UPDATE

Light up the Lake

New resorts and tours operators are rocking the peaceful waters of Inle Lake in a scramble to ready for the cresting wave of Burma-bound travelers. BY MERRITT GURLEY
Beyond Toiled by farmers and water buffaloes, and shows you more of Inle than most tours,” twisting creek is lined with paddy fields, dotted with more than 1,000 ancient stupas. “The trip takes you farther and with remarkable scenery of the lake, where you find here and those in Spain,” says Philippe Arnaud, the general manager of Sanctum Inle. At first it seems too aristocratic a concept to be driving a luxury resort, but the more I explore, the more sense it makes. The lake provides such a tranquil setting that it invites reflection. The interior designer, Brigitte Dumont de Chassart, is based in Paris but her influences seem to span the whole of Europe, with Romanesque loft ceilings and minimalist Scandinavian-style furnishings in the room types that range from the Chisiter Classic to the two-story Abbey suite. Arnaud describes Sanctum as a merging of “the spiritual and the secular, the past and the present, East and West.” He could be talking about modern Inle as well.

I ask Myint Aung what he makes of the mad-push development churning up the lake. “It is very good for us,” he says, which doesn’t surprise me as his livelihood is linked to the boom. He gives it a little more thought as we motor past a golden stupa and boatyards docking gilded barges. “We are losing something too. Some of the men on these boats aren’t real. They are fake fishermen, hoping tourists will pay them to take pictures.” That’s an unsettling notion and it has me wondering if there is more I explore, the more sense it makes. The lake is a vital ecosystem. At 900 meters above sea level, the basin lies in the palm of the southern Shan Hills, where the scenery is a farrago of misty mountains, jungled hummocks, rice paddies and even wine vineyards. The lake itself is dotted in lily pads, mint-green marshes, half-sunken stupas, stilted villages and floating vegetable gardens. Some of the endemic wildlife, like the Inle Lake danio fish, can be found nowhere else on Earth. This is also the only place to see Intha fishermen whose precariously one-legged paddling stance and conical bamboo traps have become icons of Inle. Watching their efforts play out in person feels like having magical binoculars to the past. Most of the local industries have remained unchanged for generations: rolling cheroot cigars, silverwork, boat-building, ceramics and handweaving garments. The flora and fauna are ancient and the culture is a living history of beauty, but easier access, new tours and upscale hotels can take away the tides of change.

“Inle was the only hotel here when I was a child and it was always empty,” my guide Myint Aung says. “Now there are many, and they are all full, and every year more are built.” Yes, international brands are descending like egrets on the shallows. A Novotel, the first in Burma, opened in November 2014, and later this year should bring the launches of an MGallery and a Hilton. Developing tourism while preserving the environmental and cultural value of the destination is kind of like, as the Burmese saying goes, trying to catch two eels at the same time. Yet, properties are eager to cut costs. Accor has implemented a sustainability program and is introducing one of the country’s most sophisticated water treatment systems, and Sanctum works with the surrounding communities to minimize wherever possible.

Mindfulness, harmony: Sanctum Inle takes the tenets of Buddhism beyond just codes of practice, and into the actual design as well. “It is a blend between the monasteries you find here and those in Spain,” says Philippe Arnaud, the general manager of Sanctum Inle. At first it seems too aristocratic a concept to be driving a luxury resort, but the more I explore, the more sense it makes. The lake provides such a tranquil setting that it invites reflection. The interior designer, Brigitte Dumont de Chassart, is based in Paris but her influences seem to span the whole of Europe, with Romanesque loft ceilings and minimalist Scandinavian-style furnishings in the room types that range from the Chisiter Classic to the two-story Abbey suite. Arnaud describes Sanctum as a merging of “the spiritual and the secular, the past and the present, East and West.” He could be talking about modern Inle as well.

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