



Pandaw River Cruises



ANNUAL LETTER FROM PAUL STRACHAN, FOUNDER

Dear Pandaw Passenger,

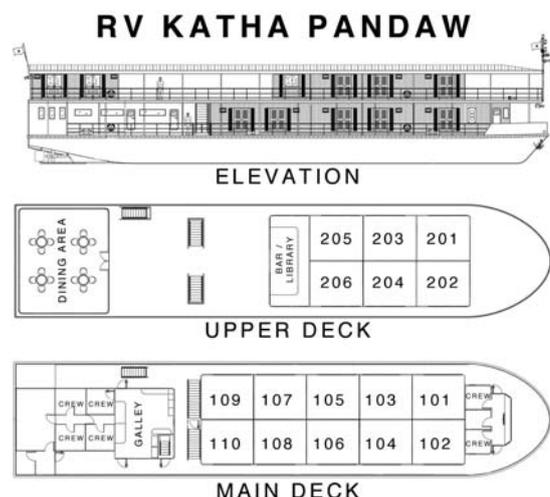
Instead of the usual newsletter I thought I would write to our past passengers personally and tell you what we have been up to and what we are planning for the future. With probably the highest repeat passengers rate in the business, representing a very loyal following, I know that many of you are waiting, watching and wondering ‘What’s next?’ I would also like to share with you a number of ideas I have and projects we are planning.

Currently we have three two ships under construction in Saigon. The *Saigon Pandaw* is a classic thirty stateroom Pandaw along the same design as the *Orient* and *Indochina Pandaws*. Though faithful to the traditional Pandaw design, there are a number of improvements – the staterooms are all upper and main deck and have French sliding windows that open to the promenades, these give better views of the river. There is now a roomy lecture theatre on the lower deck which we use for movies. The saloon bar has been moved to aft of the bridge allowing for a very pleasant observation deck over the bow on the upper deck. I love the feel of these new ships, they are also more practical and efficient to run. The *Saigon Pandaw* will be annually chartered to an American river cruise specialist.

The other ship we are building in Saigon is a smaller K class. We built our first K class in 2000 for the river Kwai in Thailand, where it is still working well under the management of a Thai company. They are called K not because of the Kwai connection but because the hull design was named after the Irrawaddy Flotilla’s ‘Kyan’ class used on the Chindwin River from the 1890s onwards. They work well in exceptionally shallow water, drawing about 80cm. The *Katha* will have just sixteen standard Pandaw staterooms and will ply the Upper Irrawaddy and Chindwin Rivers from January 2012.



RV Katha Pandaw Keel Laying





Pandaw Adventurer in Borneo



Crocodile Spotting in Borneo

not uncomfortable resort style hotel there that is perfectly adequate. I think the ten night combination of Kuching, the cruise and Mulu makes for a perfect Borneo experience

A further K class vessel will be built for Laos. I have long been looking at Laos. It's a tough one. The river is incredibly fast; there are rocks and rapids everywhere. It is both beautiful and exciting and there are a lot to see whether culturally in Vientiane and Luang Prabang, or along the way exploring villages, elephant camps and just jungle. I am just back with my family from a recce from Vientiane to Houei Xai up on the Thai border at the Golden Triangle. This is our second river recce in Laos and I can now confirm that we will be going ahead with this project. Water levels and flow rates are a real concern but with the right design we can do it. A year since we applied, Pandaw Laos Ltd has been granted all the relevant permissions and licences by the government.

However, you can not sail up the Mekong into Laos. There are waterfalls on its Cambodian border, apparently the widest waterfalls in the world. We will have to build the boat in Vietnam, dismantle it and send it over a mountain range by truck and then reassemble it on the banks of the Mekong, floating it off with the monsoon flood. Easy, we Scots have been doing this for lakes in Africa, Latin America and of course in Burma for 150 years.

In January I spent some time in Borneo. The *Orient Pandaw* is running well with a mixed team of Malaysian, Indonesian, Filipino and Cambodian crew under a Burmese Purser! The new expedition boat we built there, called the *Pandaw Adventurer*, must be one of the ugliest vessels ever known to man. Yet it does the job and can shoot the rapids at Pelagus and cope with the fast flowing tributary streams we explore. I felt that eight nights might be a bit long for some people, though a number of Pandaw addicts on board assured me that it was not long enough. The joy of river cruising in Borneo is just to sit on deck and gaze at the moving wall paper of primary rain forest. After a couple of jungle treks, a long house visit and a couple of village stops to look at markets and the Brooke Raj forts there is not an enormous amount to see and do. The excitement is in the passing scenery. We have therefore introduced a shorter five-night cruise which will be combined with two nights in Kuching, where we visit the wildlife parks and sanctuaries, and three nights at the Mulu Caves.

I took a trip up to Mulu for the first time and was really surprised. This is the largest cave complex in the world and you can trek into them and in one case right through. This cave is home to three million bats that swarm out at dusk in great upwards spirals. One of the most extraordinary sites I have seen. The national park is very well run with a good information centre and well-maintained tracks and walkways through the virgin forest.

There is a basic but



Mulu Caves in Borneo



The Mekong in Laos

Now I am not making my usual mistake of offering an itinerary for the inaugural cruise. Inaugurals on the Irrawaddy in 1995, Mekong 2003 and both Borneo and India in 2009 were all fairly disastrous. This time there will be no itinerary and we will take it day by day, as they come. That way no one can complain or sue us, which happened in India for the first time ever. Please don't ask me for dates because I do not want to break promises. When the ship is ready and water levels are right we will make an announcement. Pandaw passengers tend to be seasoned river cruisers and will understand this. The cruise will be from Vientiane to Huei Xai via Luang Prabang with a minimum of eight nights, maybe longer. Huei Xai is just a hop to Chaing Rai in Thailand.

Burma has been running really well this year with *Pandaw II* still under the command of Ko Win Hlaing. The cyclical cruise from Prome to Prome over a month, with passengers booking various segments and getting on and off at various ports along the way works really well. This year we have been full for most of our cruises. Nearly all the people who come on the Burma cruise have been with us elsewhere. I am unaware of any disappointments and still maintain that the Irrawaddy offers the best river cruising anywhere – its that potent mix of the scenic, culture and friendliness.

We had a family holiday on the Upper Irrawaddy over the new year as we do every year. It is like home to us. Many of the crew started with us sixteen years ago and we have all grown together. We now have the sons and daughters of our original team joining. One sailor told me that he was getting to old for it (at 45!) and was sending his son (18) to replace him. The family would then have the same income. By the way, Ko Po Ko (also 45), the rotund cook that many of you will know, is now a grandparent.

Burma has been very much in the news these past few months. Interest in tourism and indeed river cruising is reviving. Since her release Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has now clarified her stance and says that certain types of tourism are permissible. I wonder if this includes Pandaw? Certainly one would hope that what is meant is that mass tourism, as now experienced at Angkor, is to be discouraged whilst individual tourism, which is done so well at Luang Prabang in Laos, is to be encouraged. Alas I doubt if the hotel companies and tour operators will pay much heed to this. Bums on seats tourism does little for a country but is a trap they most seem to fall into. One of the few good things about the sanctions is that they ensured that only a very few very savvy travellers went to Burma. Till now tourist damage has been pleasantly contained.

On staff matters I am very pleased to let you know that Neville Joseph has been promoted to Fleet Manager Mekong, taking on a supervisory role of the pursers there. With our Mekong fleet growing from three to five vessels next year Neville is going to be a busy man. He is well up for it. Chantal Aguetant from France is appointed Hotel Director and roves between Borneo, Burma and the Mekong on an eternal mission for improvement that all our teams understand and respond to so well. Chantal has worked with Pandaw on and off for several years and it is great to have her on board full time now.

You may ask where we are based these days? Tricky question. I work out of a barn in Highland Perthshire in Scotland with a couple of winter months afloat on our ships. Miss Bee, our accountant works from home in Saigon and our reservations ladies Emily and June home work from Singapore. (Emily became a proud mother on Christmas Day.) We may seem scattered but the reality is that this arrangement works incredibly efficiently with us all online and talking on skype as if in adjoining offices.

Last year we set up Pandaw America with an old friend and colleague Marcus Leskovar. Enviably based in the Colorado ski resort of Breckenridge, Marcus and his team are taking care of American enquiries and developing new relationships with high end American river cruise companies. Tom Markwell has joined Pandaw America as VP Marketing and brings a wealth of experience, expertise and contacts.

At this point let me share with you my vision for the future of Pandaw. I am seeing us moving in two directions. The first we might call 'Classic Pandaw' with our four thirty-plus cabin ships plying the Mekong fulfilling demand from the larger river cruise organisations who mainly work with us by chartering these vessels. Then there will be 'Safari Pandaw' on our new K-class vessels Smaller, lighter ships exploring deeper. The atmosphere will be more informal, more like a yacht party than a cruise ship These would include rivers in Laos, Burma, Borneo and possibly a longer expedition cruise on the Mekong. People may discover us by travelling on a Classic Pandaw, love it and move onto Safari Pandaw for more adventurous expedition cruising.

Imitation is the highest form of flattery. In 1995 we started river cruising in Burma and now there are half a dozen other ships running or said to be under construction, They follow our format and are run by ex Pandaw staff. Likewise on the Mekong, where we were the first in 2003 there are at least six other ships who have followed us, emulating our styles and traditions, following our itineraries and again mainly run by ex Pandaw staff. We should be annoyed but actually it *is* flattering. Former Pandaw team members, lured to work for these new companies with offers of greater benefits and promotion, meet me and say thank you for what Pandaw gave them. Some of these new ships offer splash pools on the sundeck and a host of smart amenities, yet they all lack one thing – the magic!

A separate newsletter should be attached with this letter detailing the current activities of our Pandaw Charity (if not please download from our website). Nearly all our pro bono activities are in Burma because we believe this is where the need is greatest. Burma which is now the poorest and most deprived country in Asia, yet ironically gets the least aid or help. Whether you blame the generals or ineffective sanctions (or both), there is a prevailing humanitarian crisis in Burma that the world ignores. This trip I visited the shanty settlements that have sprung up along the riverside in Mandalay and was outraged by the way people are forced to live. We have identified a number of projects, working mainly with local Buddhist organisations, that are doing something. Shanta Kingham an American living in Rangoon, is our project co-ordinator has put the newsletter together. Shanta is doing a fantastic job making sure your money gets into the right hands.

One of the great pleasures of hopping from ship to ship as I do as part of my job is meeting our passengers. It is also a great way of discovering people's likes and dislikes and the changing direction of the way in which people are travelling now. We seem to be carrying more and more younger people, sometimes travelling with older kids. This new generation are booking online and taking control of their own travel arrangements. Thus the role of the traditional travel agent is evolving from offering fixed packages to more of a consultancy role. It is interesting also to note that whereas passengers from the UK used to be the largest nationality travelling with us, it is now Australians followed by North Americans.

Finally, I would like to thank all our Pandaw Passengers for their loyalty and co-operation over the past fifteen years. We have gone from strength to strength thanks to our ships, our crews but most importantly our passengers who make every cruise an adventure. Every time I go on a ship now I meet people who tell me they have been with us three, four and sometimes even five times. They all ask the same question 'What's next?' We just have to keep coming up with new rivers.

All best wishes,



Paul Strachan

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Paul Strachan, Founder