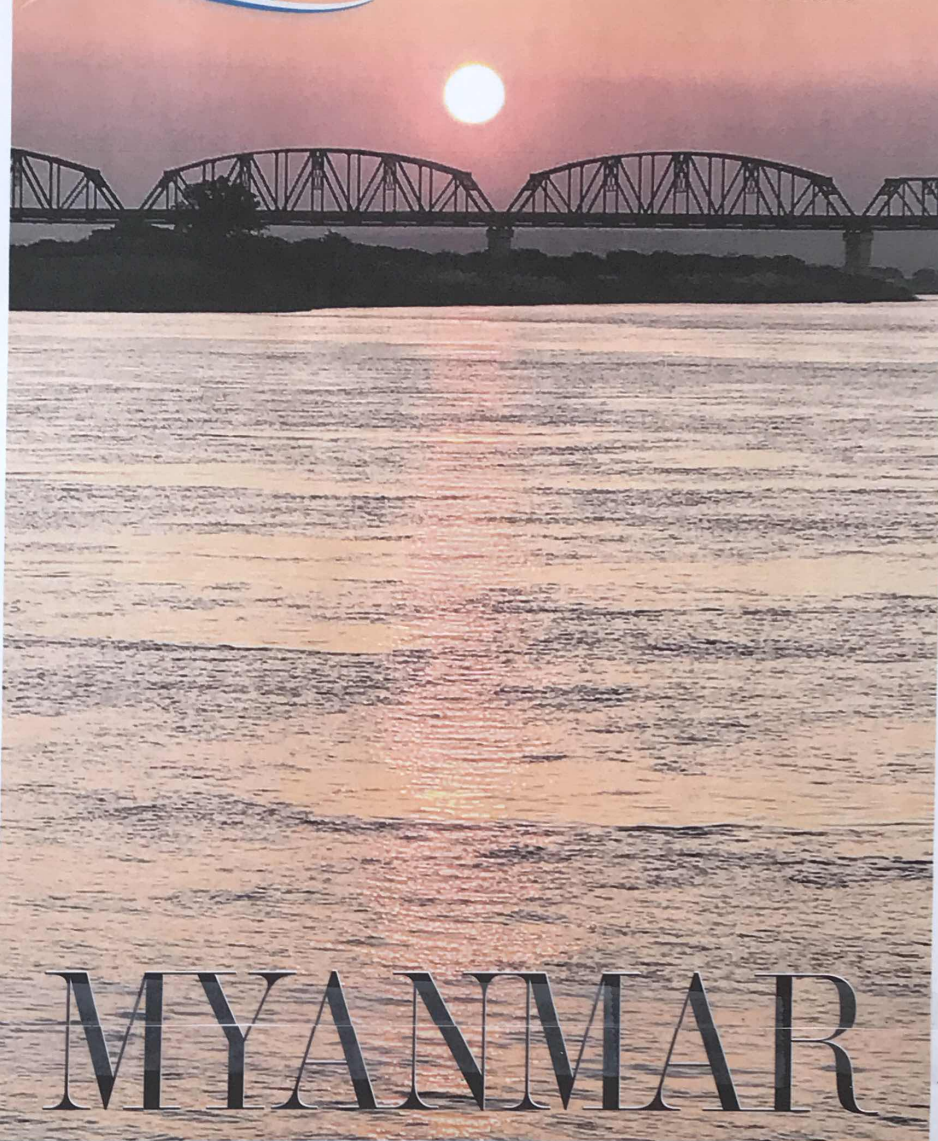


# travel

**HAWAII'S BACKYARD**  
 Local magicians gather in Kaimuki to perform at Hawaii's Magic Festival >> E7

SIGNS OF HAWAIIAN LIFE >> E2  
 LAS VEGAS ADVISOR >> E3



# MYANMMAR

*Rediscovering the road to Mandalay:  
 Cruising the Irrawaddy River*

Story and photographs by Julie L. Kessler  
 Special to the Star-Advertiser

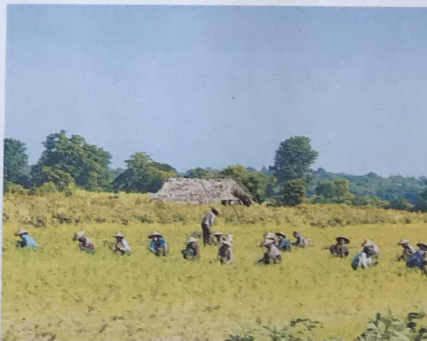
**R**udyard Kipling, Somerset Maugham and George Orwell wrote extensively of Myanmar's colonial past. Its complicated present amid magnificent temples, life-sustaining rivers and 135 distinct ethnic groups make traveling in this Buddhist-majority country unforgettable.

**A complex past**  
 Myanmar — formerly known as Burma — achieved its independence from Britain in 1948, but it has hardly been smooth sailing since. In 1988, Aung San Suu Kyi, known in Myanmar as The Lady, became head of the National League of Democracy. She then

spent the next two decades mostly under house arrest. In 1991 she received the Nobel Peace Prize and finally became state counselor in 2016.

The political road for The Lady has been rocky, reflective of an increasingly delicate dance with the still powerful military. In 2011, 300,000 visitors began trickling in. This number increased to 4.7 million by 2015, but then dropped to 2.9 million in 2016. This fragile fox-trot has been exacerbated by the August 2017 Rohingya rebel attack on the military in Myanmar's Rakhine State, followed by allegations

Please see MYANMMAR, E6



One of the many marvelous sunsets along Myanmar's Irrawaddy River, top. Above, farmers toll in fields just a few minutes from the Irrawaddy River's edge.

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PHOTOS BY JULIE L. KESSLER, SPECIAL TO THE STAR-ADVERTISER

## MYANMAR

Continued from E1

of military ethnic cleansing. In Myanmar, one thing is crystal clear: Life is complicated and multifaceted.

Long inspired by writers' depictions and intrepid travelers, I decided it was time to see if the Myanmar of my literary dreams was matched by Myanmar today.

### Mandalay: Myanmar's second largest city

The Mandalay Hill Resort's central location made seeing the city's sites a snap. Climbing the watchtower at the 1990s reconstruction of the Royal Palace provided a

good view of

the city and the

40 timber build-

ings that resemble

the original

1850s struc-

tures. Some inter-

esting period

furnishings salvaged

from King Mindon's

period are in

the small, at-

tached mu-

seum, along

with old photo-

s of the royals.

Unlike most

Burmese mon-

asteries, Man-

dalay's Golden

Palace Monas-

tery is not gold

at all, but covered

in a cornucopia

of intricately detailed

teak carv-

ings. Nearby, Kuthodaw

Pagoda's 729

inscribed, massive

marble slabs, each

in its own stupa,

or temple, comprise

the entirety of

Buddhist scriptures.

When King

Mindon assembled

2,400 monks in

1871 it took them

six months of

continuous relay

reading to com-

plete the carvings,

which have

been dubbed the

world's biggest

book.

Driving 45 minutes

to the launch, I

boarded the RV

Kalaw Pandaw

riverboat to begin

a seven-day

journey on the

Irrawaddy

River. This important

1,348-mile

waterway was

Kipling's "road"

to Mandalay.

Built in 2014, Pandaw's

187-foot

riverboat has

hardwood floors

and 18 air-

conditioned

staterooms

with

deliciously

comfortable



world's largest pile of bricks.

Built for the beloved wife of Bodawpaya's successor, Prince Bagyidaw, is the all-white Hsinbyume stupa. Its impressive wavy architecture represents the seven mountain ranges surrounding Mount Meru and is locally known as the Burmese Taj Mahal.

Once the capital of an independent Shan kingdom, Sagaing village is now a meditation training center with over 5,000 monks and nuns studying in the area. Great Irrawaddy views beckoned from atop the 14th century Soon-U-Ponnya-Shin pagoda, though the added, neon-lit halos around Buddha's head were bizarre.

Amarapura, Myanmar's penultimate royal capital, is home to the world's longest teak footbridge, over shallow Taungthaman Lake, and is one of Myanmar's most photographed sites. Built in 1849, it is 1,300 yards long with over 1,000 teak posts.

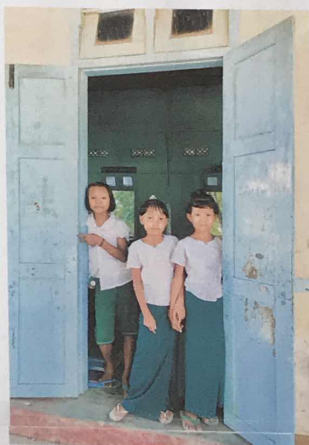
### Riverside Villages of Yandabo, Pakokku, Salay

The 1826 Treaty of Yandabo — ending the first Anglo-Burmese War — was signed in the tiny riverside village of Yandabo. Here about 1,500 people, mainly terracotta potters and subsistence farmers, reside in elevated, bamboo-thatched houses. Women go about their days miraculously balancing atop their heads enormous, stainless-steel bowls containing kilos of rice and vegetables.

In the small town of Pakokku we boarded tuk-tuks, motorcycles with attached six-seat carriages. Driving through fields dotted with farmers in conical hats, we made our way to the lively town market known for its vegetables and thanaka, a beige therapeutic paste of ground sandalwood bark that men and women routinely apply as facial adornment.

Only the Pandaw riverboat experience enables travelers the ability to access these remote, off-the-beaten-track villages, coupled with onboard cultural lectures.

An active religious village with more than 50 monasteries and less than 10,000 residents, Salay has remnants of once gorgeous



PHOTOS BY JULIE L. KESSLER, SPECIAL TO THE STAR-ADVERTISER

From top: The world's longest teak bridge at 1,300 yards, in Amarapura, Myanmar's penultimate royal capital; a handful of the several thousand stupas in Bagan; school girls adorned with thanaka, a paste made from ground sandalwood. Below, the writer's stateroom aboard the RV Kalaw Pandaw.

Burmese-Victorian architecture built when oil was discovered in the late 1800s. At the river's edge, Salay House has a small upstairs museum with artifacts of the era and a lovely garden restaurant.

### The belle of the ball: Bagan

There was a building boom until the late 13th century and more than 4,000 temples were built in the 26-square-mile Bagan region. Bagan, with its thousands of gold stupas, is an ethereal sight. Despite Mongol invasions, earthquakes and some questionable restorations, Bagan is breathtaking.

I ended my Burmese adventure at Mount Popa, where an enormous gold-gilded Buddhist prayer hall is precariously perched atop a 2,400-foot volcano. My guide in the area, who also guided author J.K. Rowling when she traveled around Myanmar, reiterated the lore that Popa inspired her Harry Potter writings.

Kipling was awestruck by Myanmar and described a nostalgic longing for Asia's exoticism. He once said, "When I die I will be a **SURVIVOR**." I'll never know if Kipling's post-mortem dream came true, but I suggest that it's a far better plan to experience the wonders along the Irrawaddy while still alive.

Julie L. Kessler is a travel writer, legal columnist and attorney based in Los Angeles and the author of the award-winning book "Fifty-Fifty: The Clarity of Hindsight." She can be reached at Julie@VagabondLawyer.com



### IF YOU GO... Myanmar

**From HNL:** Connecting service (change of planes) to Yangon, Myanmar, is offered on Korean Air, ANA, Air China, China Southern and Singapore airlines. Restricted, round-trip airfare begins at \$956, including taxes and fees. Domestic air travel is best arranged by Pandaw Cruises (pandaw.com) or other local tour operators.

**River Cruise:** Seven-day, all-inclusive Irrawaddy cruises (including all excursions, wifi and alcohol), start at \$1,534 per person. In addition to the Irrawaddy cruise, Pandaw can arrange pre- and post-cruise trips including domestic air transport, accommodations in Yangon, Inle Lake, Mandalay and elsewhere in Myanmar with air-conditioned ground transportation and English-speaking tour guides. Call 844-361-6281, pandaw.com

**Where to stay in Mandalay:** Mandalay Hill Resort, a large hotel with pool, spa, excellent buffet breakfast and Burmese barbecue dinner with traditional dance show in its lovely outdoor Kinshasa Garden Theater. Visit mandalayhillresorthotel.com

**To learn more:** Single-entry visas for up to a 28-day stay can be obtained for \$119 online (recommended) at myanmaronlinevisa.org or on arrival at Yangon Airport and at some overland border entries.

For general tourism information, see myanmar tourism.org.