

Rangoon Renaissance: Staying at the Strand

Burma is now on many world travelers' "A" list. With the release of Nobel Prize Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest last year and her subsequent triumphant election campaign, tourism to the country is at an all-time high. Decades of international isolation have left the former British colony's major city, Rangoon, with an enduring colonial charm that has pretty much disappeared elsewhere in Asia.



Emblematic of that colonial era and built in 1901 during the British heyday, The Strand Hotel, a three-story Victorian mansion, resides within easy reach of the city's main attractions, including the 2,500 year-old Shwedagon Pagoda and the rambling downtown Bogyoke Market.

From its beginnings The Strand has been regaled as the finest hostelry east of Suez; at least that is how it was reviewed in the 1911 edition of Murray's *Handbook for Travelers in India, Burma and Ceylon*. With your check-in at the Strand, you will share the guest registry with adventurous luminaries of the past and present: Rudyard Kipling, George Orwell, Somerset Maugham, Sir Noel Coward, Mick Jagger and His Royal Highness King Taufa'ahau Tupou IV of Tonga. Rudyard Kipling supposedly penned much of the *Jungle Book* series in his room at the hotel. By the time 1960 rolled around, the golden days of travel had come to an end and the once stately structure, a languishing relic of a forgotten era, fell into disrepair until the early 1990's, when an extensive renovation enabled the grand dame to once again welcome weary travelers to her doorstep. Today the hotel's 32 suites boast all the extras you would expect: polished teak floors, high ceilings, air conditioning and ceiling fans, a separate sitting area and spacious bath-

rooms. Two restaurants, The Strand Café and The Grill complement the Bar, colloquially called the Writer's Bar.

Wonderfully restored to its 1901 ambience, the Bar's dark wood paneling and vintage black and white photographs frame an inviting space to imbibe a cool gin and tonic. Relaxing in one of the teak chairs or at the ample bar, it would be easy to imagine yourself rubbing shoulders with George Orwell or a present day Hemingwayesque aspiring writer. If you are in town on a Friday evening, be sure and take advantage of the bar's popular Happy Hour when half-price drinks draw an eclectic array of local expats scattered amidst the out-of-towners.



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The Strand Café: Open from early morning on through the day, an *a la carte* breakfast menu lists both Continental and Asian offerings. For guests at the hotel, complete breakfast is included. Come with an appetite and you will enjoy freshly baked pastries, just squeezed juice, local fruits and house-made preserves with your eggs or French toast. The Café serves a British-style afternoon High Tea service daily and in this setting, it feels fitting to nibble cucumber sandwiches and munch on lemon cookies while sipping freshly brewed Burmese tea. Lounging on one of the café's comfortable rattan dining chairs with a view of the city's broad thoroughfare outside the teak-framed windows, and surrounded by sepia-toned photos of local monks on the walls, one can easily feel transported in time to an age of reverence for the art of relaxation. And to think the fare for this luxury is offered at the High Tea bargain price of \$15.



Dinner at The Grill: Executive Chef Chris Parsons oversees all food operations at the Strand. Considered Rangoon's finest dining venue for Mediterranean, Asian and Continental cuisine, The Grill's romantic setting with soft candlelight presents another opportunity to slow down and savor a rare treat. Classical guitar music adds a soothing accompaniment to the evening. During my meal, interspersed with Burmese music, the guitarist beautifully served up renditions of "Maria Elena," "Green Sleeves," and the theme from "Love Story." I elected to rely on Chef Parsons' discretion to choose from his newly revamped menu for my evening repast. The main course, perfectly grilled lamb chops resting on a crisp bed of zucchini and paired with roasted wild mushrooms was by far the best meal of my entire stay in the city.

The Lobby Lounge: A popular meeting spot with its vintage cane furniture and cool marble floors, the Lobby Lounge is also the place to catch up on world news with a copy of the International Herald Tribune while Burmese musicians play local music on the xylophone and harp. If your time in Rangoon finds you staying elsewhere, be sure and pop into the Strand Bar for a late afternoon or evening drink, partake of the Café's elegant High Tea service, and create a memorable evening for yourself with dinner at the signature Strand Grill. If you're looking for a hotel that is more than just a place to get a night's rest, but also an introduction to the historical, cultural and literary past of a country, a stay at The Strand stands the test of time and then some.



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