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On a Myanmar River Cruise, a Rare Chance to Interact With Burmese Monks

A cruise down the Irrawaddy River offers a glimpse into the cultural ritual of providing food for monks.

BY MARK ORWOLL

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When you wake at 4:45 a.m. on the [Irrawaddy River](#), this is what you hear: frogs croaking on the riverbanks, the high whine of a lone motor scooter bouncing down a village dirt road, the low chatter of some early-morning fishermen passing beneath the window of your ship cabin, and, for some bizarre reason, some type of Burmese pop emanating from an unseen loudspeaker far downstream.

Waiting at the gangway is Yi Mon, activities director of the *Scenic Aura*, a 44-passenger luxury riverboat that sails seasonally from [Mandalay](#), Myanmar, to points south, including the vast temple complex of Bagan. We whisper our good mornings, then step cautiously down a narrow plank leading to a loud ferry, the *Ruby Boat*.

Five minutes after pulling away from our ship, anchored midstream, we arrive at the sandy eastern shore. Up the steep bank at street level a passenger van idles, its cargo bay filled with crates of juice boxes, small milk cartons, and individual packets of cookies. Yi Mon inspects the bounty, pronounces it satisfactory, and off we drive through the dark dirt alleys of Nyaung-U town.

We are going to feed the monks of Myanmar.

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There are an estimated 500,000 Buddhist monks in Myanmar. [Mark Orwell](#)

Monks in Burmese culture

Under the precepts of Theravada Buddhism, as practiced in [Myanmar](#), Buddhist monks must beg for food from the local population so they can focus their attention on spiritual matters. They're proscribed by their vows from eating before dawn or after 12 p.m., so they seek their first meal when the sun rises and their second at mid-morning. A common sight throughout Myanmar (the country's former military government changed the name from [Burma](#) in 1989), red-robed monks hold begging bowls and stroll the streets of cities and villages, going from door to door and store to store to seek sustenance.

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Increased access to public education means more families can send their children to school. There's increasingly less impetus to enroll kids in monasteries and nunneries for more than a token period of religious observance.

The Burmese people, 90 percent of whom are Buddhist, are uncommonly generous to the monks; at mid-morning, even the most humble home and café will offer a handout. But it's a different story before sunrise, when most of Myanmar's population are likely still asleep. As a result, food kitchens in some communities provide daybreak meals to the monks. It is to one of those charitable distribution centers that Yi Mon and I, as passengers on the *Scenic Aura*, are heading with our van full of cookies and drinks as the first hint of dawn steals over Nyaung-U.

Partnering with local communities on a cruise

Scenic Luxury Cruises & Tours, the Australian parent company of the *Scenic Aura*, began as a motor-coach tour operator for seniors in 1986. Over the years, the company expanded its business to include five-star riverboats on the Irrawaddy, the Rhine, the Mekong, the Volga, and beyond.

The company launched the *Aura* in Myanmar in 2016, only five years after the country's military junta was dissolved in favor of a civilian government. Since that changeover, stringent restrictions on foreign visitors have been relaxed, and innumerable temples and pagodas in villages throughout the country have opened for tourism.

Scenic's mission has evolved since its early days: beyond giving travelers access to more destinations, the company works with those destinations to develop long-term partnerships at the local level. In Myanmar, the *Scenic Aura* contributes to an ongoing conservation project to support the fishing industry in the northern village of Hsithé. Here, fishermen and river dolphins long ago developed a unique relationship where they work together to catch fish, but the fishermen's livelihood is threatened by commercial over-fishing. In Yandabo, in central Myanmar, the cruise line recently built a much-needed toilet and bath facility for schoolchildren who previously had access to neither. And in Nyaung-U, in addition to other charitable programs, Scenic helps provide food for the monks.

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Early meal time at Dhana Bank, in Nyaung-U. Mark Orwoll

5:30 a.m. at Dhana Bank

Yi Mon and I arrive at the empty high street of Nyaung-U while it's still dark. A cart drawn by a horse clip-clops past us. The creeping sunlight seeps into the streets as villagers in *longyis* and straw hats and driving scooters begin to fill the roads. The scene is one that you won't see played out much anymore beyond a few parts of [Southeast Asia](#).

A red neon sign lights the façade of Dhana Bank (“dhana” means *donation*), the organization [Scenic Tours](#) partners with. Red-robed monks are already lined up and waiting for their meals. (The exact mealtime shifts according to the sunrise.) The various groups of monks tend to line up from tallest to smallest—the tallest being served first. Twelve-quart stockpots rest on

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of them speak. Each holds his compartmentalized container at the ready. Several volunteers

man the cauldrons filled with goat, fish, chicken, mango salad, vegetables, and rice. The staff from the ship coordinate with the monks and nuns in advance for what foods might be needed, and the *Scenic Aura* sources locally as much as it can. All foods are purchased in Myanmar. I stand at the far end, ready to hand out milk and cookies.

Then the line begins to move. The silent monks hold their bowls out to make it easier to pour in the food. The older monks don't look me in the face as they accept the food, but the little monks don't hide their gaze. They're staring—not at me, but at the cookies I'm handing out. Goat they get every day. But cookies?

U Htay Win (“U” is an honorific for a well-respected man) is the secretary of Dhana Bank, which began in Nyaung-U in 1987. Continually smiling, he returns to his tiny office after the food service to begin his daily paperwork and to prepare for the next day's meal. He estimates the service now feeds 200 monks a day instead of the 300 from several years ago. But if he is disappointed by those statistics, his grin doesn't show it.

“Mostly we do it to gain merit by supporting the religion,” Htay Win says. “Serving the monks will help you gain spiritual merit.”

Back to the Boat

Yi Mon and I return to the riverbank where the *Ruby Boat* is waiting. A few hands from the ship's crew meet us at the *Scenic Aura* and help us aboard. Some early risers among the passengers wander toward the restaurant for coffee, when one of them sees me and asks what I did that morning in the village.

The answer was complicated, especially from one sleepy traveler to another at 6 a.m. I volunteered, sure, but I hadn't really done that much. I observed, but I had much more to see. I felt good about volunteering, but other people do so much more on a regular basis. Feeding the monks had been worthwhile, fulfilling, and fun. More than anything, my eyes had been opened to a daily ritual that most of us will never see.

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new ocean vessel, *Scenic Lumpe*. The [Luxury Irrawaddy](#) voyages travel between Yangon and

Mandalay (or the reverse) January through March, and October through December.

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