

Magical Myanmar Part 1: Yangon and Bagan

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Burma (or Myanmar as it has been renamed to remove all colonial connotations) is not an obvious tourist destination in spite of all the exoticism it conjures up.

It has had its share of political upheavals and more recently, the media spotlight firmly focused on the Rohingya minority. The latter is never as simple or straightforward an issue as the international press, religious/ethnic and other special interest groups would depict it. What is undeniable, however, is the impact on the Burmese people from the ready outrage across social media, never shy of castigating and reducing all things, even the more complex, to a single burning issue. Cue the Jack Dorsey Myanmar [meditation trip outrage](#).

The Burmese are a profoundly religious and primarily Buddhist people. The number of temples per capita far exceeds any other nation's which is one of the reasons why history and archaeology lovers are drawn to the country.

This cultural and historic heritage should be celebrated, as should be the wonderfully hospitable Burmese people, so many of whom we had the privilege to encounter on our 10 day long trip across this astonishing country.

Rangoon (or Yangon as it now is)

There is no direct flight from London to Yangon, so we took a one stop flight via Doha on Qatar Airways. The entire trip, including layover, is some 15 hours.

Qatar Airways' reputation is not particularly good, even though the head pilots never miss a chance to remind you this is an "award-winning" airline.

Expect restricted seat space in economy, fairly shabby business and first class, and staff valiantly trying to pacify irate passengers. Meal trays not working properly, no entertainment on the long 6.5 hour leg from Doha to Yangon, meal selection not available on all flights, shambolic seat allocation in spite of pre-booked arrangements...

We finally landed in misty, humid and overcast Yangon one very early morning in late September, in the middle of monsoon season.

The mix-up about our flight arrival meant that the Strand Hotel limo was not there to meet us, a blessing in disguise as it turned out, because it gave us a chance to hire our own private chauffeur for the duration of the trip.

This was a longiy-clad Burmese taxi driver, English speaking, on the ball, and as obliging as they come, called Tommy King.

Driving some 30-40 minutes into downtown put in sharp relief the difference between Burma and its closest neighbours, Cambodia and Vietnam, which we visited **a mere 9 months earlier**. Our memories still fresh from that epic trip, we were delighted to see that motorbikes are banned from Yangon and that its streets are scrupulously clean and plastic refuse bag-free.

The ubiquitous black mould attacking most buildings does detract to some extent from the first impression of relative prosperity, but one makes allowances because of the constant and all-pervasive humidity.

And then, there is this whole faded grandeur of old colonial buildings, many in the grips of decay, but some restored to their original splendour.

The **Strand Hotel** is firmly in the latter category and what a pedigree it has!...

The Strand, Yangon



Originally built in 1901 and acquired by the legendary Sarkies brothers, the hotel has had a chequered history, with spectacular ups and downs, with its famous bar housing at one time the stables of the Japanese army.

Today, it is considered one of the most iconic hotels in South-East Asia and proudly boasts a roll call of famous visitors, but its real call to fame is perfecting and fine-tuning the art of hospitality.

BBeyond has travelled around the globe and praised a number of distinguished and iconic establishments. It is hard to impress us.

We know that, when it comes to hotels, the Italians do it better, the Swiss arguably do it best and the Asians do it with the most deference.

The Strand Hotel in Yangon is run by a French general director, the restaurant by a French chef, and the rest of the staff are primarily Burmese.

This is an architecturally significant building with interiors fully restored to match its historical site status.

A joint venture by a HK hospitality group and the Burmese government, the iconic hotel has seen no expense spared in the course of its renovation.

When you enter that unforgettable lobby, you enter a different world, quite literally: a world of colonial era service that is unmatched by any era's exacting standards.

As our belongings were whisked away and check-in process undertaken discreetly and without any input from us, we were ushered into the still empty restaurant (the local time being 7 am) for a spot of breakfast.

The menu is relatively small and the buffet, so beloved of modern travellers, absent altogether.

Instead, you get a superlative version of every breakfast option you could ever wish for, and as many portions as you hunger for.

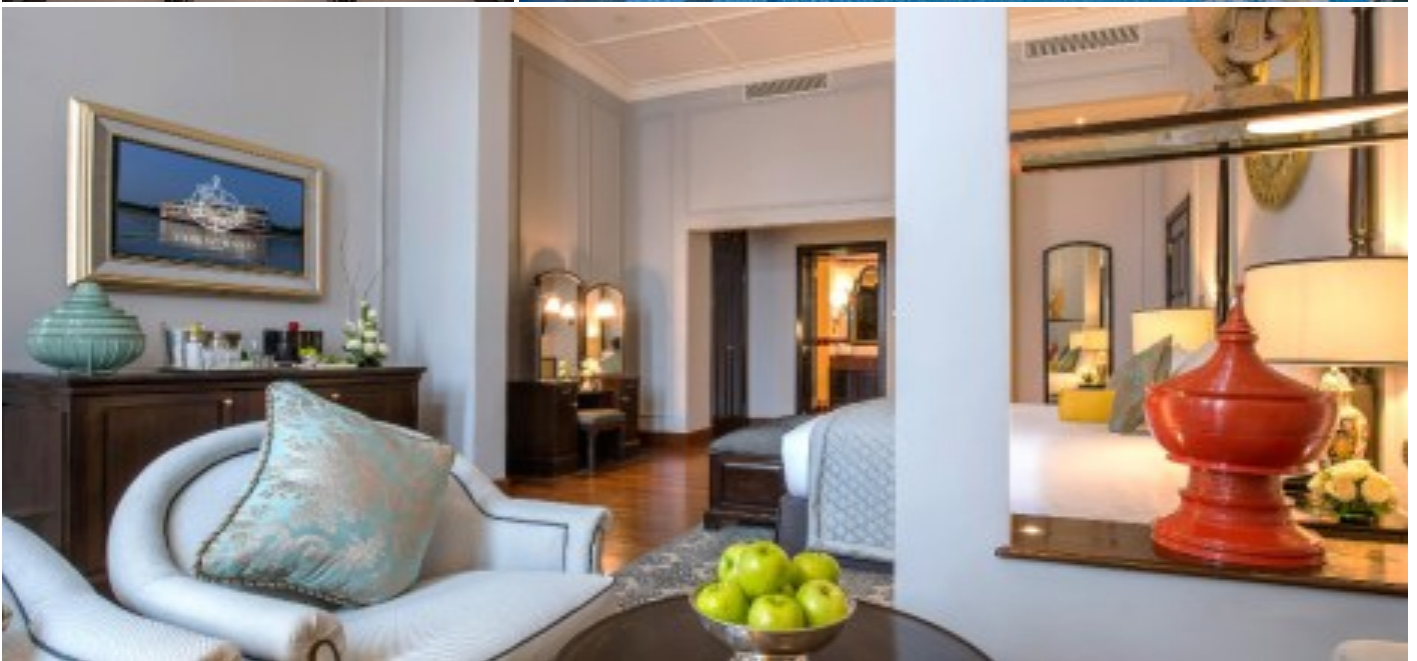
From delicate egg white only omelettes and the chef's own shakshouka, to fricasseed mushrooms, to truffled everything, to signature fresh fruit smoothies and juices of any and every kind, this is a meal to savour rather than wolf down.

On that first morning, we got a sense of how things function at The Strand...

The hotel supplies a printed news digest with a focus on your country of origin or a worldwide one and staff are pretty quick at ascertaining which you prefer.

A dedicated flower changer changes the rose on your table to a fresh bud as soon as the flower shows signs of wilting.

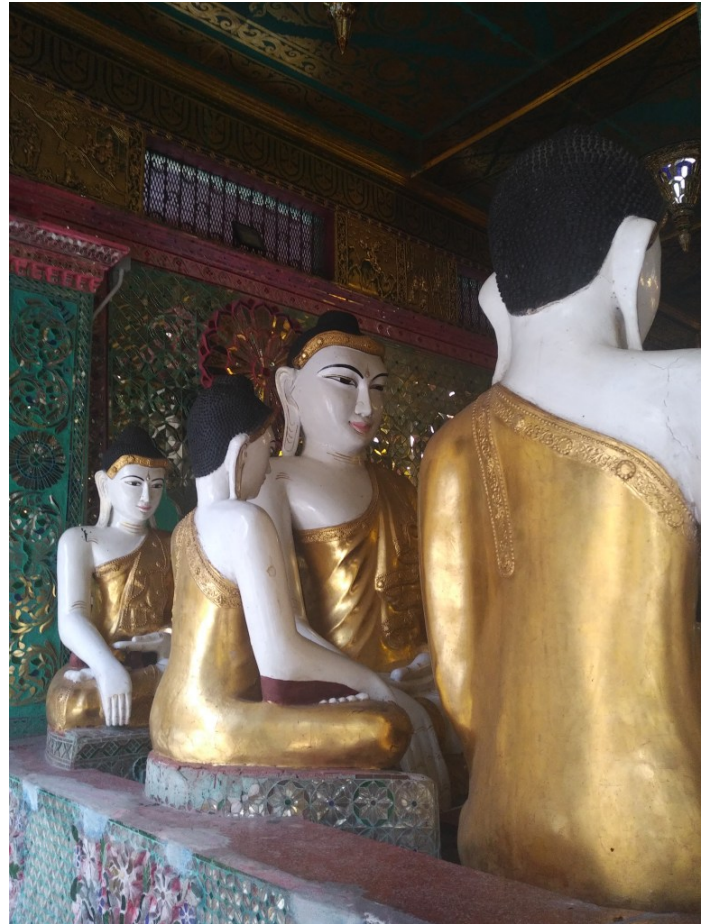
The Strand doesn't have rooms, rather it has just 32 suites, each of them quite palatial.



Exploring Yangon

After a short rest, we met with Tommy who gave us a tour of the city's main landmarks, including the Shwedagon Pagoda, the two lakes, and a running commentary on others that we drove past without stopping.

We would be remiss not to mention that the Shwedagon Pagoda is covered in pure gold and attracts countless visitors, both Burmese and from all over the world because of its historical and religious significance, but also because of its uniqueness, awesomeness and sheer beauty.



Back at the hotel, we had the prerequisite lucky hour drink before venturing out for dinner. Lucky hour at the Strand comes with delicious complimentary canapés and tiny spiced peanuts.

Dinner within a short walk of the hotel, at one of the Tripadvisor recommended eateries, was uneventful (as, incidentally, have been most Tripadvisor recommendations).

Our second day in Yangon started with the hotel breakfast when, at some stage, we had the pleasure of meeting the chef. He wasn't there just for us – we were to discover later that staff interacting with the guests is something the general manager insists upon.

The chef is originally from Montauban and has managed to keep his accent, his extensive stints around the world notwithstanding. I was not too sure if he took pleasure in our effusive compliments or if he was only too used to them. His craft is so superbly honed that appreciation seems superfluous.

We spent most of day 2 walking the well-trodden paths of the “old” crafts market and the new market, as well as lunching by the larger of the two lakes, while watching the torrential rain give way to sunshine.

This is the place to say it: the Burmese, while every bit as keen to sell to tourists, are nowhere near as rapacious as the Cambodians or Vietnamese. In fact, they are not rapacious at all. The first gem vendor we stopped by saw our reluctance to part with cash and offered to send us to a less expensive shop, selling slightly inferior quality stones.

The markets have a life of their own, of course, heaving with human interaction and day to day living. Again and again, we were impressed by the general cleanliness and positively sparkling, occasionally even high tech loos in restaurants, cafes and hotels, no matter how modest.

We made haste back to our hotel, keen to partake in a private view of a Burmese jeweller who had teamed up with watchmaker...

The evening was organised by none other than a local media group whose founder, Andreas Sigurdsson and his pretty Burmese wife invited us to dinner after the party.

Dinner was at a newly open Burmese food restaurant in a restored historical building.

Owned by Mya Myitzu, an interior designer and her chef husband, and backed by a HK investor, [The Pansodan](#) is a must-visit eatery in Yangon.

We ordered the butter fish wrapped in a banana leaf, the pork stuffed chillies, the home made pate and the baked marrow bones with a dry shrimp crust.

Our hosts opted for a baked organic chicken and the national dish, Mohinga soup.

The Pansodan specialises in reinventing traditional cooking with a contemporary, creative twist and achieves this very, very well.

Definitely on your must-visit list when in Yangon.

It was at the Pansodan that we were first introduced to Sharky, described to us as the "godfather of Burmese restaurateurs".

Sharky

A hugely engaging Burmese, speaking perfect English, Sharky grew up primarily in Switzerland where his father was a diplomat. He had a taste of running a nightclub (his own) in Europe and was, by all accounts, quite successful, but somewhere along the line decided to return to his native Burma.

He is quite the personality: organic farmer, experimental chef, bon vivant and raconteur extraordinaire, and his two restaurants in Yangon are a magnet for resident expats and tourists alike.

He also has a restaurant in Old Bagan, a great resting outpost on the temple trail.

Passionate about food and keeping impeccable ecological credentials, Sharky perceives the food chain as sacred. If he is not farming it, he is outsourcing it with the utmost care.

It is at [Sharky's](#) that you can degustate both superlative European dishes, often with a twist (he has developed his own black garlic recipe) and local Burmese specialities, such as the salmon Mohinga (a delectable soup of rice noodles, fish and soft boiled egg, delicate or spicy based on your choice of condiments).

Sharky takes justifiable pride in producing his own cheeses (the truffled variety is to die for, even if it is very, very rich indeed), ice cream, foie gras and prosciutto ham on the bone.

You can buy some of his products, including the outstanding farm sausages with the Sharky signature mustard, at the delicatessen area of the restaurant.

We visited one of his Yangon establishments on the eve of our return flight to Europe and were treated to a colourful narrative of his life story and success trajectory by the man himself. What makes him so engaging, however, is his contagious zest for life, passion for food, and love of his country.



The historical temples of Bagan, a UNESCO site

You cannot visit Myanmar (Burma) without taking a trip to Old Bagan and Mandalay.

Old Bagan is an ancient city and a UNESCO [World Heritage Site](#) located in the [Mandalay Region](#). From the 9th to 13th centuries, it was the capital of the [Pagan Kingdom](#) (11 to 13 century), during which time 4,446 [Buddhist](#) temples, [pagodas](#) and monasteries were constructed, of which the remains of 3822 temples and pagodas still survive to the present day.

You can fly from Yangon to Bagan or Mandalay by KBZ or Myanmar Airways, a domestic flight that takes just over an hour and costs approximately £80.

We flew to Bagan and stayed at the [Heritage Hotel](#).

Heritage Hotel



Built in the midst of lush tropical gardens, in the traditional style of old Bagan's temples, this is a distinctive and elegant hotel that offers airy suites in a perfect location, some 3 minutes drive from the airport and a 10 minute bike ride from the historical site.

Its impressive structure springs just off the main road to Bagan.

A courtyard leads towards a massive teak stairway, a vast open air reception featuring traditional wood carvings, and twelve buildings, each named after a Myanmar dynasty.

Between the lobby and the suites is an Olympic size outdoor swimming pool with a Jacuzzi, and further along guests will find a spa and a gym, as well as well-appointed bars and a restaurant, offering both local and international cuisine. This is where the buffet breakfast is served. We tried the Burmese noodles, the home-made sausages, the stewed banana with coconut and the sweet grain (literally, boiled grain in sweet broth), all of which were delicious. You can order organic eggs any style prepared in front of you. Fresh fruit platters and

Western style fare are varied as is the bread selection (we were intrigued with the dragon shaped breads).

Beyond the factual description above, we were delighted with the ever-smiling and solicitous service by every single member of staff.

We loved our teak balcony from which we could watch the hot monsoon rain drench the gardens before giving way to the sun.

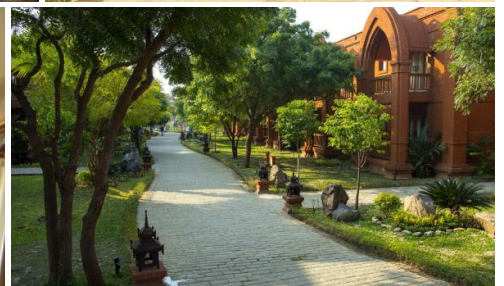
We hugely enjoyed the bike ride through both old and new Bagan (e-bikes can be hired directly from the hotel for a small fee).

Most of all, we enjoyed the focal point of this delightful hotel, which is undoubtedly the pool and the immediate area around it. Large that it is, it accommodates various groups of guests without seeming crowded and it remains open well into the evening. The beautifully lit gardens add to the festive atmosphere and dinner takes place at tables agreeably positioned around the pool. We opted for a drink and a snack before heading for town where vendors stay open late into the evening.

A wood carver and a fabric weaver were demonstrating their skills at a joint stall; tourists and locals were drinking in cafes and bars festooned with multi-coloured lights; there was a buzz about the place without the constant haranguing to buy, buy, buy...

Back at the Heritage Hotel, swimmers had swapped the pool for the dinner tables alongside it and were having a jolly good time.

The ever-obliging staff asked us what time we wanted our luggage taken out in the morning and we crashed out for a peaceful night, punctuated only by the tropical rain outside.



If visiting Bagan area you can't do better than Heritage Hotel in terms of comfort, location and experience.

Continued in [Part 2](#)

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