

## On the Road to Mandalay

January 4, 2016

Last year inspired by many of his best-known stories and poems; "Plain Tales from the Hills" and "On the Road to Mandalay", we followed Rudyard Kipling's Journey to Shimla and Rajasthan, India.

Starting out the New Year, Diane and I will begin a photographic odyssey in a country closed for almost 50 years, shadowing Kipling's journey up the Irrawaddy River to Mandalay (Myanmar aka Burma). We should be there thru the Myanmar Presidential Elections. May we live in interesting times!



## Day One: One Night in Bangkok

Having survived the 14-hour Korean Airline flight from Las Vegas to Seoul, Diane and I were revived to homeostasis by our angelic Korean flight attendants, dressed in fitted azure/cream attire, who prepared us for the landing with a hot face towel followed by a light breakfast of assorted Korean bakery confections and beverages.



Receiving a temporary reprieve from Seats 48 F and 48 G, we left the safety of our 777 luxury liner with a headlong rush into the chaos of Incheon's lavish International terminal, where previous visitations to this Asian HUB clearly demonstrated an acceptance to the continuous paradigm toward modernization. In its present reincarnation Incheon again challenges the senses for every indulgence known to corporeal men and women. It has definitely lived up to its image as the International Maison de haute couture.

For Diane and me the only prescription after such an arduous flight would be a body massage offered by several therapeutic massage establishments on the promenade.



With a three-hour layover until our next flight, we engaged the Spa on Air services located on the second level of the main terminal. There, we were greeted by a diminutive masseuse therapist, coiffed with a deep sapphire black pageboy cut and whose English was without accent. She began with a Seoulistic bow and concomitantly intoned her name as Song Park. She began our orientation with the myriad of ancient healing modalities offered by the spa service. We chose the Thai Massage with its Ayurvedic and yoga posturing therapy to restore the balance and mobility to our aging bodies and prepare us for our next 6-hour flight to Bangkok, Thailand with our final destination Yangon, Myanmar (Burma).

With our life forces (chi) fully restored and our bodies energized with a variety of Korean tapas including Dolsot Bibimbap at the Sanuki Bore Eatery, Diane and I boarded without incident for our 6-hour connecting flight to Bangkok in our new Seats 39 G and H.



Unlike every major port of call, deplaning at Bangkok's International Suvarnabhumi Airport, was orderly an assemblage of porters and hotel hustlers inveigling the throng of visitors of their services, but luckily for us, a chauffeur, in a well-appointed black Armani knock-off suit, held a white board with a Hotel logo and our names verdantly printed on it. We took it as sign from god that our Kiplian journey would begin without a kerfuffle and the Hotel Shangri-La with its world renowned Thai amenities and its spirit of hospitality would soon be an oasis on the celestial serai.

With our luggage attended to without request by awaiting smartly dressed hotel staff, we entered into the world appositely known as Shangri-La. Floral creations



and fountains adorned the entrance with gold leaf trimmed doorways leading to Registration. We were greeted there with formality afforded to attachés without portfolio, a welcome appreciated after a 20 hour flight on the celestial jet stream.

Our designated room on the 17<sup>th</sup> floor served as a Thai sanctuary with its décor resonating the classic Thai design of silk and teak.

With a room view overlooking the Chao Phraya River and the City, the 20 hour flight was well worth time.



The End of Day One

## Thailand - Land of Smiles

With the crimson dawn rising in the east and a polite wakeup call from the Hotel Desk, we managed to make our way to the breakfast buffet in the Hotel Shangri-La. Like all Asian countries with a history of British colonial influence, Thai breakfast buffets include bacon, eggs and a facsimile of Campbell's pork and beans, supplemented with every kind of cheese known to man and greatly enhanced by international and Thai cuisine.

From our table view, the breakfast buffet was populated with an assemblage of foreign and Thai tourists expressing their incredulity with the multiplicity of entrée offerings for breakfast.

This wasn't Denny's.



*Executive Chef Mark Brennick*

The Shangri-La Hotel's dining staff, dressed in their smartly coordinated black and beige uniforms and projecting their anticipatory sense of customer service, greatly enhanced our breakfast dining experience.

The dining room, located adjacent to the pool and garden area, was well appointed with gold leaf window and door trims and with strategically placed indigenous wall art created an ambience of enlightenment and insight for its guests. As a complementary adornment and in keeping with its

classic Thai décor design, the highly opaque crystal chandeliers offered a soft radiance to its dining guests and the subliminal harmony of a Montavonian music composition served as melodic background completing the charisma known as the Hotel Shangri-La, Bangkok.



*Shangri-La Dining Room*

## A Siren's Call on the Winds to Mandalay

Catching Bangkok Air Flight 707, we head into the western sun, embarking on our month-long riverboat passage on the Irrawaddy River to the colorful city of Mandalay from Yangon, Myanmar (formerly known as Rangoon, Burma).



*Bangkok Air Flight 707 Arriving*

Yangon, a city with a dense population of temples, shrines and Stupas, has endured the impermanence of time since our reprise in 1973, but the humidity and unique scent of the city has remained unaffected to those who

experienced its character 42 years past. In a country steeped with the extraordinary profession of Buddhist sanctity, we find achieving Nirvana a steeper learning curve than first thought, but like a siren's call to the Irrawaddy River, we find ourselves drawn to a world closed for almost 50 years and to what Rudyard Kipling pertinently titled "On Road to Mandalay".



## Inle Lake Excursion

Encouraged by other WTs in Yangon, an exploration of Inle Lake definitely warranted a photographic exposure into the cultural resourcefulness of the Intha Tribe.

It is their cultural identity and resourcefulness that clearly demonstrates their resiliency and ingenuity in survival by showcasing their extraordinary assimilation to their environment in aquaponics farming, their creativity in building floating villages, and their angling methodologies in providing one of the most important element in the pyramidal building blocks for protein, Fish.

Catching a flight to Heho Airport, a local airstrip, located east of Inle Lake at an elevation 4000ft, we landed on an asphalt runway that easily accommodating our Man Yatanarpon French ATR 72-212 Turboprop. Air amenities were extraordinary something Burmese passengers come to expect in one of Myanmar's burgeoning National Airlines. With a terminal with only one arrival/departure gate and one baggage claim, no signs or directions were necessary to locate the bus for Inle Lake. The hour-long ride with several "Happy Stops" and passenger stops, was a fortunate itinerary for one of the stops ended up at a local village's High School Graduation Festival where passengers were encourage to join in the festivities. For Diane and me we needed no encouragement to participate in a Myanmar Cultural Experience. With only a twenty minute respite, we were signaled by the driver to board the Bus. Next Stop was, our temporary asylum on the lake.



The Aureum Spa & Resort (aka Aureum Palace on the Lake) was nestled in a slough on the eastern side of the Inle Lake with an east and west solar exposure and with a gusting westerly wind, temperatures settled in at a cool 37 degrees during our arrival, something we were actually not expecting, but it is winter in Myanmar.



For a high end resort our lavish accommodations offered us a well-deserved respite from the frenetic touring bus and airline timetables. For at least 2 days we could enjoy the amenities of an in-room Jacuzzi, idyllic panoramas veranda views of Inle, the experience of their 5 Star Dining room.



Catching an in-country flight to Mandalay, to begin our voyage on the Irrawaddy, Diane and I are chauffeured to the Port of Mandalay, where our crew and our guide ready themselves for the challenges of a month long tour on the river. Once on board the RV Indochina Pandaw, a luxury cruiser by Myanmar's standard, the crew makes it final check before casting off and acknowledging the throng well-wishers on the pier who wave their salutatory valedictions to those who accept the challenge offered by a river passage.



With our baggage safely store in Starboard Suite 208 and the anxiety of hotel departures and riverboat boarding schedules lifted, we find solace on the boat's sun deck where high tea is served as an amenity to a Victorian Tradition long past Myanmar Independence from England.

With the diesel engine voicing a Chuck Berry 12 bar blues rhythmic pattern, we



launch our journey heading south on the Irrawaddy River to the Exotic City of Bagan. As we leave Mandalay in the distance, we are witnessed to the clouds at the river horizon, appearing as an entertaining Rorschach display with characters morphing on the Myanmar celestial stage and images limited only to the extent of our imagination. Just as a Sanskrit Mandala returns to its 5 basic elements of Earth, Water, Fire, Air and Space, the beauty of the river skyline transcends

imagination returning again to the definitive elements that will again be appreciated as an apparition of Nirvana.

### **"Stuck in Mandalay with the Yangon Blues again"**

Captain Kyaw Tint, a veteran Captain in Myanmar's' Navy, exuded a command



presence as his booming voice over the ship's sound system shouted out the cautionary orders for staff to check the water depth. It's winter here in Myanmar and running the ship aground on ever-changing sandbars would be disastrous, resulting passenger delays and possible costly repairs. From both sides of the bow the ship's crew members armed with 6

meters poles and with deliberation stabbed the muddy water yelling out the river depth readings to the Executive Officer who relayed the numbers to the Bridge.



The ship's pilot craft which was attached to Ship starboard side in port was immediately dispatched to serve as another navigation tool in the impermanent channels of the Irrawaddy.



Unfortunately, the ship was hijacked by an unforgiving sand troll, and after several attempts to loosen its grip by local Tug Boat operators, talk from the crew corroborated what everyone was thinking. Loosely translated "Stuck in Mandalay with the Yangon Blues again"; day one somewhere between Mandalay and Bagan.

It was the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company of 1865 and its present Flagship, the renovated RV Indochina Pandaw that is immortalized in Rudyard Kipling's Poem "The Road to Mandalay"

"Come you back to Mandalay Where the Old Flotilla lay"

Rudyard Kipling

### **Myanmar Culture - Eight Days a Week**

According to Burmese astrology, there are eight (8) days in a week. They are Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday (till noon), Rahu (Wednesday afternoon till the next morning), Thursday, Friday and Saturday. Burmese people believe that the astrological day a person was born is a great determinant in his or her personality and life. Hence, The Beatles Song Eight Days a Week

On the banks of the Irrawaddy with its heavily populated pagodas, stupas and temples, we retired for the night with our 80,000 ton transport stuck on a sand bar;

hopeful to be free from the clutches of the sand troll by morning and only to be comforted by the constant flow of Buddhist Chants not on my top 40 chants for 2016.

Unlike the Islamic call to prayer in the morning, the hills of the Irrawaddy were alive with the sound of music as the Monk's competed throughout the night at the Woodstock of Bagan with the winner of the Battle Bands qualifying as a candidate for Myanmar's version American Idol.



## Mohyin Thambuddahei Temple

This past week we found ourselves near the Bangladesh/Myanmar border to witness the 2nd Tallest and Reclining Buddha in the world. We approach the town of Monywa on the banks of the Chindwin River totally incredulous of the magnitude and impact such a landmark contributes to the township skyline. The Colossus of Rhodes would have paled in comparison to this distinctive marvel of the world.



Even more impressive in the town is the massive Mohyin Thambuddahei Temple build in 1303 with 500,000 images of Buddha. Like the Jain Temple in Ranakpur, India, the Free-Masons would have benefited from the architectural building tablets of these masters



## The Myanmar Waltz

With the Port of Sagaing visible on the river horizon, our passage on the Irrawaddy River ends in an Nirvanic climax with memories of days past, recollections of days present and great expectations in a country reborn to the 20th century. After the parliamentary elections for President, Myanmar will hopefully be at peace with hope as a basic tenant of the new order and intertwined with the karmic principle of reciprocity.



Diane and I celebrated our last night in Myanmar with a Burmese Music/Dance Group from Myanmar's Idol TV show on the Sun Deck of our ship, the RV Indochina Pandaw. For a group that doesn't speak a word of English, their rendition and musical arrangement of "Take It to the Limit" by the Eagles as their encore performance of the evening, brought British and American

Boomers to the floor for a final Waltz on the Irrawaddy.

## **The Sun Also Rises in Myanmar**

Heading north on the Irrawaddy River, Diane and I enjoy the view of our last sunrise in Myanmar on the bow of our ship, the RV Indochina Pandaw. Feeling the warmth of the rising sun on our faces and with a westerly breeze blowing across the ship reducing the incessant 90% dew point to a livable 23 degrees Celsius, the river comes to life with fishermen firing up their narrowed power vessels, and barges enjoined by tug boats blaring warning shots in a quiet dawn to announce their domination on the channels. It's a scene played out every day on the Irrawaddy irrespective of our presence as guests to witness this timeless event. Unfortunately, like all journeys, the circle closes on this photographic voyage with memories permanently stored in the Dizon Family Cloud, my 64 GB Flash Drive and my SD camera memory chip.



This morning we leave the Irrawaddy River, hopeful to catch a flight on Bangkok Airways and return to the Shangri-La Hotel Bangkok, our Thai sanctuary on the River of the King.