

Magazine > A Little Lost Love On Board The Ayeyarwaddy Discovery

A LITTLE LOST LOVE ON BOARD THE AYEYARWADDY DISCOVERY

By Caroline Phillips



There are naked children splashing innocently in the water by the river's edge – why would anyone waste much-needed kyats, the local currency, on swimwear? Others are climbing like mini Tarzans on anchor ropes that run high above the water from a ship to the shore.

My family and I clamber aboard a traditional wooden longtail boat — used locally for transporting custard apples, dragon fruit and piles of mustard leaves as well as for ferrying people. Nearby young men in longyis (like sarongs) stand waist-high in the water washing their hair with acacia bark (a natural shampoo) and scrubbing their bodies. This is the scene at the riverside in Mandalay, Myanmar (Burma).



Image ©JP Klovstad

Then we chug, chug our way across the water towards the Ayeyarwaddy Discovery, a traditional Myanmar teak riverboat and the newest addition to Myanmar's upscale, boutique cruise market. She's just 115 ft long by 24.4 ft wide.

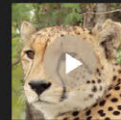
We're going on a three-night, two-day cruise to places with poetic names such as Sagaing, Ava and Yandabo then on to Mt Tantgyi and Bagan. Slow travel that will take in thousands of pagodas, temples, glittering stupas and golden Buddhas and jumping ship at remote villages with artisans.

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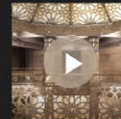
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We're welcomed aboard by a line-up of our crew of 14: a distinctly tiara moment. Two are in white uniforms, the rest in longyis — and everyone barefoot, including the cruise manager, Zaw Min Thein. "Please take off your shoes," requests this gentle man, highlighting a local custom. Call it Buddhist barefoot luxury, if you will. "Mingalaba (hello in Burmese)," the others say, as they offer us chilled flannels, fresh watermelon juice and huge smiles. We're the only passengers aboard as we've hired it for exclusive use.

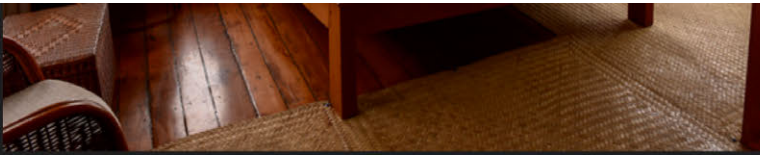
Barefoot Zaw shows us around. There's the top deck with the smiling Captain in his bridge ("Mingalaba," again), plus a simple dining and bar area, sun lounge mattresses on the stern (eyed greedily by our 21 and 23-year-old daughters), and sun beds nearby (ditto). At water level, there's a deck with a teeny kitchen and five cabins — one suite and four deluxe — for a maximum of ten passengers.



Since 1998, the Ayeyarwaddy Discovery had been used for cargo, ferrying firewood and clay pots from Bhamo in the north down to Mandalay. Starting from nothing more than an old, used hull, she was renovated in 2014 and entirely Myanmar-built. The décor is modest: teak, yet more teak, simple fabrics and large photographs of stupas and such like; the sort of boat that a Buddhist monk might consider meditating in.

Soon it's time for dinner. We soon find that home-cooked meals appear miraculously out of that tiny kitchen. Tonight it's mustard seed soup, carrot salad with peanut and fish sauce, and aubergine curry. "Everything selected from the market this morning," says Zaw.





We retire afterwards to our master cabin with its characterful sloping teak floor — somehow sleeping as flat as spirit levels, the bed having been set at a different angle to the floor. We awaken only when the engine starts at 6am and, through the port hole, spy golden stupas on the riverbanks. Soon we reach Sagaing, a former royal capital just 15 miles from Mandalay.

We clamber across gangplanks and, like pirates, jump aboard three other cruise boats to reach the shore with its packs of dogs and novice monks, the latter en-route to school. We drive up 'Frog Mountain' to Soon U Poonya Shin Pagoda: an acid-trip temple with more colours than can be counted, including tiles of pink, yellow, blue and red. ('No socks, no shoes, no spaghetti blouses,' exhorts a nearby sign). Chanting fills the air from the neighbouring nunneries as we gaze over the stupendous vista: flooded plains, pagodas and golden-tipped stupas. A man with betel-nut red teeth bangs a gong each time someone donates to the temple. Nearby another bell tinkles. More donations? "That's the ice-cream man," explains Zaw.



Afterwards we go to Ava on a public ferry filled with travellers and motorbikes. We take a horse-cart — one of maybe 200 in the village —to explore this 14th to 19th century former royal dynasty. "It was Shan then Burmese-dominated," explains Zaw, standing in front of a notice that reads: 'Do not allow taking photos with Buddha images as well as kicking the Buddha images with feet.' Then we visit the 19th century Mal Nu Oak Kyaung Brick Monastery. "It's fine place, no?" asks Zaw. "Poor Queen Mal Nu lived here trying and failing to gain the acceptance of the monks."

There are more monasteries to come. This time, we bump along the dirt track to the mid 19th-century Bagaya Wooden Monastery. In its beautiful teak building — boasting 267 gigantic teak posts — a monk sits reading, surrounded by books; another is chanting; and one more reads while a novice sits at his feet. An uplifting scene of centuries-old pastimes and contemplation. "Meditation is good for your engine to stop," explains Zaw.



our faces and the snapshots of river life are what make this trip so special. There are fishermen neck-high in the river with nets suspended between two rods, wooden boats transporting clay pots and hay, and women in longyi and conical hats washing themselves and their clothes on the riverbank. Plus banks with pagodas and golden stupas and exotic foliage: from rain trees and Chinese tamarind to maize and peanuts.

We stop eventually in the middle of nowhere. Travelling on such a small vessel, the Captain can set anchor anywhere — because of the low draft — allowing us to visit places that larger boats cannot reach. The crew puts a plank from the boat to the bank and two of them hold a bamboo culm, our handrail. While the crew take time off — swimming in the river with its very strong current and playing football — we amble with one of them to an off-grid village. He wants to introduce us to his grandmother. “The village has no electricity and they say you’re the first westerners to have visited,” he translates.



Our new village family offers us fried fish and nuts. “Why is it always people who have the least who seem to offer the most?” my husband, Adrian, asks me quietly. Then they talk about football. Which is as popular as rice in Myanmar. “We borrow electricity from the monastery to watch football on television,” explains the man wearing an Arsenal shirt. “Can I give them some money to thank them for their hospitality, or would that cause offence?” enquires Adrian. “They’d prefer a saucepan,” our impromptu guide replies.

Next day, we start cruising before breakfast, downriver to Yandabo: an unprepossessing village, but one where England and Burma signed their treaty in 1826. Nowadays, it’s famous for its handmade clay pots. Oh, and for the two 300lb sows, piglets crawling all over them, that guard the village. “The owner decided not to eat them,” reveals Zaw.



As we enter the village, a woman is tossing heavy urns to a man to load onto a lorry. “She flicks it with her finger as she throws it. If the sound isn’t clear, he chucks it away because it’s cracked,” explains Zaw. In a nearby thatched hut, a young girl kicks her leg back and forth athletically to work the potter’s wheel, whilst another throws clay onto it and expertly shapes it into urns. “They mix clay with river-sand,” explains Zaw. “Then they bake the pots by burning peanut shells, straw and wood.”

I guess you’ll be wanting to hop aboard now, won’t you? You’ll need all the detailed blah, blah then. Well, each cabin has an en-suite shower-room, intermittent WIFI and air-con (not cool enough in the master suite and weirdly, the electricity is turned off between 3am and 6am). Then there’s the lower deck, with the crew’s quarters, although it turns out they prefer to sleep

men shares the lower deck, with the crew's quarters, although it turns out they prefer to sleep companionably and alfresco in the steamy weather of August.



On the last evening, the crew decides to do a sing-song, sitting on deck with Zaw playing his guitar. "This is our engine man, this is our electrician..." he says, introducing them. They stand wreathed in smiles. Then they sing Burmese songs about young men pining for their lost loves. The candles flicker in their improvised bamboo stem holders. The stars twinkle above, the breeze strokes our faces and we sip fresh pineapple. Our daughters bliss out. Lost love? Even though we're about to walk into history and the highlight of our trip in Bagan, it's hard not to feel a little lost love when we end our cruise the next day.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Caroline Phillips is an award-winning freelance journalist who contributes to publications from Sunday and daily newspapers to glossy magazines and various luxury websites. To see more of her work, go to www.carolinephillips.net.

A trip like Caroline's can be organised by Arakan Travel, an organiser of experiences to Myanmar. Based in the country for the last 12 years, they have an intimate knowledge of the people and its places. To start the journey, e-mail myanmar@arakantravel.com or visit www.arakantravel.com. For Discovery Cruises Myanmar, visit www.myanmar-discovery-rivercruise.de.



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Top Tip 2: Get insured with BUPA Travel Insurance. I've never before needed emergency medical assistance on a trip — but I needed it in this case for my husband, who had an accident in an ox cart. Don't ask. All I can say is that BUPA and the medical department of AIG delivered everything I could ever have wanted, and more. (Yes, I know this sounds like an advertisement. Which it's not. At least, not a paid one). It was incredibly reassuring getting sound health advice in the middle of the night — it's available 24/7 — from someone with global medical expertise. Plus AIG acted fast to change our flights, organise wheelchair assistance and to have a taxi waiting for us at Heathrow. And were really sympathetic and supportive too. BUPA offer cover nearly everywhere, including the USA. I wouldn't say it's worth having an accident for service like this. But almost. Visit www.bupa.co.uk for further information.

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