

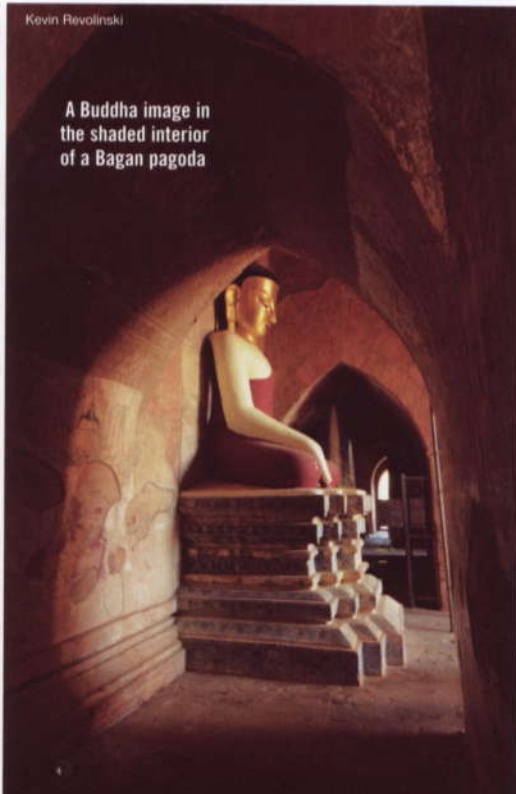
A different kind
of skyline: the
temples of Bagan



Find out on an
Orient Express
cruise in Myanmar.

BY KEVIN REVOLINSKI

WAT'S ON THE WAY TO MANDALAY?

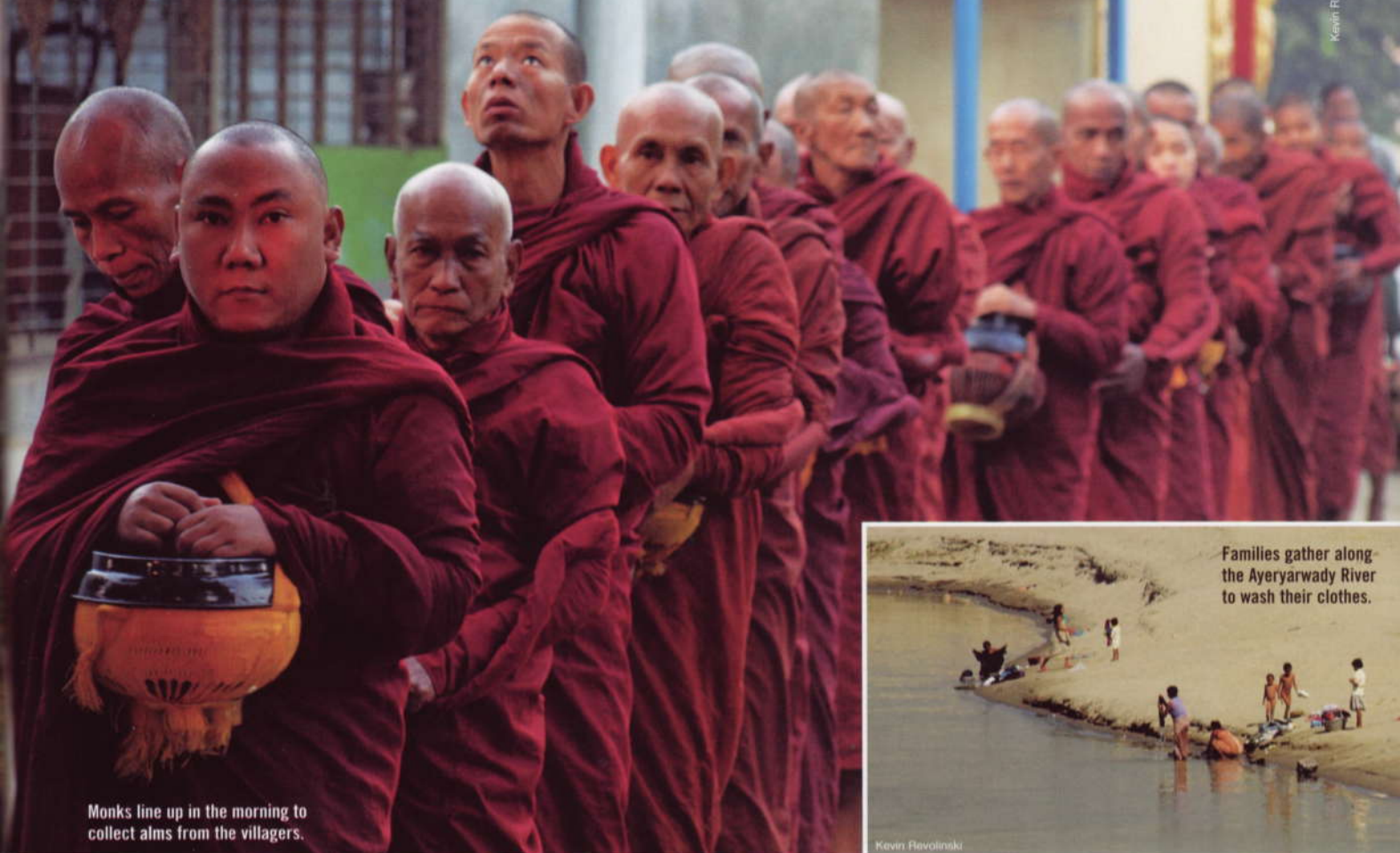


A Buddha image in
the shaded interior
of a Bagan pagoda

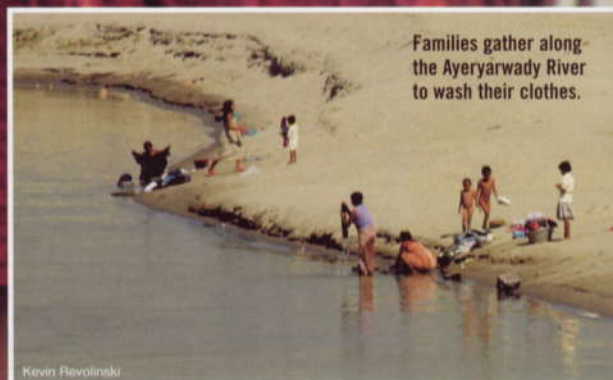
As far as the horizon I see temples. Some small like a little shrine, brick-colored; some massive, pyramid-like, with golden chedis reaching to the skies. They surround me where I perch on another temple, having climbed the dusty stone steps to await the sunset over this dry open plain that is Bagan. It's like Angkor Wat without the jungle blocking the view. This is Myanmar. And this is just the first day of my Orient Express cruise aboard *Road to Mandalay*.

Myanmar is fascinating, laden with history and hardened by it, yet the people are some of the gentlest souls you'll find. The land is full of old temples and rich with Burmese food and culture, and you can enjoy it all aboard a cruise on the Ayeyarwady River, the nation's lifeblood.

Orient Express arranged my one-hour flight north from Yangon (formerly Rangoon) to Bagan. Here, rising up from an arid plain along the bends and curves of the Ayeyarwady River are more than 3,000 temples and pagodas. We trek, barefoot when on hallowed ground, along the bricks and stones of courtyards still uncomfortably hot from the beating sun. Our guide shows us the details, the teachings of the Buddha embedded in porcelain tile work, the "nativity" carving of the young Siddhartha Gautama perched on his mother's hip. After seeing the sunset saturate the horizon, we board *Road to Mandalay* for dinner.



Monks line up in the morning to collect alms from the villagers.



Families gather along the Ayeyarwady River to wash their clothes.

Kevin Revoliniski

Road to Mandalay has a maximum of 118 passengers, and offers three cabin sizes. The ship has a piano bar, a lecture/activity room, a small library, and a massage room and fitness center. The top deck has two canopied sections with lounge chairs and a small pool in the center of a sun deck. Breakfast and lunch are buffet, while a set dinner menu offers both Asian and Western choices. Dinner is a classy affair with white-linen tables and a jacket requirement for the gents.

As river navigation is tricky, we set sail at dawn. The Ayeyarwady is a wide, meandering river stained with silt surrounded by the worn nubs of low mountains on the horizon, glinting in some spots with golden pagodas. The low sandbars, green with crops of beans, corn, and peppers when the river is low, disappear during the hotter season when the melting snow and ice of the northern mountains swell the river. Women come to the banks to slap soapy clothing against flat rocks and lay everything out to dry in the sun. A man drives an ox cart along the eroding bank road. Children play. Fishermen draw in nets. Long-tail boats ferry people back and forth.

In ports of call, we take shore excursions to local markets, special temples, marble sculptures, and other attractions. On sailing days, we attend lectures on Myanmar's culture, its 135 ethnic groups, the volunteer work of the ship's doctor, or the social programs funded by Orient Express and former passengers. One afternoon we gather for a presentation by the ship's chef and learn to make *lepethod*, a Burmese green tea leaf salad. The next day, women are applying *thanaka*, a sort of makeup-cum-sunscreen made from the bark of a special tree. The men take instruction in putting on a *longyi*, the long wraparound skirt worn by Myanmar males.

On shore, we visit a village where the local girls balance two buckets of water over their shoulders as they return from the common well. We visit Mandalay, the former seat of the Burmese royal family. We experience the river like locals when we take a chugging work boat upstream to Mingon, another former capital of the kingdom.

We watch workers stamping gold leaves and others carving marble. Shutterbugs go crazy at Taunghaman Lake, as mists rise into the light of dusk alongside white pagodas, reflecting waters, and men paddling colorful boats. U Bein Bridge, the world's longest teak bridge, curls across the water and the smoldering sunset backlights silhouettes of crossing monks.

At the end of the four days, I sip Myanmar wine and brandy and reflect on the images of the journey and the stories the friendly Burmese crew shared. Orient Express offers a longer cruise, far into the north toward the headwaters. And already I want to come back. ❧