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The Strand Yangon

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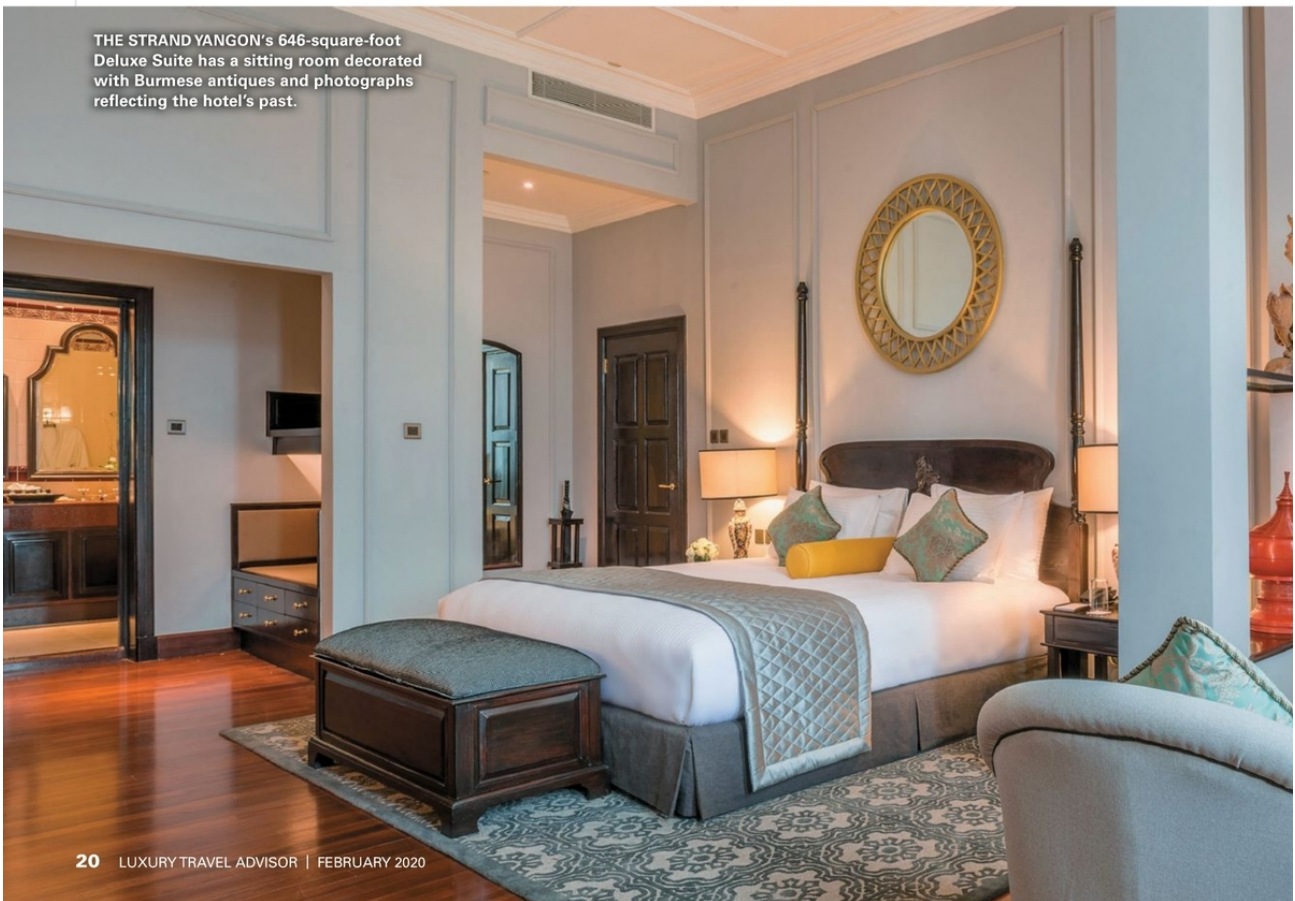
Yangon is the largest city in Myanmar (formerly called Burma) and is just as fascinating as it was a century ago when it was one of Asia's most sophisticated capitals. Today, its red-brick heritage buildings rub shoulders with high-rise condos and upscale shopping malls, but what makes it really unique is the way it clings

to its traditional lifestyle. Men still wear long cotton sarongs called *longyis*, women and children smear their faces with a yellow cosmetic called *thanaka*, sidewalks are crammed with street vendors and stalls serving local foodstuffs, and around every corner you run into golden pagodas and saffron-robed monks.

If you want to be in the heart of the action, **The Strand Yangon** is an iconic hotel that sits on the downtown riverfront between the handsome British Embassy and the old Telegraph Office. A stroll around this area is a great way to engage with the local way of life. On nearby Pansodan Street, we found stalls

with vintage books, trendy cafés, a colorful Indian temple and stores selling lacquerware, local fabrics and traditional puppets. The majestic Sule Pagoda is a short walk away and so is the historic Scott Market, a covered bazaar with 2,000 stalls selling souvenirs, clothing and paintings, and a good place to check

THE STRAND YANGON'S 646-square-foot Deluxe Suite has a sitting room decorated with Burmese antiques and photographs reflecting the hotel's past.





THE STRAND RESTAURANT (left) serves classic European fare, pairing imported ingredients with local organic produce.

THE SWIMMING POOL (here) at the Strand is set amidst a tropical garden.



out Myanmar's fabulous rubies.

But back to The Strand Yangon, where a recent refurbishment has given this all-suite grand hotel a fresh new look, with teak floors and antique furnishings lovingly revamped by local artisans, and tech features and bright textiles introduced to the 32 suites and public areas. Yet not one iota of its Old World elegance has been lost.

The entrance lobby sets the scene. And what a scene it is, with the stately glamour of colonial days, whirling ceiling fans, high-backed black rattan chairs, daylight streaming down from the original skylight and elegant couches on which arriving guests are offered a welcome drink while checking-in.

Our 700-square-foot Executive Suite on the second floor had a side-street view. We liked the open shelving with Burmese antiques that creates a cozy living area for the two-seater couch and two armchairs around a low oval table. There was a padded chest at the end of the bed, a large desk with power

points and a vintage dressing table with a three-sided mirror.

Seven of these Executive Suites and three of the 646-square-foot Deluxe Suites have views of the main Strand Road; there are four pairs of connecting Deluxe and Executive Suites. Bathrooms have elegant black and white floors and separate tubs and showers.

The Strand Suite, which also looks out on the Strand Road and the river, measures 2,152 square feet. In addition to the master bedroom with a four-poster bed and the living room with a table that can seat up to eight guests, it has a private massage room with two treatment beds and a kitchenette with its own entrance. Many illustrious guests from George Orwell to Mick Jagger, and David Rockefeller to Anthony Bourdain have stayed here. Good to know: When VIPs arrive at Yangon's international airport (which also takes private jets), the Strand butlers steer them quickly through immigration and into the hotel's BMW.



The Strand butlers are on duty 24/7 on the spacious first- and second-floor landings, which have comfortable seating areas. We never got a chance to unlock our suite because a smiling butler always stepped forward as we left the elevator, enquiring about our day and asking if we needed anything as he opened our door for us. There are no in-suite tea and coffee-making facilities, but the butlers are more than happy to bring complimentary tea and coffee at any time of the day... or night.

During the hotel's refurbishment a walled tropical garden and a large infinity pool were added. With sun loungers, private cabanas and tables for all-day al fresco dining on the wooden deck, we found this a great place for snacks and taking time to relax.

The spa and the fitness center both open onto the pool, and spa manager Khin Zaw (spa@hotelthstrand.com; 011-951-243-377) said it is wise to book ahead for the two treatment rooms. He also said that the most popular therapists are Phoo Pwint Aung and Hnin Hnin and recommends the signature 90-minute Strand Massage incorporating both acupressure and aromatherapy.

The signature cocktail in the famed Sarkies Bar is the Strand Sour, but while we were there it was Portuguese Week, so we had a Portorico cocktail made with fine port wine accompanied by a plate of tasty Chorizo Paté. Top Tip: Wednesdays are Jazz Night, and on Fridays and Saturdays, Happy Hour is from 5 p.m. to 9 p.m.

The Strand Restaurant is open for dinner from Monday to Saturday, and the menu runs the gamut of the finest seafood and meats. We dined on Crab Meat and Truffle Ravioli followed by a Seared King Prawn Tartlet and ended with a Pyramid of Mango Mousse and Caramel Ice Cream.

THE STRAND SUITE (above), which is spread over 2,152 square feet, has a living room with a table that can seat up to eight guests.

THE STRAND CAFÉ (below), popular for the classic high tea, is an all-day dining option, serving Myanmar dishes with a European flair.



The Degustation Menus with wine pairings change regularly, and those in the know look out for the monthly special menus like the recent French Mushroom and Truffle Creations and Understated Lobster Experience. With levels of service that rival the excellence of the food, and with Normandy-born chef de cuisine Xavier Fauvel (xavier@hotelthstrand.com) newly at the helm, dining in these supremely elegant surroundings is a gourmet experience no traveler should be allowed to miss.

The Strand Café is breezily elegant with lacquer-red rattan chairs and windows looking onto

the Strand Road. With great value, set three-course international lunch and dinner menus, it also does curries, salads, burgers and grills. Alongside the classical continental and British breakfasts, stand-out dishes include Cloud Eggs, Cardinal Eggs with Truffles, and Lobster Omelettes, and afternoon tea comes in the classical or local Myanmar version.

General manager Barthelemy Durand (barth@hotelthstrand.com; 011-951-243-377) is the person to contact if you have VIPs visiting. Guest experience manager Thida Aung (thida@hotelthstrand.com; 011-959-420-111-357) sets up unusual experiences like palm readings with a famous fortuneteller. She also advises on the best golf and sailing clubs and says visitors enjoy the Karaweik cultural show with dinner on a replica of the royal barge on nearby Kandawgyi Lake.

For excursions, she suggests an overnight at Kyaiktiyo, the famous Golden Rock sanctuary, or a day in Bago, which is a couple of hours away, to visit the palace and the pagoda and, for the more adventurous, to try fried dormouse, which is a local specialty. Good to know: Thida says that private classes with a professional Yangon puppeteer are particularly popular with families traveling with children.

An exclusive way to prolong the Strand experience is to take The Strand Cruise for a two-, three- or four-night voyage between the ancient cities of Bagan and Mandalay, docking at private moorings close to landmarks along the Ayeyarwady River. There are 25 cabins and suites, and the Strand Suite has its own private balcony. With two sun decks, one with a pool, the Sarkies Bar and the Strand Restaurant with local and international cuisines and fine wines, these cruises are a unique way to cross paths with Myanmar's history, customs and peoples. ■