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FEATURE | CRUISING

ON DECK IS THE BEST PLACE TO FEEL THE WINDS OF CHANGE BLOWING THROUGH MYANMAR, WRITES FIONA CARRUTHERS.

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Call it a Margaret Mead-style moment. On arriving in Myanmar, that edgy transitional energy born of liberation and economic change is impossible to miss – an energy loved by anthropologists and travellers alike.

Each day, the surprisingly good English-language Myanmar Times trumpets stories of skyrocketing land prices, as the international brands set up shop. Belmond, formerly Orient Express, is expanding its luxury offerings; the five-star Pullman and Peninsula brands have both secured **hotel** sites; while Abercrombie & Kent is now offering berths on the just-minted river cruiser, Sanctuary Ananda.

Even the country's 50 million residents are getting in on the entrepreneurial act, as mothers attempt to sell copies of George Orwell's *Burmese Days* – Orwell being one of many literary stars who spent time here. The women set up impromptu straw mat stalls on the footpaths of downtown Yangon, sleeping babes in their arms, money tins by their feet.

In Bagan, city of 6000 pagodas, our amiable tour guide, Aung Zaw Min, who we call Khun, interrupts his well-rehearsed tour to show us his pet project – a cafe (under noisy construction as we speak) with outdoor and indoor seating, shaded by a clutch of banyan trees.

"Do you think people will want to sit here?" he asks hopefully. "I think it has a nice feel." He even has a name for his new venture – Khun's Corner Kafe. Despite his touching enthusiasm, in truth, Khun sports the slightly exhausted cynicism of a fledgling entrepreneur hard up against it.

"More and more private banks are opening along with shops; land prices are going through the roof," he sighs, interrupting his tour yet again to duck over the street when he spots his neighbour.

"Hey, do you want to sell your land?" he asks. The answer is a polite negative. "Well, what about your sister's land?" Khun persists.

All around us, the pagodas are slowly being dwarfed by power lines and reception towers. "First we had the Thais, then the Singaporeans, then Norwegians – now we have the big telcos from Dubai coming in," Khun says. "Twenty years ago we had nothing but bikes. Now we have cars, motorbikes and SIM cards."

Large billboard ads for whisky, vitamins, anti-dandruff shampoo, OMO washing powder and batteries loom over the little villages. Micro-finance shops are mushrooming on every street corner – you even spot the odd Mercedes and Lexus on the roads.

As is the way with so many countries aiming for the middle-class bull's eye, it's like watching a three-legged beast struggle painfully to its feet.

And the major driver of all this transition is tourism.

In 2010 – the year pro-democracy leader Aung Sun Suu Kyi was finally released from house arrest – Myanmar welcomed about 300,000 tourists a year. In 2012, it hit 1 million tourists – rising to 2 million in 2013 ("Cambodia gets 4.5 million," Khun grumbles).

As I go aboard Belmond's newest river cruiser, Orcaella, to drift down the Irrawaddy (also known as the Ayeyarwaddy) I become one of those 2 million tourists. Modernity and old-world charm

As we motor along the country's largest and most important **commercial** waterway, modernity is offset by old-world charm. We spend most days docked by tiny villages. Yes, there are mobiles, satellites and cars. There are also temples and ancient Buddhist rituals, plus bustling wet markets where we trail behind withered grandmas in sarongs with grandchildren in tow as they bargain for limes and argue over the last salmon steak.

It's quickly apparent there's no better way to explore Myanmar than by river cruise. Belmond has operated in Myanmar for close to two decades, principally with its gorgeous Governor's Residence boutique **hotel** in Yangon, and its Road to Mandalay boat, which has long cruised the **Chindwin** River.

Now sister ship Orcaella (she's still only one year old), is doing the Irrawaddy, offering a number of cruise options, including our seven-night Bagan to Yangon itinerary.

The rhythm of this river is busy but soothing; locals bathe, wash, rinse and wring out their laundry on its shores; rose-pink sunsets enliven the Irrawaddy's mud brown colour. And those big river skies ... all set to the incessant gurgle, gurgle, lap, lap, lap of the water hitting the mudflats. Life on the river banks is a blur of enduring village vignettes: lumbering white oxen shake their heads against the flies as they lug big-wheeled carts; workers' conical hats bob up and down in the paddy fields; bamboo is everywhere, hopelessly gone to seed. The pagodas, almost garish, rise above the chaos of human existence.

With only 25 cabins carrying a maximum of 50 guests, Orcaella offers the benefit of intimacy, which equals access. As the week unfolds, staff tell you about their villages (my favourite is the waiter from the "pig village", so named because of all the pigs there); rickshaw drivers befriend you, small gifts are exchanged. Each night small pieces of brightly coloured paper promising an awful lot of blessings appear on every guests' pillow.

Orcaella also delivers some of the most intriguing shore excursions I've ever encountered, including a ride in an oxen cart to Gwechaung and the Min Hla forts (Italians built the forts in 1860 to help the Burmese king to keep the British at bay). There is a visit in Danuphyu to a cigar workshop, where workers (mainly women) make up to 400 cigars a day during nine-hour shifts, with an hour off for lunch. Their hands are covered in yellow saffron and the cigars are **sold** for about US\$8 each. My favourite was the corn husk cigar, also known as the old lady cigar.

We clock up quite a few village markets, including Magwe, Shwe Taung and Syriam – a sleepy hamlet outside Yangon. In Zalon, I succumb to a bad case of "market blindness", as a fellow travel editor dubs it. For no good reason, I **purchase** 10 large bamboo kitchen baskets at \$US2 (\$2.10) each.

My rickshaw driver today has arms of steel. He is an impressive piece of human sinew tough enough to tackle anything from the local rocky terrain to dodging erratically driven buses coming straight at us. All morning, he wears a poker face as he pedals along; the pinnacle of cool professionalism in this tough, demanding industry.

But when he sees me emerge from the markets swinging the 10 large-pizza-sized baskets, he breaks into loud guffaws, slapping his knee under his longyi; betel juice and nicotine-stained teeth on full display.

Great though all these activities are, the pièce de résistance of Orcaella's onshore offerings is the cane ball night.

I've had some trippy travel experiences in my time, and this was right up there with them. You really have to see it (or at least YouTube it) to understand.

Suffice to say, guests are introduced to Myanmar's national sport of **chinlone** – or cane ball – in which small teams of players bounce a rattan ball on designated body parts, mainly their ankles and toes, while they perform increasingly difficult manoeuvres, such as balancing on a pyramid of stacked glass bottles and even standing on broken glass.

What most travellers love about Asia is that sense of life unravelled and laid bare. In Myanmar, it's also still authentic. If there's such a category as anthropological tourism, this came pretty close.

Genuine surprise is, after all, the greatest luxury any traveller can experience.

The writer was a guest of Belmond and Singapore Airlines. The seven-night cruise starts at \$5410pp and includes internal flights, meals, day trips and on-board entertainment. belmond.com. Singapore Airlines does four flights a day from Sydney and Melbourne to Singapore - and also flies into Adelaide, Brisbane and Perth. SilkAir flies from Darwin. Singapore Airlines and SilkAir operate 17 flights a week from Singapore to Yangon. SilkAir also operates a Mandalay service from Singapore. For current specials (economy return \$1163, business \$4295 including taxes and surcharges), go to singaporeair.com.

PENNYWORT LEAF SALAD

Courtesy of Orcaella's chef Ban (above)

100 gm pennywort leaf*

1 tomato, diced

1 teaspoon bean powder

35 gm roasted peanuts, ground

1 tablespoon lime juice

2 tablespoons fish sauce

50 gm dried shrimp paste

5 gm deep-fried onion or fried shallots

½ teaspoon garlic oil

½ teaspoon chilli oil

METHOD

Place washed, chopped pennywort leaves and tomato pieces in a large bowl. Add ground roasted peanuts, bean powder, dried shrimp paste and fried onions.

Season with fish sauce, add salt and lime juice to taste. Add garlic and chilli oils and mix well.

Serves two.

* Pennywort leaf is the name given to a number of bitter green leaf varieties. Pennywort can be difficult to find outside Asia, however young dandelion leaves or similar are a good substitute.

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