

Strand Hotel Yangon: Relive the history of Myanmar's colonial capital

"Beauty is meaningless unless it is shared," wrote George Orwell in his novel "Burmese Days". Entering the lobby of the Strand Hotel in Yangon, Orwell's words come to mind. The harmony and welcoming atmosphere of the newly renovated colonial interior makes it the kind of place where friends gather and strangers become friends. Orwell might have had the same feeling.

Located in the heart of Yangon's downtown and diplomatic district next to the Yangon River, the Strand Hotel is surrounded by a treasure trove of 19th-century colonial buildings and renowned Buddhist sites. If you've spent any time on London's Strand, Yangon's Strand will feel familiar. The British had a habit of replicating parts of their beloved London in the places they occupied. That's why you can find Strand Roads sprinkled about the cities of the former Commonwealth, from Bombay to Hong Kong to Sydney to Singapore.



Iranian-born Armenian brothers, the Sarkies, ran successful trading companies in South America. With the opening of the Suez Canal the trade routes they depended on dried up, so the brothers packed up and headed east to try their luck elsewhere. They first founded the famous Singapore hotel, Raffles, and then opened The Strand Hotel in Yangon, in 1901. It has been a destination for dignitaries and celebrities ever since, including notables from the literary set, such as George Orwell, Somerset Maugham, Rudyard Kipling and Sir Noel Coward.

The Colonial-era architecture of The Strand Hotel is both grand and impressive. Once through the heavy teak front doors, you find yourself in an impressive marble-floored atrium, overlooked by landings of two stories of guest suites above. Referred to simply as 'The Lobby', the atrium leads to three restaurants: 'The Bar', with its legendary Friday Happy Hour, which has for decades been an institution amongst the British ex-pat community; 'The Café', carries on the British tradition of high tea, daily, complete with homemade pastries; and 'The Grill' is a lavish dining room with vaulted ceilings, classic skylights, chandeliers and an exquisite fine-dining menu.



After checking in, we make our way up to our room which, based on the standards of modern efficient hotel accommodations, is more than generous. It feels like a small city apartment. Since at least the time of Orwell, a butler is always at the ready, sitting at his/her desk on your floor, ready to answer your questions and assist with whatever you might need.



Our visit to Yangon began as the hot season was kicking off, and Yangon gets very hot, so refreshment was never far from our minds. Fortunately, our arrival coincided with tea time in The Café. Our waiter, in traditional costume, ushered us to a table overlooking the busy Strand Road. Our seats were made of red and black lacquered rattan, inspired by the traditional lacquer techniques found throughout Myanmar. Large ceiling fans turned at a lazy pace, and in the lobby beyond, a young woman played the “Pattalar”, a staple instrument of traditional Myanmar music.



Our waitress suggests we try the Burmese high tea, a fusion of English high tea and Burmese dishes. It is served in a tower of black lacquer bowls that the waitress disassembled and placed on our table one by one, like a “food puzzle”—a great way of serving. I later bought one of these towers with a view towards serving guests of my own.

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The Burmese version of high tea comes with tea-leaf salad and small plates laid out with exotic flowers and cookies. Just heavenly on a hot afternoon. We imagined ourselves killing time on a hot afternoon back in the days when Kipling and Orwell passed their time here. Even if you don’t stay at the Strand Hotel be sure to plan an afternoon tea break at The Café.



In the early evening, it's off to "Sarkies" for a drink. The teakwood-panelled bar was, for over a century, the epicenter of social life in Yangon: a gathering place for adventurers, raconteurs, and explorers. Sitting at the bar you can imagine them, swapping stories over the classic Strand Hotel Sour cocktail.



Rounding out our day, we have dinner reservations at The Grill, where chef Chris

Martena prepares a Mediterranean menu drawing on locally sourced ingredients. Chris came to The Strand Hotel from a post in Bangkok, and after stints in several European Michelin-starred restaurants.

Sourcing for ingredients can make or break a great restaurant, and for Chris it took a bit more than shopping to get produce that met his standards. He put his team to work finding farmers in the communities surrounding Yangon and them teaching them what to grow and how to grow it, to meet the restaurant's needs throughout the year. His efforts have paid off—the menu at The Strand Hotel is excellent.



Next morning, on the recommendation of several locals, we try "Mohinga". Many consider it the national dish of Myanmar. The main ingredients are chickpea flour, crushed rice, garlic, onions, lemongrass, banana tree stem, fish paste and catfish, all cooked in a rich broth at a boil. Served with rice vermicelli and topped with an egg, it quickly became my favorite, and a daily routine for the rest of the trip.



A trip to Yangon is part local culture and part a visit to a former British colonial outpost that has long since fallen into decay. Until recently very little happened in the way of urban development and the city quietly and slowly aged. What is left is a rare example of a British Colonial city, a little worse for the wear but retaining much of its original look and feel. Yangon is now modernizing at a rapid clip so the old city is fading away. But for a few years, you can bask in the light of a Great Britain heyday. And there's no better place to relive Yangon's fragile history than at the mainstay of Yangon accommodation for over 100 years, The Strand Hotel. With its recent refresh, it will no doubt serve the good and great visitors to Yangon for at least 100 more.

Details

To find out more and to make a booking, go to;
www.hotelthestrang.com

Photography and story by [Daniela Stallinger](#)

Planning a visit to Yangon, Myanmar? Here is the current weather and what to expect for the next few days.

92°

partly cloudy

42% humidity

wind: 11mph SE

H 93 • L 74