

Burma's historic Strand Hotel again plays host to a new wave of travellers on the Roads to Rangoon and Mandalay.



REUNION AT THE STRAND

by JACK GOLDFARB

"Somewhere east of Suez," and a jet hour west of Bangkok, Rangoon has the welcome mat out once again for tourists, who have had to forego Burma's exotic attractions for seven years. With the old policy of visa restriction recently modified by the Burmese, an increasing flow of travellers has decided (quoting Kipling again) —

"the temple bells are callin', and it's there that I would be —

By the old Moulmein Pagoda lookin' lazy at the sea —"

Across the "sea" (actually the little Gulf of Martaban) from Moulmein, lies Rangoon with its more fabled pagodas, its more cosmopolitan atmosphere, and its more insistent call to the wayfarer.

Capital and gateway city of Burma, seaport of a million and a half Burmese, Indians, and Chinese, and distinctively Asian in character, Rangoon has three unique landmarks:

— on the peak of a nearby hill the world's largest and oldest Buddhist shrine,

the golden Shwe Dagon Pagoda, with its magnificent diamond-encrusted crown, dominates the Rangoon skyline.

— from the exact centre of the city the 2200 year-old, ornate Sule Pagoda radiates its majestic splendour.

— and down by the harbourfront an historic old hotel, retaining its dignified yesteryear charm while aging gracefully, has, since the turn of the century, housed most of the travellers who have taken the roads to Rangoon and Mandalay.

STRANDHOTEL reads the sign on the white, three-story, colonial-style structure overlooking the Rangoon River. (The period after the name neatly dates the building back to the time when sign punctuation was in flower.)

In 1901, John Darwood, a civic leader who did much to literally propel Burma into the Twentieth Century by introducing electricity and urban transit systems, constructed a 60-room hotel across the street from his family mansion on the corner of Strand Road and Lewis Street.

Along with incandescent lamps and trolley cars, another innovation that Darwood (later knighted for his efforts) deemed important was an elegant hostelry of which Rangoon could be proud.

Through the lofty colonnaded entrance the patrons soon began flocking—up-country plantation owners in starched cotton suits, mustachioed Punjabi merchants in colourful turbans, pipe-puffing British Empire administrators—to mingle with the foreigners just off the ocean-going vessels that sailed up from the Bay of Bengal, or back down the Irrawaddy from a trip to Mandalay on one of the paddleboats of the old Flotilla Line.

In the Strand dining room a dozen ceiling fans idled overhead, humming the background for conversational variations on the themes of this year's rice crop, last year's monsoon, or how to recognize authentic Burmese jade.

After dinner, sprightly tunes were played by a Filipino band in the spacious ballroom, while other sounds filtered into the lounge: the clicking of balls on the green-felted tables in the Billiard Room; the gurgle of glasses filling with British gin from the ample stock in the bar.

As Rangoon prospered into one of the most important trading towns in South Asia, one could see from the balustraded balconies of the Strand the elephants ponderously stacking teak logs on the wharves, and the cheroot-smoking dock workers loading the endless sacks of rice which had now boosted Burma into the position of the world's leading rice exporter.

The Strand expanded along with the times. In the tumultuous Twenties the hotel was renovated and its capacity en-

larged by acquiring the palatial Darwood Mansion across the street. Sir John's stately ancestral home and birthplace, having gone public, flung wide its fenced-in doors, above which was now painted the name STRAND HOUSE. (with the period.)

Meanwhile the British, who had undertaken three wars in the Nineteenth Century to subdue the affable but fierce-fighting Burmese, had gradually raised the political status of Burma from a sub-province of India to that of Crown Colony just before the outbreak of World War II.

Came the Japanese invasion, and after a two-month siege, British forces were driven from Rangoon in early 1942. The city was severely battered, and later, during the Occupation, came under withering Allied bombing attacks. The Strand buildings were heavily damaged but were still used by the Japanese as a Naval headquarters.

When the war ended and the British returned, they agreed in October 1947 to grant full independence to Burma. In that same year restoration work on the Strand was completed and a British shipping firm became the new principal owners. An amiable Armenian restaurateur from Iran, Pete Aratoon, became a partner and general manager, a position he held until recently.

The present manager, Major Khin Maung Kyi, has done much to preserve the Strand's distinguished aura, which comes across even before the guest has inked the register.

Although glamour is at a minimum in the austere lobby of caned chairs and gleaming brass flowerpots, clamour is also minimal with the hushed finesse of desk clerks checking in arrivals and *longyi*-skirted bellboys unobtrusively whisking luggage off to the rooms.

Ten years ago, when the present Revolutionary Government of Burma came to power, most business enterprises, including the Strand, were nationalized. At that time the adjacent Strand House was sold to the Australians for an embassy, and extra rooms were added on to the original structure to make up the loss.

Adding on rooms, however, was a premature move, as the next seven years turned out to be lean and lonely ones. As a result of the Government's decision to restrict visitors to 24-hour visas, the echo of a tourist's footstep in the brightly-polished corridors became a seldom thing.

During these years, the Strand Guest Book was signed by a trickle of diplomats, foreign technical advisers, and those air travellers whose onward connections permitted, or required an overnight in Rangoon.

Nevertheless, a number of airlines, notably BOAC, Pan American, and Aeroflot, still considered Rangoon an important stop, and regular schedules were maintained.

Today eight carriers, including Mainland China's government airline, fly travellers into Rangoon. Only one, Burma Airways Corporation, takes them up Kipling's celebrated route, the road to Mandalay, a town most Burma-bound travellers want to see.

In June 1970, shortly after Burma started issuing seven-day tourist visas, the New Wave began arriving. Especially Burma-conscious were those sophisticated explorers who by now had discovered most of the earth, except perhaps Mainland China and Sikkim.

Veteran wayfarers, nowadays accustomed to lodging in the sleekly-modern, cloud-high hotels, accoutred with all imaginable facilities from art galleries to zoos, were just as pleased to see the romantic gentility of the septuagenarian Strand serenely carrying on.

Once more the chairs in the elegant dining room are filling up. At the teak tables in this vast, high-ceilinged hall, over a million guests have supped, including royalty and refugee, the Aga Khan with his entourages of twenty or more, Somerset Maugham, remembered as a connoisseur of good food and wine, empire builders and revolutionaries, and Prime Ministers by the score.

The maitre d' has less time to chat now, as he urges on the maroon-sashed waiters, balancing bowls of *mulligatawny* and platters of chicken *biryani*. He knows the Burmese proverb, "A hungry man is an angry man." The hotel is genuinely

concerned with the guests' comfort—except for one or two inflexible rules.

One regulation says that no gentleman is permitted in the dining room, bar, or lobby after 5 p.m. without a shirt and tie. Even though Rangoon's summer temperatures can soar, the rule is hard and fast. Some years back, after an unprecedented brawl in the bar, it was decided that collared and cravated guests would be less pugnacious. There has scarcely been a scuffle since. To keep the patrons further tranquillized, nightly dinner music is played in the main lounge.

Some of the amenities at the Strand are so old-fashioned that they have gone full cycle, and are coming back in style again: especially the accent on the "human touch."

There is the Writing Room, a cozy, parlour-like sanctum furnished with polished desks, inkwells for both black and red ink, and a heady silence, a rare feature in any hotel today.

There is not a television set anywhere on the premises. (But then television has not yet come to Burma.)

A Lost Property cabinet off the lobby displays shelf after shelf of articles left behind by forgetful guests. Ranging from precious jewelry to neatly pressed handkerchiefs, the items are still waiting—some of them over 18 years—to be claimed by owners with proper proof. The scrupulously catalogued collection testifies to the impressive honesty of the Strand staff.

Focal spot for Strand patrons is the snug Chinthe Bar, a venerable haunt which takes its name from the ferocious white lions which are the legendary guardians of Burma. It is said that they appear in the bar after the tenth Scotch to frighten off any pink elephants that have trooped out of the panelled walls.

Outside the Strand's front doors, the saronged rickshaw drivers wait (along with the motorized taxis) with their bicycle-powered vehicles to haul passengers through the checkerboard, tree-lined streets of Rangoon. Theirs is a vintage mode of Asian transport, less fashionable and less swanky than most—but leisurely-paced, personal, and picturesque.

Very much like the Strand.



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Carpets at Hassans on Orchard Road, Amir and Sons opposite Mandarin Hotel and Oriental Carpets on Tanglin Road.

For a good hand-tailored suit in just 24 hours, see Fashion's Tailors

on Orchard Road, China Tailor in Shop No. 4, Hotel Singapura or Chanrai's in Supreme House, with branches in Goodwood Park Hotel, Hilton Hotel, Raffles Hotel, Cold Storage and on High Street.

For jewellery, we'd recommend B. P. De Silva at 19-21 High Street and in Specialist Centre, Cullinan's in The Orchard, Lee Onn Goldsmith in South Bridge Road, Kevin's at Hilton Hotel, Shiu Hwa Jewellery in Tanglin Shopping Centre and Je t'aime at the Specialist Centre.

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