



Strand Hotel, Rangoon, once again receives travellers in its inimitable pre-World War II style

TRAVEL GUIDE

Somerset Maugham slept here

by Jack Goldfarb

AS I WAS about to sit down for dinner in the stately dining room of the Strand Hotel in Rangoon, the head waiter padded over to inform me I could not be served. 'Sorry,' he said, 'but gentlemen are not permitted in the dining room, bar or lobby after 5 p.m. without a proper shirt and tie.'

Above me, the slowly-revolving ceiling fans were laboring to dispel the 31°C. heat. The Maitre d' felt apologetic enough to explain: some time ago, after an unprecedented *melée* in the bar of this distinguished hotel, the shirt-and-tie rule was adopted in the belief that 'well-dressed' gentlemen would not brawl. No fracas has occurred since—not after 5 p.m.

In acceptable attire, I legitimately returned to enjoy mulligatawny soup and chicken biryani in the lofty, Victorian dining hall where more than 1,000,000 guests have supped since Sir John Darwood opened the Strand more than seventy years ago.

Over the decades, the Strand guest book has been signed by Maharajahs and mercenaries, Prime Ministers and pilgrims, Viceroys and vagabonds, couriers and commercial travellers. And, as expected, that tireless narrator of tales of the exotic East, Somerset Maugham, sojourned here often and is best remembered for his refined tastes in food and wine.

When Sir John Darwood built the three-storey, colonial-style edifice across the street from his family mansion on Strand Road, he wanted Rangoon to have its first elegant hotel, one in which it could take pride. With its white, tall-columned portico facing the busy harbourside, the Strand Hotel soon became the favourite stopping place for travellers from ocean-going steamers up from the Bay of Bengal and the paddleboats of the old Flotilla Line chugging down the Irawaddy River from Pagan and Mandalay. The lounge, billiard room, and Chinthe Bar became popular haunts for the cotton-suited rice planters, colourfully-turbaned Punjabi traders, and pipe-smoking Empire officials.

As the Strand's reputation for dignified charm and unruffled efficiency grew, it eventually became necessary to expand its sixty-room capacity. The adjacent Darwood residence was annexed and both buildings underwent a major renovation. But along came World War II, and a two-month siege and bombardment of Rangoon by Japanese

forces caused the Strand buildings heavy damage. When the British defenders finally evacuated the city, the Japanese took over the Strand as their naval headquarters. Subsequent allied bombing further battered it.

The Strand completed its post-war restoration in 1947, the year in which Burma achieved her full independence. A British shipping company bought the hotel and maintained ownership until the present Burma Government nationalized business enterprises a decade ago. For seven lean years afterwards only a trickle of visitor traffic filtered into the Strand, as tourist visas to Burma were limited to twenty-four hour stays.

Business as of old

Today, once again the bellboys in *longyi* skirts and the waiters in maroon cummerbunds are tending to the wants of a full house. The amenities at the Strand are, by most standards, quaintly old-fashioned. The writing room is a snug sanctum with secluded desks, black and red inkwells, and a stark silence, broken only by the scratching of metal pen-points on paper. A lost property cabinet off the lobby is crammed with items found in guest rooms over the last fifteen years. Everything, from precious gems and cash to ladies' hair clips and neatly ironed handkerchiefs, has been meticulously catalogued and awaits its claimant. Situated near the reception desk, the showcase collection serves as an advertisement for the hotel staff's honesty. The Strand is also one of those rare hotels where shoes placed outside the door at night will be surely there in the morning, smartly shined, and accompanied by two morning newspapers.

The Chinthe Bar continues to be the gathering place for the Strand's thirstier patrons. It gets its name from the fierce white lions, legendary guardians of Burma, whose statues can be seen all over the country. Live chinthes, the barman assured me, show up in the bar after the tenth Scotch to chase any pink elephants that have lumbered out of the woodwork.

In this age of sleek, 1000-windowed hyper-hotels, which boast every facility from saunas to supermarkets, the Strand serenely carries on with its atmosphere of romantic gentility and adventure. Kipling, Conrad, and Maugham would still feel at home here.