

Luxury Myanmar river cruise – and the art of giving back

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I met Janice and George Mucalov, two travel writers, on an [Alaska cruise](#) in 2011 and we've stayed in touch ever since, following each other's travels via social media. Janice, George and I enjoy travelling in the same manner, i.e. comfortably, or rather... the 'velvet' way, so when Janice approached me with an idea for a guest post about a luxury Myanmar river cruise with an element of supporting local communities, I said "yes" in an instant! Read about this wonderful Velvet Escape in [Myanmar](#):

Luxury Myanmar river cruise – and the art of 'giving back'

After draining our cappuccinos, we step down the gangplank to our waiting trishaws. We're cruising up Myanmar's Irrawaddy River, from Yangon to Bagan, on the new "[Belmond Orcaella](#)" – this morning we'll visit a monastery and cherooot-making shop in the village of Danuphyu. And again, we notice him.

Dapper in dark pants and a crisp white shirt, he carries a black leather bag. He's always the first person off, clouds of red dust swirling about his ankles as he strides ahead along a dirt path under the fierce rising sun.

It turns out this mystery man is the ship's doctor, Dr. Oo Ko. And while he's onboard to help should any of the 64 guests need his services, he also visits the villages along the river route to see local patients – for free.

Already this season, he's seen 86 people on four visits to Moke Taw and 78 patients on three visits to tiny Kyi Taung Oo village (where he also gave away 43 pairs of free reading glasses). He's encountered and treated cases of relapsed TB, malnutrition and worm infestations in children, lead poisoning among villagers from Nye Nyein who glaze pottery, iodine deficiencies and viral infections. Often, what's needed are basic health care measures that we take for granted back home.



Belmond cruiser in Myanmar



Exploring Bagan.

About Keith Jenkins



I'm Keith Jenkins. In July 2008, I left my ten-year banking career to travel around the world. I've not looked back since.

[Learn more about Keith...](#)

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Health checks at local schools.

One afternoon, the soft-spoken unassuming doctor gave an onboard talk about the variety of initiatives Belmond sponsors to support the local people through health, educational and even engineering projects. We're astonished how very small amounts can go a long way in Myanmar! Just think – it costs only \$4 to \$8 U.S. for a one-week course of antibiotics to treat a patient with a chest infection. For \$2, a student can get the stationery, pencils, ruler and exercise books they need for a year of school; a whole school building can be built for only \$6,500 to \$8,000. He doesn't make us feel guilty though. If anything, we wish we'd known in advance and brought along some reading glasses to donate.



Children singing at a school in Myanmar.

First Belmond Myanmar cruise

Belmond has deep roots in Myanmar – this year it celebrates 20 years of cruising on the Irrawaddy River. It first launched the "Belmond Road to Mandalay" in 1995. That's since been totally refurbished, and its gleaming wood and jade tile interiors are said to be even lovelier now.



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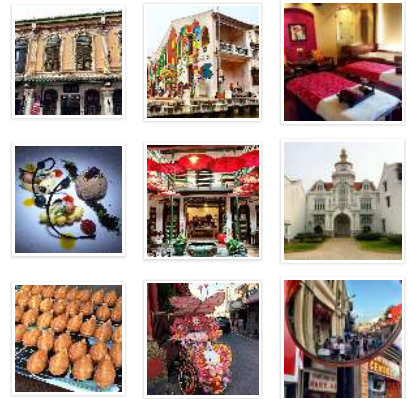
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But back to 1995. That same year Belmond – the luxury riverboat, hotel and train company known then as “Orient-Express” – also started helping the Myanmar community. We’re not surprised, having met Mrs. Sherwood, one of Belmond’s founders. She’s sailing with her husband as a non-VIP guest and exudes kindness.



Beautiful Bagan in Myanmar.

Belmond’s first project was a school in Shwe Kyet Yet village; some of the school’s former students have ended up working for Belmond. (Perhaps the smiling steward who places a fresh carnation in our cabin each day was taught there?) With the help of donations from guests and staff, the company has since built another 21 schools along the river, serving 3,000 students (and it also pays the salaries for some teachers). And it undertakes other projects too – like donating solar panels for a village that never had electricity after dark, and constructing a well to provide drinking water and irrigation for another village.

As for Dr. Oo Ko, he isn’t the only Belmond doctor who helps patients in Myanmar. A physician on the “[Belmond Road to Mandalay](#)” also operates pop-up health clinics at villages visited by that river cruise boat. And in Bagan – where a horse cart takes us clip-clopping around some of the ancient city’s 3,000 red-brick temples and stupas – the company opened a free clinic in 2011. Patients come from all over the country,

sometimes taking days to make the trip. So far, over 40,000 patients have been treated.

Luxury and “giving back” go hand in hand

Dr. Oo Ko’s service and informative talk gives us a little more insight into a country of stark contrasts undergoing rapid change – a place where red-robed monks still beg for alms and oxen plough fields, as land prices soar in Yangon and international hotel chains and food franchise empires fight for a slice of Myanmar’s growing tourism pie.



A temple in Bagan.



Red-robed monks in Myanmar.

We reflect on this as we leave the “Belmond Orcaella.” From Bulgari bath amenities to a chef who tantalizes us with veal cheeks slow-cooked in local dark beer, Belmond has perfected the art of river cruising in Myanmar. But it’s also perfected the art of “giving back” to the exotic country we are fortunate to explore as its guests.



Inside the Belmond Orcaella.



The lovely staff onboard the Belmond Orcaella.

About the guest writers

Janice and George Mucalov are award-winning travel writers with a taste for luxury and a thirst for adventure. Janice mostly authors their [Sand In My Suitcase](#) travel blog, sharing their travel tales of hiking, snorkeling, temple touring, wildlife spotting and bedding down in dreamy digs around the world. They never say “no” to a spa treatment. But they also love highlighting activities offered by (surprisingly many!) cruise lines, hotels and tour operators that help in some way to make this world a better place. Follow them on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).



Janice and George Mucalov

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 <p>Sofia 24/07/2015 7:35 am #</p>	<p>I can stare at that temple in Bagan for a little while and go back staring at it again and never look away. It's one of the prettiest temples I've seen in pictures and in person. Myanmar sure is rich in culture and history, and the people are hospitable and happy, and kind.</p>
 <p>Rachel Heller 23/07/2015 11:38 pm #</p>	<p>Belmont sounds like a great company with a great business philosophy. I've always tried to go with local companies rather than multinationals when traveling in the developing world, just to keep the money in the country. This takes it one step further!</p>
 <p>Keith Jenkins 23/07/2015 11:05 pm #</p>	<p>Hi Janice, Thanks once again for your lovely contribution. 😊 No more SAplans for this year but you never know! hehe!</p> <p>Hugs, Keith</p>
 <p>Sand In My Suitcase 23/07/2015 4:55 pm #</p>	<p>Thanks so much for the sweet introduction :-). Since meeting you, we've enjoyed following your travels via your blog and social media. Any more South Africa trips in the near future?</p>

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