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Cruise Myanmar: Sailing back in time along the Irrawaddy

Mark Orwoll



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When you wake at 4.45am on the Irrawaddy River, this is what you hear: frogs croaking on the riverbanks, the high whine of a lone motor scooter bouncing down a village dirt road, the low chatter of some early-morning fishermen passing beneath the window of your ship cabin, and, God knows why, especially at this hour, some species of Burmese pop emanating from an unseen loudspeaker far downstream.

Waiting at the gangway is Yi Mon, activities director of the Scenic Aura, a 44-passenger luxury riverboat that sails seasonally from Mandalay to points south, including the vast temple complex of Bagan. We whisper our good mornings, then step cautiously down a narrow plank leading to a comfortless and excessively loud ferry, the Ruby Boat.

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Five minutes after pulling away from our ship, anchored midstream, we arrive at the sandy eastern shore. Up the steep bank at street level a passenger van idles, its cargo bay filled with crates of juice boxes, small milk cartons, and individual packets of cookies. Yi Mon inspects the bounty, pronounces it satisfactory, and off we drive through the dark dirt alleys of Nyaung-U town.



The Mya Thein Tan Pagoda at Bagan. Photo: iStock

We are going to feed the monks of Myanmar.

ONE IN EVERY 54 BURMESE MALES IS A MONK

There are an estimated 500,000 Buddhist monks and 75,000 nuns in Myanmar among a population of 54 million. Burmese parents often send their children to be monks or nuns because the family can't afford to feed, clothe, and educate them. But in modern Myanmar, more efficient farming methods have resulted in more and cheaper food for the masses and increased access to public education means more families can send their children to school. There's increasingly less impetus to enrol kids in monasteries and nunneries for more than a token period of religious observance.

In any event, those monks who are still in the monasteries need to eat. Traditionally, as taught by Buddha, the monks of Myanmar must beg for food from the local population. Because they are proscribed by their vows from eating before dawn or after noon, they seek their first meal when the sun rises and their second at mid-morning. A common sight throughout Myanmar (the country's former military government changed the name from Burma in 1989), red-robed monks holding begging bowls stroll the streets of cities and villages, going from door to door and store to store to seek sustenance.



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The Burmese people, 90 per cent of whom are Buddhist, are uncommonly generous with these meandering mendicants. At mid-morning, the monks are apt to find handouts in the most humble home and cafe. But it's a different story before sunrise, when even the most industrious among Myanmar's population are likely still asleep. As a result, food kitchens in some communities provide daybreak meals to the monks.

It is to one of those charitable distribution centres that Yi Mon and I, with our van full of cookies and drinks, head as the first hint of dawn steals over Nyaung-U.

HOW ONE COMPANY GIVES BACK

Scenic Luxury Cruises & Tours, the Australian parent company of the Scenic Aura, began as a motor-coach tour operator for seniors in 1986. Over the years, it expanded to include five-star riverboats on the Irrawaddy, the Rhine, the Mekong, the Volga, and beyond. The company's mission has also evolved: to leave the places it visits better off than before.

The Scenic Aura, for instance, contributes to an ongoing project in the northern village of Hsith, where fishermen and river dolphins have worked together in a symbiosis from time immemorial, but whose livelihood is now threatened by commercial overfishing. The cruise line recently built a much-needed toilet and bath facility in Yandabo for schoolchildren who previously had access to neither. And in Nyaung-U, besides its multiple other charitable programs, Scenic helps feed the monks.

THE ALLURE OF MYANMAR

Ken Hammond, is an author, Asian history scholar, and professor at New Mexico State University in the US. He accompanied the cruise of the Scenic Aura as a National Geographic Expert in a partnership between Scenic and the National Geographic Society.

Over drinks in the lounge, I ask Hammond about the appeal of Myanmar. "For some travellers," he says, "the attraction would be to go some place not in the mainstream, that's got an exotic quality to it, that's unspoiled. Myanmar is where you can encounter a traditional south-east Asian society that is still intact." I ask him what sort of traveller would be inclined to visit the country. "Travellers that are bright, worldly," he replies. "Ones who have an understanding that other cultures can be pretty darn interesting

and legitimate in their own ways. They're not coming here to be specialists, but to increase their own understanding of the world."

Of course, Rudyard Kipling's poem *The Road To Mandalay*, the swinging song version of that poem by Frank Sinatra, and the exotic novel *Burmese Days* by George Orwell have helped build a mythology around the country, making it seductive to adventure travellers the world over.

EARLY MORNING AT DHANA BANK

Yi Mon and I arrive at the empty high street of Nyaung-U at 5.30am while it is still dark. A cart drawn by an underfed horse clip-clops past us. Birds complain from the trees. The creeping sunlight seeps into the streets as villagers in longyis and straw hats and driving exhaust-spewing scooters begin to people the roads. The scene is like a chapter from Maugham, from Kipling, from Greene, from Orwell, one that you won't see played out much any more, beyond a few parts of south-east Asia.

A red neon sign lights the facade of Dhana Bank ("dhana" means donation), the charitable organisation. Red-robed monks are already lined up and waiting for their meals. (The exact mealtime shifts according to the sunrise.) Curiously, the various groups of monks tend to line up from tallest to smallest – the tallest being served first. Fifteen-litre pots rest on portable cooktops on the footpath in front of the Dhana Bank storefront, each with clouds of steam and large ladles at the ready.

Scores more monks, many trucked in via military-style troop transports, begin arriving. None of them speaks. Each holds his compartmentalised container at the ready. Several volunteers man the cauldrons filled with goat, fish, chicken, mango salad, vegetables, and rice. I stand at the far end, ready to hand out milk and cookies.

Then the line begins to move. Servers dish out the food rapidly, expertly. The silent monks hold their bowls out to make it easier to pour in the food. The older monks don't look me in the face as they accept the food, but the little monks don't hide their gaze. They're staring – not at me, exactly, but at the cookies I'm handing out. Goat they get every day. But cookies?

U Htay Win ("U" is an honorific for a well-respected man) is the jolly secretary of Dhana Bank, which began in Nyaung-U in 1987. Continually smiling, he returns to his tiny office after the food service to begin his daily paperwork and to prepare for the next day's meal.

He estimates the service now feeds 200 monks a day instead of the 300 from several years ago. But if he is disappointed by those statistics, his big grin doesn't show it.

"Mostly we do it to gain merit by supporting the religion," Htay

Win replies. "Serving the monks will help you gain spiritual merit."

And then he smiles again.

BACK TO THE BOAT

Yi Mon and I return to the riverbank where the Ruby Boat is waiting, ready to foul the peaceful river with its loud, oily engine. A few hands from the ship's crew meet us at the Scenic Aura and help us aboard. Some early risers among the passengers wander towards the restaurant for coffee, when one of them sees me and asks what I did that morning in the village.

I'm not quite sure how to answer. I haven't yet synthesised the experience, nor fully grasped the enormous role the monks play in Myanmar society. I don't know what it all means.

"What'd I do in the village?" I repeat. "Hopefully I gained some spiritual merit. And I also gave away cookies and milk."

Then I try to smile like U Htay Win.

TRIP NOTES

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CRUISE

Scenic Luxury Cruises & Tours operates two river ships in south-east Asia. Scenic Aura sails 18 voyages in 2020, all on Myanmar's Irrawaddy River. The ship sails from January through March, then resumes from October through December.

The writer travelled on a "Luxury Irrawaddy" voyage, of which there are 18 in 2020 between Yangon and Mandalay (or the reverse). As an example, the 10-night "Luxury Irrawaddy" voyage departing on March 2 visits Mingun, Amarapura, Sagaing, Yandabo, Pakkoku, Bagan, Salay, Minhla Fort, and Magwe. Longer itineraries visit the same cities and add excursions. From \$5745 pp twin share. Phone 1300 861 432. See [scenic.com.au](https://www.scenic.com.au)

Mark Orwoll travelled as a guest of Scenic Luxury Cruises & Tours.

Mark Orwoll Oct 15 2019

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