

# A Sentimental Journey

Julie Sturzy, Product Executive for Elegant Resorts' Worldwide portfolio, reports on her visit to Burma where she enjoyed a mini-cruise on the Road to Mandalay by Orient-Express.

I'd heard so much about Burma (Myanmar) from friends and colleagues – that it was an intriguing and mysterious land with amazing landscapes, not to mention the turbulent politics, communication challenges (such as limited communications coverage, power shortages and unreliable transport) and the long-suffering people, whose devout Buddhist beliefs help frame their daily lives, so I was both excited and a little apprehensive about my trip.

Unlike my fellow travellers – who were able to make comparisons to Angkor Wat, Vietnam and Laos and witty references to Rudyard Kipling and the classics, such as 'Burmese Days' by George Orwell – I had no expectations and went with my mind completely open to this brand new experience. I'm glad I did because, the impressions I formed of Mandalay were so completely vivid and so entirely my own – sultry days, lingering blood-orange sunsets, dusty paths, mysterious relics dotted across vast plains and people working with ox and horse carts, in contrast to the hectic city of Yangon.

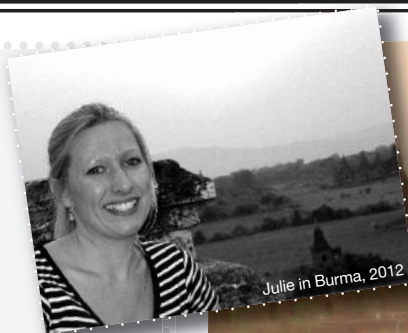
From Bangkok, it was an hour-and-a-half to Burma (Myanmar). My first impression on landing was that it reminded me of Fiji; lots of lush palm trees and a sultry haze. The airport interior was surprisingly modern with tall glass panels and acres of cream tiles, not at all what you might expect – that is until you discover it's only a few years old. Then, of course, there was the adjacent domestic terminal which we experienced later in our trip, an experience, quite literally, from a time gone by – old-fashioned weighing scales, paddle signs, paper tickets, basic facilities and free seating. Immigration was predictably slow and I was so desperate to venture outside the airport and take everything in. Finally, the sound of whistles and loud-halers from uniformed airport workers greeted us, along with a wall of heat.

We were met by the Orient-Express staff who smoothly escorted us to a relatively modern vehicle (a bonus in a country where vehicles are subject to a massive import tax) and off we went along the busy airport road, passing vans laden with goods and people literally hanging off

overcrowded buses and coaches. Orient-Express established their presence in the country over seventeen years ago and, working independently from the Government, they have formed excellent relationships with the locals. As a result, they now work with a team of long-serving, experienced, multi-lingual Guides.

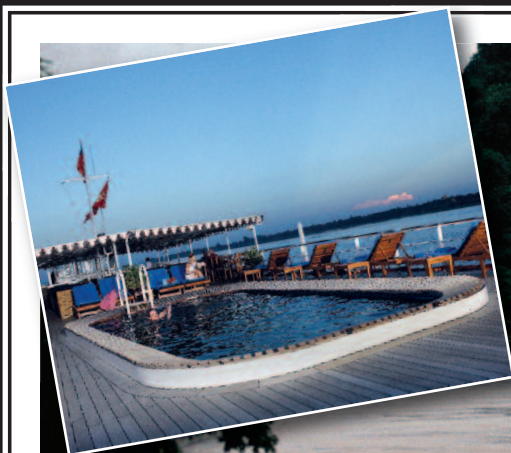
On the drive to our first stop, my eyes were bombarded with unusual sights: men wearing skirt-like 'longyi' and ladies faces covered with a pale yellow powder called 'thanakha'; barefoot monks and nuns in pink robes carrying parasols; children precariously balanced on bicycles, crouching street-sellers and red-stained teeth from Betel-chewing. Sugar plantations, teak, gems, oil and silver all form part of Myanmar's naturally rich resources that over the years have attracted many races (not only the British), their migration resulting in a cultural mixing pot, exemplified in the Indian and Chinese Quarters. The crumbling architecture of Yangon (Rangoon), echoing the country's Colonial past and hinting at its troubled history, sat in stark contrast to the newly placed, large advertising boards for western-style products and brands, including one for Daks Clothing which, given the surroundings, made me laugh out loud.

An impressive teak residence set within beautiful, peaceful gardens with lily ponds, dancing dragonflies, butterflies and giant parasols, it was a treat to reach our hotel. A calm oasis within the Embassy Quarter and only ten minutes from the city centre, The Governor's Residence features traditional ceiling fans, walls adorned with modern art, stylish boutiques, generously sized rooms, and an outside courtyard with pool, a luxury no other hotel in Yangon has. We were treated to a half-day city tour followed by an evening visit to the impressive Shwedagon Pagoda. Over two-thousand years old, it contains many religious relics, including strands of Buddha's hair, making it a place of pilgrimage for many Buddhists and should be considered essential viewing for everyone. Nothing could have prepared me for the disparity between the outside chaos and the serenity of the interior with its lakes, villas, gold leaf and diamonds.





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## Road to Mandalay by Orient-Express

From Yangon we flew with Mandalay Air (about an hour-and-a-half) to Bagan where we joined the Road to Mandalay by Orient-Express. Bagan is completely different to Yangon; flatter and much more rural, and it was here that I saw people in traditional bamboo hats as I travelled along dirt track roads filled with ox and horse carts, with the occasional moped weaving through it all.

The Road to Mandalay is a stylish cruiser that sails all year along the Ayeyarwady River (except April and late July), offering cruises lasting from three to twelve days, depending on the river levels – the more remote northern gorges are only possible in times of high water. The ship was brought over from Europe more than a decade ago and plays a vital role that goes far beyond tourism, assisting and aiding the people who live alongside the river. It was much larger than I expected but, in true Orient-Express style, my cabin was generously sized, nicely styled with a fabulous bed and a power shower, as well as a flat-screen television (with limited satellite channels) and Bvlgari amenities in the bathroom. If possible, I recommend booking one of the State Cabins which, being situated closer to the centre of the ship, are easier to access and are cooler and quieter.

The cuisine was divine and featured a mixture of Asian and International dishes with buffet and à la carte breakfast and lunch options and sumptuous fine dining in the evenings – do pack some loose clothing to accommodate it all! After which, there were drinks in the piano bar and charming performances by local entertainers to enjoy.

We were in no danger of suffering from cabin fever as each day was packed full of new discoveries with well planned excursions to temples, stupas and pagodas, not to mention the visits to hectic markets and the Toddy Palm Plantations, plus Cheroot and lacquerware factories. By now it had become quite the norm to slip off our sandals and not worry about how black our feet were getting.

It was after one such excursion to Mount Popa – when my calves were aching from the seven-hundred plus steps it took to climb to the top of the teetering temple to worship the Nats (Spirit Gods) and taking a dip in the super cool pool on the top deck seemed to soothe them – that I had time to reflect on my trip. Whilst there was no doubt that I was far from home, by this time I had become accustomed and even attached to the remoteness and simple pace of Myanmar life and the sounds of the passing junk boats and the ship's engine which lulled me into a sound sleep each night.

After four days on-board, we returned to Yangon with a heavy heart. I know we all had such an amazing experience. Liberating, beguiling, intriguing, I left with a feeling of wonderment and respect for the Myanmar people. Their Buddhist faith, with its Hindu influences, is fascinatingly complex, whilst their infrastructure, aided by the British, is now beginning to reflect the changes being made by Chinese investors. My advice would be to go now and create your own sentimental journey, before the people become too accustomed to tourism and international influences start to assert themselves. The country is experiencing an influx of tourists but there is enough untouched country for us

all to explore, especially in the remote northern parts filled with forests and dramatic gorges.

I would definitely return for longer next time (and with enough money to buy a ruby – this was the one time I missed my credit card!). There's still so much I haven't seen and would like to do. Despite the positive reaction by my friends to my amateur pictures, I believe I only captured a fraction of what I saw. Everywhere I looked my eyes were like a camera, each blink like the click of the shutter, imprinting the images onto my mind: Click – a man pushing a bike laden with chickens hanging from the handlebars. Click – children playing with rattan footballs. Click – people washing in the river. Click – old ladies smoking large cheroot cigarettes. I'm off to buy a copy of 'Burmese Days'...

### About Julie...

Julie joined our Product Department in 2005, as a Product Executive and assistant to the Product Manager responsible for the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka, Africa, Asia and Australasia portfolio. Julie's husband hails from New Zealand so she's no stranger to long haul travel, making the great trek at least once a year with the whole family.

