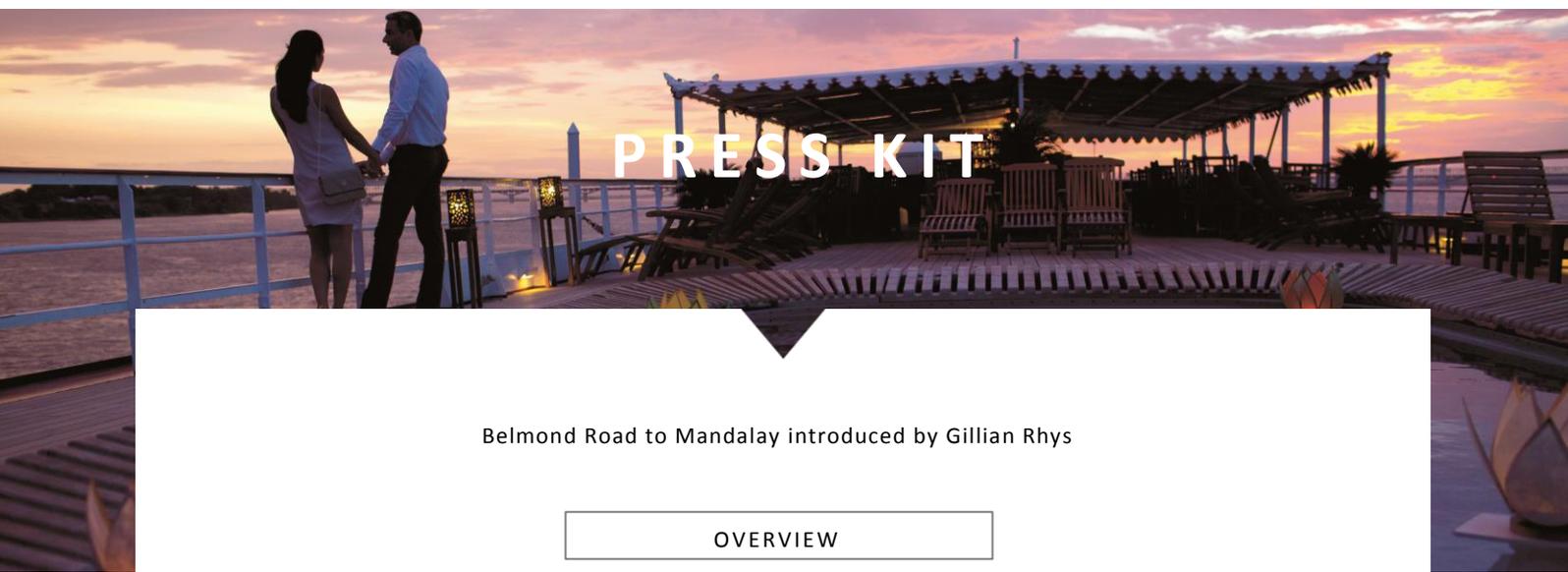




BELMOND
ROAD TO MANDALAY
MYANMAR



PRESS KIT

Belmond Road to Mandalay introduced by Gillian Rhys

OVERVIEW

Starting in the Himalayas, the great Ayeyarwady river runs vertically down through the centre of Myanmar in Southeast Asia, towards the Andaman Sea. As it flows it passes Mandalay, the country's last royal capital, and Bagan, home to over two thousand ancient pagodas. The Belmond Road to Mandalay cruise ship links these two great destinations, gliding through vast plains and open farmland.

Passengers can sit back and watch rural Myanmar go by. On the outskirts of Mandalay, the riverbanks are serene landscapes of palm trees and gleaming white pagodas topped with gold domes. Working vessels pass by, carrying sacks of rice or stacks of wood. More curious craft come into view too: vast rafts made of bamboo and floating petrol stations. Even more intriguing are the sandbanks in the river where groups of people set up temporary camps.

Closer to Bagan fishermen in small boats cast their nets and the landscape turns into farmland where oxen plough the fields. Pagodas, also known as stupas, line the riverbank – most are bare brick and rather stark compared with those near Mandalay – but equally dramatic.

Guests can choose to travel north to south along the Ayeyarwady from Mandalay to Bagan or vice versa, and take part in shore excursions. Perhaps a horse and cart or bicycle tour of Ava, an ancient imperial capital from the 14th to 19th centuries. Or a walking tour around the small riverside town of Mingun and a visit to the famous unfinished stupa, Pahtodawgyi.

Belmond's personable guides escort passengers in air-conditioned minivans. The local villagers are keen to meet and chat to visitors.

Both journeys can also be taken as a return trip so passengers can begin and end in the same destination.

Mandalay

The bustling, poetically named city of Mandalay is Myanmar's centre of gold leaf and marble craftsmanship, both of which are seen in profusion at its many pagodas. There are entire streets of artisans devoted to marble carving, with shops selling their wares. There's also a chance to visit one of the many gold leaf workshops to see how the precious metal is still hammered arduously by hand to produce gleaming, paper-thin sheets. These are bought by local people to be rubbed on to Buddhas at the pagodas.

Kuthodaw pagoda, at the foot of Mandalay Hill, features what is known as the world's largest "book" – 750 marble tablets engraved with Buddhist teachings. By contrast Shwenandaw

Monastery, a former palace of King Mindon rebuilt in this location near Mandalay Hill, is a serenely beautiful teak mansion featuring exquisite carvings.

Bagan

Bagan's verdant landscape flaunts a wealth of beguiling brick and sandstone stupas. Many journeys arrive early in the morning: guests are encouraged to be up on deck at sunrise for an unforgettable view as the pagodas loom into view.

One of Bagan's largest and most ornate temples is Ananda, a towering white edifice that houses four giant Buddhas. Fine examples of Bagan's two artisan industries – terracotta tiles and lacquer – can also be seen here. There's an opportunity to visit the local craftsmen and women as well as families producing colourful bamboo and paper fans which are seen in the markets and are given as gifts at weddings and other special occasions. Belmond Road to Mandalay passengers can join them to learn how to make a paper fan themselves too.

Another intrepid trip is a visit to the smaller pagoda ruins dotted around the richly vegetated countryside. Depending on passengers' fitness levels and heat tolerance there's no shortage of options of transport between them: bicycle, pony and cart or air-conditioned minibus.

HISTORY & FEATURES

Belmond pioneered river cruising in Myanmar back in 1996 with the launch of Road to Mandalay – the country's first luxury river cruiser.

Over the last twenty years, Belmond has become a specialist in tourism on the Ayeyarwady and has developed strong relationships with the local communities along the river.

The Ship

The Belmond Road to Mandalay is a sleek river cruiser, built and operated on the Rhine in Germany and subsequently transported to Myanmar where it was redecorated with Burmese interior touches. The social hub of the ship is the top deck with its canopied lounge area of padded rattan chairs and sofas, a fresco bar and small swimming pool lined with steamer recliners. A palm reader sits beneath a canopy during the afternoons on board, welcoming a constant stream of passengers to his table.

On the deck below there's an indoor viewing gallery which doubles up as a venue for guest speakers (such as social historians, yoga teachers and award-winning travel and wildlife photographers). The nightly evening entertainment, which may include a traditional Burmese play or puppet show, is also held here, and there's a cosy piano bar to retire to afterwards.

If guests are transferring from the Belmond Governor's Residence hotel in Yangon they say goodbye to their luggage before setting off to the airport and will find it in their cabin on board.

The ship's 43 cabins include Single, Superior and Deluxe—all on the lower deck. The Deluxe is slightly roomier than the Superior and both come with twin beds. State Cabins, situated on the floor above, together with the Governor's Suite, are larger still with double beds. All cabins have large windows but none have balconies so everyone tends to head up to the top deck for the best views—adding to the social feel of the journey.

Dining

In between excursions, life on board is punctuated by culinary experiences from afternoon tea to cocktail parties.

Breakfast, lunch and dinner are served in a spacious dining room and under shade on the observation deck. Guests are free to dine à deux although many choose to eat with new friends made on the trip.

An international buffet is served for lunch while for dinner there's a choice of Western and Pan Asian set menus with Myanmar dishes such as the famous Tea Leaf Salad. To accompany the menu, there's an excellent international wine list including a selection from the Myanmar wine producer Aythaya.

On one evening during the trip dinner is held on the observation deck with a live cooking station, barbecue and salad bar where guests can dine alfresco under the stars.

Wellness

As well as a range of activities in the small fitness area and spa and beauty treatment rooms, yoga and tai chi are offered on board and at select locations along the route. A juice bar serves healthy drinks. On certain journeys, Belmond Road to Mandalay features renowned guest yoga teachers.

EXPERIENCES

Food Markets

In both Mandalay and Bagan passengers may visit one of the many local markets to see the array of fresh produce gleaned from the surrounding countryside. Enticing items on display range from peanuts and several varieties of rice to mounds of green vegetables including yard-long beans and okra. In the mornings there's a profusion of carts selling mohinga, a clear fish soup with fine rice noodles which local people love to eat for breakfast, and freshly made rice or wheat noodles which are popular at any time of day. A particular favourite is the local speciality Mandalay Mond - a rice noodle dish with chicken curry. Belmond Road to Mandalay passengers can see the noodles being made and even have a go themselves. In Bagan, guests may also visit a household that makes ponyegy, a fermented soy bean paste which is added to curries and salads.

U Bein bridge

For journeys starting in Mandalay and continuing to Bagan, passengers will visit one of Myanmar's most distinctive and photographed sights: U Bein bridge at Lake Taungthaman. They'll reach the bridge in time for sunset when the local people take their evening constitutional walk from one side to the other and back again. Passengers are rowed out in a small wooden boat to the middle of the lake for the best view of the sky's dramatic changing colours, until the wooden bridge and the pedestrians – some sitting on thoughtfully placed benches, some wheeling bicycles – became silhouetted in the fading light.

Sagaing Hill

From the Belmond Road to Mandalay's dock on the Ayeyarwady River at Shwe Kyet Yet there's a bird's eye view of Sagaing, a verdant green hill studded with twinkling gold pagodas. Hundreds of novice monks and nuns flock to the area to study – Mandalay and its environs have more monasteries than any other part of Myanmar.

Belmond Road to Mandalay guides will escort passengers via minivan to the top of Sagaing for a close up view of the temples. Along the way shaven-headed young monks and nuns walk alongside, the men in burgundy robes (as opposed to the saffron ones worn in other Southeast Asian countries) and the women wearing pretty candy pink.

At the very top sits the exceptionally colourful Soon U Shu pagoda, mirror-encrusted and aglow with flashing lights. Its hilltop perch affords a panoramic view over the many monasteries and stupas peeking out of the lush greenery and cascading down towards the river.

Guests also have the chance to visit a small, intimate monastery in the village of Shwe Kyet Yet, near the Belmond Road to Mandalay jetty, to witness the traditional ritual of alms giving.

PEOPLE

Eddie Teh, General Manager

Eddie Teh moved to Myanmar in 2012 to become General Manager of Belmond cruises. Prior to that he was General Manager of Belmond La Résidence Phou Vao in Luang Prabang, Laos.

Originally from Malaysia, Eddie grew up in George Town, Penang. After completing an apprenticeship in hospitality, he gained experience in several Southeast Asian hotels. From there Eddie travelled to Sydney and instantly fell in love with the harbour city so decided to call it home. While working as a Regional Director of Food and Beverage in 2000 he received a Food & Beverage employee of the year award from the Australia Hotel Association.

"I love to travel and enjoy countries through their food," he says. "Food connects people from all walks of life."

Another of Eddie's favourite activities is a village walk. "When we leave the ship I like to stroll through the nearby village and to interact with the local people. Even though we may not speak the same language, we try to communicate by using signs and body language. It is fascinating to experience their way of life."

Eddie has witnessed the transformation of Myanmar as the country has opened up to the outside world. "There have been many challenges but we embrace them and have been running our business by working closely with the local community to support them," he says.

An important part of Eddie's job has been to establish a relationship with villagers along the ship's routes, to make them feel that they are showcasing their homeland to foreigners. "There are many places where the local people are not familiar with having visitors and some haven't seen foreigners before, especially when we introduce a new journey. When they feel a part of the visit, they become proud hosts and naturally engage with our guests who in turn are immersed in the experience and discover the true magic of Myanmar," says Eddie.

Dr Hla Tun, Ship's Doctor

Dr Hla Tun joined Belmond in 2004 as the ship doctor on board the Road to Mandalay. Born and raised in Myanmar, Dr Tun gained his medical degree from Yangon University in his home town. He also achieved US medical accreditation through passing the United States Medical Licensing Examination.

Dr Tun's life onboard begins at 6.30am when he exercises and then prays (he is a devout Buddhist). His surgery opens at 8am and he is on call for guests 24 hours a day.

In addition to his work as a physician, Dr Tun has instigated and continues to run an extraordinary philanthropic programme. Since the ship began operating he has liaised with local people and guests of the ship to build and run 26 schools in the region and begun offering medical assistance.

When the ship docks in Bagan, Dr Tun runs Belmond's Free Clinic which he set up there having helped to raise the necessary funds. He sees up to 300 local patients a day between 9am to 11pm. At the same time he remains on call for guests of the ship.

Following the cyclones that hit Myanmar in 2008 and 2011, Dr Tun took groups of volunteers to affected areas to provide medical care and to help provide food, water and clothing to people in need. He made a total of 66 visits to the area and treated 35,000 storm victims.

Dr Tun also runs the Orphans and Vulnerable Children Programme which was originally set up by UNICEF to help underprivileged children whose parents have HIV, as well as to provide basic welfare and education. He is integral to Belmond's ongoing support of education in the region.

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY & ENVIRONMENT

Belmond employs an impressive 97 per cent of local people in the destinations along the ship's route. Part of Belmond's revenue, together with donations from guests, goes toward charities supporting wellbeing and education.

In 2011 Belmond opened a Free Clinic at Bagan. Up to 300 people attend every day, some travelling from up to 200 km away. A free lunch is given to patients at the clinic and it is also possible for them to stay overnight at an adjacent monastery. Belmond passengers are welcome to visit the clinic (they are also encouraged to bring unwanted spectacles with them to donate).

A number of Belmond guests, having travelled on one of the cruises, make a one off donation or a long-term commitment of support to the community. One former passenger, a doctor from Germany, joined Dr Tun for a month in 2015 to provide help in remote villages. And in 2008, an Italian guest, who was also a doctor, donated a large sum of money to victims of Cyclone Nargis and also travelled to Myanmar in person to visit them.

Over the last 20 years Belmond has built and renovated 26 schools in the central Myanmar region. The first was built in Shwe Kyet Yet village near the Belmond Road to Mandalay's port

and the newest is in the village of Pon, outside Bagan. There are also schools at the various ports along the river. Some 3,000 pupils currently attend these schools.