

Journey

boat manned by a Captain who must be able to read a river with centuries-old soundings should its state-of-the-art electronic systems fail. He can. The boat is filled with people from all over the world, lugging their laptops, tuning into CNN, calling anywhere in the world from their cabin, speaking to a staff that can answer in 12 languages and 38 dialects. Yet monks have boarded and blessed the boat, crew and guests for a safe sailing.

And some supplies have

good in my hand.

Our small group went out before sunrise to photograph. Yesterday, we were allowed to wander freely among the more than 2,000 temples, pagodas and stupas in old Pagan and new Bagan. Where one starts and the other ends is hard to say. Our guide knows. He also knows his history. Apparently, one king ordered more than 10,000 structures torn down in the face of Kublai Khan's advancing army in 1287. In 1975 an epic earthquake struck

read, it's as if all the silk and spice routes collided here. The temples and stupas reflect Indian, Chinese, Siamese, Tibetan, and assorted cultures. Besides its temples, Burma is known for jewels, rubies, jade, sapphires, silver and gold work, rattan, and fine wood carving. According to many, it is the last great source of the fine lacquer in the world. I saw small cinnabar-colored lacquer cups being made on horsehair bases. The finished products—weightless, waterproof and a

the major rivers of the world.

This is a style of travel that cuts across many groups: young, mature, hip, romantic, adventurous. One can sit on the boat and see gleaming white and gold tipped pagodas rise from the muddy riverbanks. Or climb the highest temples (not even the best of us could make it, and there were mountain climbers along). The food was superb, with a Western and Asian offering at every meal, and more than a few accents joined around the piano bar after



ONE LEARNS IT'S IMPROPER TO: WEAR SHOES INSIDE OR FACING BUDDHA, PAT A PERSON ON THE HEAD, OR, HAND MONEY DIRECTLY TO A MONK.

arrived by donkey cart.

Monks, even ones who seem alarmingly young, beg for a purpose. (As it turns out, all boys spend one year in the monastery, rather like our draft when we had one. If they stay, they spend a year traveling the country begging for alms. Girls do the same, but they are not required to spend a year in a Buddhist convent.)

But just now, it's hot and the air is so still it begs for a breeze. I am sitting under an elegant awning on the teak top deck. The ice makes the outside of the tall glass sweat. It's filled with fresh lime soda, and it feels

Pagan, bringing world attention to these historic monuments; many have been rebuilt.

It takes a lot to grasp that one is standing on soil captured by Kublai Khan, visited by Marco Polo, and written about by Rudyard Kipling. Such things jolt a traveler, even a world-weary one, which I am not. History's long arm should do that, which is why it's great to go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art's website timeline (metmuseum.org) or the Asia Society (asiasociety.org) to learn who was killing whom, plundering what, when and where.

From the bits I've seen and

wonder in design—take a good year to make.

These cups are now in my suitcase right next to the redining Buddha I found in a public market, my only mementos of the trip. Burma is more about experience than shopping.

I am trying to get a grasp of my fellow travelers. A group of Italians are doing what Italians do around a pool: taking a few aimless strokes, adjusting their things, finding their deck chairs, looking divine. An English baroness is hard at it in a card game with her gentleman companion. An American couple is here as part of a goal to sail

dinner. What began as a bit of Cole Porter usually ended with some rollicking Elton John (several bottles of champagne, Burmese beer, Gin Rickeys and whatever else later...).

Seeing the mist coming up to meet the sky, with temples tucked in between as the sun rises, makes me realize what a truly mystical kingdom I'd been to.

There was but one hitch. At the time I went, no credit cards were accepted. All cash. Probably just as well: in a country known for the finest rubies and sapphires in the world, I could have done a lot of damage with a credit card!

The Road to Mandalay

A MYSTICAL JOURNEY OF PEACE AND BEAUTY.

Everyone has a list of dream destinations.

Burma has been on my list for so long that the country—and most of its cities—had changed names by the time I arrived. No matter. Little else had. Though half the listings say Burma, the country is officially Myanmar. Rangoon, now Yangon, retains its decaying Pan-Asian fusion culture. But Yangon is a quick stopover.

I am headed to Pagan, a near-mythical city where the promise of pagodas, temples, monasteries and stupas, awaits. From Pagan I will go by boat to Mandalay. Given the alternatives—ox cart, jeep, unreliable trains, buses (all of which can get washed out at the tail end of the rainy season)—a

boat seemed sensible. I had long had my eye on this one.

The "Road to Mandalay," a large yacht (or very small ship), carries 118 passengers, gently making its way on the once-heroic Ayeyarway River. At the height of Anglo-Burma business in the 1930s, this river carried some 602 vessels with 9 million people annually. It cuts through the country from the gateway of China to the Andaman Sea. It is the Mississippi of Burma.

Each season, it changes course. Now, after the rainy season, the water is high. Still the barges bringing teak, Andaman redwood and other cargo must move slowly. Everything moves slowly in

Burma. Peacefully, is a better choice of words. Peace, quiet, and beauty are apt descriptions of this entire trip, which, given Myanmar's political problems, is somewhat ironic. Yet no one, with the exception of one bombastic British blowhard who bored everyone who would listen, was interested in talking politics.

The peace is driven by the spiritual life of the people, which flows like the great river. The "Road to Mandalay" works in harmony with the people, the water, and the spirituality of the place especially if one begins their journey in Pagan.

Respectfully balancing the needs of its guests with its host country, "entertainment" includes

lectures by experts in history and culture, a performance of traditional Burmese dance, puppet shows, acrobats rather than disco music, dance contests, gambling, and wet T-shirt contests.

You will never hear loud noises. Even at temples chanting is one long low song. Though the people are busy, they're unhurried. They're also very pretty, smile a lot and put thanaka, a yellowish powder, on their faces for beauty and as sunscreen. One learns it's improper to wear shoes inside or facing Buddha, pat a person on the head, or hand money directly to a monk.

The contrasts are amazing and yet they work. There is a

Enchanted India

A magical journey to the mysterious land of spice, spirituality, and snake charmers. by Diane Siniavski



The African safari, the tour of Europe, the Nile Cruise, the Himalayan trek... these are destinations to make memories. India is like that. It's an all-or-nothing place. It's a love-it-or-hate-it place.

For me, seeing India was a lifelong dream. Since my travel fantasies do not include riding around in some huge motor van with a bunch of strangers,

I convinced three pals who had each been to India several times to show me "real" India. Our itinerary would include Delhi, the main cities of Rajasthan (the country's most talked state, located in North-Central India)—

Jajpur, Jodhpur, and Udaipur—and two side trips to see the Taj Mahal and attend the Pushkar Camel Festival.

First stop: Delhi. Getting there from the East Coast takes nearly 15 hours. Lidor to door, customs and city ride included. Before setting out, we had booked first-class accommodations,

hired professional guides, and arranged to have an air-conditioned car with a driver stay with us throughout most of the trip (the private car sounds like a great luxury, but the cost is as little as \$20 per day). India can be a tough place to travel, so some luxuries are necessities.

From Delhi, we drove south for several hours to see the Taj Mahal, located in the town of Agra. The Taj Mahal is to India what the Statue of Liberty is to the United States. It takes your breath away. We went at sunset and again the next morning, then headed west toward Jaipur, the capital of the luminous state of Rajasthan.

Rajasthan is what most people think of as India. It's where the greatest forts, palaces, and nesting places of Mughal warriors and maharajahs stretch to the Pakistani border. One hardly needs the Wikipedia to Rajasthani sign to know one's there. An elephant lumbers down the highway. Horns blast, traffic nerve-shattering. Yet, holy men, occasionally naked except for a turban, wander along undisturbed. Women in blazing silk saree work in the fields, shop for sugar, and gather in groups to gossip. Men in somber khaki khaki is the Hindi word for dust wrap their heads in bold, colorful turbans.

In Rajasthan, the eyes dance across exposures of sand dotted with grey-dad camels, across sacred lakes

covered with flowers, and over five centuries of Mughal and maharajah architecture—lasting monuments to love, power and intrigue.

Rajasthan defines its two most important cities by color. Jaipur is pink. Jodhpur is blue. My basic black travel clothes suddenly seem out of place. Not to worry: In each city there's shopping galore, all prices that are hard to beat. You can select fabric, get measured, and have your new clothes delivered in time for a go-and-ferret on the lawn of some princely palace-turned-hotel.

The Old City of Jaipur was painted pink in 1876 to get its palaces, monuments, and massive elephant gates ready for a visit from the Prince of Wales. It remains that color by law. The city is famed for jewelry, miniature paintings, and printed and mirrored fabrics and handicrafts. My favorite "handicrafts" are found at the Gem Palace, possibly the most famous jewel emporium in all of India. Since 1852, the Kachwal family has been cutting, polishing, and creating jewelry for royals, designers, and ordinary folks throughout the world.

Owner Pappu Kachwal loves to watch people's faces when he drops a smooth, cool emerald as big as a robin's egg into the palm of a customer's hand, or drapes a king's ransom of diamonds and rubies around a visitor's neck. Nice, but out of my price range! Settling for a

See:

Restoring marble palaces; brilliant silk saris; elephants and sacred cows stopping traffic.

Hear:

Chiming bells and hypnotic, rhythmic chanting for meditation.