



ASIA RIVER CRUISES

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Interest in cruises on Asia's rivers has been fueled by clients who either have "been there, done that" and/or want something more exotic than the usual European river experience. The demand is being met with added ships - many, if not most, have been specifically built to sail the region - as well as expanded itineraries. Also noteworthy: the level of luxury has been kicked up substantially with

such features as spas, fully equipped fitness centers, butlers and menus created by celebrity chefs.

The most popular Asia cruises are along the Yangtze, the world's third-longest river (3,900 miles), which stretches from Shanghai through China's heartland. And most cover the Three River Gorges, a 100-mile stretch between Nanjin Pass in the east and White King City in the west. Journeys are timed to show the gorges in daylight. For clients who intend the trip to be once-in-a-lifetime, there are packages that combine the cruise with some of China's once-in-a-lifetime attractions, such as the Great Wall in Beijing and the terracotta warriors in Xian.

Traffic continues to build on the Mekong River, the longest (2,700 miles) in Southeast Asia. The Upper Mekong originates in China's Tsinghai province, while the Lower Mekong forms part of the border between Burma (Myanmar) and Laos, and also between Laos and Thailand. As travel increases, so do the choices in itinerary as well as the style of ship. Itineraries generally begin in Siem Reap in northwest Cambodia, gateway to the Angkor region and travel either to Ho Chi Minh City or Phnom Penh. Not so long ago travel to Myanmar (Burma) was somewhat unusual; today the country is growing in popularity as a river cruise destination and a number of lines include cruises on the 1,348-mile Irrawaddy River among their itineraries. The river flows north to south from high in the Himalayas through the center of the country and empties into the Andaman Sea. In August, when the Himalayan snows melt, the water is high enough to allow vessels to travel all the way to Bhamo, near the Chinese border.

Cruise Companies

AmaWaterways' 56-passenger all-suite AmaPura sails 10- to 14-night Myanmar itineraries. The 62-stateroom AmaDara, which debuted last year and is one of the larger ships on the Mekong River, sails 7-night Vietnam itineraries. The AmaLotus travels Vietnam and Cambodia in a variety of itineraries, ranging from 7 to 16 nights.

Avalon Waterways has two fairly new (2015) all-suite 36-passenger ships in Asia: the Siem Reap and the Myanmar. Both have been specifically built for their respective rivers and are able to dock in smaller ports the bigger river ships cannot reach; both offer expansive itineraries that range from 12 to 21 nights and 13 to 18 nights respectively. The Siem Reap sails in Vietnam and Cambodia, while the Myanmar sails the Irrawaddy River. Both ships have Avalon's signature open-air Balconies which feature floor-to-ceiling, wall-to-wall panoramic windows measuring 14-feet-wide with retractable screen systems and doors that slide open a full 9-feet and create the feeling of sitting outside.

Avalon currently charters two Century ships, the five-star-rated Century Legend and Century Paragon. Both have 196 cabins (40 suites and 156 balcony staterooms) and are state-of-the-art ships with 7-story atriums, propulsion systems that reduce vibration and emissions and large indoor pools. The Legend sails in China and offers land/Yangtze River (between Shanghai and Beijing) packages of up to 15 days; the Paragon sails 6- and 7-day one-way cruises either to Shanghai or Beijing.

Aqua Expeditions' five-star 20-suite Aqua Mekong sails Vietnam and Cambodia on 3-, 4- and 7-night cruises starting either from Siem Reap, Phnom Penh or Ho Chi Minh, traveling down the Mekong or upriver. In addition to some of the river's largest guest rooms, the ship has an upper-deck pool, a fully equipped gym, an outdoor cinema and private tenders for shore excursions.

Belmond (formerly Orient-Express) pioneered short Myanmar cruises on the Irrawaddy between Mandalay and Bagan and now has two ships in the area. The 82-passenger Belmond Road to Mandalay sails the Irrawaddy on two 7-night itineraries, a roundtrip from Mandalay and a roundtrip from Bagan; also available: 2-, 3- and 4-night voyages between Bagan and Mandalay. The newer and more intimate 50-passenger Belmond Orcaella is a stylish and elegant vessel with spacious staterooms and Juliet balconies providing a luxury experience with exceptional service and fine local cuisine. The Orcaella sails 7- and 8-night itineraries between Bagan and Yangon; 11-night journeys between Mandalay and Bagan; and a 12-night (land-river) trip on the Chindwin River between Mandalay and Yangon.

CroisiVoyages (part of CroisiEurope) currently has the 48-passenger RV Indochine, a colonial-style ship that cruises the Mekong River between Siem Reap and Saigon (via Phnom Penh) on 11- and 14-day itineraries. (The line's more modern RV Indochine II, originally scheduled for 2016, will launch in 2017).

Emerald Waterways is a relatively new arrival in Asia. The 56-passenger French-colonial-style Mekong Navigator sails 8-day cruises between Siem Reap and Ho Chi Minh and 16-day Cambodia/Vietnam itineraries. In Myanmar, the 56-passenger English-colonial-style Irrawaddy Explorer travels a 10-day itinerary between Mandalay and Yangon and a 16-day cruise, roundtrip from Yangon.

Passenger Amenities

Pandaw River Cruises is a major presence in Asia, specializing in itineraries that travel remote, hard-to-reach destinations with purpose-built ships that accommodate between 10 and 60 passengers and feature observation and promenade decks designed to offer panoramic views. Cabins are air-conditioned and are equipped with safes, wardrobes, writing desks, hair dryers, kimonos and slippers, minibars, regional toiletries and phones. There are no cabin TVs because the exotic itineraries mean spotty satellite signals. (However, the exotic locations also mean that chefs knowledgeable in local cuisine often prepare meals using exotic organic produce.) Wi-Fi is available in public areas and iPads are available to passenger use. The ships feature lecture rooms, libraries, spa facilities, shops, live entertainment, movie showings, gyms and bars and hospitality desks. They cruise the Mekong, the Tonle (the Mekong's principal tributary), the Irrawaddy, the Chindwin (the Irrawaddy's main tributary) and the Red Rivers. The basic 7-night itinerary starts in Saigon (with a coach transfer to the port of My Tho) and travels to Siem Reap. A longer 10-day voyage is offered, as well as 3- and 4-day cruises between Saigon and Phnom Penh. With a focus on Northern Vietnam, a 10-night itinerary from Halong Bay to Hoa Binh. In Burma, Pandaw voyages range from 7 to 14 nights; an expanded 20-night itinerary travels between Rangoon and Mandalay. New for 2016 are the 14-day four-country itineraries that sail from Thailand on the Upper Mekong to China and the 10-day three-country voyages. Also new: a 10-night exploration of southern Burma, and the Nergui Archipelago from Ranong to Rangoon aboard a classic 1960s motor yacht. Pandaw offers a wide variety of variety of land packages to complement all their trips. The company also charters a number of its vessels annually to American and European river cruise specialists.

With the 68-passenger all-suite Scenic Spirit, Scenic Cruises has raised the luxury all-inclusive standard on the Mekong River, with personal butler service and accommodations that range from 350 square feet to 865 square feet, the largest balcony suites (and the only elevator). The 861-square-foot Royal Panorama suite (the largest on any of the world's river cruises) has a bedroom, living room, a walk-in dressing room, an enormous balcony with an outdoor Jacuzzi. The ship has been described as a 5-star floating hotel, with a pool, a steam sauna and an open-air cinema. "All-inclusive" here includes tipping, shore excursions, both alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages, Wi-Fi and more. There are four dining options; passengers on the Diamond Deck may choose the exclusive Table La Rive degustation restaurant. The Spirit sails an 8-day Mekong voyage between Ho Chi Minh City and Siem Reap, which can also be part of the 13-day Treasures of the Mekong itinerary. A 12-day itinerary travels between Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi; an expanded 17-day itinerary is also available. The 17-day Gems of Southeast Asia voyage travels from Bangkok to Ho Chi Minh City; the 18-day Journey Along the Mekong travels between Ho Chi Minh City and Luan Prabang. (In 2017 Scenic will also introduce the 22-day Indochina Explorer and Luxury Mekong, which will begin in the north of Vietnam, travel through Laos and Cambodia along the Mekong before concluding in Ho Chi Minh City.) In September of this year, Scenic's 44-passenger all-suite Scenic Aura, will launch on the Irrawaddy River and travel over 11 or 14 days between the cities of Mandalay and Yangon; 18 days roundtrip from Yangon; and 30 days on both the Mekong and Irrawaddy Rivers from Siem Reap to Yangon. The Scenic Aura will feature the same level of luxury as that on the Spirit, though on a slightly smaller scale.

Sanctuary Retreats' 42-passenger, all-suite, all-balcony Sanctuary Ananda Myanmar is another luxury ship, custom built by local craftsmen using traditional materials, with a high staff-to-passenger ratio and large entry-level accommodations, a pair of pools and cabin butler service. Onboard cuisine was developed in partnership with celebrity chef Michelle Bernstein. The ship sails 3- to 11-night itineraries across segments of the Irrawaddy River and its tributary, the Chindwin. The 124-passenger all-balcony Sanctuary Yangzi Explorer also offers a very high staff-to-guest ratio and has some of the largest cabins and suites on the river. The ship sails 3- and 4-night Yangtze River cruises, 5- and 6-night combination rail and river packages and 8- and 9-night river and land packages.

Chartered by Uniworld, the 58-passenger (2 suites, 27 staterooms) River Orchid is a French-Colonial-style river ship that travels a 15-day itinerary through Vietnam and Cambodia on the Mekong River.

Victoria Cruises' has six ships—the Grace, Jenna, Katarina, Lianna, Selina and Sophia—that operate on the Yangtze River with itineraries ranging from 4 to 8 days. Land tour options are offered.

Viking's 256-passenger Emerald sails between Shanghai and Beijing on 13 to 18 day river/land itineraries. Packages of 15 days, between Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh are offered on the 60-passenger Viking Mekong; 15-day Myanmar packages (Bangkok roundtrip) include an Irrawaddy cruise aboard the 60-passenger Myanmar Explorer.