ready and Sir Eric and Lady Yarrow were persuaded to come out from Glasgow and re-launch the vessel – exactly fifty years after Yarrows launched her in the Clyde. Sir Eric had fought in Burma during the war and as a Royal Engineer sunk many of his own ships to prevent them falling into the hands of the Japanese.

In the agreement IFC were responsible for refurbishing the ship, building cabins, etc, and IWT the hull and machinery. This IWT forgot to do. In the first season not a day passed without a breakdown of some sort. Saya U Hla Shwe, the chief, spent his nights stripping engines, forging parts, improvising and conjuring and having them ready to run the next morning. There were five sister P class ships to the *Pandaw* and every time a spare part was needed they would cannibalise it from one of the other ships. By the end of the first month the entire P class fleet was down just to keep our ship running, even ships in far Arakan were cannibalised and the parts flown to Mandalay.

Thus the *Pandaw* story began. So successful was the formula of running expeditions into otherwise unreachable parts of the country, from the comfort and charm of this wonderful old ship, that a second ship was needed. IFC could of taken another old ship but by 2000 politically things were changing in Burma. As power slipped from the more liberal General Khin Nyunt's hands into those of the hard liners, the government was becoming more and more xenophobic. It was becoming increasingly difficult to work with IWT and it was decided that it would be much easier to build a new ship than work with the government.

*Pandaw II* was the first passenger ship ever built in Burma and a tremendous achievement for our only Burmese team of engineers and naval architects. The day of the first trial run remains one of the proudest moments of Paul's life. To build a ship is no mean thing and is the combined effort of hundreds of men, all working alongside each other in a spirit of single minded dedication. On that trial run they took along all the workers and their families along and the emotion was palpable. *Pandaw II* was the first of five ships they were to build in Burma over a busy four year period. With gusto, Paul became an expert on the various complex Buddhist rituals that mark the commissioning of a new ship in Burma. To the Burmese these are as important as a naval architect's calculations. Despite these auspicious beginnings *Pandaw II* ran aground on the third day of her maiden voyage. Nearly a week was spent on a sandbank and the passengers were having such a good time they refused to be evacuated. Eventually the ship was floated off, thanks to an ingenious system of pumping out sand underneath the hull. The *Ode to Pandaw II* written by a passenger says it all.

The writing had been on the wall for some time in Burma. The regime did not like to see a successful foreign company. As said, xenophobia was on the up and foreign investors discouraged – many left during this period as conditions worsened. Meanwhile, at home people were told by their newspapers not to go to Burma as their dollars propped up the regime. Nothing could be less true, the regime wanted to get rid of tourism as it cost them more than it made. *Pandaw*, as locally the business now became known, fell between two stools, resented by the regime and vilified by the politically correct at home. Eventually Paul could not take working with the government any longer and was forced into giving up the old *Pandaw*, it broke his heart and is something he regrets to this day.

In 2003 Paul took the Pandaw formula first with less success to the River Kwai in Thailand and then with greater success to the Mekong between Vietnam and Cambodia. Pandaw have prospered on the Mekong whilst travel to Burma has shrunk. The emphasis is now on the Mekong with developing markets in Malaysian Borneo, India and future destinations in Laos and Kalimantan. Yet all at Pandaw remain proud of their Burmese origins and over fifty Burmese crew work on Pandaws dotted around Asia. Working or travelling in Burma is an act of defiance against the politically correct commissars who control opinion in the west. Paul and the Pandaw team know, deep in their consciences, that they are doing the right thing. The overwhelming majority of Burmese, aspiring for democracy and a better life, would agree with that.

It all began with a \$100 investment. Growth has been organic, financed by cash flow with no borrowing. Not a business model that is taught much on MBA courses but it seems to work. Pandaw's success is assisted by the fact that they work in countries keen to move ahead with enthusiastic and energetic people. Pandaw explore some of the greatest rivers on the planet, with unique and vibrant cultures strewn along their banks. The Pandaw ships are practical and full of comfort and character. However, the real reason for such success are the passengers, who today, in the spirit of the *Irrawaddy Princess* back in 1995, remain ready for anything.



Pandaw II under construction



Pandaw II on her first run



## *Ode to Pandaw II*

On the upper Irrawaddy  
Some way off the western shore  
There's a little sandy island  
That was never there before.  
For the wind is on the sundeck  
And the throbbing engines say:  
"get you back, you British tourists,  
Get you back to Mandalay"

On the Road from Mandalay  
Where the shifting sandbanks play  
Here we sit aboard the Pandaw  
While the river drains away.  
Far away past Mandalay  
We've been here for many a day  
Where the dawn comes up like thunder  
(so I've heard the others say)

They have sent for men and tug boats  
But we doubt they'll ever come  
So we wave to passing vessels  
Shouting promises of rum.  
For the dinner gong is calling  
As the pumps they pound away  
And the noise is so appalling  
You can hardly hear us say:

"Take us back to Mandalay!  
Surely there must be a way?"  
"Shall we never get to Bhamo  
Where the river dolphins play?"  
Though the scenery is splendid  
It looks just like yesterday.  
When the dawn comes up tomorrow,  
Will it look just like today?

On the Upper Irrawaddy  
Where the Pandaw last was seen,  
There's a great big sandy island  
That has since grown lush and green.  
And the river boats come calling  
But they're always chased away  
By some ragged grey-haired natives  
shaking bamboo spears who say:

"Get you back to Mandalay!  
We'd much rather live this way.  
We can grow our own bananas  
And drink toddy every day.  
For the dinner gong is calling  
As it does here twice a day  
In our home on Pandaw island  
So it's here that we shall stay.

*By a passenger (after Kipling)*

# BORNEO:

This exciting new service on the Rajang River in Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo, started in July 2008. The response from our Old Pandaw Hands was overwhelming and nearly all departures were out. Sarawak is one of the world's best travel secrets. It is an eco-paradise with incredible scenery, flora and fauna that has happily been bypassed by mass tourism. Upriver we see Iban tribal life, visiting long houses.

The circular cruise from Sibü to Sibü is eight nights with an optional (yet essential) two night stay in Kuching. This is a gem of a city and Kuching

is one of the best preserved old South-East Asian cities left, full of life and character. We will be running this year round with three departures a month.

### Climate

The temperature year round fluctuates little averaging 30 Celsius (86F) but it can be 98% humidity and rains most days. The wetter season is October to March with 300-500mm a month (14-20 inches) and in April to September this drops to 200 mm (8 inches).



## *A Rajang River Recce by Paul Strachan*

Prior to this summer, I confess I knew very little about the Rajang River, let alone Sarawak or even Borneo, the third largest island in the world. I had an uncle who had fled the Japanese through the Borneo jungles staying in long houses. Our family holiday cottage on the Isle of Arran had been decorated with colourful Iban hats. Other than that my knowledge was zero.

At Pandaw we are ever gazing at maps wondering where next? Now we have Google Earth it is possible to follow rivers as if in a helicopter, and you get a real feel for the topography and features. The more I researched the Rajang the better the omens looked. When we research a new river there are three key ingredients that we have to get right: accessibility for international flights with easy connections; navigability for a vessel of Pandaw size for at least several months of the year; plenty of things to see and do during the cruise, with at least one daily stop to see something different. It is rare that we find a river where all three come together.

The best book about the Rajang and its main tributary the Baleh, is Redmond O'Hanlon's classic *Into the Heart of Borneo*. It is also probably the funniest travel book ever written. We planned the trip in O'Hanlon's footsteps and, though written thirty years ago, found that not much had changed.

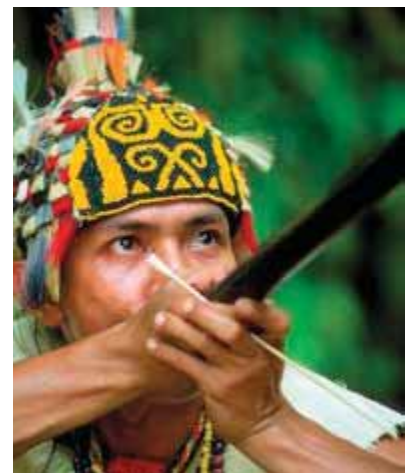
Our first surprise was Kuching. I was completely unprepared for this little gem of a city. On mainland South-East Asia all various 'pearls of the orient' have become holes of the orient. In Hanoi you can not cross the street for traffic; the klongs of Bangkok have been filled in to make freeways; a once splendid colonial Rangoon fallen to the Chinese property developer. Kuching seemed untouched. Quietly prosperous, the streets of old Chinese shop houses meet the restrained dignity of Brooke Raj civic buildings. Courthouses, General Post Office, the Astana or official residence of the White Rajas and the enchanting Sarawak Museum all survive unmolested by the moderniser. The serene Sarawak River flows through the city and there is a pleasant corniche. You can walk around quite safely and nothing is very far away. We stayed in the Hilton, which was perfectly fine with good views across the river. The Sarawak Museum is a must – a Victorian anthropological and naturalist's paradise, again escaping the meddlesome moderniser's hand. Just out of town, the Orang-utan sanctuary is well worth a visit at feeding time. Ritchie the king ways 120kg and has double the arm span of a human – not to be trifled with!

Sibu is only a twenty minutes flight away but seems to get no tourists at all. Another Chinese city, despite one or two modern complexes, the old markets, colonial shop houses and temples calmly lie along the north bank of the mighty Rajang. And mighty it was.

Sibu is a seaport with a container base. Freighters moor mid stream whilst barges laden with coal and timber come down from the interior. Busy shipyards stretch along the opposite bank, separated from the town by at least a mile of muddy chocolate coloured waters. The gateway to the interior, numerous high speed ferry boat bomb in and out of the Passenger Terminal laden with supplies for distant jungle settlements – including many a crate of beer, and other necessities of life for the remote longhouseman. The coastal plains are agriculturally very rich – Sibu is the world's biggest pepper producer and in the surrounding plantations all manner of exotic fruits are cultivated: pineapples weighing ten kilograms; bananas a foot long. Golf is a popular pastime amongst the Sibuan gentry, but beware of trying to fish your ball out of one of the many ponds – submerged crocodiles lurk beneath.

I was met at Sibu by the Sarawak Minister of Finance and other high officials. They were very enthusiastic at the prospect of a river cruise ship coming in as Sibu and the Rajang get few tourists. In all the other countries where I have tried to start river cruises in I have been obstructed, obfuscated, lied to, robbed and ruthlessly bled dry by corrupt officials. Here in Malaysia it was *not* a question of "what can we get him for" but "what can we do for him to get him in". This is civilisation. Most of the officials round the table had PhDs or top degrees from UK, American or Australian universities. They were looking at long term benefits to their country, not to self interest. This was somewhat different from playing snakes and ladders with Burmese generals or being lost in the bureaucratic minefields of Cambodia. After the meeting we were whisked off to the Sheraton, fortunately not one of the so named hotel chain, but a wonderful Chinese restaurant where the minister insisted that my wife Roser and son Toni joined us. After about ten courses we nearly collapsed, yet our hosts seemed to be quite able to carry on for another ten. It was explained that in Sarawak it was too hot and humid to do much other than eat. Eat they could, surrounded with unlimited supplies of tropical bounty. Yet all the Sarawakians I met seemed very fit and bouncy.

The next day we were whisked up the river in a cigar tube - a terrifying fast express boat that looked like a wingless aircraft fuselage. Malaysians love air conditioning and clad only in shorts and T shirts we were in danger of suffering the irony of catching hypothermia in the tropics. I tried sitting on the roof but there was a real danger of being blown off. In the end we rolled up newspapers round our limbs and spread them across torsos.



A video played at high volume from a central screen engrossing our son with a poorly pirated movie. In it, Scotland was being invaded by zombies with Mohican hair doos. Trying to keep warm, and watching Mohicans rampaging around the Trossachs, one felt very at home.

Despite the speed and discomforts of the journey, we quickly grasped the sheer magnificence of the river – jungle dropped off the hills into the muddied waters. As we went deeper into the interior hills gave way to mountains and we started seeing our first long houses. Most of these have been modernised with government grants. They resemble railway trains strung along the high banks of the river.

Kapit the main upriver town had not changed much from O’Hanlon’s day with its Fort Sylvia, markets and bars. Here we transferred to a speed boat provided by the Pelagus Resort Hotel, where we would base ourselves. Another thirty miles upstream the river got more and more interesting with myriad islands and great rocks protruding from the river bed. Yet the depth would be sufficient for a shallow draft Pandaw and if we could not get all the way passengers could transfer to a speed boat for the final stretch that grew more and more boulder strewn as we approached the rapids.

The Pelagus Resort holds a commanding position over the rapids and is owned by the Forestry Department. It had seen better days. We were the only residents, indeed it seemed we were the first residents for a long time. All the staff were Iban and very charming, though, as if woken from a long slumber, they took a little time to get back into gear. That afternoon we set off on a trek up the river to view the rapids. The path was narrow and overgrown in places and crossed a number of gullies by rickety foot bridges. Failing to take O’Hanlon’s advice and wear long trousers, preferably tucked into socks like plus twos, we were soon covered by leeches and had to beat a hasty retreat!

The very obliging hotel manager arranged the hire of the hotel speed boat to make various excursions on the rivers. The next day we travelled for several hours up the Baleh River covering about fifty kilometres. We were royally entertained in a long house where the manager had a connection – you can not turn up uninvited. The Iban are great drinkers making a

rice wine called *tauik* which is surprisingly good, if dangerously potent, and we were plied with seemingly unlimited quantities first thing in the morning – a great way to start the day. This was a modern long house and even had a central satellite dish. Families live in very comfortable and well kitted out apartments that extend back from a long corridor – really a covered street where people congregate, kids play and the various great Iban festivals are (drunkenly) held. We made friends with a young man who worked for an oil company in the Congo. We were shown around his house which was full of mod cons and in pride of place a karaoke machine. It seems that the Iban have successfully merged the traditional long house culture with the modern world. Only fifty years ago, as a rite of passage into manhood, the Iban male would sally forth to gather heads from neighbouring tribes. I am sure that some on the sly still do; old habits die hard. (Officials told us that this only happens in the Indonesian part of Borneo.)

We are not expert naturalists, but could not miss sightings of crocodiles, monitor lizards and the hornbill, the national bird of Sarawak. We spotted the giant seven inch butterflies described by O’Hanlon and could not help marvel at the sheer immensity of the jungle. On our cruises here the very fact of this primeval rain forest will be the greatest excitement.

We were concerned that logging may have ruined the forest. Along the river we saw no deforestation but were shocked at the sheer volume of vessels and barges coming downstream. There are loading stations at points all the way up and clearly logging is a major part of the economy here. We also saw coal being loaded, trucked to the river from coal mines deep in the jungle. The Malaysian government people assured us that logging was sustainable and the forest replanted after its extraction.

There was certainly enough to see and do up river but it is essential we have a good expedition boat to take our passengers up tributaries and into remoter areas where the Pandaws can not go. I think the main attraction of the Rajang is the river itself and its jungle clad banks. This is a cruise where you just sit back in a steamer chair and watch the moving wallpaper of jungle pass by. So overwhelmingly rich and powerful is the forest that it becomes intoxicating, almost spiritual in its primeval intensity.



# Up the Rajang River by Steamer

By Colin Hinschelwood



With a couple of blasts on her whistle, the *Orient Pandaw* cast off from the port of Sibul and began her second voyage up the Rajang River, one of the world's last uncharted frontiers.

Dozens of locals had gathered at the docks in open awe of what appeared to be a majestic paddle steamer. Waving from the top deck, I imagined that I might look like Rudyard Kipling in the jungles of colonial India or Joseph Conrad setting out to explore Africa.

It was as if we had abandoned the 21st century and were back in the heyday of the British Empire. I surveyed the vast rainforest ahead, contemplating the mystique of Asia through pale European eyes.

We were shown to our cabins neat, cozy staterooms finished in teak and brass. I donned my most dapper attire and went up to the sundeck to join the 34 other passengers enjoying cocktails.

Bryce and Fae, a lovely Australian couple in their 60s, tell me they are on their fifth cruise with this company. This time they've brought their daughter and 5-year-old grandson. Then there's Peter, an English gentleman who has been globetrotting as a travel writer since 1973. Most passengers are seasoned world travelers, but have great expectations for this trip into the heart of Borneo.

Any trip to Sarawak, on the northern coast of the island of Borneo, usually begins in the state capital, Kuching. If you think that Borneo is a wild and primitive land, then be prepared for a shock.

Kuching is modern, clean, lively and elegant. Think Singapore without the neon lights and high-rises. Almost all the half-million residents speak English. The city is characterized by its harmonious fusion of Malay

administration, Chinese business savvy, tribal cultures and the charming vestiges of British colonial architecture.

The port of departure for this cruise, Sibul, on the other hand, is the city that tourism forgot. Or it was until now. Sibul and its Rajang River district received just 2,000 foreign tourists in 2008. That number will almost double this year thanks to Pandaw Cruises.

Nowadays, the ships are powered by two 500 hp diesel engines rather than steam and paddles, but the romance of a bygone era is still evident. With a gentle hum, the *Orient Pandaw* does a steady 8 knots and leaves almost no wake. I spend the first day doing little more than watching the chocolate-colored river and the mangroves glide by.

No passenger ship has been seen on the 640-km Rajang since 1942, so it is no surprise that we are such an attraction. Astonished Malay, Chinese, Iban, Melanau, Kenyah and other indigenous faces stare at us when we tie up at local villages; or they suddenly produce mobile phones and start taking photos of us which shakes me back soberly to the present era.

Days 2 and 3 see me settled in a deckchair reading, sipping tea and breathing in the virgin rainforest air. A brass gong routinely interrupts my reverie, announcing breakfast, lunch or dinner, which are meticulously presented dishes of local and Asian fusion cuisine. Soft drinks and beer are complimentary while wines are reasonably priced. On the third day, I go for an oil massage. So far, it is all going to plan.

The only other breaks in my lazy routine are the daily stops at villages on the river where we sample palm or sago wine and visit rubber plantations, schools and markets.



At sunset, we gather on deck to mingle, comparing previous adventures and drinking cocktails. Most of my fellow passengers tell me they are here for the adventure, not for relaxation. We visit a village every morning and most afternoons, but I am often the sole passenger left lounging on the sundeck while everyone else goes exploring.

But I'm not always so lethargic. As soon as I hear the engines start up before dawn I spring out of bed and get up on deck. The boat seems to float on a morning mist. The distant silhouettes of mountains stand out against an indigo sky.

Armed with my *Birds of Borneo* reference book and a fresh morning mug of coffee, I pull a deckchair up to the rail and start scanning the hazy riverbanks for signs of life.

Borneo should be a naturalist's dream: it is the native habitat of crocodiles, rhinoceroses, clouded leopards and orangutans, and is also home to snakes, monitor lizards, civets, monkeys, gibbons and an impressive diversity of bird species, including hornbills, kingfishers and eagles.

I wait patiently for the swish of a crocodile's tail as it scrambles into the mangroves or for the screech of an eagle spotting its prey. But nothing. They've all moved into the jungle, says our guide Andreas with an apologetic smile. Too many hunters: too many timber companies. Disappointed, I ready myself for my second mission on this trip: to find a headhunter.

On Day 4, some 150 miles upriver, we arrive at the town of Kapit. We are driven in minivans to an Iban village and visit a longhouse, which is the traditional tribal dwelling in Borneo. Each longhouse is about 120 feet in length and has separate rooms linked by a wooden balcony which acts as communal area. Andreas tells me there could be up to 300 members of an extended family living in this one longhouse. I notice that there are lots of mothers, children and old people, but not so many working-age men around. They must have headed for the Big Smoke.

On the ceiling, I find evidence of the tribal headhunters a hanging basket of human skulls. I am told that they are more than 60 years old. There is an old man sitting in the corner with black tribal tattoos on his neck, torso and legs. With Andreas as translator, I go over and sit down beside him for a chat. But I notice that he does not have any tattoos on his knuckles a tradition reserved only for men who have taken heads. There might only be one or two ex-headhunters still alive in Borneo, Andreas translates, but none in this town. Maybe it is just as well...

As we were the first tour group the town had seen in years, the curator opened the Fort Sylvia museum for us, even though it was his day off. The fort was built by the second of Sarawak's colonial White Rajahs, James Brooke, as a frontier post to prevent Iban warriors attacking weaker tribes upriver.

Kapit also marks the point where the Rajang narrows and the ship turns around to head downriver. However, the captain, ex-QE II Chief Officer Sean Whalley, was able to steer us up a jungle tributary for half a day of spontaneous exploration.

Now these really are uncharted waters, muttered Captain Sean to me, and I joined him at the bow on the lookout for sandbanks and debris.

On Day 7 we pass Sibu again and head for the mouth of the river. The unmistakable scent of the sea tells me it is not far. The Rajang widens to around 1 kilometer and the mangroves are replaced by palm and sago trees. There is a tidal line across the river where the Rajang meets the South China Sea. The water turns cloudy jade and, on the horizon, I can make out the turquoise fringe of the ocean. We have reached the end of the line. The Rajang has been conquered and it's time to head back to port.

Unsurprisingly, that night we have seafood for dinner. Appetizers include raw fish cerviche and dill salmon. I am famished, so I opt for the surf 'n turf beef sirloin with grilled lobster. Delicious! Peter is celebrating his anniversary tonight and kindly orders a couple of bottles of South African Shiraz for our table.

On the final night we all exchange cards and emails, and I am touched by the genuine feelings of warmth. Some are even hatching plans to meet on the Ganges trip later this year.

I just loved being in Borneo, said Ken, an investment manager from Los Angeles. So unexplored, so much potential for adventure.



# Going Deeper

By Glenn Harris



The good news from Borneo is that our newly developed excursion programme is now fully operational. Even at high water we have not encountered any problems venturing through the Pelagus Rapids or further up the Balleh River. However, water levels can change dramatically in a very short space of time. If there is a sudden fall, we now know our limitations and quickly revise the programme.

Most cruises we manage to travel further up the Balleh 'into the heart of Borneo' to Nanga Gaat. This is a very small outpost and it was the forward staging post for British forces in the 'Konfrontasi' with Indonesia in the 1960's. What I like about the upper reaches of the Balleh is that you are removed from essential services as there are no roads, no electricity, no phone connection, nor even any regular public transport. The remoteness is pervasive and seems to capture the real essence of adventure travel into an area otherwise impossible to reach without a lot of pre-organisation. Our picnic lunches on the Balleh are continuing although the choice of shaded sandbars can be limited. I found a lovely spot in front of a longhouse near Nanga Gaat. While lunch is being prepared, passengers can wander up to the longhouse and interact with the Ibans.

Negotiating the Pelagus Rapids has proved a real adventure. It is thrill seeking but safe in high water. Returning downstream from Kapit, we have a number of activities taking place at the small riverside town of Song. We arrive there in the evening and are treated to traditional Iban and Malay dances from nearby longhouses and children from local schools. Early the next morning, energetic passengers may join a pre dawn longboat excursion up one of the two small tributaries that enter the Rajang opposite Song. This early morning activity promises bird spotting as well as meeting locals emerging from the creeks carrying produce to the market in Song. We also use a traditional style of excursion boat to travel up the Katibas River at Song to taste *ijok* (the local palm wine).

At Sarikei, we have developed a visit to Rumah Nyuka where we go on an interesting walk through rice paddy, pepper gardens and rubber plantations to a very pretty waterfall. Back in the *mai* after the trek, passengers can witness the dying of rubber collected that morning, rattan and *ikat* weaving, and traditional cakemaking. Passengers are served tea and refreshments and can taste wild local fruit.

Our new *Pandaw Adventurer* should be launched sometime in May 2010. This is a purpose built excursion boat and will allow us to transport passengers to the Pelagus Rapids and the Balleh in style and comfort. It will also open up a lot more possibilities of river exploration on tributaries and can only enhance the whole Borneo experience.

We opened the Kapit and Sarikei trekking trail in November 2009 after working together with the longhouse people. The earlier we start walking the better so as to escape the full heat of the day. On the Kapit trail mist rises up over the ridges and the fresh morning air make it all the more wonderful. As there are some steepish sections on the Kapit trail, walkers are encouraged to wear adventure footwear that provide good ankle support. It is also advisable to tuck trousers into socks to prevent any leeches, though we do not pass any swampy areas but clear running streams and waterfalls. There are five rest areas on this trail, which are used as congregating points for our guides to address the walkers with points of interest. As the trail does wind through jungle in a single file, it would be preferable for groups to leave the boat in staggered intervals rather than one long conga line that could slow everyone down.

Similarly, in Sarikei we offer early morning walks. The walk to Pala Munsoh waterfall is longer and it is preferable for those trekkers to leave much earlier, as early as 6.30am, and take a small packed breakfast to consume once they reached the waterfall. The walkers going on the shorter Pau waterfall trail leave after an early breakfast on Pandaw - around 8am. Both parties to return to the longhouse around 11am to watch rubber drying and other activities before lunch at the longhouse.



Treking trail near Kapit



Falls at Sarikei

The early morning walks give greater opportunity to witness birdlife as well as the longhouse folk using the same trails going about their pastoral activities - tending to rice paddies, rubber tapping and checking on the pepper gardens. Walkers are advised to wear good footwear as well but on these trails there are no real steep sections. A good sun protection hat is a necessity though as these trails are not as shaded as Kapit. At both trekking locations, carrying a small sweat towel is a good idea. Not that the trails are strenuous, but Borneo is hot and if you're doing any outdoor activity, you will sweat a good deal. I also intend to develop some rest and congregating areas on the Sarikei trails as we have done in Kapit. Again these trails are single file but the landscape is more open.

The before breakfast bird watching excursions go well and there are birds! Going up a small creek in a longboat in the early morning is exhilarating. Initially, I thought only a small number of people would take up this opportunity but it seems to be very popular and the majority of passengers take advantage of it. This can present a bit of a logistical problem in terms of large boats or numerous small boats on a creek. While water levels remain high, larger longboats can access the creeks near Song and we managed on the last cruise to split the party and send half the group in two boats up the Sungei Song and half in another two boats up the Sungei Iran. However, once water levels drop, we will need to utilize small flat boats that can only carry two or three persons each. We cannot send too many boats up one creek or we will end up scaring all the birds away. Similarly, we have to ensure any boat we use has paddies for when the boatman cuts the motor and cruises in silence. My idea is that when we have low water levels, we should limit each bird watching excursion by passenger numbers at any one location but also look for other locations with small creek tributary so that over the length of the cruise, everyone gets a chance to take this excursion.

The longhouse folk have prepared the trails for us and we spend a whole day there watching rubber and pepper processing, witnessing handicraft demonstrations and trail walking depending on fitness levels. Lunch is on the riverside below the longhouse. It really a great day!

*Glenn joined Pandaw as Expedition Manager in 2009 to develop the Rajang River excursions. Originally from the Snowy River county in Australia, where he ran a ski and snowboard business, Glenn has always had a keen interest in adventure travel. He moved to Sibuan with his Malay wife in 2008, to experience living in Asia and pursue his travel interest. With Pandaw, he has found the perfect outlet for his talent to develop excursion potential and you can follow Glenn as he develops new and exciting excursions here!*



## The Great Orangutan Project

Pandaw have come to an agreement with WOX who run the Matang Wildlife Reserve to subsidise their monthly orangutan feeding costs. In return Pandaw passengers will receive special access. Matang is only 30km from Kuching and the trip will be included in the Kuching visit we offer as a pre or post cruise add on. As it is unlikely that you will see orangutans in the wild whilst on the Rajang sailing this visit will be of great interest.

[www.forestry.sarawak.gov.my](http://www.forestry.sarawak.gov.my)

[www.orangutanproject.com](http://www.orangutanproject.com)



## The Brooke Raj and Sarawak

Few people know that an English family were the rulers of Sarawak for exactly a century. James Brooke was created Raja of Sarawak by the Sultan of Brunei in 1842 as a reward for pacifying the region. Brooke, an army captain who had served in Burma, had fitted out his own private man of war and just happened to be exploring the area when called upon by the Sultan. He was succeeded by his nephew Charles Brooke and between them they brought the warlike Dyak tribes under their control and rapidly extended the boundaries of their kingdom. Sarawak was rich in resources – timber; mining, agriculture and latterly oil. The Brookes encouraged the Chinese, particularly a persecuted Methodist sect from Fuchow to come and settle which is why Sarawak's cities are predominantly Chinese and very prosperous too. The White Rajas as they became known ran a colonial style civil service, modelled on that of the British Empire but totally independent of it. Their administrative buildings like the law courts and post office are splendid examples of colonial architecture and up the Rajang River we will visit their 'forts', in reality fortified timber dak bungalows, at Kanowit and Kapit. The third and last Raja was Charles Vyner Brooke whose reign was interrupted by the arrival of the Japanese in 1942. After the war, in 1945, Brooke handed over the kingdom to the British Crown and in 1963 Sarawak was given independence as part of modern Malaysia. Up till 1966 as many as 50,000 Australian, New Zealand and British troops were deployed in the Confrontation against Indonesia. Today Sarawak is the most multicultural, prosperous and tolerant state in Malaysia.



## The Hornbill

The national bird of Sarawak, the Hornbill is the most exotic and extraordinary of creatures. Hornbills generally form monogamous pairs. Before incubation, the females of all Bucorvinae—sometimes assisted by the male—begin to close the entrance to the nest cavity with a wall made of mud, droppings and fruit pulp. When the female is ready to lay her eggs, the entrance is just large enough for it to enter the nest, and after she has done so, the remaining opening is also all but sealed shut. There is only one narrow aperture, big enough for the male to transfer food to the mother and the chicks. The function of this behaviour is apparently related to protecting the nesting site from rival hornbills. During the incubation period the female undergoes a complete moult. When the chicks and the female are too big to fit in the nest, the mother breaks out, then both parents feed the chicks. It is said that if another male shows excessive interest in an incarcerated female then her spouse will, in a pique of jealousy, completely seal the nest killing her.



## Borneo Sailings on the *RV Orient Pandaw*

### Into the Heart of Borneo

Eight Nights on the Mighty Rajang from US\$4,495 per room for two people sharing a main deck cabin with three cruises a month year round for details go to [www.pandaw.com](http://www.pandaw.com)

### Kuching

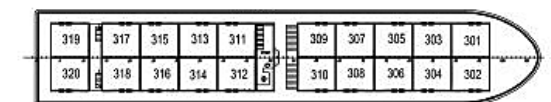
We highly recommend a two night add on in Kuching before or after the cruise with a highlight visit to the Matang Wildlife Reserve to visit the Great Orangutan Project. Stay at the Hilton two nights, price from US\$225 per person which includes transfers and excursions



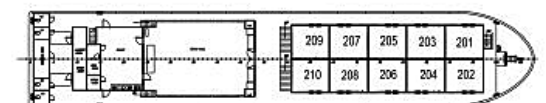
## RV ORIENT PANDAW



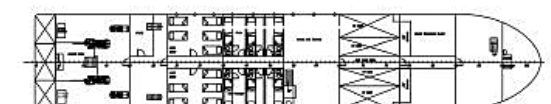
ELEVATION



UPPER DECK



MAIN DECK



LOWER DECK

# INDIA:

We venture eight hundred miles along India's most holy of rivers on a journey from the mighty metropolis of Calcutta to the soaring temples of Varanasi. No river in the world plays a more important cultural, economic or social role in the lives of more people than the Ganges. The spiritual heart of Hinduism, the Ganges is strewn with cities, pilgrimage sites, mountains and forests.

A Pandaw river journey allows the traveller to slowly absorb the sights and everyday life that is just not possible by any other means of travel. This is particularly true of the Ganges; its banks offer an ever-changing colourful scene and a fascinating glimpse of India, from the enchanting rural landscapes to the bustling towns and cities.

Only by river can one connect the great monuments of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and the British Raj. Moving between these great sites one passes through a rural topography of unsurpassed tranquility and beauty.

Anyone who travels regularly to India will tell you that moving around on land can often be frustratingly slow. Our journey aboard the *RV Bengal Pandaw* alleviates much of this stress as so much of what we will see and do can be approached from the banks of the river.



# Birds of the Ganges

By Raj Singh

India is one of the few countries where besides ancient monuments and culture we see nature at its richest. From the Gangotri glacier in the high Himalayas flowing through the Indian States of Uttranchal, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal the Ganga finally joins the Brahmaputra in Bangladesh draining into the Bay of Bengal. A journey of 2500 km.

The Ganges, 'Mother India' to the Hindus, is the most venerated river on earth. To bathe in it is to wash away all the sins and for those who have not made pilgrimage to drink few drops Ganges water gives merit. To be cremated on its banks and to have one's ashes scattered in its waters makes a journey to next life easy.

The banks of Ganges are still home to some of the large and endangered mammals such as Bluebull and Blackbuck antelope, Wild Boar, Jackal, Bengal fox, Jungle Cat. Rhesus Macaques and Grey Langur are quite common and there is a good chance of Indian Mongoose. Among smaller mammals, Black Naped Hare is most likely to be seen. Throughout the journey Smooth Indian Otter, Terrapins and Tortoise may also be spotted along the river banks. The Ganges has healthy population of the river dolphins and over ninety species of fish.

The Ganges supports thousands of migratory and resident birds. There are also large numbers of Great Crested and Little Grebe, large flocks of ducks such as Common Teal, Pintail, Shoveller, Gadwall, Brahminy Duck, Common Shelduck, Mallard, hundreds of Lesser Whistling Teal, Barheaded and Grey Lag Geese. Indians Skimmers are also sighted as they skim the river surface in different stretches of the river.

Along the sand four species of storks including Open Bill, Wolley Neck, Black Necked and Painted, Small Pratincole, Great Thick-knee, River Lapwing, Common White Throated and Pied Kingfisher, River and Red Wattled Lapwings, Pallas's Gulls and flocks of Common Cranes.

Birds of Prey include: Crested Serpent Eagle, Common, and Long-legged Buzzards, Egyptian, White Rumped vulture, Greater Spotted, Steppe, Imperial, Bonelli's and Booted Eagles, Eurasian Sparrow Hawk, Peregrine Falcons, Black Brahminy, Black Shouldered Kite and Osprey.

The area near Farrakka Barrage is also rich in bird life and the following birds can be seen: Oriental Darter, Black-crowned Night Heron, Purple Gallinule, Great Thick-Knee, Plain Martin, four species of Wagtail. Grey Breasted and Plain Prinias, Hume's Warbler, Stone Bushchat, Olive Backed and Paddyfield Pipits, Thick-billed Flowerpecker, Indian Silverbill, Scaly-breasted Munia .

On the banks along the river these birds are commonplace: Jungle Owlets, Indian Nightjars, Lesser Flamebacks, Golden and Black-headed Oriole, Cuckooshrikes, Scarlet Minivet, Red Vented Bulbul, Grey Francolin, Rose Ring Parakeets, Indian Grey Hornbill, Black Drongo, Crimson Breasted and Barbet, Rufous Treepie.

On bushes and trees on the banks of the river. Blyth's Leaf, Golden spectacled and Grey-hooded Warblers, Pale-billed Flowerpecker and Purple Sunbird. Tickell's Blue Flycatcher, Blyth's Reed, Dusky, Tickell's Leaf, Hume's, Lemon-rumped and Greenish Warblers.

In the grasslands along the banks you may spot Oriental Skylark, Ashy Prinia, Common Stonechat, Paddyfield Pipit, Black-throated and Baya Weavers. At dusk flocks of swifts often form over the grasslands. In the villages we visit there are many species of nesting birds can be seen including a pair of Barn Owls.

Overall 250 species can be seen on the journey between Kolkatta and Varanasi.

*Raj Singh is Managing Director of Pandaw India and the author of several well known books on Indian ornithology*





# On the Ganges

By Barry Broman

Having sailed on Pandaw ships in Myanmar, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Malaysia, I was eager to experience the Ganges River in India. My chance came in early January in the passage from Kolkata to Varanasi (Calcutta to Benares) aboard the *RV Bengal Pandaw*. It was seasonally warm during the first week afloat but then cold winds poured down from the Himalayas in the coldest winter in thirty years. We encountered dense fog and chilly temperatures. It was a challenge the staff and crew met with characteristic Pandaw flexibility with extra blankets and hot water bottles provided.

Kolkata can be a daunting experience with twenty-five million inhabitants and growing. Staying at the Oberoi Grand Hotel and dining at places like the Oh Calcutta Restaurant were highlights. Walks through the teeming and colorful flower market and Kumartully, a crowded neighborhood where elegant clay images of the diety Durga are created for ritual ceremonies, provided memorable experiences of the city. The outings offered photogenic opportunities, the visit to the Victoria Memorial Museum gave an impressive glimpse of the city's colonial past.

Our journey on the river began in the Chandernagore. Chandernagore was the center of the French East India Company and was the center of the sandalwood trade. Today, it is a charming city which retains a French flair with a tree-lined quai along the river. At dusk we waited on the quai and in the waning light of the day watched the arrival of the Pandaw sailing upstream. We stepped off the quai onto a country boat which ferried us over to the Pandaw and boarded. My wife thought it very romantic and a perfect beginning. Before the Pandaw reached the Ganges proper we steamed up the Hoogly River, one of the many tributaries of the Ganges. The Hoogly was for me a highlight of the trip as we visited several old colonial sites of French, Dutch, and Portuguese traders who vied with the British in days gone by. The narrow width of the river provided a close look at life along the waterway. The stops to see little-visited palaces, strolls through villages, visiting temple sites, notably the exquisite 18th century terra cotta temple at Baranagar, added to the unique experiences of being in India. Visits ashore often featured transportation in the form of horse-drawn carts (two passengers per cart) or cyclo rickshaws reminiscent of my pell mell race through Pakokku on the Irrawaddy.

There were two excellent guides on board who conducted the visits ashore while also lecturing in the evenings on subjects of great interest such as the Hindu caste system, how marriages are arranged in India, and the history and cultures of the region. There were also two naturalists on board, one of them a paramedic who came in very handy for the passengers who caught colds because of the unseasonable temperatures. The boat passes through areas with great populations of water fowl including storks, cranes, and the charming kingfisher. We also passed though an area rich in the protected Ganges dolphins. A guest lecturer came on board to talk about the dolphin project and just as he ended his comments a cry of "Dolphin ahoy?" brought all hands on deck to watch the real thing.

Every trip on a Pandaw is an adventure. Some are quite benign like the milk run between Mandalay and Pagan on the Irrawaddy. Others, like the two maiden voyages I made from Saigon to Angkor and up the Rajang river on Borneo were considerably more exciting. Cruising the Ganges is virgin territory and when the boat passes the Farrakka lock into prime bird-watching territory you are on the Ganges proper. Here the river is wide but not always deep. An added challenge is a shifting and narrow channel. To avoid the embarrassment of running up on a sand bar and waiting for a passing tug to take you off an arrangement has been made with the Inland Waterway folks in each state the boat passes through. An escort vessel leads the way, shows the channel, and in the event of a too-close encounter with a sand bank, pulls the *Bengal Pandaw* free. The skipper of the escort boat kindly invited passengers aboard for a brief ride up the Ganges and an opportunity to photograph the Pandaw while she steamed.

One needs to be flexible and "go with the flow" on the Ganges. The weather (fog) resulted in schedule changes and changes in venues. With the challenges came added bonuses. One evening when we anchored for the night we witnessed a Brahmin ceremony which blessed the voyage. Several of the passengers went ashore and became active participants of the ritual. A Brahmin priest came aboard and blessed passengers with a red tikka on the forehead.

On another occasion we were fortunate to be in a village where hundreds of Jain followers were celebrating the "eclipse of the sun" by making a pilgrimage to a temple on the top of a hill.

The ship passes through the state of Bihar, one of most lawless in India. As a result and thanks to a good working relationship with the Bihar police there is an armed police escort on board when passing through the state. The police also provided an escort during a bus excursion ashore to the great Buddhist site at Bodh Gaya where the Buddha attained enlightenment under a bodhi tree. The tree (or one like it) is still there and a scene of great veneration. Our visit was in the wake of one by the Dalai Lama and thousands of Tibetans monks were on hand. Far quieter and almost equally interesting was a visit to the ancient university of Nalanda one of the oldest centers of learning on earth.

Evenings in the forward lounge were lively, possibly due to the reduced traffic on the sun deck during the time when the winds whipped across the river and the temperature plunged. This Scottish-like weather did not deter a few hardy Aussie yoga enthusiasts who took advantage of a yoga master on board. Most sessions, it must be said, were deferred to the lounge. Another attraction of the lounge, apart from the body heat of fellow cruisers, was the full flow of Old Monk Rum, India's finest and a close copy of the Mandalay Rum well known to cruisers of the Irrawaddy and Chindwin rivers. The lounge also hosted nightly film presentations of great films about India including a three-part documentary on the Ganges itself.

Perhaps the highlight of the voyage was the final port of call, Varanasi, the holiest city on the holiest river of India. Here we visited the riverside ghats where bodies are cremated in great numbers, a somber sight we observed from small boats. We also observed a Brahmanic ceremony after which we shifted upriver a few hundred meters and put ashore at a former palace where the twinkling flames of hundreds of candles welcomed us to an evening of traditional dance and an excellent banquet dinner inside the private palace at Raj Ghat. It was a perfect end to our adventure on the Ganges. Varanasi is a good shopping city. A visit to a one of the oldest weaving establishments provided beautiful textiles which were quickly snapped up by travelers who had packed too light for the trip.

After the cruise ended at mid-month my wife and I moved on to Delhi and Agra for a few days before heading into Rajasthan for two weeks of warm weather, sumptuous palaces, great forts and equally great shopping. Now safely home in Seattle, Washington I have begun to edit photos from the trip and will be contributing some for the website in the near future.

*Barry Broman, retired from the United States foreign service, is a professional photographer based out of Seattle. Barry has worked with Pandaw for over ten years.*





# The Ganges: A Celestial River

By Dr Donald M Stadtner

Much time and energy in the 19th century went to discovering the sources of the world's great rivers. The much publicized missions down the Mekong and the Nile and so on form a long list of daring explorations. But for Hindus, the source of the Ganges was a non-issue. It descended from the heavens. Indeed, the river was gifted by the Goddess, known as Parvati, in response to an urgent plea from a ruler whose kingdom was parched with drought. Set to fall with incalculable destructive power, like a tsunami from above, the mighty river was cushioned by descending onto the flowing locks of Parvati's consort, Lord Shiva. So the river and its safe passage to earth reflects the joint action of Lord Shiva and Parvati. But for most Indians, the river is simply known as Mata Ganga, or literally Mother Ganges, a measure of its nurturing influence. The Pandaw's journey on this remarkable river resembles a pilgrimage, since the river is dotted with sites sacred to all of India's major faiths.

The Ganges originates in the western Himalayas, from melting snow at the base of Gangotri Glacier, whose elevation is 3,892 metres (12, 779 feet). It winds down numerous streams, becoming rivers, that eventually debouch at Hardwar and the wide Gangetic plain. It then flows through the greater part of northeastern India before breaking into many deltaic rivers in West Bengal state. The most famous is the Hooghly which passes Calcutta, just before it empties into the Indian Ocean.

Passenger ships on the Ganges were discontinued long ago, in the 1930s, supplanted by the country's famous rail service. The Pandaw is the first cruise company to venture in these waters, another feather in the hat for Pandaw River Cruises. In as much as it is a new Pandaw offering there are many kinks which have yet to be straightened. We must therefore expect the unexpected, a hallmark of Indian travel (even for first-class land travel). But the unexpected in India is usually flavored with serendipity. Indeed, these very mishaps are the experiences that one remembers most vividly when comfortably at home.

Our journey begins in Calcutta, the Jewel in the Crown of the British Empire in Asia. Its fame has of course faded since Independence in 1947 and its crumbling buildings need more than paint, but its narrow lanes evoke the Raj in ways that few places can. I am struck with the same feeling when strolling in the Colaba district of Bombay and old Rangoon. We first visit St. John's, testimony to all of the triumphs and tragedies of British India. Inscriptions on tombs within the nave speak of the Afghan campaigns, the 1857 Mutiny and the two world wars. On my last trip I met outside the church a young Englishman who was searching for the memorial to one of his descendants. As we entered the church I was about to ask if I could help, but I knew it was a private moment and so let him be. But such tugs from the past are inescapable in Calcutta.

Near to St. John's is the grand Victoria Memorial, constructed just as the decision was taken to move the capital to Delhi. Entirely of marble, it glistens. In my favourite gallery are huge canvasses by the most famous early British artists, such as Zoffany. Even the Victoria and Albert Museum in London has nothing to compete with the size, quality and range of these many oil paintings. The Memorial is also a great place to 'people watch' since its visitors come from all parts the subcontinent, even Rajasthani farmers, with their colorful orange and red turbans and turned-up stiff leather shoes.

The 800 mile cruise begins, after sailing from Calcutta, with a stop at a tiny former French outpost known as Chandernagore where there is the house once inhabited by the French general, Duplex. The next day finds us at Plassey, where Robert Clive defeated the French in a battle that perhaps decided if India was to be French or British. Other attractions further up river include the Vikramashila Dolphin Sanctuary. These endangered fresh water dolphins are making a steady comeback, and they are also found in the Irrawaddy and the Mekong.



A highlight of our pilgrimage is a full-day excursion to Buddhism's most holy places, Bodh Gaya. For it was in this sleepy little village over 2,000 years ago that Lord Buddha achieved enlightenment, an event that altered the course of world civilisation. Sitting beneath the special Bodhi Tree (*Ficus religiosa*), the Buddha emerged from a special trance, a new being, enlightened by meditation and self-examination. The Buddha's youth was spent as a prince whose father shielded him from human suffering. However, he abandoned the untold luxuries of palace life to uncover the reasons for human suffering. The answer was announced to the world at Sarnath, another major pilgrimage spot on our journey, near Varanasi.

Pilgrims abound at Bodh Gaya from throughout the Buddhist world, from Sri Lanka to Korea and Japan. Bodh Gaya then is the Jerusalem for Buddhists. Many are Tibetans. The older monks fled Tibet in the 1950s when Chinese troops moved into Lhasa, and their spiritual leader is the exiled Dalai Lama. Now there are second and third generation Tibetans in India, and youngsters can be seen learning the complex rituals that guide Tibetan life. Pilgrims congregate in the vicinity of a large temple containing numerous Buddha images, but the chief focus is a massive Bodhi Tree towering at the rear of the temple. Buddhists believe that this is the same tree that Gotama Buddha sat beneath, but it probably represents innumerable plantings of Bodhi trees placed in the same spot. The tree itself is the subject of many legends. The most important is the ancient Emperor Ashoka who severed a branch that was later transplanted in Sri Lanka where it occupies one of the most sacred spots on the island. Another colorful legend claims that Ashoka's wife poisoned the tree because she was jealous of the king's attention to the tree; but Ashoka resuscitated the tree by pouring hundreds of pots of milk around it.

Near Bodh Gaya is the ancient university town of Nalanda, a Buddhist center that drew Chinese, Nepalese and Tibetan scholars centuries ago. Nalanda is often likened to the early universities of Europe, such as Oxford, the Sorbonne or the University of Bologna. Its brick monasteries form a contrast to the temple architecture at Bodh Gaya.

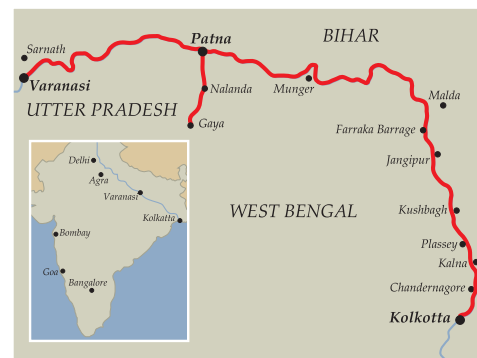
The city of Patna, capital of Bihar state, has a distinguished history since it marks the spot of Ashoka's capital, the ancient Pataliputra. Even the Greek author, Megasthenes, mentioned the city. The city museum is a treasure house of Hindu sculpture and Buddhist bronze figures.

Varanasi culminates our journey-cum-pilgrimage. It is the home of the gods, especially Shiva and his consort Parvati, the pair to whom we must thank for providing the river. Dipping in the Ganges is as auspicious as it is protective, and thousands of pilgrims dot the stone steps, or ghats (Hindi), preparing for submersion in the chilly waters. In the narrow lanes behind the ghats are shops, selling everything from silk saris to religious souvenirs. But my favorite things are little handcrafted toys, some featuring full musical bands, all in a neat cardboard box, while others present all ten of Lord Vishnu's avatars (Sanskrit), or manifestations. Little has changed in Varanasi.

On the outskirts of town is Sarnath, where the Buddha returned from Bodh Gaya to meet the five ascetics with whom he had earlier wandered. And here he spoke those immortal words that continue to resonate: that the root cause of suffering was desire and its handmaiden, attachment, and that to release ourselves from suffering the key was to restrict desire. And thus the Middle Way was born. This simple but powerful axiom is usually called the 'First Sermon' but this dry description robs the event of its drama and its consequences. It was not long after the Buddha's demise that the Buddhist order arose, eventually spreading into Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka, China, Korea and Japan. Paradoxically, Buddhism is no longer a major religion in India, its seeds sewn far and wide.

Sarnath's museum centerpiece is an Ashokan column, with four rampant lions shown back to back. This became at Independence in 1947 the symbol of the Indian nation, appearing on bank notes and gracing the outside of countless government buildings throughout the land. Competing for attention is a Gupta period 5th century sculpture, showing the Buddha delivering his sermon at Sarnath to the new converts. On the base are shown two deer, suggesting that the Lord's teachings were intended for all sentient beings. And deer are now at Sarnath, kept behind a fence and fed by pilgrims.

Our journey ends in Varanasi, but for many it is a beginning. India awakens us to a world quite different from our own. It is a difficult country, as even seasoned travelers will admit. But liking India or not liking India is not the point. Our vision changes and our horizons expand into areas we scarcely knew.



## India Sailings on the RV Bengal Pandaw

### Slowly Down the Ganges

Fifteen days between Kolkotta and Varanasi which includes nights at either end in the luxurious Taj hotels from \$12,490 for two people sharing a main deck twin cabin. Only ten departures a year so limited availability. These sailings are strictly for the adventurous traveller and itineraries are subject to constant change!

### RV BENGAL PANDAW

