

Burma: Asia's jewel in the crown

Burma has so much to offer visitors, with its faded charm, beauty and now hope for a new democracy, says Sarah Sands

SARAH SANDS | Monday 18 April 2016 | 0 comments



To the point: Bagan's medieval stupas Getty Images/Moment RF

In Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Glass Palace*, the king of Burma muses on the royal family of Siam, a country once conquered by his own. It's 1885, the British have exiled him to genteel poverty in India and he reads a newspaper report of a royal tour of Europe by the Siamese king. His neighbour is being put up in Buckingham Palace, fêted by the German emperor and greeted with respect in France while he, monarch of Burma, land of gold, languishes.

Burma – now known also as Myanmar – has great beauty and terrible luck. While Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam have surged ahead, Myanmar has struggled to be free of the isolation that resulted from military rule. So it is wonderful to fly into Yangon on

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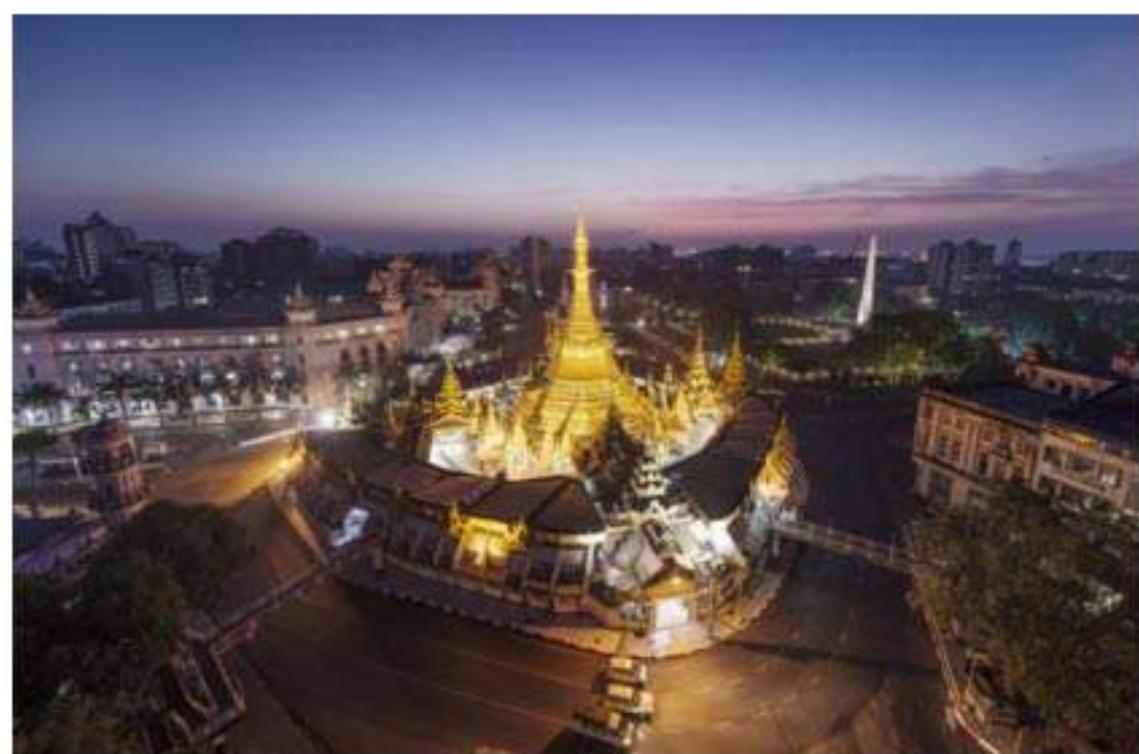
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the day the country's democratic figurehead Aung San Suu Kyi is installed in government, in a newly created post of "state counsellor". The position is meant to give her prime ministerial-style power, a solution to a constitution concocted by the regime that prevented her becoming president because her British-born sons do not have Burmese passports.

There is optimism in the air. The Lady has finally beaten the generals. Our guide says he believes the sun is rising for Myanmar. The country is enchanting and largely undeveloped, though the Chinese have been doing something about that. Yangon, what used to be Rangoon, is a fascinating mix of faded colonial blocks and brutal new towers. Infrastructure has been neglected, pavements are cracking, traffic is terrible. Yet the potential is immense.



(Getty Images/Martin Puddy)

For all the traffic jams, it is easy to imagine the past. British visitors walk these busy, grimy streets and see the ghosts of Rudyard Kipling and Somerset Maugham and the faded evidence of colonial rule. That's probably one reason the generals moved the capital to Naypyitaw, a featureless, purpose-built, would-be metropolis in the central southern region. Parliament meets there now but there is no reason for anyone else to go. Not when there is so much to look at here.

We wait for late afternoon and the temperature to fall below 40 degrees to walk to the Shwezigon Pagoda, the most prominent of thousands of

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pagodas and stupas erected across Burma over two millennia. Burnished by tons of gold and topped by a massive diamond, this pagoda speaks of the nation's mineral wealth. Monks stroll by in maroon robes. Here and there are girl nuns, heads shaved like their brothers', in pink. Who knows whether it will last but there is an engaging courtesy shown to tourists. The postcard sellers do not pester, the would-be guides take a polite no for an answer. They are mildly curious about their visitors.

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We stay the first night at the Belmond Governor's Residence, a converted colonial house in the embassy area, set among gardens, lily ponds and a swimming pool the size of a small lake. The rooms are of hard wood, tastefully furnished, cool amid the heat. In early April the humidity is exhausting. By June, before the rains begin, the temperature will be touching 50C.



(Getty Images/Stephen J Boitano)

Thankfully we are heading for the relative coolness of the Ayeyarwady river – renamed the Irrawaddy by the British – the great natural artery that provides irrigation for crops and the highway for the country's teak. Our steamer – a Rhine cruiser transported here more than 20 years ago – is named after Kipling: The Road to Mandalay. We join at Bagan, a skyline described by Marco Polo as “one of the finest sights in the world”. Some 2,000 medieval stupas and pagodas rise through the morning mist at the river bend. There are not many tourists, even at the famous pagodas of Ananda and Sulamani. This would be a World Heritage site were it not for the machinations of the junta. With a tragi-comic idiocy, the

generals thought they would increase tourism by constructing an observation tower, hotel and golf course in the middle of this historic plain. The Burmese people did not aid the cause: in their religious earnestness they “crowdsourced” as many as 1,000 new temples and made amateurish restorations to many of the old ones. It’s a bit botched for Unesco, which is trying to find a solution by giving status to individual temples.

On this end-of-season trip, fewer than half of The Road to Mandalay’s 40 cabins are occupied. There is a small swimming pool and a dining area serving first-rate food. There’s internet too. As we pull away from Bagan, I train my binoculars on the temples and stupas, villagers washing clothes at the water’s edge, fishermen casting nets from narrow boats. The sun sinks, and we watch flocks of white cattle egrets in arrow formation across the river to roost. Some swifts swoop low, chasing flies.



Home comforts: one of Belmond Governor's colonial-style bedrooms

Then, in the deep darkness of the river at night, the crew sets up a romantic drama in celebration of a festival of light. Some 1,600 lanterns, constructed from coconut leaf and bamboo, float past on the current, each a small beacon of hope for a country facing a democratic future for the first time since independence in 1948. The effect is moving.

We, sadly, are not. With the snow melts of the Himalayas yet to start and monsoon rains some weeks off, this huge, wide river is running shallow. We watch as two tugs manoeuvre a barge from a sandbank. A couple of men with measuring sticks call out the depths of the shifting shoals. We will have to moor well south of Mandalay and

drive rather than arrive in the historic city by boat.

We fill the time we would have spent on board with excursions – to markets, small farms and local industry. We learn the mysteries of lacquer and watch how gold leaf is made: a group of young men rhythmically pound the paper-thin layers, pressing it thinner and thinner. Down another street in Mandalay we come to the stone masons' area, where more young men work at large blocks of marble, carving out statues of Buddha. There's none of the hard sell you expect but still I return festooned with jewellery and silk scarves. Meanwhile, the boat's resident doctor has slipped into a local village for a pop-up surgery. He dispenses medicines, advice and spectacles along the boat's route, a scheme supported by the company and by donations from passengers.

Myanmar - in pictures



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show all

In Mandalay the celebrated Sagaing hill gleams with stupas, temples and pagodas. The air is sweet with jasmine and swifts circle high above. Here are the joy and peace that have been the antidote to the ugly, corrupt, military force of the 20th century. We visit the great palace walls and the one remaining hall, which was transferred to a monastery in the 19th century, thus avoiding the fate of the rest of the palace compound, to be destroyed by Allied bombing in the war.

the palace compound, to be destroyed by Allied bombing in the war. The other great attraction of Mandalay is the U Bein Bridge, said to be the longest wooden bridge in the world, a rickety teak structure across a lake that provides a local market place and social gathering point. Beneath it, young monks play football.

So back to the boat, a little yoga, massage and meditation and a final supper. We fly back to Yangon for a final night at the Governor's Residence before the long flight home via Bangkok. I leave with fingers crossed for Myanmar, hoping that the unique character and beauty that have enabled it to survive such a troubled past will help it withstand the consequences of imminent mass tourism. Yangon, a city with street vendors cooking at every corner, has just got its first KFC. What follows?

Details:

Cleveland Collection (020 3111 0806; clevelandcollection.co.uk) offers a week-long trip including two nights' B&B at the Belmond Governor's Residence, Yangon, a four-night full-board Belmond Road to Mandalay cruise, flights from Heathrow, transfers and internal flights from £2,850 per person. British passport-holders require a visa, obtainable in advance online (evisa.moip.gov.mm) or from the Myanmar Embassy.

myanmar.travel ■

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