

## Celebrating 30 years of success in Asia

Paul Strachan of Pandaw Cruises talks with Susan Parker about the history of river cruise brand, which may soon expand operations into Western waters



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Locals board Pandaw Cruises’ river vessels to showcase traditional entertainment to the guests

First established by Scottish merchants in 1865, the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company (IFC) once had the largest fleet of privately owned vessels in the world – by the 1920s, it operated more than 650 vessels, mainly paddle steamers, on the rivers of Myanmar. However, operations ceased in the 1940s due to the Japanese invasion of the country and Myanmar’s subsequent successful fight to gain independence.

In 1995, Scotsman Paul Strachan and his wife Roser revived IFC, becoming the first to offer river cruises on the Irrawaddy since colonial times. The couple discovered one of IFC’s original Clyde-built steamers, Pandaw, and decided to lease, restore and operate the vessel under new brand Pandaw Cruises.

Today, the company has 18 ships, 11 of which are operational and seven of which are laid up in Myanmar due to difficulties caused by the current civil war between resistance groups and the ruling military junta.

Revival is something Strachan does well. Although Covid-19 had devastating effects on his business and he momentarily considered retiring, the upswell in loyal passenger support and requests for him to continue was irresistible and the brand restarted cruises in 2022. “It was very, very touching to have so many people wanting us to come back and other companies wanting to buy the ships showed there was still value in the business,” he says.

The comeback started slowly, with 3,000 passengers sailing on eight ships in 2023-2024 and numbers rising to 3,500 on 11 vessels in 2024-2025. Strachan predicts the brand will host at least 4,000 guests in 2025-2026, noting that over 3,000 bookings have already been made. The company has a 10,000-strong members’ club and a historical repeat rate of 45 per cent. Most guests (60 per cent) come from Britain, while 25 per cent hail from Australia and New Zealand, and the remainder are from the USA.

Being a small company makes Pandaw agile, a trait that allowed it to launch a new India route out of Kolkata on Kalaw Pandaw in October 2024. “River cruising in India is great operationally and from the point of view of service levels,” says





Paul Strachan and his wife Roser (third from left) join crew members onboard one of Pandaw Cruises' river vessels, which feature open-air restaurants and take guests to destinations in Asia, where they can meet with locals

Strachan. "However, the cost of pre and post-cruise stays is exorbitantly high. We usually have [land] tours associated with a cruise but, if you want to do this in five-star hotels, it is very expensive. That is why we came up with a 10-day itinerary which gives passengers the chance to see Kolkata whilst tied up alongside for two nights in the city."

The company faces different challenges when operating in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. Whilst pre- and post-cruise options in the former two countries are "fantastic", there are signs of crowding on the Mekong River. "There are too many operators with massive European-style ships which are too big for the rivers," explains Strachan. "The highlight of Pandaw's cruises is that guests experience life in local communities. Sightseeing is becoming stressful, so we've had to redo our itineraries and find new destinations because there are so many more people

now than when we brought the first ships to the Mekong."

Bigger ships are unable to operate in Laos, so there is no overcrowding, but Chinese developers are building two dams upriver, which will lead to reduced water and possible operational revisions, says Strachan.

Sustainability is written into the DNA of Pandaw as the ships are built and renovated locally. The company also works with the communities it visits and sources much of its food and beverages from local markets. "This helps local economies and it tastes better too!" says Strachan.

All 300 crew were recruited locally, which links the company to the villages. "We now have multigenerational crew on our ships; grandchildren are coming up now which is fantastic," says Strachan. "There are more than 2,000 people out there who trained with us and are now working in hotels, cruise ships and so on."

To prepare for the future, Pandaw is constructing a new ship in Kerala, which will begin sailing on the backwaters in October 2025. It is also converting 28 cabins on Tonle Pandaw into 14 suites to sail on the Mekong in Vietnam and Cambodia. "We believe there is interest, especially in the USA, for an upmarket ship," says Strachan.

He is also considering taking his Asian river cruising concept to southern Europe. "We are looking at the Veneto and the river Po in Italy where only small ships can travel – this would include Venice and the lagoon. We're looking at a very particular design because of the locks and bridge heights."

As Pandaw celebrates 30 years in the business and a successful post-Covid revival, its future is looking bright, says Strachan. "Things have come back; the ships are looking really good and everything is going very well." **CFR**