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Exotic lands

- And untouched corners -

The prospect of sailing through exotic lands of gleaming temples, ancient tribes and authentic traditions is proving to be an alluring mix that increasing numbers of travellers are unable to resist. **Sara Macefield** reports

Asia is the rising star of the river cruising world that shows no sign of losing its sheen. One of the main attractions is the ease of taking such a trip through some of the most untouched corners of Asia to places where tourism is virtually unknown.

Yet by choosing a river cruise, customers are reassured of a certain level of comfort and service that remains constant, no matter where they cruise. The views outside may change drastically, but the onboard ambience will not.

In several destinations, most notably Myanmar (Burma), riverboats and cruise ships offer the best options for tourists as the country's former isolation from the outside world means there are few international-standard hotels. In time, this will change, but for now cruise vessels have the upper hand and this has fuelled an explosion of interest in the country that has made it one of the hottest tourist destinations of the moment.

China may be the long-established mainstay



of Asia river cruising with sailings along the Yangtze with, amongst others, Wendy Wu, Viking and Avalon. But while it continues to account for the bulk of the business, it is Indo-China and India that are adding fresh interest.

A string of river cruise lines are virtually queuing up to launch new river vessels and itineraries along the Irrawaddy River, primarily between Mandalay and Bagan on three or four-night sailings or between Mandalay/Bagan and Yangon on longer cruises.

This month (November) Sanctuary Retreats unveils *Sanctuary Ananda*, an opulent all-suite, all-balcony vessel, claiming its 21 suites are the largest of any riverboat in Myanmar.

SAMPLE
DEAL

AMAWATERWAYS HAS A 17-NIGHT FLY-CRUISE PACKAGE THAT INCLUDES STAYS IN HANOI, HALONG BAY AND SIEM REAP PRE-CRUISE, A SEVEN-NIGHT SAILING AND TWO NIGHTS IN HO CHI MINH CITY POST-CRUISE. IT COSTS FROM £3,559PP, DEPARTING AUGUST 10, 2015. DRINKS AND EXCURSIONS INCLUDED.

☎ 0800 954 0063; amawaterways.co.uk



“By choosing a river cruise, customers are assured of a certain level of comfort and service that remains constant, no matter where they cruise.”

“We were the first luxury river cruise company to operate in Myanmar and the early pioneers of tourism on the Irrawaddy”

GARY FRANKLIN, MANAGING DIRECTOR,
BELMOND TRAINS AND CRUISES

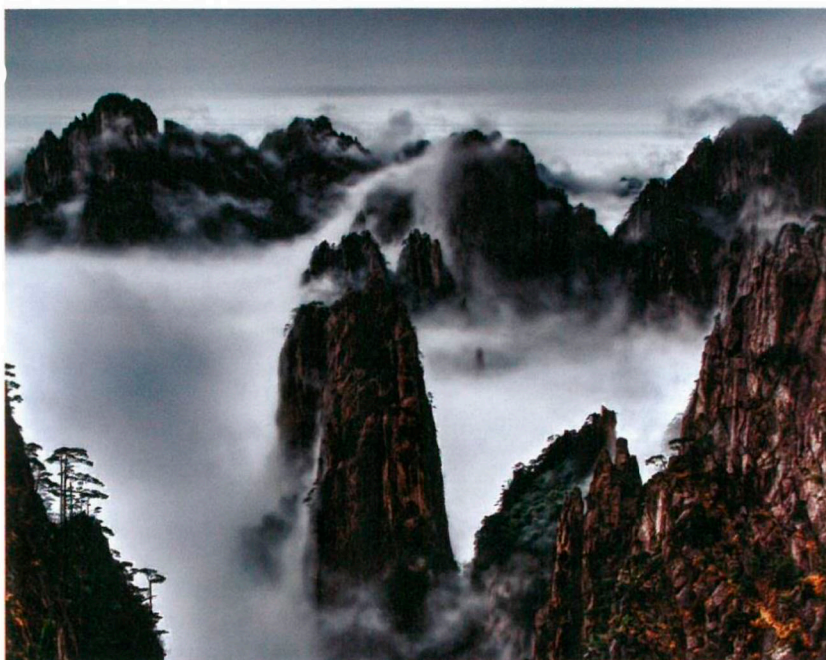
AmaWaterways is also launching its 56-passenger all-balcony, all-suite *AmaPura* this month as the company debuts its new programme of sailings along the Irrawaddy. This will be followed by *AmaDara*, on the Mekong next year.

Viking River Cruises launched its first vessel, *Viking Mandalay*, on the Irrawaddy last month offering 15-night packages comprising a 10-night voyage from Mandalay to Yangon and overnight stays pre- and post-cruise.

Next year also marks Avalon Waterways' debut on the Irrawaddy with the addition of *Avalon Myanmar* in September 2015. Having introduced Mekong sailings three years ago, the company is adding *Avalon Siem Reap* from next February.

Pandaw is another river cruise line with ambitious expansion plans and a 10-strong fleet of colonial-style riverboats in Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia that will rise to 13 next year. In Myanmar, where it is already well established, the company is branching out with sailings along the lesser-known Chindwin River, which stretches through tribal lands up to the Indian border, and along the Kaladan River through Myanmar's Arakan region.

Sanctuary Retreats is also planning Chindwin sailings, joining Pandaw and Belmond – which



as the former Orient-Express Hotels – is the longest-established luxury river cruise company in this part of the world, having based its vessel *Road to Mandalay* on the Irrawaddy for nearly 20 years.

“We were the first luxury river cruiser to operate in Myanmar and the early pioneers of tourism on the Irrawaddy,” explained Belmond Trains and Cruises managing director Gary Franklin. “In 2013, we launched *Belmond Orcaella* to cruise the Chindwin River and these longer cruises provide a deeper immersion into rural communities that, as yet, remain untouched by Western influences.”

With the spate of new riverboat launches,

Franklin adds: “Tourism numbers are predicted to rise from three million to 20 million over the next five years. There could be short-term challenges concerning airlift and hotel availability, but in time the lines will develop their own different itineraries.”

Since the Mekong River flowed onto the river cruising scene around five years ago, it has been a huge catalyst for growth as more river cruise companies have followed each other ▶

Facing page: An unexpected desert scene in Asia; a Thai longboat and the Inle Lake in Myanmar. This page: Yellow Mountain in China's Anhui Province; three strollers in Mandalay, Myanmar, and working on the Mekong Delta

SAMPLE
DEAL

SANCTUARY RETREATS
HAS A 10-NIGHT
CHINDWIN SAILING FROM
MANDALAY TO BAGAN VIA HOMALIN
COSTS FROM £2,944PP CRUISE-
ONLY, DEPARTING JULY 26, 2015.
EXCURSIONS AND SELECTED
DRINKS INCLUDED.

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“Not only do our itineraries take in major cultural highlights; we get into the heart of the destinations by experiencing local village life”

NEIL BARCLAY, HEAD OF SALES, VIKING RIVER CRUISES

► into the region, determined to capture their own share of insatiable public demand.

Now all the main names such as Viking, APT, Uniworld and Avalon Waterways cruise the Lower Mekong across the delta through Vietnam and Cambodia.

But there are still new names appearing, such as CroisiEurope which gained an instant foothold earlier this year after buying the Mekong River Cruise Company and its four colonial-style vessels. CroisiEurope now plans to expand its Asian fleet by building another two vessels.

Boutique river cruise line Aqua Expeditions, which operates two vessels on the Amazon River, launched *Aqua Mekong* last month offering a similar standard of luxury and attention to detail

on three, four and seven-night sailings.

Viking River Cruises Head of Sales Neil Barclay said the line was originally encouraged to add Mekong sailings following the popularity of its Yangtze River cruises in China.

“The routes have proved popular with people who enjoy river cruising and are looking for us to unlock new areas,” he explained. “Not only do our itineraries take in major cultural highlights; we get into the heart of the destinations by experiencing local village life. For instance, in Yueyang in China, we work with a school that we sponsor.”

The Upper Mekong, which runs through Laos and is notoriously difficult to navigate, has only previously been promoted by Mekong River Cruises, represented in the UK by Perl River Cruises. However, from November 2015 it will be joined by Pandaw which will offer sailings between Laos capital Vientiane and Unesco World Heritage site Luang Prabang.

Another area starting to make its mark is India, with the growing awareness and popularity of sailings along the Brahmaputra and Ganges waterways. APT has unveiled a new India programme for 2015 with a 16-day tour, featuring a one-week Ganges sailing on a round-trip route from Kolkata to Murshidabad.

It will be followed by Uniworld, sold in the UK exclusively by Titan Travel, which is to introduce seven-night sailings along the Ganges from January 2016 on new 56-passenger all-suite *Ganges Voyager II*, as part of a 12-night India package.



Main picture: Heading home with the wheat harvest and, right, Wat Arun in Thailand's capital Bangkok. Above: Luang Prabang in Laos

SAMPLE DEAL APT HAS A 15-NIGHT SPIRIT OF INDIA TOUR THAT INCLUDES A ONE-WEEK GANGES SAILING. COSTS FROM £5,995PP, DEPARTING FEBRUARY 18, 2015. FLIGHTS, EXCURSIONS AND DRINKS WITH MEALS ARE INCLUDED. ☎ 0800 012 6686; aptouring.co.uk

Pandaw is to introduce one-week Brahmaputra sailings through the Indian region of Assam from next March.

Perl River Cruises director Stuart Perl, who was one of the first UK companies to promote sailings along the Brahmaputra after linking up with Indian company Far Horizon Tours, felt awareness was growing among customers and the trade.

“Consumers are starting to realise that a river cruise offers opportunities to experience areas that have previously been off the tourist map, while travel agents are becoming more confident of selling the product due to training, familiarisation trips and the region's increased profile,” he explained.

Viking's Neil Barclay also stressed that such sailings were perfect for attracting new to cruise customers as well as existing cruisers, adding: “Agents are encouraged to use these as a way to entice previous river cruisers back to explore new routes and take in destinations further afield.” •