

DOWN STREAM discovery



Luxury aside, a cruise with Pandaw offers an immersive experience and an intimate journey through the history and culture of some of the world's most beautiful riverside destinations.

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The RV Angkor Pandaw originally sailed the Mekong river in 2015, but has since been transferred to the Red River as its enclosed dining room keeps guests warm during cold winter nights.





It was a breezy day, and I was aboard the RV Angkor Pandaw, scheduled to cruise 600kms through Vietnam's Red River from Viet Tri to Halong Bay. My 10-day trip covered only a small portion of the Red River, which actually begins in Yunnan, China, and stretches all the way to the Gulf of Tonkin near northern Vietnam. I watched the waiter make his rounds, deftly balancing his tray as the boat swayed to the rhythm of the rippling water. It was cocktail hour, and I was savouring a Singapore Sling, the drink of the day. My guide Tifo looked at me splayed out on the deck chair and said, "Enjoy it while you can, because tomorrow you're going to jail!"

BEHIND BARS The jail in question turned out to be Hoa Lò Prison, a prison built in the late 1800s, which was later ironically dubbed the Hanoi Hilton by American POWs during the Vietnam War. These walls held prisoners from the Vietnam War as well as Vietnamese communists who resisted the French forces during the Indochina War in the 1950s.

Although most of the compound was recently demolished, the remaining structure is an apt reminder of the terrors that took place within the building. Concrete beds with foot shackles bestow a sense of doom that pervades the entire premises. Prisoners kept in the communal and solitary cells of the Hanoi Hilton were subjected to this inhumane practice, and it was clear from the placement of the shackles that many prisoners would have spent most of the time lying bound to their beds, as there was simply no other imaginable position for them to be in, with both feet tethered to the bed. And if that wasn't daunting enough, the portable guillotine on display at the end of the communal cell was a stark statement as to the final stop of the inmates' journey.

A war veteran aboard the cruise shared his distaste for the building's gruesome history as we strolled through its gallery of horrors. I nodded in agreement. We were assigned an hour to explore the premises, which I felt was 59 minutes too long! My quick exit led me out

into the open, and I don't think I have ever been more grateful to be able to savour the sunshine and fresh air. Still, Hoa Lò Prison remains a necessary evil, a beacon of history to remind the country of the past it has endured and grown from.

THE PANDAW ADVENTURE My visit to Hoa Lò Prison was facilitated by Pandaw, a company that specialises in unique river cruises. The company was originally established in 1865 and was known as the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company. Today, the company offers cruises through many of the world's renowned rivers, made possible by their steamships' shallow drafts. This opens up many routes that are otherwise inaccessible. Most of Pandaw's destinations, therefore, involve watery roads less travelled, taking visitors on unique cruises.

Instead of the typical fare of staying in a hotel on water, Pandaw offers a more immersive experience of the routes that they ply.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Mining boats harvest sand from Phu Tho or Tuyen Quang and transport them to areas like Hanoi for construction; Pandaw offers cocktail hour, where guests can sample the tittle of the day, aside from the beers, wines, and spirits available on-board; Meeting the locals and learning their culture is a common affair during Pandaw's land excursions.

While guests can choose to lounge on board, few pass up the opportunity to participate in the interesting itineraries that have obviously been planned with much thought. Guests even have the option of exploring the surrounding areas on their own, and Pandaw equips their cruise ships with mountain bikes for precisely this purpose.

The excursions themselves include seamless transfers to points of interest, so guests need do little else other than follow their guide. Pandaw has a pool of knowledgeable guides, as exemplified by Tifo and the second guide on board our cruise, Stephan. Due to his fluency in German and Vietnamese, Stephan was called on to lead the Swiss group on our boat, while Tifo took care of everyone else.

Depending on the weather, the crew handed out umbrellas or cold water before each excursion, just as every other detail of the cruise was planned to a tee. The audio receivers provided were also a major asset, as it meant that guests could roam freely and still listen in on Tifo re-



lating the history of his locale on the wireless sets. Put together, my time on the cruise added up to an unforgettable immersive experience that spanned Viet Tri to Halong Bay.

LUXURY ON-BOARD To simply kick back and relax, there's no better place to do it than aboard the RV Angkor Pandaw. The 16 state-rooms are designed to reflect colonial luxury, with a polished wooden interior making up most of the cabin. These rooms can be outfitted with one king-sized or two twin beds, and all rooms are air-conditioned to keep the hot weather at bay. On cooler days, guests can leave their doors open and enjoy the sights from bed.

Measuring 42 metres from bow to stern, this two-storey boat effortlessly combines extravagance and comfort. The boat's teak and brass finishing creates a cosy ambience, while the Wi-Fi connectivity, library and bar ensure that travellers have everything they need to while the day away. And one of the best indulgences



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Due to the social nature of dining aboard the RV Angkor Pandaw, guests will end the journey with many more friends than they started the cruise with; Blacksmiths in Ly Nhan village forge tools by shaping, tempering, and sharpening metal; The Thai pagoda features a statue of Tu Dao Hanh, who was a famous monk, a water-puppet choreographer, and an inventor in the 12th century.



on board the RV Angkor Pandaw is enjoying a perfect sunset at the lounge bar while relaxing with a tippie.

When the steamship sails from one stop to another, guests can stretch out on the observation deck and take in the refreshing breeze. On the journey from Ha Nam to Ninh Binh, I managed to spend the entire commute – lasting approximately three hours – on the observation deck just watching the scenery pass me by. Taking in the spectacular views along the river was an experience in and of its own; the deck is a great place to catch a glimpse of the locals' lives, be it a mining-boat operator drying his laundry at the back of a barge, or villagers on motorcycles and bicycles waiting for ferries to cross the river.

A gong sounded every afternoon and night, indicating that food was served. Meals took place in an enclosed dining room on the upper deck, which kept everyone cool during the day, and regulated the temperature at night. This was great as the temperatures fluctuated

between seven to 30 degrees Celsius, all in the same day!

Asian delights such as *ban xeo* (Vietnamese fried pancake) and Red River tilapia graced the menu, with ingredients consisting of fresh local produce, all served in the boat's enclosed dining room. I found myself looking forward to these get-togethers at the end of each day not only because of the delicious food, but also the social aspect of it, as guests share tables and mingle with each other.

This daily ritual created a delightful ambience of cheer and camaraderie, and by the end of the journey, I had become acquainted with every other guest on the boat – an experience I know I will cherish long after my days with Pandaw. Few things rival being aboard the RV Angkor Pandaw, and the excursions are one of them.

ARTISANS AT WORK As a writer, I'm endlessly fascinated by those who seem to be able to create something out of nothing, and the

province of Vinh Phuc is filled with people who do just that. The region, located 70km north of Hanoi, is the site of two villages, Bich Chu and Ly Nhan, both of which were on our itinerary. The villages boast well-known cottage industries in the country, and while the villagers of Bich Chu are highly skilled in carpentry, Ly Nhan is home to masterful blacksmiths.

As my tour group walked through Bich Chu village, we saw carpenters hard at work at every turn. Some were feeding planks of wood through buzz saws, while others worked with chisels and makeshift mallets. It was apparent how invested they were in their craft, as some of the sculptures looked like they belonged in a UNESCO World Heritage temple! The works produced here, the result of skilled craftsmanship passed down through the generations, are mostly furniture or altar adornments.

Neighbouring this carpentry village is the steelwork centre of Ly Nhan. Apparently, owing to the stellar quality of the various items such as knives, scissors and sickles made here,



ABOUT PANDAW

The Irrawaddy Flotilla Company was established by Scots merchants in 1865, and by the 1920s, the company had over 650 vessels in its fleet working the rivers of Burma (now Myanmar). The fleet was scuppered during the Japanese invasion in 1942, and was revived by Paul and Roser Strachan in 1995. The name Pandaw came from Paul Strachan's discovery of an original Clyde-built steamship of the same name. Today, Pandaw cruises through many rivers across the globe, including the Amazon in South America, Brahmaputra on the Indian continent and Chindwin in Myanmar.

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DID YOU KNOW?

Water puppetry dates back to the 11th century, originating from the villages of the Red River. This traditional performance takes place in waist-deep water, tracing its roots to the days when villagers would entertain each other as the rice fields flooded.

Puppeteers control wooden dolls from behind a screen, making it seem as if the puppets are moving on their own in the water.

Today, visitors can enjoy these performances at the Thang Long theatre in Hanoi, or the Thanh Hai theatre in Hai Duong, Vietnam.



Travelling on a rowboat is a great way to explore the narrow waterways that meander between the limestone karsts at Ha Long Bay.



During excursions, guests often share the same boats that ferry locals from one riverbank to the other, allowing for friendly exchanges with locals.



An example of the blending between Catholicism and Vietnam's local culture lies in this 300-year-old home in Duong Lam village.





ABOVE Sculptures portray the overcrowding and usage of shackles, which were only part of the horrors that prisoners had to endure at the Hanoi Hilton.

Ly Nhan's products, which are still mostly handmade, are a favourite among the Vietnamese. No one really knows how this trade spread in the village, but it is believed that a duke once visited Ly Nhan, only to find its dwellers ensnared in gambling, drinking and other vices. In order to help the villagers overcome their decadent lifestyle, the duke recruited blacksmiths from the surrounding countryside and encouraged the villagers to pick up the trade as well, turning Ly Nhan into the forging community it is today. I enjoyed picking up these little informative gems, which made each place I visited so much more interesting.

BRIDGING BELIEFS With its long history of Buddhism dating back to the 2nd century AD, as well as the introduction of Catholicism in the 16th and 17th centuries, Vietnam has an intriguing tapestry of religions, each with its unique architectural traditions, which often overlap with interesting effect.

I witnessed this unique fusion first-hand when I visited the Phat Diem Cathedral, located in the Ninh Binh province. The cathedral

is a perfect embodiment of east-meets-west in a religious, as well as an architectural, context. Built in 1892, the structure features arched roofs, dragon carvings often associated with Chinese temples, stone sculptures and a Lourdes-style grotto reminiscent of western influences. A couple from my tour group who were architects, had a field day exploring the church's unique features, and they pointed out that the stone-lattice swastikas on the church walls were indeed a rare sight.

The Tay Phuong pagoda was another beautiful religious site. Reaching the Tay Phuong pagoda involves a steep climb of 237 steps. During my hike up, I was accompanied by another shipmate who was a Buddhist from San Francisco. He told me how exciting it was learning more about his own religion, and I couldn't help but agree with him, having seen a different side to Catholicism myself; up until that day, I'd never seen a swastika – which is a symbol of auspiciousness more common to Buddhism and Hinduism – in a church before! It was great to see how religions can incorporate elements from local beliefs and traditions.

When we finally made it to Tay Phuong, beautiful Buddhist statues carved from jackfruit trees greeted us, and I found myself wondering if the carpenters from Bich Chu had anything to do with the breath-taking statuary.

A RICH JOURNEY Nothing beats discovering new cultures, and Pandaw knows how to thrill guests on that front. With its immersive travel concept and unparalleled service, Pandaw is so much more than just a river cruise.

It shines from a social perspective, as guests spend every adventure, meal and evening cocktail together, and that's really the hidden wonder of the cruise. Aboard the RV Angkor Pandaw, I was touched by the passion of the architect couple, the zen of the American Buddhist, and the tales of the war veteran. These people were only a handful of the 30 travellers I had the privilege to meet, and I left the cruise having shared a beautiful adventure with my shipmates. And ultimately, that is the most valuable experience I took home with me. ☺

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