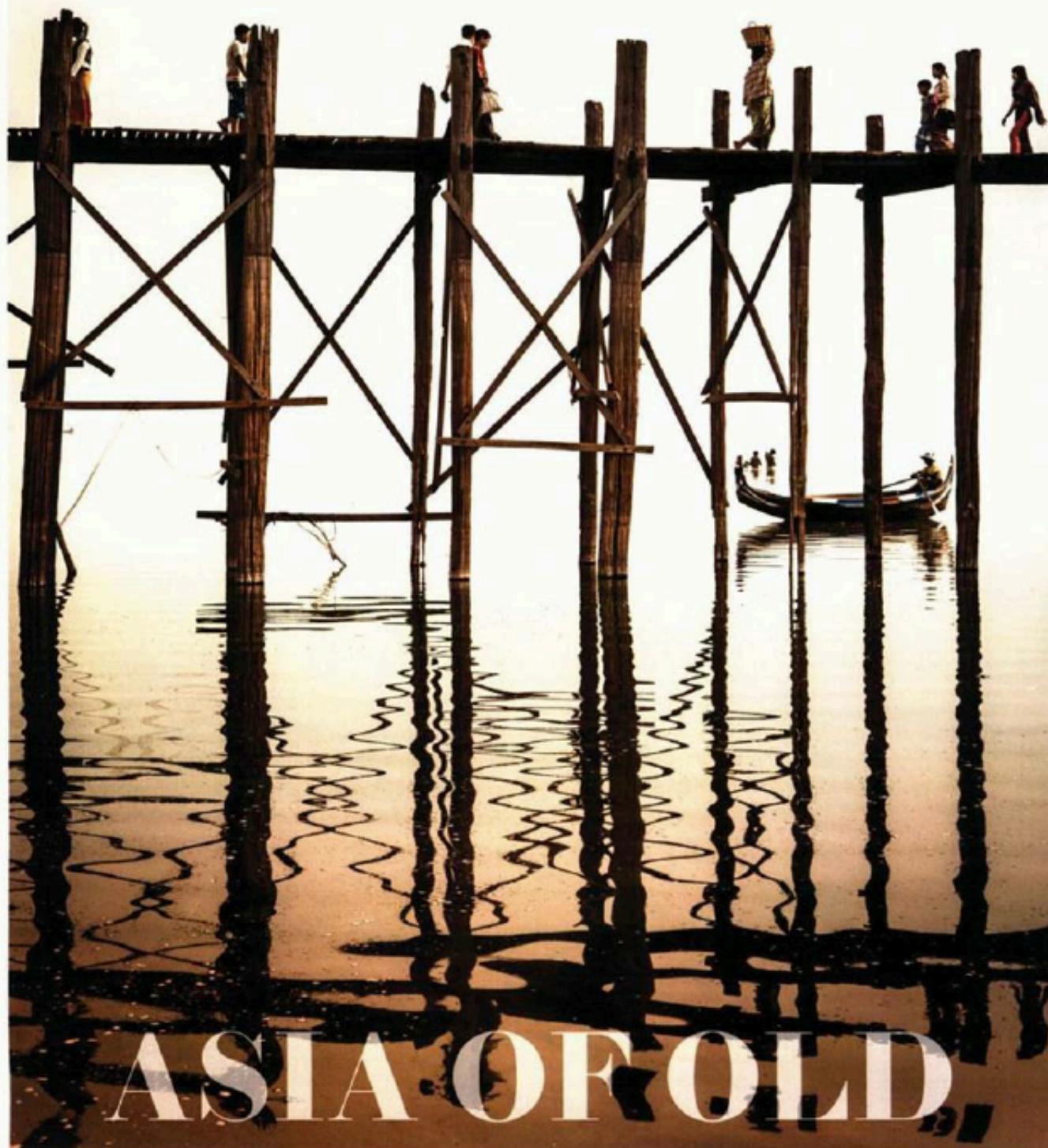
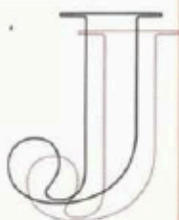


The U Bein Bridge crosses
over Taungthaman Lake
near Amarapura



AS BURMA'S TOURISM DAWN BREAKS, AOIFE O'RIORDAIN DISCOVERS THE THRUMMING STREET LIFE OF YANGON, AND ON A CRUISE BETWEEN MANDALAY AND BAGAN, THE SUMPTUOUS LANDSCAPES AND OUTPOSTS OF THE IRRAWADDY



ust think about it,' said the girl in a sing-song voice as she and her friend pursued us on their rickety bicycles, her basket of postcards and jewellery swinging on her handlebars. Mass tourism might be knocking on its door, but the Burmese still have a lot to learn about pushy sales techniques.

We had been on our way to the Maha Aungmye Bonzan temple in Ava, one of Burma's historic former capitals, when we came across our charming souvenir sellers. It is one of the stops on an itinerary along Burma's Irrawaddy River on board the *Strand Cruise*. Once the boat had docked, we set off in a convoy of horses and carts, threading our way through an enchanting scene of butter bean and cabbage fields, banana plantations and kapok trees. We arrived at the ruined temple with its serene, moss-draped statue of the Buddha, and it was completely deserted.

Like most of the other boats, the *Strand Cruise* plies the 115-mile historically and culturally rich stretch of the 1,300-mile-long Irrawaddy River between Mandalay and Bagan. It's undoubtedly the best way to see as much as you can in a short span of time - three days, in our case - and another perk is the boat's personalised shore excursions.

Custom built with 28 cabins and suites, the boat has carved teak beds, wooden floors, a tropical inspired decoration and mod cons like air conditioning and Wi-Fi. The contemporary, colonial-chic theme continues in the bar, restaurants and decks. There are two treatment rooms, a swimming pool on the top deck and ample space for lounging.

The food is also top notch and mingles European, Asian and local dishes: one night there was butter soft steak and the next, a sharing style Burmese dinner featuring a salad of fermented tea leaves.

Burma is experiencing momentous change. Following decades of isolation, Aung San Suu Kyi's recent political triumphs and the first democratically elected president in 25 years have given its 60 million population a new sense of hope. But for now, this is a place still relatively untouched by globalism and commerce.

My journey had started on the teeming, traffic-choked streets of the former capital, Yangon. Here, I stayed at the boat's land-bound sibling, the Strand Yangon, a not-to-be-missed Raj-era relic built in 1901 by the Sarkies Brothers, who

also owned Raffles in Singapore. It has just unveiled the first phase in a smart new makeover that will include a pool.

The city's downtown district is an almost perfectly preserved grid of colonial-era architecture. In the hairdryer-like heat and humidity that envelops you, I wandered past the faded, ice cream colours of the crumbling art-deco buildings lining Pansodan Street, the epicentre of colonial power and commerce until Burma gained independence from Britain in 1948. The pavements were thronged with betel leaf sellers, hawkers and the Burmese, elegantly dressed in their longyi.

No matter how long you are in Yangon, all roads eventually lead to the Shwedagon Pagoda. Its 99-metre-high stupa gleams like a beacon covered with over two and a half tonnes of gold and its bell tower is encrusted with diamonds, rubies, sapphires and other gems. Over 80 per cent of the population adheres to Theravada Buddhism and this is Burma's most sacred site. The scenes at ground level were equally dazzling with over 2,000 mini stupas and shrines dotting the courtyard and the hushed hum of devotion.

After my brief stay in Yangon, I flew north to Mandalay to join the cruise.

As I drove from the airport with my guide, Lin, the sun cast a golden wash over a tapestry of chickpea,

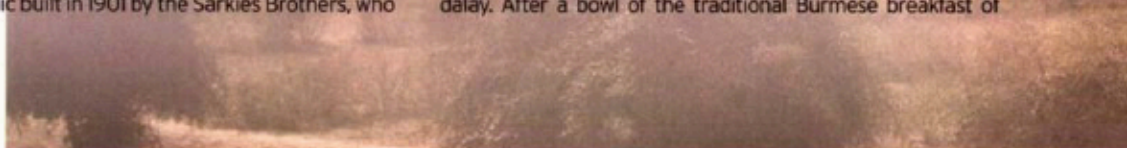
sunflower and peanut fields, while huge piles of watermelons lined the roadside.

Mandalay was the last royal capital of Burma and while it is not as romantic as its literary connotations might suggest, there is plenty to see. When we arrived at the U Bein Bridge, the morning mist was still casting wispy shadows across Taungthaman Lake. The 1.2-kilometre bridge perching on rickety stilts over the water is reputedly the world's longest teak footbridge. Beneath us, a man herded a flock of ducks back onto land and fishermen were casting their nets. The watery morning light made it all look like an Impressionist painting.

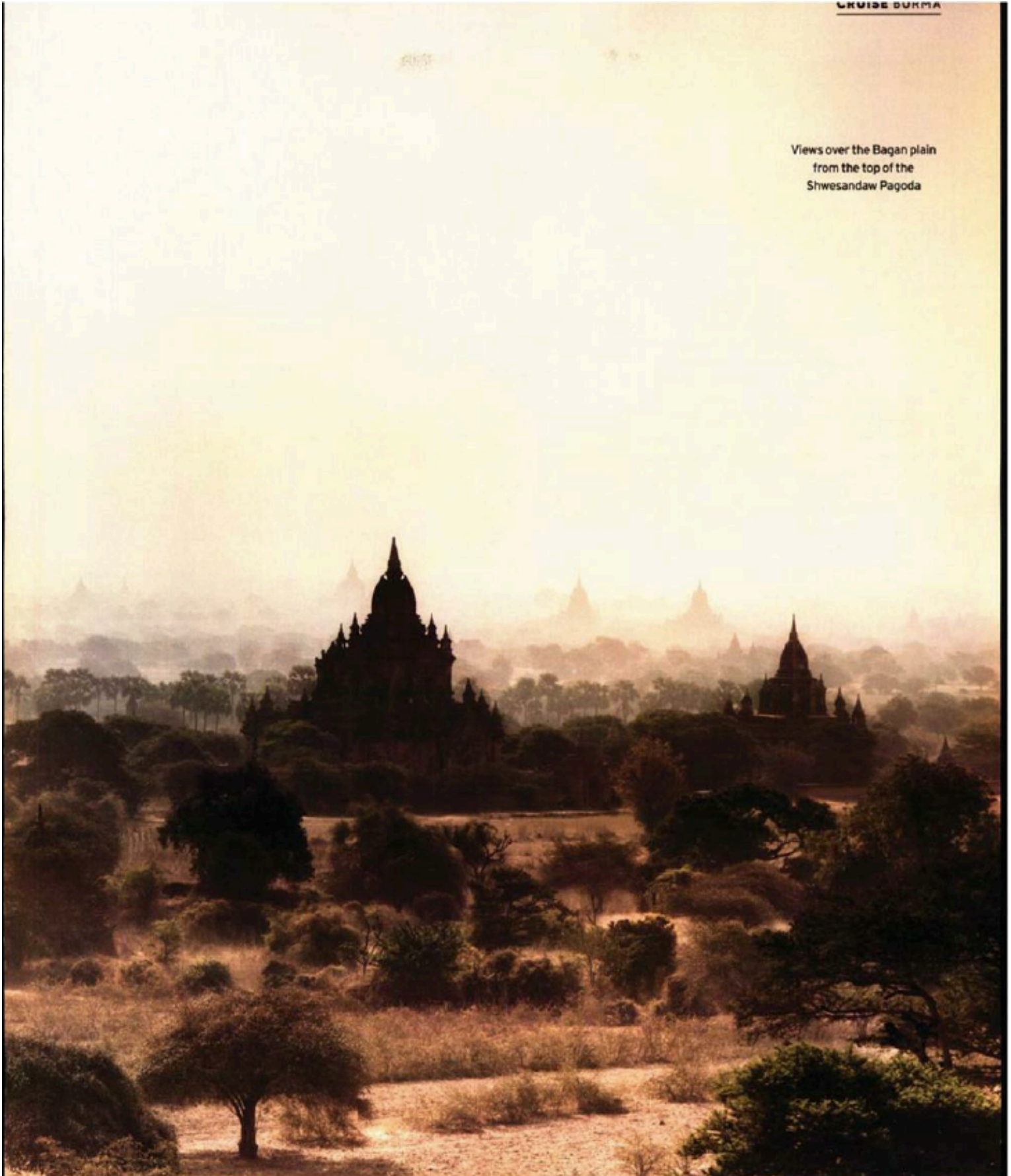
After a welcome lunch on the boat's terrace, we diverted upstream to see another of Burma's erstwhile capitals, Mingun. In the cloying heat we climbed the lung busting steps to the summit of the gargantuan Mingun Pahtodawgyi. Built by King Bodawpaya in 1790 it was never finished, yet it's still an impressive pile of bricks and the reward was uninterrupted views over river and countryside.

The following morning the sun rose in a hazy palette of greys and pinks as we docked 40 kilometres south of Mandalay. After a bowl of the traditional Burmese breakfast of

“The view was of RIBBON-LIKE MISTS *threading* around the hills and the sun picking out the 500 TEMPLES AND PAGODAS below us”



Views over the Bagan plain
from the top of the
Shwesandaw Pagoda



CRUISE BURMA

soup-like noodles called mohinga, we were driven to the nearby town of Sagaing. One of the most important religious centres in Burma, it is home to over 6,000 monks and 4,000 nuns and one of the country's most prestigious Buddhist Universities. As we wound along a series of hairpin bends, monks and nuns filed along the road collecting their morning alms.

From the terrace of our destination, the Soon Oo Ponnya Shin Pagoda on a hill above town, the view of the ribbon-like mists threading around the surrounding hills and the sun picking out the glistering gold of some of the 500 temples and pagodas below us, was bewitching. We were also the only foreign visitors among the pilgrims and local tourists. On the way back to the boat we made an unscheduled stop at a small, open-air market, where monks and nuns were browsing the fruit and vegetable stalls and locals gossiped.

Back on the Strand, a lazy afternoon spent by the pool was an opportunity to observe the mosaic of rural life: fishing boats, cornfields and villagers bathing and washing their clothes in the river. On board there were talks about cultural life and local traditions like longyi tying and how to crush thanaka tree bark into a paste to make natural, Burmese-style sunscreen.

But the best was saved for last. After our second night on the river we docked in Bagan as the sun was rising. Bagan is Burma's must-see although the country's turbulent past means it is still waiting for the nod from Unesco for inclusion as a World Heritage Site.

The country's capital from the ninth to thirteenth centuries, there are over 3,000 temples and pagodas on the 70-square-kilometre plain that is roughly the size of Manhattan. Erected between 1050 and 1280 in a fervent building boom of religious one-upmanship, it is devotion on a grand scale. We scrambled up the steep terraces of the Shwesandaw Pagoda in Bagan's central plain, one of five temples visitors can climb. No photograph can do justice to the panorama that unfolded as thousands of temples, pagodas and stupas dissolved into the horizon as far as the eye could see.

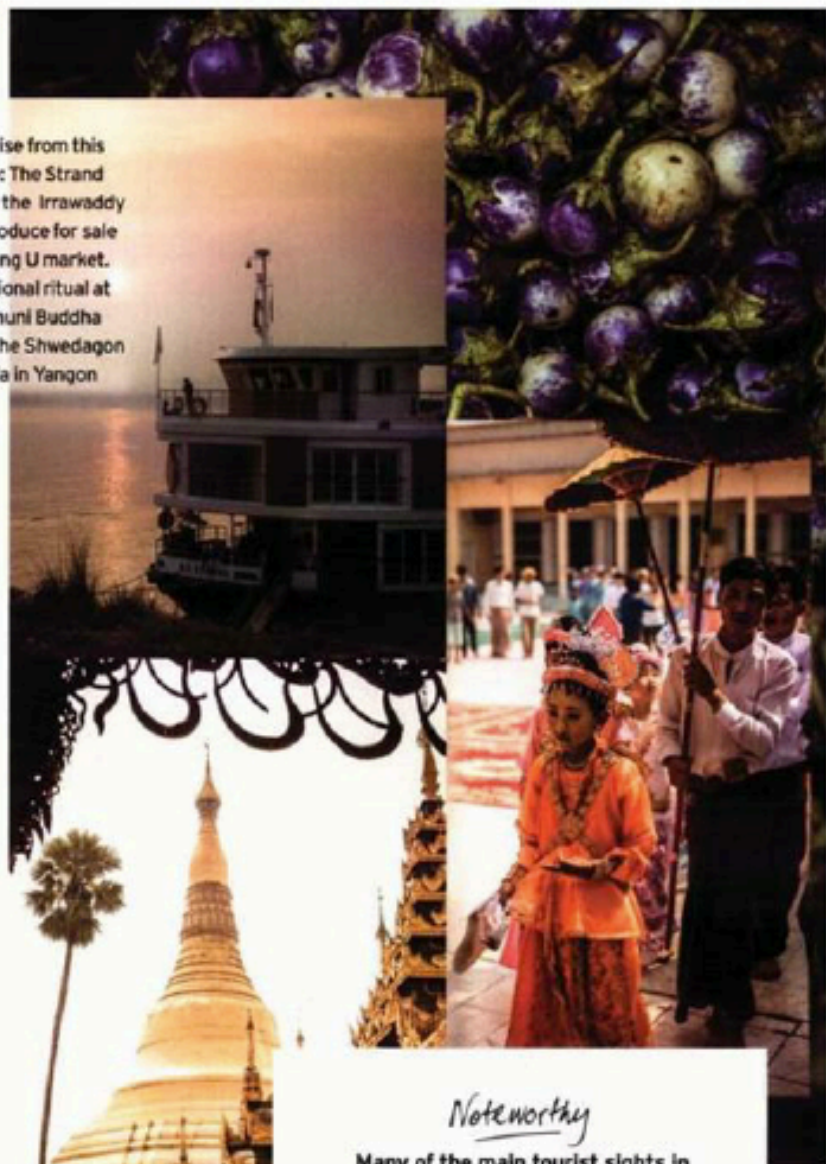
Next was the twelfth-century Shwezigon Pagoda, Bagan's most important pilgrimage site in nearby Nyaung-U. A welcome temple break came in the dusty lanes of the covered market just off Nyaung-U's main street. Inside, it's a mishmash of antiques, lacquerware, food, household items, hats and dressmakers busy behind vintage sewing machines.

By the time we reached our final stop in Old Bagan, the terracotta bricks of the twelfth-century Sulamani Temple's exterior were glowing a mellow red as the sun set. Save for the dwindling tourists, little seemed to have changed for centuries. It is easy to imagine the past in Burma but for all the optimism, the future is more uncertain. Go now while it still offers a glimpse into the Old Asia that will not exist forever. @

ESSENTIALS

HOW Audley Travel (01993-838 1000; audleytravel.com) offers a seven-night package including a three-night journey from Mandalay to Bagan on the *Strand Cruise* and two nights in a Deluxe Suite at the Strand Yangon from £2,570 per person, based on two people sharing. The price includes all return international and domestic flights, transfers and all excursions on the *Strand Cruise*.

Clockwise from this picture: The Strand Cruise on the Irrawaddy River. Produce for sale at Nyaung U market. A devotional ritual at Mahamuni Buddha Temple. The Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon



Noteworthy

Many of the main tourist sights in Burma are religious pagodas, stupas and temples, so removing your shoes and socks is mandatory. Wear shoes that are easy to take on and off and don't point at anything with your feet, which is considered to be disrespectful.

Most visitors make a beeline for Yangon's Shwedagon Pagoda in the evening, but go in the morning if you want to escape large groups of tourists and experience it surrounded by locals.

Burma is still quite a conservative society. When you are visiting temples make sure your shoulders and knees are covered and never take a photograph of anyone without asking permission first.

By and large it's probably best to give street food a miss as hygiene standards are questionable.

Apart from hotels and restaurants in major cities that take credit cards, the currency of choice is American dollars.

But only bring pristine bills, anything even a tiny bit crumpled or tattered won't be accepted by locals.

RIGHT FROM TOP
Yangon's last operating public jetty. The giant bell in Mingun

