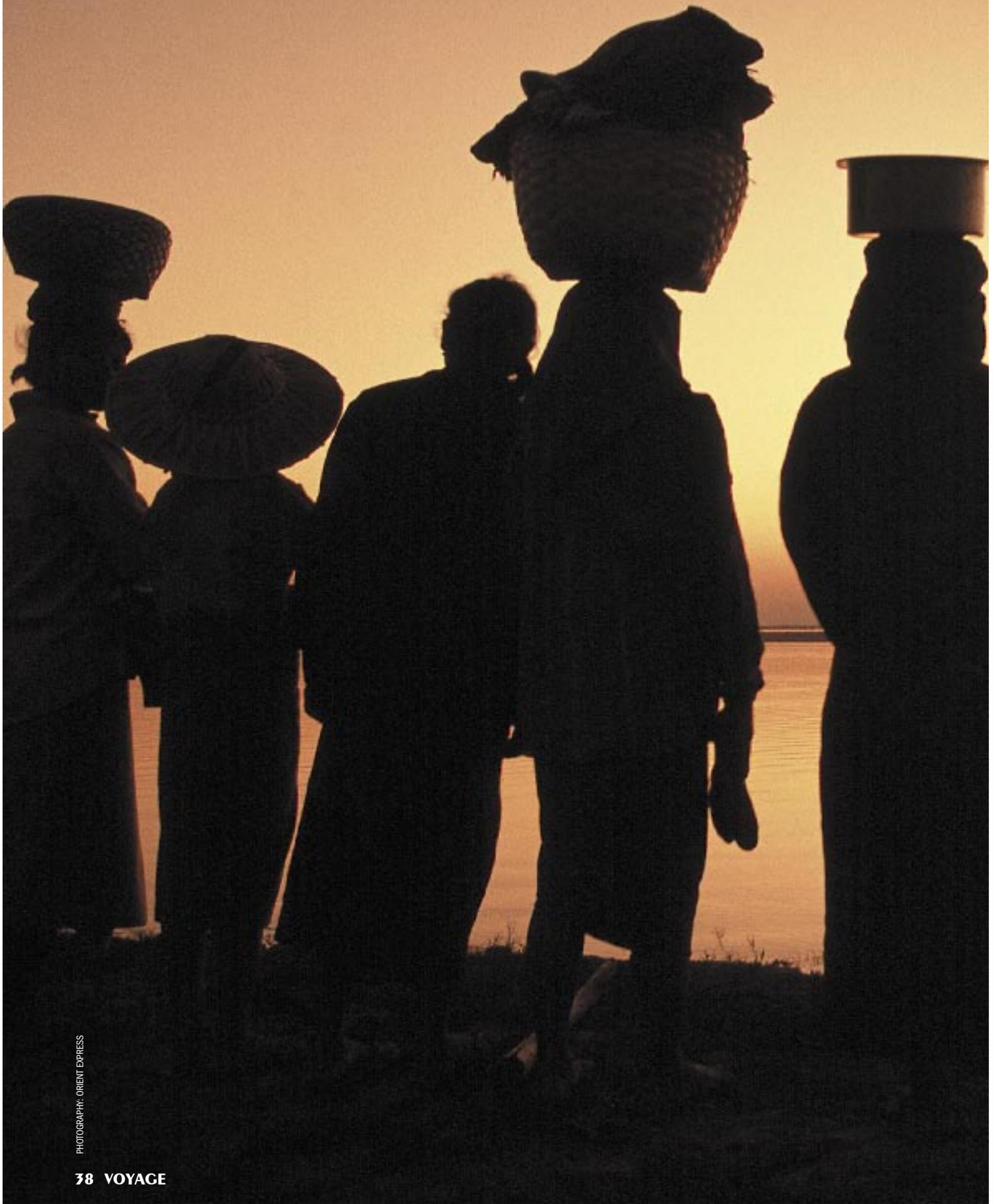




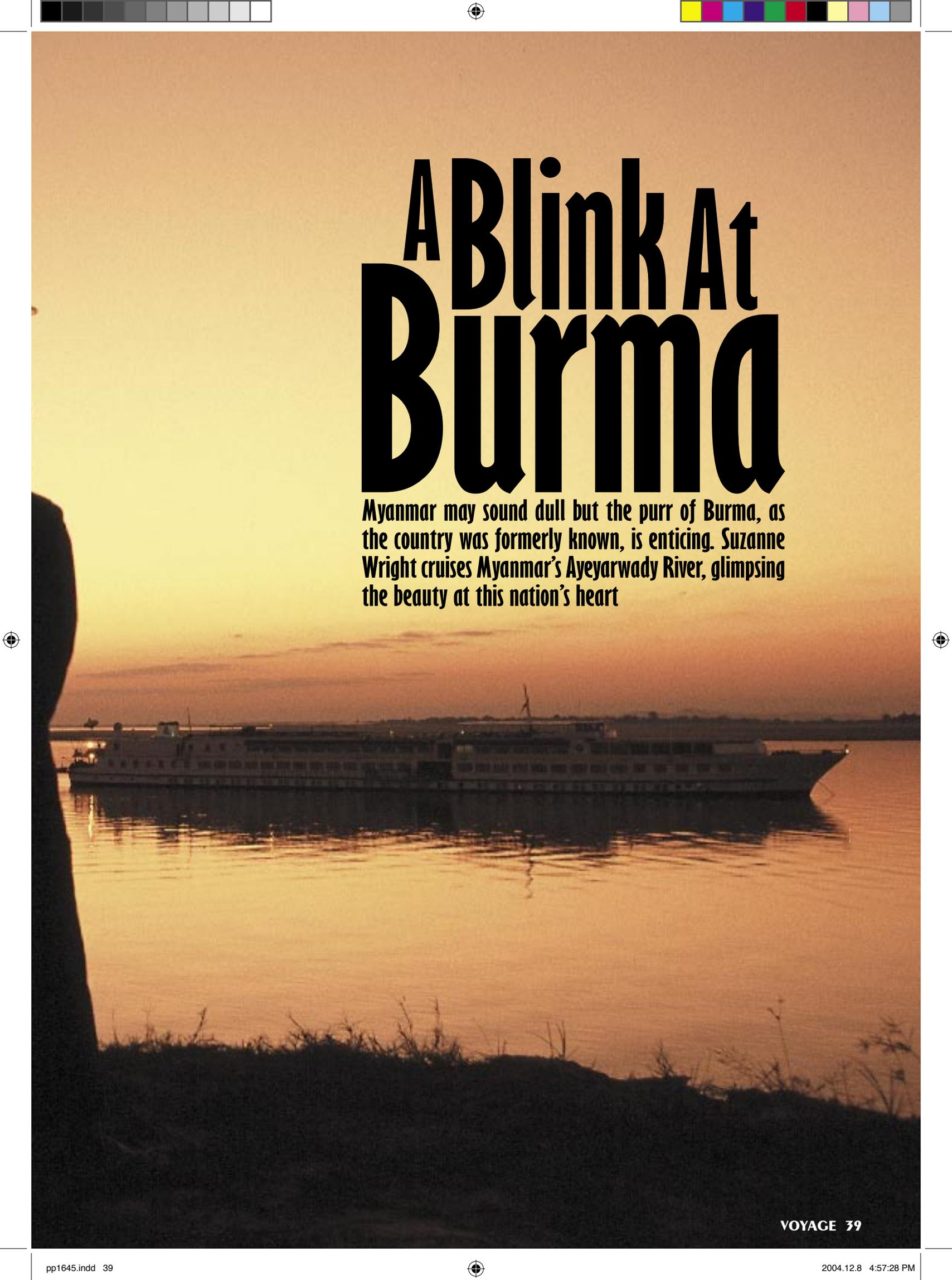
ASIA | Burma



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38 VOYAGE





A Blink At Burma

Myanmar may sound dull but the purr of Burma, as the country was formerly known, is enticing. Suzanne Wright cruises Myanmar's Ayeyarwady River, glimpsing the beauty at this nation's heart

I had to blink several times to be sure my eyes weren't deceiving me: yes, there was a flotilla of multicoloured lanterns – 2,003 to be exact – bobbing on the surface of the Irrawaddy (now known as Ayeyarwady) River under an inky night sky in Burma.

All day long, right under our noses, our crew, along with villagers enlisted from the adjacent town had been affixing candles to four-inch square bamboo rafts and speeding them into the river. When we docked for dinner that evening, they were simultaneously lit. As we ascended the stairs to the upper deck to celebrate an elderly passenger's birthday, the magical sight engulfed us.

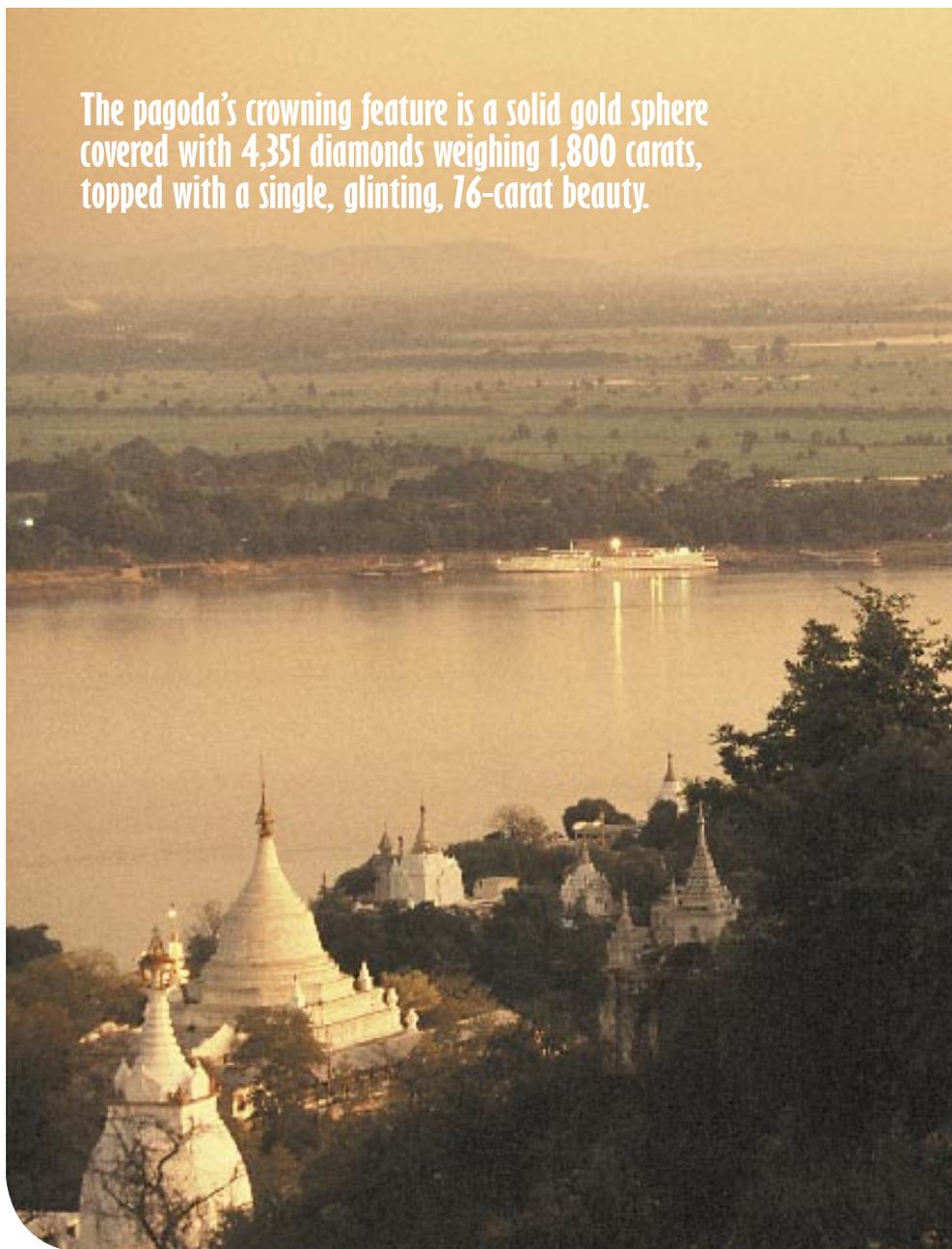
This wasn't the first – or last – time I'd blink in amazement at Burma, one of Asia's most mysterious and untouched nations. Long hidden from the world, it is reopening its timeless charms to discerning travellers from around the globe.

The Road to Mandalay, operated by the Orient-Express, is a fabulously luxe way to experience this land of gentle people and unforgettable vistas. Slowly plying the river, the rhythms of the country unfold. The recently renovated ship holds 110 passengers but is not always fully booked; my three-day voyage carries just 35 of us, so there is an even higher staff-to-guest ratio than normal. By the second meal the attentive servers know our names and our drink preferences. We are a chatty, well-travelled group; by the end of the cruise many of us have swapped addresses and all agree that Burma is a marvelously unspoiled destination.

Before boarding, I spend two days in Rangoon with the Orient-Express guide, Gi-Gi – a girl with an infectious giggle. We walk the city's tree-lined streets swarming with men and women in sarong-like *longis*. I try hard not to stare at the saffron and vermilion-robed monks; I am surprised to see many carrying briefcases. On the sidewalks young men hawk glossy posters of Britney Spears, while women roast corn and sell ice. Friends crouch over low tea tables, sipping cup after cup of brew, trading stories.

The city's largest market, Scott's, is a loud experience of bartering and buying. I plough through the aisles, stopping in booth after booth to admire baskets, clothing, jewellery. The food stalls are tempting, but I plan to eat lunch at the storied Strand Hotel, so I reluctantly keep moving. Finally, after comparing a dizzying array of choices, I buy several lengths of beautiful embroidered fabric to be made into *longis*. The middle-aged seamstress takes my measurements and drapes me in a swath of blue. She tells me to come back tomorrow when my *longis* will be ready.

I love the unexpected beauty of the dark faces of the men, women and children decorated with the dried paste of yellowish thanaka bark, which protects their cheeks and foreheads from the blazing sun. I appreciate the irony of a petite woman smoking a fat, hand-rolled cheroot. I smile at the broad, red grins of men with betel-stained teeth, and the friendly laughter of children who scramble toward me. I blink again



The pagoda's crowning feature is a solid gold sphere covered with 4,351 diamonds weighing 1,800 carats, topped with a single, glinting, 76-carat beauty.

with pleasure.

The undeniable highlight of the city – and one of the most fantastic man-made structures in the world – is a glittering shrine called Shwedagon Pagoda. A Buddhist Oz-like city rising 98 metres in the sky, it's a glorious gold-spired sight. The myriad of conical stupas are covered in gold leaf and encrusted with precious stones. The crowning feature is a solid gold sphere covered with 4,351 diamonds weighing 1,800 carats, topped with a single, glinting, 76-carat beauty.

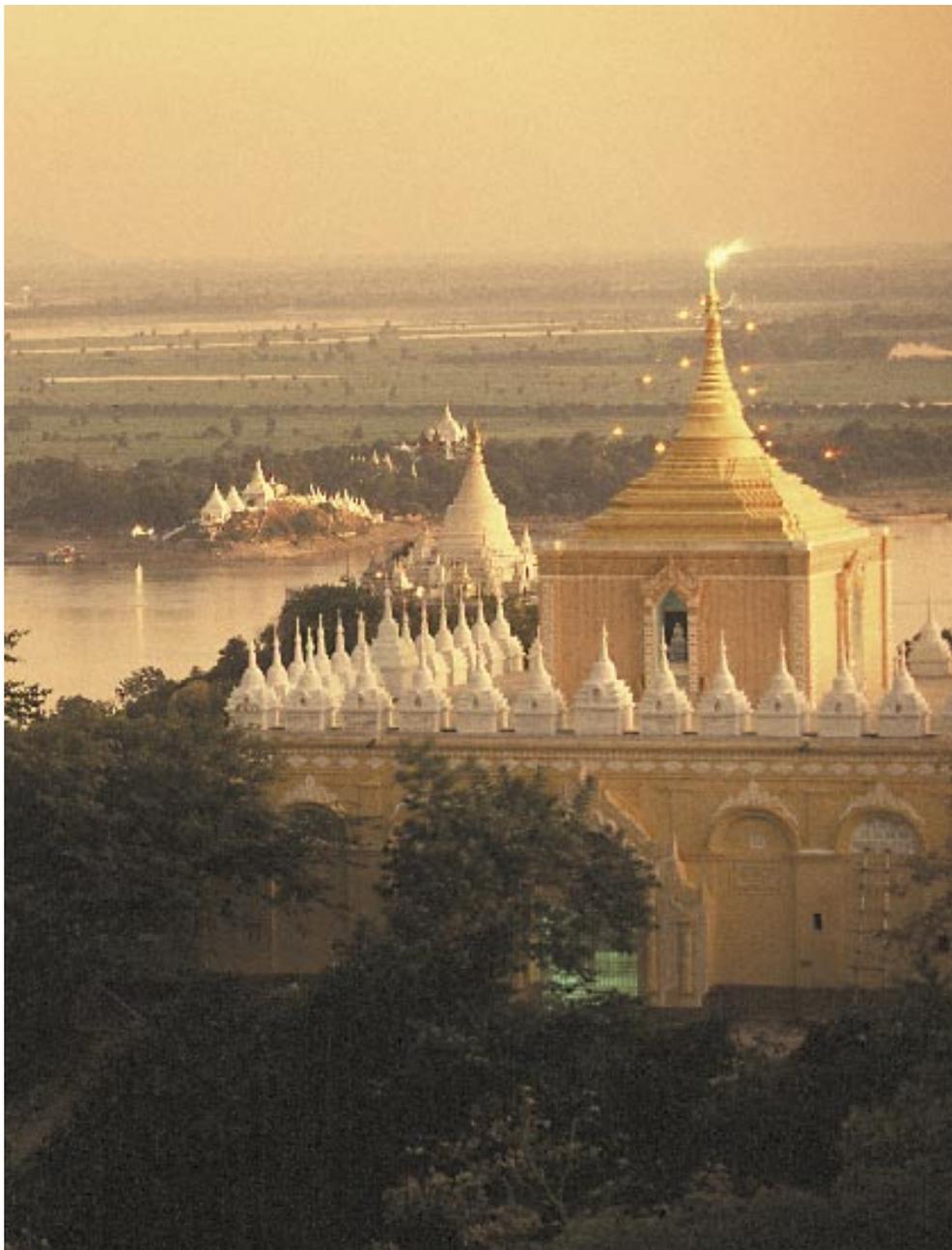
Barefoot, we circle the marble platform clockwise, gazing at the highly decorated temples and statues donated by believers, watching the faithful in meditation, ladling water on Buddhist figures, lighting incense, offering flowers. Rows of women circle the platform, using brooms made of twigs to sweep the marble floor. An endearingly shy group of shaven-head nuns clad in pink ask to have their picture with me. With the universal affection of sisters we encircle waists and smile for the camera. Blink, blink.

Onboard the Road to Mandalay, our guide, the unflappable San (Eddy Murphy's long lost twin) amazes us with an encyclopedic knowledge of historic facts and figures. We try – but never succeed – at tripping him up.

We stop at Bagan, the spiritual heart of the country and one of the most extraordinary sights in Southeast Asia. More than 2,000 Buddhist temples, pagodas and stupas erected in the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries dot 42 square metres of countryside. Panting, we climb stair after stair to the top of Ananda Pagoda for a sweeping view of the crimson and mango-coloured sunset. Our appreciation is reverent, silent. Back onboard more than 600 monasteries, temples and pagodas that house 5,000 monks in this holy city illuminate the darkened hills of Sagaing in a twinkling display.

The following morning, we watch rural life unfold along the river: women washing their hair and bodies on the banks; a profusion of painted ceramic pots on a barge headed upriver for a

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festival; rafts made of teak logs lashed together, with modest huts sheltering the passengers (later the logs will be disassembled and sold, and those on board will take buses back to their towns). We wave at the passing vessels, and they invariably return our greetings.

Our meals are excellent. There are Thai, Vietnamese and Burmese lunch buffets, and dinner delights like olive-filled chicken breast with capers, wild mushroom risotto, chocolate mousse, French cheeses and wines. One night we are treated to a royal acrobatic performance on deck; another night the staff offers a talent show; on the last some puppetry.

While the boatman slowly plies the lake, I look up to see monks silhouetted against the setting sun, riding bikes across the rickety U Bein Bridge as ox carts emerge from the shimmering waters.

On our last day we disembark to watch the offering of alms at a monastery: a seemingly endless procession of monks as young as five clutching their lacquer rice bowls receive donations of bananas, rice and chicken from locals. Next we visit a nunnery to see the sweet-faced young girls who memorise Buddhist teaching for seven hours a day, and make excursions to factories to see impressive Burmese handicrafts including hammered silverware, intricate woodcarving and glossy lacquerware.

That night, we take in another spectacular golden sunset from a rented canoe in Lake Amarapura. While the boatman slowly plies the lake, I look up to see monks silhouetted against the setting sun, riding bikes across the rickety U Bein Bridge as ox carts emerge from the shimmering waters – a *National Geographic* photograph in the making.

Click goes my camera, blink go my eyes one last time. ❖

Golden Days: (left) The Pagoda at Shwekyetye; (above from top) On deck on the Road to Mandalay cruise; Onboard dining

Essentials

Suzanne Wright travelled with Orient Express who offer various Road to Mandalay cruises lasting from 3-11 nights and costing from USD 2,330-4,720 including all meals, accommodation, in-tour flights and excursions. Cruises depart between July and April with special departures available with guest lectures. (+65 6392 3500; www.orient-express.com)