



IMMERSED IN MYANMAR

From a cheroot-making shop to gilded stupas and Bagan's pagoda-studded plains, this Ayeyarwady River cruise onboard the deluxe *Belmond Orcaella* immerses you in exotic Myanmar.

JANICE AND GEORGE MUCALOV





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Our horse cart clip-clops along a sand track

stirring up swirls of red dust as we weave around Bagan’s brick pagodas. Once a magnificent kingdom, Bagan is studded with some 4,000 temples and stupas built by the kings of Myanmar between 1044 and 1287. Burnished by the rays of the baking sun, they spread out as far as we can see. Each is unique. Some are crumbling relics overgrown with weeds and bougainvillea, but most are fantastically preserved, bell-shaped structures and ornate pyramid-style monuments that look like giant wedding cakes.

We’re spending eight nights aboard the luxurious river cruiser *Belmond Orcaella* on Myanmar’s Ayeyarwady River. Belmond has a long history in Myanmar (formerly Burma). It launched the *Belmond Road to Mandalay* in 1995 – and that river ship (since refurbished) mainly sails between Bagan and Mandalay to the north. Our vessel, the newer *Belmond Orcaella*, cruises the southern river stretch between Bagan and Myanmar’s capital, Yangon.

After leaving the bustle of booming Yangon, our first few days on the river are languorous ones. We lie under pink umbrellas by the pool, sipping fresh-squeezed lemonade while gazing at the river traffic – long barges hauling sand for construction, rafts festooned with bamboo huts and fluttering laundry, skiffs with fishermen in conical hats reeling in their nets.

After lunch (perhaps grilled river prawns with lemongrass and a New Zealand sauvignon blanc), we usually head to our stateroom. With polished wood floors, king-size beds, contemporary Burmese furniture, ensuite bathrooms stocked with Bvlgari amenities and sliding glass doors to take in the views, the 25 staterooms are restful retreats from the outside world.

Later, we might enjoy a lecture about the life of Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar’s pro-democracy stateswoman, or a lesson on how to tie a longyi (the traditional wrap-around skirt worn by locals).

Only shore excursions can lure us from the delightful sanctuary of our river ship. Our first is to the country village of Danuphyu. We hop on trishaws and are pedaled to the market – an explosion of fruits and veggies. There are mangoes, carrots, lettuces, herbs and baskets of red chilis and other spices. Though 80 percent of those who live outside of Yangon don’t have electricity, they eat well. They love their sweets too. A turbaned vendor hacks off a slice of dry “cake” made from rice flour and palm sugar for us to try.

Many girls and women have their faces and arms smeared with thanaka, a yellowish-white paste made from ground bark (worn as a cosmetic and sunscreen). At a cheroot-making shop, we watch as four women deftly roll up yellow cornhusk cigars, pausing occasionally to puff on their own fat cheroots.

When we return to the *Belmond Orcaella*, tied to the riverbank, our trishaw driver gives us a huge grin with a mouth stained red from chewing betel-nuts.

Another afternoon, we visit the splendid Shwesandaw Pagoda in Pyay. It’s said to date back to 589 BC and contain hairs of the Buddha (its name, “Shwesandaw,” means the “golden hair relics”). Red-robed monks walk softly about,

Clockwise from above:
18th century painting inside Sulamani Temple, Bagan.
Horse cart at sunset on the plain of Bagan.
Burmese woman with thanaka on her face. Thanaka is a yellowish-white cosmetic paste made from ground bark.
Transportation to Gwechaung Fort by traditional ox cart.
A young monk prays in front of Buddha statue in a temple at Bagan.





PHOTOS COURTESY BELMOND

Cruising on the *Belmond Orcaella*

Launched in 2013, the *Belmond Orcaella* is one of the most elegant riverboats in Myanmar. Built for longer 7-12-night voyages on the Ayeyarwady and Chindwin Rivers exploring the country's more remote regions, its décor is contemporary, with lots of gleaming hardwood floors, panoramic floor-to-ceiling windows, Burmese art and huge bowls of roses. We particularly loved how much space there is. The 12 "standard" staterooms with king beds range from 258 to 344 square feet in size and have Juliet balconies (there are also nine smaller staterooms with twin beds and four much larger suites). Each stateroom also comes with a wooden closet and separate chest of drawers adorned with leather handles, desk and poufy stool, satellite TV, air-conditioning, iPod docking station, bathrobe and slippers – plus useful gifts like hand fans, sun creams, collapsible straw hats and his-and-hers Shan bags. With a polished wood door, floor and countertops, the ensuite bathroom reminded us of colonial times (though the roomy glass rainshower and abundant Bvlgari toiletries are decidedly modern). Lovely touch: a fresh carnation is placed on your bed each day. A huge, shady outdoor lounge with potted plants on the top deck has intimate seating clusters of cushioned wicker armchairs and sofas (cocktail parties are also hosted here). We listened to lectures in the piano bar while sipping fresh-squeezed lemonade, and lounged by the small pool under pink umbrellas at the stern (where Tai Chi classes are offered at sunset).

some chatting on their cell phones. Pale-skinned foreigners that we are, we're still a rare enough sight here that some locals want to take our picture.

The closer we get to Bagan, the greener the banks of the silty Ayeyarwady become. Golden pagodas sprout up among tall palm trees, and we see villagers washing their clothes on the river banks.

One trip by ox cart takes us to Gwechaung Fort, designed by Italian architects for the Burmese king in 1860 to keep the British at bay (though it fell in a day). We're always intrigued by the local conveyances for each excursion, and this primitive ox cart ride is the most unusual – and challenging! We're seated on cushions on the wooden cart, while the driver sits or stands between the two oxen, tapping them with a stick to make them move. It's very bouncy and we have to hang on tight to avoid sliding off.

Back onboard, we surrender our dusty sandals to waiting staff, who will later deliver them to our stateroom, magically clean once again. And we eagerly accept the welcome-back drink – this time, fresh mint, dragonfruit and soda.

That evening, we're treated to a special stir fry and barbeque dinner in the Min Hla Fort. Torches and candles shed flickering light on Burmese dancers swaying to music played on traditional xylophones and harps. Our lovely ship staff is here too, refilling our glasses with champagne.

There are more memorable outings too. Like our tuk tuk ride to the gilded Myathalon Pagoda in Magwe, which draws people from miles around during religious festivals, and then a wander through Salay village to a fancifully carved teak monastery, now a quaint museum.

But the best – Bagan – awaits at the end of our cruise. We learn that a temple is a structure that can be entered, while a stupa is solid ("pagoda" refers to both). Who knew so many Bagan temples have fascinating murals and Buddha statues inside? Our favorite is the 12th century Sulamani Temple. Demon head sculptures decorate the outside (to prevent bad spirits from crossing the threshold). In the inner chambers, beautiful wall paintings in red, green and black show daily life at the time – a decorated elephant, a woman having her long hair brushed, a man smoking a pipe.

It strikes us that, in many ways, life in Myanmar hasn't changed much. The present is knocking on the door, but for now, it's as exotic a country as you could hope to visit. We can't think of a finer way to experience it than from the Ayeyarwady River, the country's lifeblood, aboard the *Belmond Orcaella*. ■

IF YOU GO: The *Belmond Orcaella* offers a variety of 7-12-night cruises on the Ayeyarwady and Chindwin Rivers. The 8-night cruise from Yangon to Bagan includes all meals and house wines, shore excursions, champagne cocktail parties, lectures and return flight from Bagan back to Yangon. www.belmond.com/orcaella-myanmar