

# Northern Vietnam Cruise off the beaten track to a magical land of temples and pagodas

I am watching from the deck as on the riverbank, one of the crew draws on a thick hawser from the boat and ties it firmly round a clump of bamboo. This is to bring the boat close enough to the bank to enable us to disembark. Each time we do this it is different, sometimes simple planking followed by a scramble up the bank is enough (there are always half a dozen crew stationed to help anyone unsteady) at other times we all clamber into small boats or board one of the ferries which criss-cross the river, in the company local people, their ducks and pigs. One thing we almost never do is to moor at a conventional dock for this is a Pandaw cruise, fulfilling its brief to take us off the beaten track to visit villages, pagodas and temples along the rivers of Northern Vietnam.

The Pandaw Cruise Company was established, not without difficulty, by an energetic and enterprising Scotsman, Paul Strachan. He based the design of his boats on those of the nineteenth century Irrawaddy Flotilla Company in Burma. When this was privatised some vessels were purchased by Todd, Findlay & Co, a Scottish company based in Rangoon, after which a company was formed in **Glasgow** with Paddy Henderson, the shipping line and the shipbuilders Denny, of Dumbarton making up a triumvirate of Scots owners. Vessels were made on the Clyde and shipped out in parts to be reassembled in Rangoon and soon 600 ships were in operation, some even carrying the first Thomas Cook tourists up the Irrawaddy. This continued until 1942 when the flotilla was scuppered to prevent its falling into Japanese hands. After the war more ships were ordered from Denny's including 6 shallow-draft vessels built at Yarrow on the Upper Clyde which amazingly sailed out to Burma under their own power.

Almost 50 years later it was one of these old ships which Paul found rotting on the bank at Mandalay with pigs, chickens and naked babies running about on it. Paul, who had started a cruise company with chartered boats was desperate for a vessel of his own so he bought her, the first Pandaw, which he restored to her original teak and brass glory.

Our Pandaw, R.V. Angkor Pandaw has brought us from glorious Halong Bay where thousands of limestone karsts topped with trees rise sheer and dramatic from the misty sea. We are a group of 20 passengers looked after by an almost equal number of crew. We enjoy comfortable cabins, a spacious upper deck on which to relax, wonderful food and drink and exceptional service - and every day there are excursions to less-visited places.

In Halong Bay we are able to sail away from the tourist hordes until our vessel finds itself alone in this still and magical landscape. We then board smaller boats and sail into the Dark d through a pitch-black tunnel from which, ducking stalagmites, we emerge into a secret pool similar to that in the film Indochine which had been screened on board the night before. Unforgettable.

Another time we sail to Three Peach Island where we find cocktails and canapés awaiting us on the beach. A Pandaw trip is full of these little treats. When we arrive at Than Ha to watch a Water Puppet show the crew had been before us to erect an awning for us to sit under. Throughout this trip we are experiencing Vietnam through a watery lens; by sea, on the wide ochre coloured rivers and in the paddy fields ( in which we see the living working and the dead buried) and so it is not surprising that this ancient traditional entertainment involves water. The performance takes place in a large tank disguised with a bright green skirt and vivid scarlet and yellow tenting decorated with dragons A rattan curtain hides the puppeteers who operate the puppets via long poles just below the water level. A small orchestra of pipes and drums plus a singer create the mood and the performance begins with the entry of a figure on the water, apparently a farmer in his paddy fields. He is followed by two dragons which undulate sinuously through the water (the actions are amazing throughout.) then comes a yellow turtle, two water buffalo and a group noble-looking people in a boat. At the end the dragons breathe real smoke, firecrackers explode and the water is whipped into waves. Even though we don't understand a thing we enjoy the spectacle enormously, as do the local people, mainly grannies who have picked children up from school, who join us under the Pandaw awning.

Many pagodas are fronted by a lotus pond and it is in these that water puppetry was originally (and sometimes still is) staged. At Sai Son village we visit the Thay Pagoda, one of the oldest in Vietnam. Set in a garden with bonsai trees

and orchids the atmosphere is peaceful. In the main hall we see banks of Buddhas in different colours. There are offerings of flowers and also rather incongruously, boxes of biscuits. In another room there is a statue of the monk Tu Dao Hanh, after whom the pagoda is named: he was mystic, a medical man, an inventor as well as a choreographer of water puppetry.

We visit several temples and pagodas but one of the most unusual buildings we see is the Catholic Cathedral at Phat Diem. Built in 1892 by a Vietnamese priest, Tran Luc known as Father Six, it has a bell tower 'with spreading oriental wings' and is part of a large complex of schools and convents all built in a heady mix of European gothic and Oriental pagoda style. The wooden interior of the cathedral with its blue vaulted ceiling with golden-winged cherubs and its granite altar backed by lavish scarlet and gold lacquer work is truly breathtaking. Phat Diem's Catholic Prince Bishop ruled here with a private army until the French took over in 1951. From the bell tower the protagonist in Graham Green's book *The Quiet American* watches as local people seek shelter from the ravages of the Franco-Indochinese war.

Throughout this trip we come into contact with local people going about their everyday lives: we visit them working in a ceramic village, a village devoted to bonsai trees, a carpentry village, a village where bamboo is made into pots and a village devoted to the making of the traditional conical hats. We see rice noodles, sticky rice cake and green bean cakes being made and we sit with families before their ancestor's altar sipping rice wine. We are also entertained, we watch the wonderful Lion Dance and at Hung Lo Temple we see a troupe in traditional dress dancing and singing the folk song Hat Xoan which has actually been designated part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO.

As we travel by bus our guide sets us a game which he says will give us at least 5 words of Vietnamese to take home. He divides us into four teams, then repeats the 5 words twice, telling us to note them down phonetically. Each team is then given the same number of dong and the clue that the words mean vegetables or herbs, before being let loose on a village market. The team which brings the correct items at the lowest price to be the winner of a bottle of wine. All good fun especially as our team won!

Vietnam is a county in transition. On the rivers we pass barges full of sand and aggregates and along the river banks we see banana plantations being uprooted

to build new roads. Preparations are underway to increase tourism. We though, are never pestered or given any sort of 'hard sell', on the contrary we are invariably welcomed by friendly faces and offered drinks. Near the town of Ninh Bin however, at Tam Coc on the Ngo Dong river in an area known as 'Halong Inland', we take rides in sampans rowed by ladies, as it turns out with their feet. With the gentle swish of the oars it is a relaxing journey with paddy fields on either side and sugar-pink water lilies and white ducks near enough to touch. We pass through caves as at Halong Bay, and finally come to a pool where our rower stops, I think to turn round, but no, it is to give each of us back a massage! And very good it is too. She then brings out a bag of 'handicrafts' to sell, all quite pretty and after a brief bargaining session, cheap; I buy a small bag. I consider this excursion one of the best so far but as we get out of the sampan a photographer rushes up to sell us the pictures of us he'd taken from the riverbank. It is then that I hear rumblings from discontented punters who are being asked by the boat ladies for bigger 'tips.' Our guides have shielded us from all this but I imagine this scene in a few years time and am glad to have come before this beautiful place has completely lost its innocence.

We have travelled 653 km and sailed on 8 rivers but all too soon it is time to leave our Pandaw and its marvellous crew who entertain and dance with us on the last evening and deliver us safely to the airport the next day.

When travelling far afield I always try to use a national airline and Vietnam airlines does not disappoint. The plane is new, the food is good and the sight of the air hostesses in their pale jade ao dai, makes a good last memory of beautiful Vietnam.

## Information

Prices for Pandaw's 10-night 'Halong Bay and Red River' cruise start from US\$3,069 per person, based on two sharing. (Given in dollars as rate fluctuates)

This includes 10 nights on RV Angkor Pandaw, meals, some drinks, transfers, excursions, entrance fees, guide services, gratuities to crew.

Departures available year round. [www.pandaw.com](http://www.pandaw.com) / 0208 326 5620

Vietnam Airlines [www.vietnamairlines.com](http://www.vietnamairlines.com) operates the UK's only nonstop scheduled services to Vietnam, with daily flights from Heathrow T4 to either Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City. Return Economy fares start from £464 per person.

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