

The Grand Tour

The Legendary Cities and Colonial Hotels of Southeast Asia

Words and Photography by Kennie Ting

“Ship me somewheres east of Suez, where the best is like the worst,
Where there aren’t no Ten Commandments an’ a man can raise a thirst;
For the temple-bells are callin’, an’ it’s there that I would be –
By the old Moulmein Pagoda, looking lazy at the sea.”

Rudyard Kipling, *Mandalay*

“If you haven’t seen this place, you haven’t seen the world.”

W. Somerset Maugham, *The Gentleman in the Parlour*

Introduction



East of the Suez

“East of the Suez” was what they used to call it in those days: a collection of far-flung and exotic regions in India, China and Southeast Asia; territories of half a dozen largely European colonial empires – the British, the French, the Dutch, the Spanish, the Portuguese and later, the Americans – as well as a few incumbent Asian ones – Chinese, Thai, Japanese. In those days, it was fashionable for the incredibly rich and famous to travel by ship to these colonies in the Far East, to seek inspiration, to satiate their intellectual curiosity, or to simply while away a surfeit of leisure time. It was glamorous, indeed, *de rigueur*, to have spent some time in the furthest most corners of the Empire, if only to remark to one’s closest friends, that one had been *there*.

By the late 19th century, an entire industry had developed to accommodate the demand for travel to the Far East. The advent of long-distance cruise ships – the likes of the ill-fated Titanic – made travel accessible, if only to a privileged few and their hangers on, who never traveled anything less than ostentatiously. Soon, a proliferation of literature and news reports from “the colonies,” emphasizing the exotic climes and less-than-virtuous mores of these “heathen and backward nations,” spurred greater demand for such travel such that even the upper middle classes could aspire to and afford a brief sojourn in the East. A multi-stop, ultra-luxurious colonial packaged tour of sorts evolved, which took many of these intrepid travellers on two to three year journeys through the cities of Asia; this phenomenon would come to be known as the “Grand Tour.” Inspired by a similar “Grand Tour” of Continental Europe, which remained a popular rite of passage for wealthy elites in Britain and America well into the 19th century, this maritime version of the Tour would involve a similar combination of exposure to foreign peoples, cultures and ways of living; and the pursuit of fame, fortune or love. Along the way, some travelers would decide to stay on, never to return to the West.

The customary stops on the Grand Tour depended in large part on the Colonial Empire from which the traveler hailed, but generally took in a handful of key cities: Bombay, Calcutta, Rangoon, Singapore, Hong Kong and Shanghai (for the British); with the addition or substitution of Phnom Penh, Saigon and Hanoi (for the French); or Batavia, Bandung and Surabaya (for the Dutch); or Manila (for the Spanish and later the Americans) – major port cities that were also trading and political capitals. In each of these cities, glorious, opulent hotels were built to cater to the fastidious needs of the travellers, who often took their entire way of life with them, complete with dozens of trunks of luggage and their closest maid or man servants. Boasting “European style” amenities which included full suites – with separate living / dining, sleeping, and washing areas – and the latest technologies like electricity and water closets, these establishments were more like homes away from home, rather than the hotels or guest-houses contemporary travellers are more accustomed to today. Guests would reside for weeks or months at a go, reading books, writing letters, entertaining guests, trading gossip – in other words, doing exactly what they would have done back home in their city or country estates in Europe or America.

Quite a few of these Grand Hotels became legendary destinations in their own right – the *Grand* in Calcutta, the *Strand* in Rangoon, the *Hotel Des Indes* in Batavia (present-day Jakarta), the *Hotel Continental* in Saigon (present-day Ho Chi Minh City), and the *Cathay Hotel* in Shanghai. These became the centre of the colonial social circles of each city, and played host to a veritable who's who of heads of state, royalty, business tycoons, entertainers and socialites. But it is the writers that have immortalized the gilded vision of life in the Far East at the turn of the century: Somerset Maugham, Noel Coward, Rudyard Kipling, Ernest Hemingway and Joseph Conrad in the Anglophone tradition; but also André Malraux and Marguerite Duras in the Francophone tradition; and Rob Nieuwenhuys and E. du Perron in the Dutch tradition. Some of these writers had been born or lived significant parts of their lives in the Far East before repatriating to the West; others undertook the Grand Tour of these parts and returned to tell the tale. Somerset Maugham, in particular, would famously establish a presence in many of the region's legendary hotels, having travelled through almost all of the major cities en route to the Pacific Islands. He would later meticulously document his experiences in numerous travel books, novels and stories.

Notable personalities linked to the grand hotels weren't limited to guests alone. One family of hoteliers would play a key role in shaping the very notion of what a Grand Hotel ought to look like. The remarkable Sarkies family of brothers, Armenians from New Julfa, Isfahan (a still bustling Armenian enclave in present-day Iran), would have their name associated with a good half a dozen legendary hotels. Four of these – including the most famous of them all, the *Raffles Hotel* in Singapore – still remain in almost-mint condition and are featured in this Grand Tour. Within a mere 30 years, the four expatriate Sarkies brothers – there was a fifth who remained in Persia – built a hotel empire that spanned Burma, Malaya and Java. Unfortunately, World War I and the ensuing worldwide economic depression would put an end to the brother's fortunes and these hotels gradually fell out of the family's hands after the last Sarkies brother died in the 1930s.

World War II would put an end to the Grand Tour of the Far East as an institution altogether, a mere 50 years after it appeared. Some occasional (American) celebrities would still descend on a few of the remaining Grand Hotels in the '50s and

‘60s in a bid to relive their former glory, but they were exceptions to a dwindling trend. Decolonization and independence movements in the 1940s to ‘60s would seal the fates of these hotels. Once the centre of high society, they became tainted by their association with imperialism and by extension, racist oppression. Many fell into disrepair and disuse. One – the *Hotel Des Indes* in Jakarta – in a newly nationalistic Indonesia, was demolished in the early 1970s to make way for a shopping mall. Remarkably, however, almost all the other hotels remained in some form or another, and in the latter half of the 20th century, most would be fully refurbished and restored to their former splendour.

A Nostalgic Journey

It is hard to imagine the sheer opulence and style involved in long-distance travel at the turn of century, as well as the sense of excitement and adventure that accompanied travelers as they journeyed for weeks and months on a large cruise ship to get where they wanted to be. These days, a simple plane ride would take one halfway across the globe in just over a day’s worth of travelling, while even flying in First Class is a distant approximation of the levels of luxury well-heeled travelers were accustomed to in those days. The *process* of travelling, being so much less protracted and so much more matter-of-fact, just isn’t that glamorous anymore. While efforts have been made to re-create a sense of travelling in old-world style – the *Eastern and Oriental Express* luxury train service, operated by the Orient Express Company, and taking guests from Singapore to Bangkok, being such an example – these are modern-day novelties that did not exist in Asia then. Luxury cruise services which take travelers on short trips from Singapore to Penang or to Bangkok also exist and are very popular; but by and large, do not replicate the multi-city Grand Tour of the region by ship from Calcutta to Singapore to Shanghai.

To catch a glimpse of these glory days of luxury travel therefore, one needs to turn to the remaining Grand Hotels from the era, of which about two dozen currently exist, almost all having faced a period of decline and bankruptcy before being turned around from the brink. All of these surviving hotels have been extensively renovated, at great cost, to upgrade their amenities and to introduce elements that today’s well-heeled traveler have come to expect as essential to a hotel experience – health and

fitness facilities, a business centre, a swimming pool, an on-site spa. In most cases, historic blueprints and authentic materials from the region have been used in refurbishment and restoration efforts, to reinstate the hotel to a certain benchmark year which would best present the property's historic old-world charm. The management companies of all the hotels have adopted a similar approach of banking on popular nostalgia and growing affluence to market and position these properties as 5-star boutique heritage hotels. The strategy has been extremely successful, and has offered the grand hotels a new lease on life, at least for now.

This book takes the reader to 12 legendary Grand Hotels and their host cities in the Southeast Asian region, leaving hotels in the Indian subcontinent, Mainland China, Korea and Japan out for a subsequent journey. The aim is to re-introduce the notion of the "Grand Tour of the Far East" to the Europeans and American expatriates that have continued to flock to the region in search of fortune and love; as well as to newly affluent Southeast Asians, unburdened by the weight of the past like their parents and grandparents were, and eager to learn more about a part of their national histories that continues to shape their lives. It's hard to deny that this is an exercise in nostalgia for a period in history that many of the Southeast Asian nations are still eager to put behind; and for a way of life that many today may regard as unfairly privileged, inaccessible and quite possibly politically incorrect. But there is a plus side to this nostalgia, which is to suggest that perhaps the cities and nations of Southeast Asia are less fragmented and divided than they would seem to believe; that today, 50-odd years after independence for most of these nations, there is more to bind the region than imagined, embodied in a rich legacy of colonial buildings, and shared memories, whether painful or pleasurable, of the colonial period. Both aspects of this heritage – tangible and intangible – are present in the stately facades and silent corridors of these glorious and once-embattled hotels, which have played host to a larger story of imperialism, nationalist struggle and regional pride.

The itinerary proposed for this contemporary version of the Grand Tour is as follows:

- 1) Penang, Malaysia and the *Eastern & Oriental Hotel*;
- 2) Manila, the Philippines and the *Manila Hotel*;

- 3) Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, and the *Hotel Majestic*;
- 4) Surabaya, Indonesia and the *Hotel Majapahit*;
- 5) Bangkok, Thailand, and the *Mandarin Oriental Bangkok*;
- 6) Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and the *Raffles Hotel Le Royal*;
- 7) Vientiane, Laos, and the *Settha Palace Hotel*;
- 8) Yangon, Myanmar, and the *Strand Hotel*;
- 9) Hanoi, Vietnam, and the *Sofitel Metropole*;
- 10) Jakarta, Indonesia to pay tribute to the memory of the *Hotel Des Indes* (demolished);
- 11) Malacca, Malaysia, and *The Majestic Hotel*; and finally
- 12) Singapore, where our journey ends at the *Raffles Hotel* - the grande dame herself.

Rather than embarking on a continuous journey from one of these cities to the next, I shall structure my travel as a series of three-day weekends, undertaken once a month, using Singapore as a base. This mirrors present-day regional air travel routes, which all invariably converge onto Singapore; and also underscores just how easy and convenient it is to *complete* the Grand Tour.

At each stop of the Grand Tour, I shall wander the city's historic colonial quarters, and haunt the lobbies, hallways and restaurants of their Grand Hotels, searching for traces of the past that still linger on in the present. Through reportage both literary and photographic, I shall attempt to imagine or evoke how life might have been like in those days; while simultaneously providing a realistic picture of what the modern-day traveller could expect to see, smell, hear and feel today.

The book is thus not a travel guide per se, but a series of loosely connected reflections on and recollections of people I meet, stories I hear or read about, vistas and set-pieces that I stumble upon serendipitously in the course of wandering, reliving and dreaming. Nevertheless, I hope that through experiencing vicariously, my year and a bit of nostalgia, reverie and extravagance, readers may be spurred into exploring a few of these cities and their grand hotels for themselves; and perhaps even the Grand Tour in its entirety, replete with sumptuous dinners, stifling heat and glorious views of the city and the sea, but perhaps sans the stiff white shirts, black dinner

jackets, tight corsets and crinoline skirts that were completely inappropriate for the tropical weather, even in those days.

All aboard ship, my fellow travelers! Or rather, fasten your seatbelts, for this voyage is about to begin.

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Essential Reading:

In the Anglophone Tradition

- Joseph Conrad, 1897. *The Lagoon*, as well as other short stories published in “the Malayan phase” of his literary career between 1895 and 1920.
- Noel Coward, 1932. *Mad Dogs and Englishmen*.
- Graham Greene, 1955. *The Quiet American*.
- Rudyard Kipling, 1890. *Mandalay*.
- Somerset Maugham, 1935. *The Gentleman in the Parlour: A Record of a Journey from Rangoon to Haiphong*
- George Orwell, 1934. *Burmese Days*

In the Francophone Tradition

- Marguerite Duras, 1984. *The Lover (L'amant)*
- Andre Malraux, 1930. *The Royal Way (La voie royale)*

In the Dutch

- Rob Nieuwenhuys, 1972. *Mirror of the Indies: A History of Dutch Colonial Literature (Oost-Indische Spiegel)*
- E. du Perron, 1935. *Country of Origin (Het land van herkomst)*