



# *Discovery Voyage*

Asia's mighty waterways are the lifeblood of its countries. **GEMMA PRICE** cruises along on six of Asia's great boat journeys, each evoking a bygone golden era of exploration, while providing a sensory travel experience like no other.

*The Road to Mandalay* glides on the Ayeyarwady, offering a glimpse of Myanmar's gilded pagodas.





## Paradise Peak Halong Bay

Three hours drive east of Hanoi, UNESCO World Heritage site Halong Bay – which translates to “bay of the descending dragon” – is the emerald jewel in Vietnam’s crown, a spectacular seascape of precipitous limestone karsts which has enthralled everyone who sailed its waters, from emperors to poets, French colonialists to fishermen. Many of the cruises along the bay also have a retrospective, historic feel. One standout vessel is the eight-cabin *Paradise Peak*. With its saffron sails billowing in the breeze, this luxurious replica of a Chinese junk recalls the nostalgia of a trading era, taking passengers far from the flotilla of

day-trippers to immerse them in the bay’s mystery and magic. Over a lunch platter stacked with local shrimp, squid and clams, my personal butler helped me customise my itinerary: a stroll through the vast Sung Sot grotto, called “cave of surprises” on Bo Hon Island, home to lit stalactite and stalagmite formations; a visit to a floating village, where local families showed me how they rear fish beneath their sky-blue wooden homes; and a kayak expedition through rocky tunnels to float serenely at the limpid, cliff-enclosed Luon lagoon. And the best end to a day of exploration? Returning to the *Paradise Peak*’s anchorage to enjoy uninterrupted vistas from a bow balcony and ensuite jacuzzi, glass of complimentary bubbly in hand.

*Suites for a two-night cruise start at US\$708. All Paradise boats can be chartered for day or multi-night cruises. [paradisecruises.vn](http://paradisecruises.vn)*

## The Jahan Tonle Sap River

Cambodia’s Tonle Sap River is the lifeline of the nation, connecting Cambodia’s capital to the Tonle Sap Lake and the Angkorian ruins in Siem Reap, and countless villages along innumerable tributaries. Of all the boats cruising this kingdom’s mighty waterways, *The Jahan* reigns supreme. Inspired by the romantic story of the

original Jahan, home to Lord Byron and his lover Lady Kashmira – and named for her ancestor, the revered Shah Jahan – each of the 26 luxurious cabins and communal spaces have been painstakingly appointed to recreate the days of the British Raj. The classical British-Indian colonial décor of the Raj of India Lounge is the perfect place to relax with a magazine or a novel. Meanwhile, the camel-bone inlaid East India Club funnel bar, illuminated by a large lamp adorned with Sanskrit carvings on the terrace deck, invites you to nurse a whiskey sour while watching the tapestry of vivid-green paddy fields, mirror-like pools and expansive orchards of exotic fruits unfolding on the banks. *The Jahan*’s regal environs set the mood for exploring the sights: from Phnom Penh, the New Khmer architectural hub, stop-offs include the black sandstone Wat Nokor which is built within the ruins of an ancient temple and believed to have been the headquarters of Jayavarman II in the 9th century; and Wat Hanchey, an 8th-century pre-Angkorian temple, perched atop a hill overlooking the meandering river, before the finale of Angkor Wat itself.

*The Jahan has three- to eight-day cruises between Ho Chi Minh City, Chau Doc, Phnom Penh and Siem Reap. Prices for a Superior Stateroom begin at US\$1,771 for a three-night, low-season cruise from Phnom Penh to Siem Reap. [heritage-line.com](http://heritage-line.com)*

## Oberoi Motor Vessel Vrinda Kerala’s backwaters

Known as Queen of the Arabian Sea, Kochi was the centre of the Indian spice trade from the 14th century, when Arabs, Chinese, British and Portuguese seafarers sailed Kerala’s backwaters. Today, a leisurely, modern-day exploration of this network of canals, estuaries and deltas usually begins at Vembanad, India’s longest lake. Aboard the eight-cabin *Oberoi Motor Vessel Vrinda*, large windows just above the water line command fish-eye views of huge cantilever fishing nets silhouetted against the skyline. Country boats, or *vallam*, laden with everything from curry leaf and coconuts to waving schoolchildren in plaid uniforms, glide by. Smaller rice boats putter past small

*Below: A cruise on The Jahan includes a visit to Wat Hanchey. Bottom: See green rice paddies at the fringe of the Tonle Sap River.*



*From top: Halong Bay’s countless limestone pillars greet guests on Paradise Peak; The illuminated Sung Sot cave is one of Vietnam’s hidden gems.*

AARON JOEL SANTOS; DREAMSTIME

IMMAGINE; GETTY IMAGES





plots of land occupied by tiny houses, and a few chickens and the odd cow negotiate narrow paddy field tributaries where each seedling is blessed before being planted. Along the way, onshore excursions include a visit to St Mary's Church, established by St Thomas in 1721 – it's said that all who enter are imbued with a sense of tranquillity and peace; and the enshrined half-statue of Lord Buddha at Karumadi. Back onboard, spectacular sunsets at the Vembanad Lake anchorage are followed by dinner featuring fusion creations like crab and orange salad and *masala* prawns, before another equally colourful spectacle – an evening performance of the highly ritualised Kathakali dance, which tells stories from the ancient Hindu epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*; and the classic dance form Mohiniattam, or "dance of the



**Right:** Relax in your suite with a changing vista of India's countryside. **Below:** The Oberoi Motor Vessel Vrinda sails on the serene Vembanad Lake.

enchantress," distinctive to Kerala. For guests keen to pick up some Indian cooking skills, the chefs onboard are happy to teach you how to create dishes like freshly caught pearlspot fish in banana leaf with Kerala spices.

Prices start from INR88,000 (US\$1,620) per cabin for two-night cruises, and INR117,000 (US\$2,150) for three nights. The vessel does not sail during the May to September monsoon season. oberoihotels.com

### *Si Datu Bua Raja Ampat archipelago*

Columbus, Magellan and Francis Drake all sailed in search of the Spice Islands, a time when majestic sailing ships transported their aromatic cargoes of sandalwood, nutmeg, mace, cloves and pepper from the Indonesian archipelago to the ancient kingdoms of China and India and, later, to Europe. *Si Datu Bua*, inspired by the traditional Indonesian *phinisi* ships built for trade along the Spice Routes, embodies the spirit of this colourful maritime era. And discovery is what this cruise experience, run by Silolona Sojourns, is all about. Expect spontaneous beach barbecues on deserted shores, expeditions to Bird of Paradise mating sites to see males dancing to entice females, and kayaking through the Gua

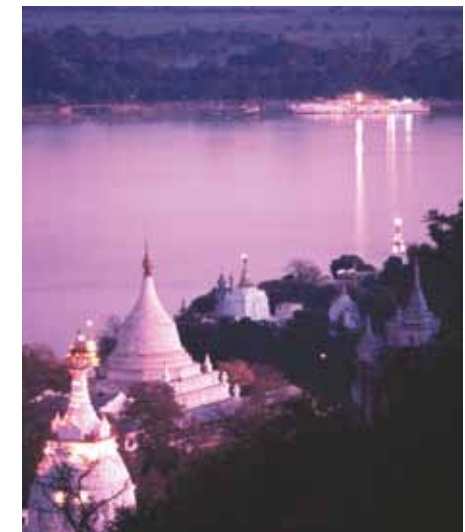


Sacral, a 10-storey high sacred cave formed in a hollowed-out limestone karst pinnacle. Even onboard, you still feel immersed in the spirit of the islands – the vessel is crafted from the finest tropical ironwood to German Lloyds specifications by the Konjo boat builders of Sulawesi. Each of the three suites on the 40-metre vessel was inspired by the Toraja highlands as well as the islands surrounding Banda and Celebes seas, and elegantly appointed in hardwood furnishings and vanity fittings complemented by locally produced cottons and colourful silks.

*Silolona Sojourns operates cruises to various regions, including the Mergui archipelago in Myanmar and islands in Thailand, according to seasonal sea and weather conditions. Si Datu Bua is available for charter. silolona.com*

### *Road to Mandalay Ayeyarwady River*

Author Rudyard Kipling famously described Myanmar, as "quite unlike any land you know about," and more than a century after writing his world-famous poem *Mandalay* – which doesn't, in fact, refer to a road but the Ayeyarwady River – passengers boarding the poem's namesake *Road to Mandalay* will find his words still ring true. Mandalay's woodcarving, stone sculpting,



**From top:** Embark on a journey to Indonesia's secluded isles aboard *Si Datu Bua*; A trip on the *Road to Mandalay* wouldn't be complete without a glimpse of the stupas peeking in the distance.

cheroot rolling and gold leaf workshops are a hive of traditional handcraft activity. The multiple layers of gold leaf applied by worshippers to the revered seated Buddha at Mahamuni Pagoda have reshaped the statue, while the pagoda-studded hill in nearby Sagaing – famous for its silversmiths – commands vistas of the city opposite and the timeless brown river snaking between. As the *Road to Mandalay* cruises 128 nautical miles south to the ancient capital of Bagan, home to more than 2,000 temples built by kings in the 11th and 12th century, the days seem as infinite as the horizon.





**From top:** Spend the day between towering gorges aboard *Sanctuary Yangzi Explorer*. A sculpture in ghost town Fengdu.

Ferries, fishing boats, barges and bamboo rafts drift downriver at a relaxed pace, perfectly in keeping with the afternoon's languorous heat. Oxen pull carts along dusty paths past small teak and bamboo dwellings and beautiful gilded monasteries flushed with the last light of the sun. Your Burmese cultural journey continues into nightfall where onboard, guests get to sample Burmese dishes like crispy butter bean salad, green tea leaf salad, and *mohinga*, the fish noodle soup staple, before being treated to performances of traditional dances and folk tales told by elaborately painted marionettes.

Road to Mandalay cruises range from three to 11 days. Prices per person for a four-night cruise start at S\$3,650 (US\$2,945), single occupancy. [orient-express.com](http://orient-express.com)

### *Sanctuary Yangzi Explorer Yangtze River*

The waters of the Yangtze emerge from the edge of the Tibetan Plateau, plunging

off the "roof of the world" to rush through huge gorges and flow across 13 of China's provinces. While traversing the entire length of Asia's longest river is a considerable undertaking, the 660-kilometre stretch from Chongqing to Yichang is considered one of Asia's most picturesque and a private cabin balcony aboard the *Sanctuary Yangzi Explorer* is the perfect perch for watching the scenery unfold. Onboard, royal-court inspired banquets, and cabins decked out in Chinese silk cushions and fretwork bed posts recall China's rich heritage. Mornings begin with *tai chi* on the observation deck, followed by demonstrations of local handicrafts such as silk embroidery and snuff bottles painted with mountains to mirror the peaks towering through the mist on both sides along your journey. See the 12-storey red wooden Shibaozhai Pagoda, constructed without nails against a sheer rock face. At ghost town Fengdu, guides tell chilling tales about Chinese souls believed to gather there after death. Then it's back to modern-day China with a tour of the world's largest engineering feat, the Three Gorges Dam project, set within the gargantuan 76-kilometre Xiling Gorge. ↘

Three-night cruises depart from Chongqing to Yichang. Twin-sharing rooms start from RMB8,980 (US\$1,450) per person. [sanctuaryretreats.com](http://sanctuaryretreats.com)

*SilkAir flies from Singapore to Hanoi, Siem Reap, Phnom Penh, Kochi, Yangan and Chongqing. For flight schedules, see SilkAir Postcards on page 66.*

