Rediscovering the road to Mandalay: Cruising the Irrawaddy River

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Rudyard Kipling, Somerset Maugham and George Orwell wrote extensively of Myanmar’s colonial past. Its complicated present amid magnificent temples, live-sustaining rivers and 135 distinct ethnic groups make traveling to this Buddhist-majority country unforgettable.

A complex past

Myanmar—formerly known as Burma—achieved its independence from Britain in 1948. But it has barely 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 to The Lady has been rocky, reflective of an increasingly delicate balance with the still powerful military. In 2011, 300,000 voters began voting in. This number increased to 4.7 million by 2015, but then dropped to 2.9 million in 2016. A fragile frontier has been exacerbated by the Arakan 2017 Rohingya rebel attack on the military in Myanmar’s Rakhine State. Followed by allegations

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

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

Long inspired by written depictions and temple frescoes, I decided it was time to see if the Myanmar of my literary dreams was matched by Myanmar today.

Mondays: Myanmar's second largest city

The Mandalay Hill, Bagan’s central location made it the city’s only town. Climbing the watchtower at the 18th-century monastic complex of the Royal Palace provided a good view of the city and the 45 Shwesandaw Pagodas that enshrine the original 1000-structure complex. The fascinating period architecture of the 13th-century temples is well preserved from King Mindon’s period in the 18th century, as well as the monasteries of the 13th, 15th and 16th centuries, some of which are still in use. Unlike most Burmese monasteries, Mandalay’s Golden Palace Monastery is not open to the public, but instead is a commercial center with a large market and temple. The monastery is also home to the famous Mandalay bee breath, which is believed to be the world’s most powerful honey.

In the afternoon, I visited the nearby town of Bagan, where the largest pagoda in the world, the Ananda Pagoda, stands on a hill overlooking the Irrawaddy River. The pagoda was built in 1105 and is one of the most impressive structures in the entire region. The temple was built on a pre-existing platform and is considered a masterpiece of Burmese architecture.

Rivervail of the Irrawaddy

The world’s longest river, the Irrawaddy, flows through Myanmar and is one of the most important rivers in the region. The river is home to a diverse array of wildlife, including elephants, tigers, and crocodiles. The Irrawaddy is also a popular destination for tourists, who can go on boat tours to explore the river and its surrounding areas.

From top: The world’s longest river, the Irrawaddy, flows through Myanmar. The river is home to a diverse array of wildlife, including elephants, tigers, and crocodiles. It is also a popular destination for tourists, who can go on boat tours to explore the river and its surrounding areas.