

‘Ayeyarwady Experience’ Itinerary 2016-2017 Mandalay-Bagan-Mandalay (7 nights)

Day One: Mandalay

“Mingalaba” — welcome aboard Belmond Road to Mandalay! We are here to ensure that your cruise is unforgettable, with land excursions and authentic experiences that provide a fascinating glimpse into the culture of Myanmar.

For guests arriving on our group flight from Yangon (ETA 08.30):

You will be met by Belmond Road to Mandalay guides at Mandalay’s airport. Together you will go to the hills of Sagaing, the spiritual centre of Myanmar, which is home to hundreds of pagodas and numerous monasteries, nunneries and Buddhist learning centres. Enjoy expansive views of the Ayeyarwady River from the Soon U Ponya Shin Pagoda. Time permitting you will visit a nunnery for a fascinating glimpse into the monastic way of life. Proceed to Shwe Kyet Yet village, home of Belmond’s private jetty, and board Belmond Road to Mandalay at 11.15.

For guests checking in independently:

Please arrive at our jetty in Shwe Kyet Yet village between 10.30 and 11.00.

Once on board you are escorted to your cabin and then invited to the Observation Lounge to meet the Captain and crew. A short safety briefing is given.

A buffet lunch is served as Belmond Road to Mandalay sets sail, cruising towards Mandalay.

After lunch you disembark for a guided tour of Mandalay, considered the home of Burmese traditional arts. Explore some of its great treasures, including Kuthodaw Pagoda, a UNESCO-listed site with 729 stone tablets inscribed with Buddhist scriptures, and the atmospheric Shwenandaw, an intricately carved wooden monastery which used to be part of King Mindon’s living quarters. Pass through the streets of the marble quarter where artisans sculpt Buddhas of all sizes and continue to the outdoor workshop of a family of bronze casters to observe, first hand, the creation of statuesque Buddha images and ceremonial gongs. End the day with a visit to the 200-year-old U Bein Bridge, one of Myanmar’s most photographed sites.

Re-board Belmond Road to Mandalay at Shwe Kyet Yet village where the ship will berth for the night. This evening you are invited to join a cocktail party on the Observation Deck, followed by dinner in the elegant Restaurant. Enjoy a selection of gourmet Asian and Western dishes prepared by our Chef. House wines are included with dinner, or you might prefer to choose a fine wine from our extensive international list.

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Late arrivals to Mandalay have the option to board the ship at the following times:

14.00 at the Htin Win Jetty in Mandalay (please note you will miss the afternoon tour as the ship will sail back to Shwe Kyet Yet), or after 17.00 in Shwe Kyet Yet village.

Day Two: Ava (Inwa)

Early risers may wish to visit the Healthy Juice Bar on the Observation Deck. An extensive breakfast buffet with à la carte menu is served in the Restaurant and guests also have the option to order tea or coffee to their room.

Those who wish may join our guides on an early-morning visit to the village of Shwe Kyet Yet. This small village holds a special place in our hearts, having been the location of the ship's berth for 20 years. Visit the village pagoda, where you will have the opportunity to donate food to a procession of monks from the local monastery. On the return walk you can observe the bustling activity around the market and teashops.

Belmond Road to Mandalay sets sail for Ava (or "Inwa"), an ancient imperial capital situated between the Ayeyarwady and Myitnge Rivers. Here you have a choice of two tour options:

Ava by Horse and Cart

Perfect for those who wish to explore the most fascinating highlights of the ancient city. Climb into one of the traditional buggies and enjoy a scenic drive. Ava was the capital of Burma four times between 1364 and 1841, although what remains today dates mostly from the early 19th century. See the ruins of King Bagyidaw's palace walls and moat, visit a beautiful 19th-century teak monastery, now a monastic school, and journey through picturesque villages, farmlands and rice paddies.

Ava Adventure (Limited space. Please register at Reception. English-language tour only)

Set off on an independent mountain bike tour (a map will be provided), or join one of our staff for a leisurely, guided bike ride. Head off the beaten track into Ava's more rural pathways, pedalling past King Bagyidaw's palace ruins, through farmlands and tranquil villages. The ride is suitable for advanced beginners and above. There are no steep inclines, but be prepared for a mix of paved roads and dirt tracks with rocky or sandy surfaces.

Mid-morning, return to the ship and set sail towards Bagan.

You now have ample time to enjoy the ship's leisure facilities, such as a treatment at the spa, relaxation by the pool or a scenic lunch on the Observation Deck.

Or you may wish to join one of our onboard activities: have your fortune told by an astrologer, or attend a demonstration by our housekeeping staff on how to tie a longyi (Myanmar sarong) or prepare thanaka, a paste that serves as both decorative make-up and protection from the sun. Our onboard doctor will be giving a presentation on his charitable and community activities in Myanmar in the Observation Lounge. Indulge in afternoon tea, Myanmar-style, in our Burmese Tea Shop before visiting the Observation Lounge for a talk on Myanmar Ways of Life by one of the expert Belmond guides.

Late afternoon, on the port side, the ship will pass the village of Yandabo, where in 1826 the treaty of the same name was signed between the Kingdom of Ava and the invading colonial British. Today this village is known for its production of terracotta clay water pots, which can often be seen drying on the riverbanks.

After dinner this evening, visit the Observation Deck for an unforgettable surprise on the river (weather permitting).

The ship anchors mid-river for the night.

Day Three: Bagan & Mt Popa

Early birds may wish to rise in time for a sunrise yoga session on the Observation Deck. Later a meditation class will be held in the Lounge.

It might be worth finishing breakfast by about 08.30 this morning so you can be free to enjoy the views from the Observation Deck as we sail into the Bagan area. Fishermen are often to be seen casting their nets as local boats carry passengers from one bank to the other. You can see the gilded hti or crowns of pagodas on the riverbanks as the ship circles and drops anchor near our private jetty at Taung Be village near Old Bagan.

Disembark for an excursion to sacred Mt Popa, the traditional home of the 37 Nats or animist spirits, which have been worshipped in Myanmar since long before the arrival of Buddhism. The journey overland will take about two hours altogether, but there will be a stop en route at a toddy palm plantation to see the traditional methods still employed to produce jaggery, a palm sugar used in sweets and in an alcoholic drink, which you may try.

Mt Popa is actually a 5,000ft extinct volcano, which stands alone on the Myingyan Plain. Its summit, which is home to a mix of Nat and Buddhist shrines, can be reached by climbing 777 steep and sometimes difficult steps (taking about 20 minutes). Climb to the top for magnificent views or stay and explore the village instead.

A Burmese-style lunch will be served al fresco at Mt Popa Resort with incredible views overlooking the mountain. We recommend bringing your swimsuit in case you wish to enjoy a dip in the resort's fresh spring-water infinity pool. Return to the ship in the late afternoon.

Grilled specialities are a highlight of dinner, which is served from live cooking stations under the stars on the Observation Deck. Afterwards you are treated to a classical marionette performance. Historically these shows were royal entertainment, depicting stories from the early life of Buddha, but they were also considered a safe way to deliver messages to the King.

Belmond Road to Mandalay anchors at Bagan for the night.

Day Four: Bagan

Dawn risers can experience one of the most magical highlights of Bagan—a sunrise hot-air balloon flight over the pagodas (operates October-March, advance reservations essential, supplement applies). Guests participating in this activity will return to the ship at around 08.30.

Today, enjoy a full day of exploring the best of Bagan with your guide. Bagan has been one of the main visitor attractions in Myanmar for many years, ranking alongside Angkor Wat in Cambodia and Borobudur on Java as the greatest historic sites in Southeast Asia. Over 3,000 temples dot the plain beside the Ayeyarwady River, most of which were built between the 11th and 13th centuries. Begin with a visit to the bustling morning market at Nyaung-U. Explore the narrow lanes and admire stalls piled high with exotic fruits and vegetables and typical Myanmar products such as betel leaf, thanaka wood and cheroot cigars. Continue to a small complex near Minnanthu to discover off-the-beaten-track temples, including a gem with richly coloured murals dating from AD 1225. You will also visit Thitsawaddy, a pagoda affording panoramic views over the Bagan plains.

Return to the ship for lunch. Afterwards, alight for an afternoon excursion to one of the most significant pagodas of Bagan, Ananda Temple. This architectural masterpiece was built in AD 1090 and contains four gilded Buddha statues, each standing 30ft tall. You will also be led to a small temple, opened exclusively for Belmond guests, to discover magnificent murals by torchlight. A short walk brings you to a stunning view of 12th-century Thatbyinnyu, one of Bagan's tallest pagodas. A visit to a lacquerware workshop follows. Marvel at the exquisite patience and skill required to produce these finely detailed pieces, many of which take several months to complete.

As daylight starts to fade you gather to watch the sunset over plains peppered with hundreds of ancient pagodas. You then proceed to a small temple close to the jetty to participate in an exclusive Belmond experience—a magical candle-lighting ceremony.

Tonight, enjoy a sumptuous dinner on the Observation Deck. The ship remains mid-river at Bagan.

Day Five: Bagan & Sailing

This morning you can embark on the tour of your choice before the ship sets sail.

Pagodas in the Morning

Enjoy an early-morning walking tour with your guide. Visit a small temple surrounded by fields where farmers can often be seen nurturing crops such as peanut, sesame and beans. Then explore the famous pagoda Sulamani (“crowning jewel”), with its impressive brick and ornamental work and murals dating from the 12th to 18th centuries. Tour begins at 07.00.

Bagan by Bicycle *(Limited space. Advance reservations essential. English-language tour only)*

Set off on an independent mountain bike adventure (a map will be provided), or opt to join our staff on a guided ride through Old Bagan. Pedal along small paths and roads that wind their way around ancient temples and pagodas. The ride is suitable for advanced beginners and above and cyclists should expect to bike on dirt road surfaces with patches of sand. The guided tour begins at 06.30.

Traditional Horse and Cart Ride *(Advance reservations essential)*

Travel in time-honoured style with your own horse and buggy through Old Bagan. Your local driver will take you on a leisurely, scenic route through the heart of the archaeological zone, passing many ancient pagodas and offering plentiful photo opportunities. Please note that some buggy drivers may have limited English-speaking ability. Starts at 07.00.

Village Visit and Social Contribution *(English language only)*

Join our staff in Taung Be village to participate in one of Belmond’s Social Contribution Projects. Next to the jetty is our free health clinic, established by the ship’s doctor, Dr Hla Tun, where he treats hundreds of patients a week while Belmond Road to Mandalay is stationed in Bagan. Activities change depending on the current project and community needs and might include: preparing lunch for visiting patients, working in the pharmacy with the monk or helping to build a new eye clinic. The visit begins at 08.15. Please speak with Reception to learn more.

Alternatively, for those interested, today is another opportunity to experience one of the highlights of Bagan—a hot-air balloon flight over the pagodas at sunrise.

All morning tours and activities conclude by 09.00 at Taung Be village where the transfer boat waits to take guests back to the ship.

After setting sail a leisurely day on board awaits. Take full advantage of the facilities on offer, from spa treatments and poolside relaxation to teatime treats. There is also an exhibition by a local artist on board and an inspiring talk on Myanmar culture from one of our expert guides.

Dinner is served in the Restaurant, after which please make your way to the Observation Deck for an unforgettable surprise on the river (weather permitting).

Day Six: Mingun

The ship continues to sail north. Enjoy a selection of morning activities, including a sunrise yoga session, a meditation class or an enticing cookery demonstration by our Chef.

Before lunch, Dr Hla Tun will give a presentation on the charitable and community activities he is involved with at villages along the river, such as school building and healthcare projects.

After lunch the ship arrives at Mingun and you disembark, by transfer boat, for an afternoon tour. The following two options are available:

Classic Mingun

Enjoy a walking tour of Mingun and visit Pahtodawgyi, an enormous unfinished pagoda that was started in the late 18th century by King Bodawpaya but never finished due to a prophecy that the king would die upon its completion. You will have the chance to ring the world's biggest uncracked bell, which weighs 90 tonnes and stands 13 feet tall. You will also see the dazzling Myatheindan (Hsinbyume) Pagoda, constructed of seven whitewashed terraces designed to symbolise sacred Mount Meru. Those who wish can climb the 88 steps to the top of the pagoda, which represents obtaining *nirvana*.

Village Walk (English language only)

An alternative option is to visit a rural village in the middle of the river. Walk along the island's narrow dirt paths and across fields of beans, corn and millet and see villagers going about their daily lives. Visit the home of talented woodcarvers who make decorative ox carts used for ordination ceremonies and witness the production of dried lima beans, a vital ingredient in Burmese Tea Leaf Salad.

Back on board you are invited to dress in your longyi for a special cocktail party on the Observation Deck, with views of Mingun in the distance.

Belmond Road to Mandalay anchors near Mingun tonight.

Day Seven: Pyin Oo Lwin (Maymo)

Early this morning, Belmond Road to Mandalay sails to the city of Mandalay and the Htin Win Jetty. You can opt to join our guides for an early-morning visit to shore to participate in a Buddhist almsgiving ceremony.

Today's excursion takes you into the mountains to the former colonial hill station of Maymyo, now known as Pyin Oo Lwin. Journey for approximately two hours along the famous Burma Road (the route to China from Mandalay), climbing to 1000m/3500ft above Mandalay, where it may be 8-10 degrees cooler.

Maymyo (May-town), named after Colonel May of the 5th Bengal Infantry, was founded by the British in 1896 as a cool summer retreat. For the next 50 years it was the scene of gins-and-tonics, casual tennis tournaments and other hallmarks of Raj-style colonial life. You can still see many English country cottage-type mansions, although a number are in need of restoration. You will enjoy a typical Shan lunch at one of the mansions that has already been restored—look out for photos of the building from the 1930s.

Your tour will include a circuit of the town in a traditional horse-drawn carriage, visiting the vibrant local market where you may find unexpected delights such as locally produced strawberry jam and beautiful flowers. The floral theme continues as you make your way around the Kandawgyi Botanical Gardens, which were established in 1924 and are still beautifully maintained.

Return to the ship berthed at Shwe Kyet Yet village for an evening at leisure. Tonight you are treated to a sumptuous farewell dinner in the Restaurant, followed by an evening of traditional entertainment.

Day Eight: Mandalay

An early-bird breakfast is served before you disembark from Belmond Road to Mandalay for your onward travel arrangements. Check-out time from your cabin is at 08.30 and you are welcome to use the ship's public spaces until the final disembarkation time of 11.00. Guests travelling on the group flight to Yangon will be escorted to the airport.

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Please note, all timings are approximate and should be used as a guide only. Please note, routes and associated itineraries may be subject to change.

The rivers of Myanmar vary from season to season, with as much as a 30ft variance in water level. From January through June, the Ayeyarwady's levels may drop for a few weeks to a few months, creating a narrower channel for navigation. To allow for these changes, Belmond Road to Mandalay may operate a revised itinerary and mooring locations may be amended.