

Condé Nast Traveller

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THE ISLANDS ISSUE 2017

OUR FAVOURITE NEW HOTELS
IN THE MALDIVES,
SEYCHELLES & MAURITIUS

BRILLIANT
BRITISH HOUSES
TO RENT

MANHATTAN'S
TOP 5
BAKERIES

JAMAICA'S COOLEST
BEACH SCENE

+ THE SMARTEST
PRIVATE ISLANDS
IN THE WORLD



Burma

Explore a land of golden pagodas on a slo-mo journey along the Irrawaddy River



Decades of cloistered military rule might have kept Burma in the dark, but in the last few years, the country has flung open its doors to tourists. In anticipation the Strand Yangon, the capital's iconic grande dame hotel, emerged from a spruce up and a brand expansion that included the launch of the Strand Cruise, a riverboat that meanders along the dreamy Irrawaddy River. We embark in Bagan, a temple-strewn town in central Burma, about 290km south-west of Mandalay. From the 11th to 13th century, more than 10,000 Buddhist temples, pagodas and monasteries were built throughout this ancient place and the endless rolling plains beyond. Today around 2,200 temples survive, making for a magnificent view from a height, as we discover on our first morning

from atop the Shwesandaw temple. A cluster of hot-air balloons rise silently above the horizon, the early sun casting a red glow over the bell-shaped stupas scattered throughout the grassland.

Back on board, we slurp steaming bowls of mohinga, the local's fishy breakfast soup, as the boat lazily chugs towards Mandalay – past scenic villages, their wonky wooden huts teetering on the water's edge as rows of colourful laundry dries on the adjacent slopes. Inside, the design is a modern take on old colonial charm with period-style furnishings: with just 28 cabins it feels intimate, but there are ample public areas, including a small pool and an on-deck bar at the rear. As the boat continues to drift upstream, most of us idly alternate between the sundeck, indulging at the spa and stuffing ourselves with the excellent food – a considered menu of both western and local cuisine devised by executive chef Christian Martena – which rolls out like clockwork.

In the town of Mingun, we see the hulking unfinished brick stupa and have a go at ringing the 90-ton bell (once the largest in the world) before exploring the magnificent bright white pagoda, built by a long-gone king for his wife who died in childbirth. Waking the next day on the mist-cloaked riverbanks of Mandalay, fishing boats gently bob on the shore against a tableau of hills speckled with golden pagoda tips. Here in Burma's bustling second largest city, the epicentre is a chaotic framework of smog, traffic and concrete buildings that gradually expands into a haphazard urban sprawl. The morning begins off-grid, just south of the city, with a stroll over the U-Bein Bridge, reportedly the oldest and longest teakwood bridge of all. We watch farmers herding their ducks from canoes on Taungthaman Lake below, and visit the gorgeous carved teak monastery Shwe In Bin.

Our final stop, the ancient imperial capital Ava, is a complete contrast. It's a peaceful backwater, flecked with ruins, stupas and crumbling monasteries, which, we find, are best experienced in the late afternoon sun, aboard charming horse-drawn carts.

THE STRAND CRUISE offers a four-night Bagan to Mandalay cruise from around £1,181 per person, based on two sharing, on a full-board basis, followed by two nights at The Strand Yangon in a Superior Suite on a bed & breakfast basis, including domestic flights, transfers and excursions. Call +95 1 243 377 or visit thestrandcruise.com



Clockwise from top: U-Bein Bridge, Mandalay; Umin Thonze Pagoda, Sagaing; a balloon ride over Bagan

