

The Cuba Craze p.38 Myanmar's Cruise Debut p.56

LUXURY  
EXPEDITION

through  
the South Pacific

# Porthole Cruise

10.2016

A  
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VIEW

PLUS

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**The Myanmar Mystique**

The Strand experience showcases this magical country.

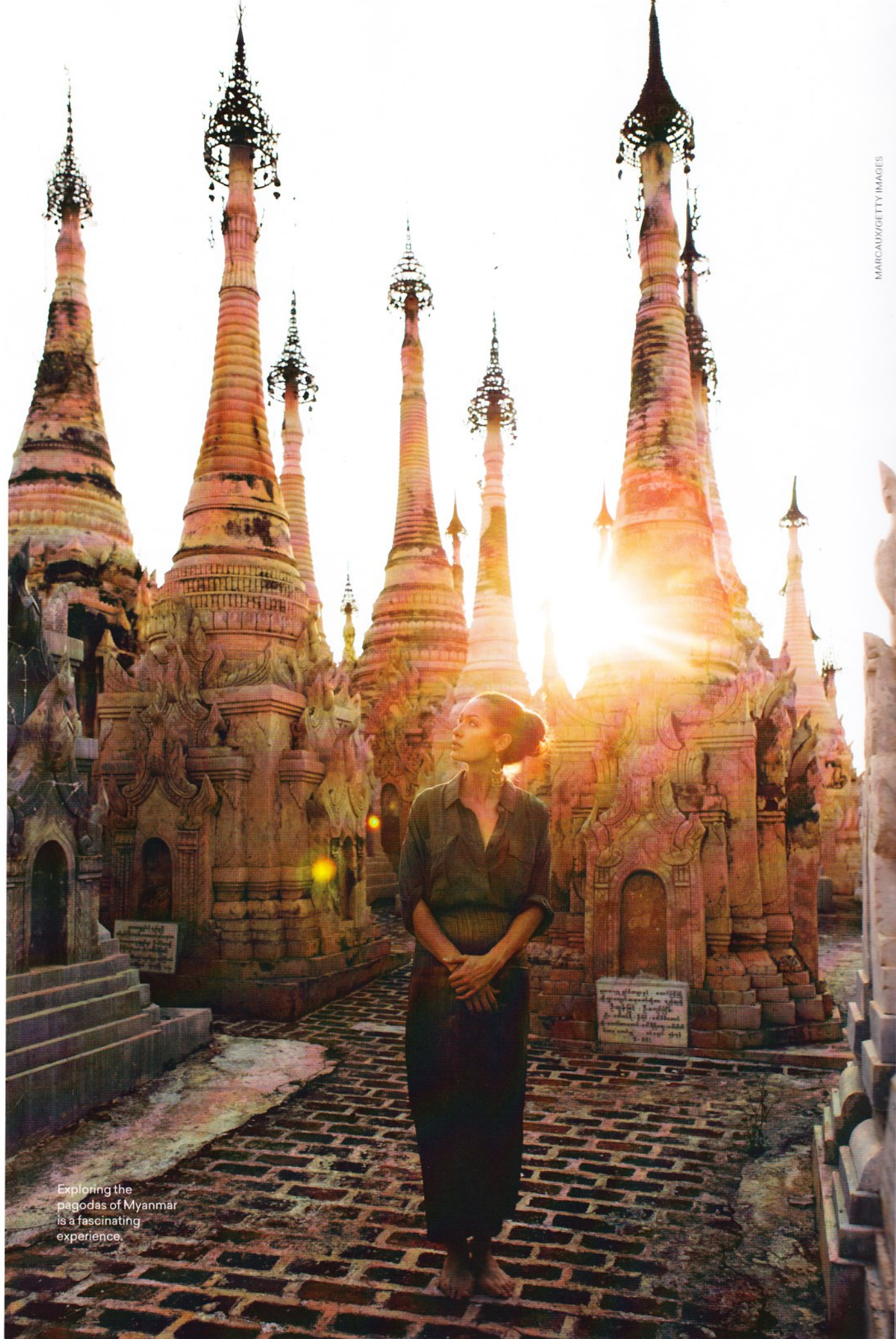
BY STEVE LELAND

**ON THE COVER**

Carnival Cruise Line/  
Bernhard Lang  
This page: Martin  
Puddy/Getty Images







Exploring the pagodas of Myanmar is a fascinating experience.



From ship to shore, The Strand experience best showcases this magical country.

IT'S BEEN SAID THAT STEPPING OUTSIDE YOUR TRAVEL COMFORT zone makes for an exhilarating experience, and I will concur that there is nothing more exhilarating than a journey to Myanmar. Decades of self-inflicted isolation had previously kept travel to the country improbable, if not impossible. But today, with new democratic reforms and the government actively embracing tourism, the country is preparing to emerge from its off-the-grid shadows into the spotlight of international tourism.

Evolving out of a time warp of five decades, the isolation has only served to propagate intrigue and mystique, creating hope for a new Golden Age of Myanmar (formerly known as Burma). What I soon discovered was that to best experience this new era was through The Strand experience, both on land and, most recently, on the water.

**The Strand Experience** ... Although the country's tourism development is still in its infancy, pre- and post-cruise guests will find no lack of luxury at the historic 5-star Strand Hotel in Yangon. The legendary property exudes imagery reminiscent of its bygone British colonial past, while simultaneously providing every modern day luxury and amenity.

Entering the three-story lobby, you can easily envision why the hotel has played host to international celebrities, socialites, and famed writers the likes of Maugham, Kipling, and Orwell.

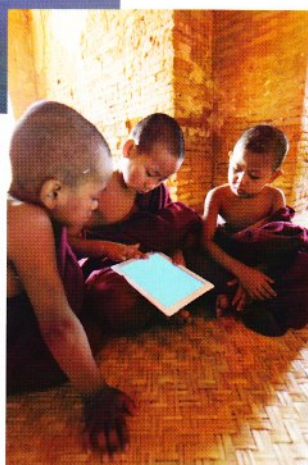
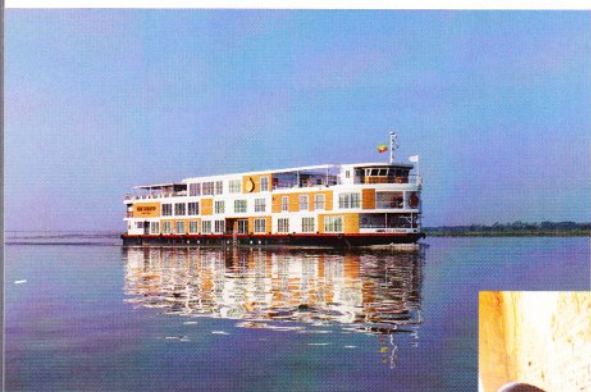
Black and white floor tiles intertwined with teak wood, characteristic ceiling fans, and classic rattan furnishings create a perfect setting for a

## THE MYSTIQUE OF

# MYANMAR

by STEVE IELAND





Above: Aboard the Strand cruise;  
Right: novice monks using a tablet;  
bustling Yangon



trip into the hotel's colorful past. Tastefully decorated suites complemented with new furnishings retain the colonial era vibe. Two different restaurants offer a choice between formal dining or lighter fare with both serving delicious regional and international cuisine.

As impressive as the hotel is, it is the flawless service of the staff that eclipses its iconic period design. Ever-present welcoming smiles and 24-hour butler service indicate not only exceptional training, but demonstrate a natural pride in service standards. It is easy to see why the property has been appropriately featured as one of "The Most Famous Hotels In The World."

Yangon (formerly known as Rangoon) contains a plethora of sights for visitors, none more impressive than the Shwedagon Pagoda. Construction on this impressive structure began over 2,500 years ago, culminating in a 99-meter (325 feet)-high gold dome. The intricate design augments the disparity between the simplicity of everyday Burmese life and these sacred shrines.

Every step through the former capital presents a look into the soul of Myanmar's culture. Tea shops, food markets, and pagodas appear around every corner. Hundreds, if not thousands, of makeshift stores consume every inch of sidewalk space. Brooding buildings begging to be restored to their glory days and recalling elements of a bygone era are a feast for the tourist eye. Brimming street food hawkers are mixed in with merchants

offering every item one can imagine. Although there are exceptional sights, the city experience leans as much toward an eye opener as a jaw dropper.

**A Cruise Debut ...** While the spotlight shines on Myanmar's coming out party, the real debutante of the tourism ball is the newly inaugurated Strand Cruise. Elegantly dancing her way along the Ayeyarwady River, the 27-suite *Strand* explores thousands of years of culture and riveting scenic beauty, all while offering sophisticated elegance on board.

The vessel was designed with the premise of exclusivity and offers something akin to an affluent club-like atmosphere. Other than sailing on water, there is little that bears any resemblance to a traditional cruise ship. Picture suites that rival five-star hotel rooms, world-class cuisine, and personalized 24-hour butler service, not only for the higher category suites, but for every cabin. The clear intent is to provide a personalized cruise experience to each and every guest.

*Strand* boasts classical elegance with the use of dark teak wood against a palette of warm, richly hued colors throughout. Entering the lobby, your eye is immediately drawn to a beautiful teak wood spiral stairway leading up to the detail-rich dining room. Imagine yourself in an exclusive club with doting waiters, and that sums up the intimate dining experience. Menus are a true culinary journey with emphasis on regional cuisine.



The Strand experience combines modern luxuries on board with spiritual adventures on shore.



Elegantly dancing her way along the Ayeayarwady River, Strand explores thousands of years of culture and riveting scenic beauty while offering sophisticated elegance on board.

An impressive Sun Deck features a chic pool with an innovative design that places chaise lounge chairs actually in the water on the shallow sides. The same fashionable vibe carries over to the aft section where you can enjoy lunch al fresco at contemporary marble-topped tables as you sink into cushioned sofa-like seating. Enjoy the chance to soak up the sun with the views along the river. Sarkies Bar, with rich teak wood design, and a small library are adjacent to the Sun Deck area. There are also excellent spa facilities as well as a small gym for those remaining true to their workout regimens.

**Incredible Journeys ...** Sailing 3- and 4-night cruises between Mandalay and Bagan, guests are treated to complimentary and comprehensive shore excursions in each port of call. The opening act features the impressive temples and pagodas of Bagan, of which there are more than 3,500 covering just 18 square miles.

As an exclusive component of The Strand experience, you are escorted by informative guides as you visit several of the more significant sites of this premier destination that's a visual treat unlike anything in the world. For the more adventurous, optional hot air balloon rides over the fields of temples are popular for a once-in-a-lifetime adrenaline rush.



The itinerary includes refreshing mid-morning sailings that feature views of villages portraying the cinematic drama of daily life along the river. A port call in Mingun features a visit to one of the largest pagodas ever constructed: the aptly named "Unfinished Pagoda." Adding to the experience, shoreside transportation is provided by tuk tuk, essentially a motorcycle attached to a pickup truck bed with seats. Later in the evening, the ship ties up at a remote river sandbar where guests disembark to enjoy champagne and appetizers as the colorful sunset takes center stage.

Mandalay is filled with outstanding excursion experiences including a walk on the U Bein Bridge, the oldest and longest teak wood bridge in existence. Cameras will work overtime to catch the indescribable photo ops of the temples and monasteries along the Mandalay Heritage Trail. For the ultimate in local color, ride in horse-drawn carts through the naturally preserved landscape of Ava village, visiting fascinating ancient sites along the way.

Farewells are never easy at the end of any cruise, but because of the intimacy aboard *Strand*, the departure is even more regretful. The staff's eagerness to please tugs at your emotions. The feelings you have for the country and the hope for its people is overwhelming. It is impossible to capture the visual essence of Myanmar and The Strand experience with written narrative. It is without any doubt a "you have to be there" feeling. ●