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## HERITAGE HOTELS of the GREATER MEKONG

Among the ever increasing number of new luxury hotels and resorts in the Mekong region, there can still be found a few historical gems that have weathered through decades – some surviving more than a century – remaining polished, sparkling, and appealing to today’s most discerning travelers.

These gems include the riverside property **Mandarin Oriental, Bangkok** (formerly The Oriental Bangkok), the beachside **Centara Grand Beach Resort & Villas Hua Hin** (formerly The Railway Hotel), **The Strand**, Yangon, **Raffles Hotel Le Royal**, Phnom Penh (formerly Le Royal), **Raffles Grand Hotel d’Angkor**, Siem Reap (formerly Grand Hotel d’Angkor), **Sofitel Legend Metropole**, Hanoi (formerly The Metropole), the **Rex Hotel**, Ho Chi Minh City, and several more.

The Strand is in the heart of the buzzing city of Yangon, and together with The Raffles in Singapore, and the Eastern & Oriental (E&O) in Penang, The Strand has always been considered one of the most ‘British’ of the colonial hotels in Southeast Asia. But, in fact, all three hotels were conceived and built by the three Sarkies brothers, from Armenia, about a century ago. Hanoi’s The Metropole, meanwhile, is more than just a long-standing hotel. It is an integral part of the city and a landmark where many historical events took place, making it a legend in its own right and an icon of Southeast Asian hotel history. As for Le Royal, which opened in Phnom Penh in 1929 to accommodate passengers of steamship lines and air routes who were stopping off to view the “long-lost Kingdom of Angkor”, it became the hotel of choice for Charlie Chaplin, Somerset Maugham, Charles de Gaulle, Jacqueline Kennedy, Andre Malraux, and many other famous personages.



## THE STRAND, YANGON



**By Jim Algie**

Of the colonial-era hoteliers, the Sarkies brothers were some of the greatest master-builders. They made their mark on the nascent hospitality industry and left a legacy that still stands today with a trio of properties: the Raffles Hotel in Singapore, the Eastern and Oriental (E&O) Hotel in Penang and the Strand in Yangon.

Originally opened in 1903, the Strand has seen many refurbishments, but retains its opulent charm of a bygone era. Stepping into the lobby is a time traveler's reverie realized in muted shades of black and silver embellished with antiques, richly upholstered chairs, thick carpets and photos that are portals into Yangon's illustrious past as an important port city during the British empire. Off to one side, a xylophonist in traditional garb tinkles away on a wooden, museum-worthy instrument.

The three-story edifice houses 30 suites. Each comes with its own butler, who can fulfill any special requests in a matter of minutes. The suites, with their high ceilings, teak floors, rustic furnishings and old bathroom

fixtures, are models of spacious and subdued elegance, which also come with all of the modern amenities like flat screen TVs, mini-bars and Wi-Fi.



In that grand Victorian tradition guests can take high tea at The Strand Café, which is also the breakfast venue. This is not a buffet. Instead, diners can gorge on an appetizing array of freshly prepared dishes, from the healthy like fruit and muesli to the carb-heavy like bagels with cream cheese and smoked salmon.

For dinner, The Strand Restaurant’s white-jacketed waiters serve up a variety of Mediterranean-style dishes, both set menus and a la carte, in a chandelier-lit atmosphere that harkens back to the days of European colonialism, with an executive chef from Italy. For a nightcap try The Strand Bar, which boasts a range of cocktails and single-malt whiskies.

Bringing this beautiful relic into the 21<sup>st</sup> century are state-of-the-art amenities such as a new swimming pool, spa therapy suites and a fully equipped gym.

It’s that blend of the luxuriously quaint and the quintessentially contemporary that is the hotel’s main allure, pulling in guests from George Orwell (the 1984 author whose first novel *Burmese Days* detailed his days as a colonial policeman in the country) to more current guests like Mick Jagger.

Located in the city’s historic heart, The Strand is also a great launch pad for exploring the rich heritage of Yangon, which boasts more age-old buildings than any other city in Southeast Asia.



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