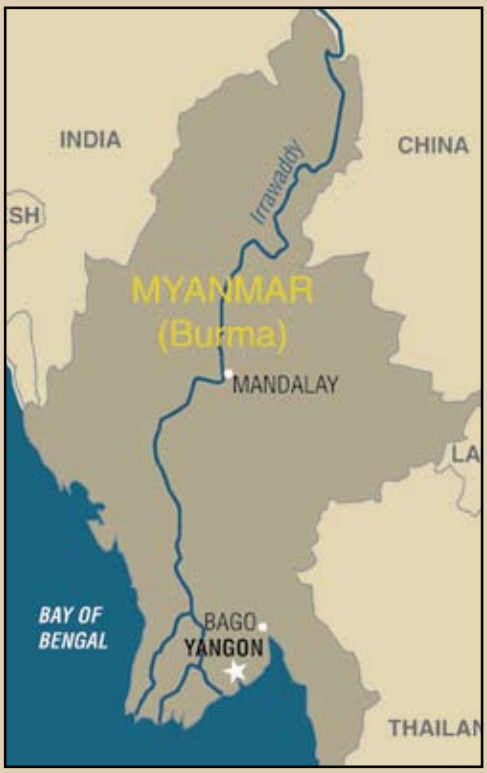
BANDOOLA THROUGH BURMA: The Jo Sinfield Interview

At the end of a business career in the Big Apple, Jo Sinfield was searching for an entirely different sort of challenge—something like a 3000-mile solo sailing voyage down the Ayeyarwady River in Myanmar (formerly Burma) aboard a Dudley Dix designed Cape Cutter 19.

What was the purpose of your voyage, and why Myanmar?
I had reached the end of a career with Seagram when the company was sold to Pernod-Ricard and Diageo in 2002. I was based in New York at the time and I had the burning desire for a solo adventurous expedition. My criteria were to learn a new skill, search out a distant culture, in an area that I did not know that well, and attempt to put something back into the country. I wanted it to be water-based and had the idea of sailing being the new skill. I had sailed before but not single-handed.

I landed on a part-river, part-sea voyage after researching the Irrawaddy River in Burma, which is navigable for 1000 miles to the sea. The river is steeped in history and it would be a challenge to be granted the relevant permissions into a notoriously closed part of the world. I could then sail on through Thailand and Malaysia along a beautiful tropical coastline, dotted with archipelagos and sheltered bays. The timing was favourable, with the change of seasons. I had four months to pull it off before the ice melt in the Himalayas made the river system more treacherous to navigate.



Why did you choose the Cape Cutter 19 and was it a good choice in retrospect?
Coincidentally when I was in New York I did some research into vessels through *Small Craft Advisor* (I have just found the print-outs!). However, as I have a history in Cape Town I started investigating locally made small boats that fitted

OPPOSITE—Jo Sinfield and *Bandoola*. ABOVE— A sandstorm close to Bagan.

my criteria and came across the Cape Cutter 19, which was being manufactured in Cape Town at the time. It was rather fortuitous as not only was it affordable, it was made to fit into a 20-foot container, had a cabin, an outboard, lift-keel, and was highly manoeverable—being made primarily of fiberglass. It was a perfect fit and also an "eye-catcher" being constructed along traditional lines.

I commissioned one to be constructed after sailing the prototype in the Solent in the UK, and they fit me into their production schedule at the last moment. I spent time with Dudley Dix, the owners Nick and Lyndsay Voorhoeve, and the legendary Manuel Mendez who put the boat together with so much enthusiasm and good humour. It made it all the more special that I had so much contact with these people.

I couldn't have been happier with the performance of the vessel, for what I wanted it for. It did what I wanted, when I wanted it to, and it was easy to handle on my own, being a relatively inexperienced sailor. I did not encounter enough heavy weather, apart from a few short squalls, to be severely challenged.

How was your boat outfitted for the voyage—any special gear?

From memory, I had an autohelm fitted to the tiller, a depth sounder, a compass, navigation lights, and the boat-builder worked with me to ensure all operations could be carried out by one person at the helm. I had a convertor linked up from the outboard to a deep-cycle battery to charge my electronics like sat phone, autohelm and video camera. A solar panel was also topping up the battery. I added some storage pockets and a furler for the jib was fitted.

I had a cradle made which I used twice—once on the way across from Cape Town in the container, and we kept it and reused it from Rangoon to Ranong aboard a ferry. A condition set by the authorities was that, sadly, I could not do the sea leg in Burma due to insurgents, as the Burmese Ambassador in London put it, taking "pot-shots" at vessels in the Mergui Archipelago.

How would you modify her if you were doing the voyage again?

Set up my camp kitchen better and a proper awning for shade. A fridge, most definitely, warm beer in the tropics is not pleasant. A proper fan for the cabin. I did not have a head installed as it took up space and I did not need one, in retrospect. I would also put on a swim ladder to get back into the boat easily.

ABOVE— Cliff of a Thousand Images at Tombo, put there by sailors who had to wait at the windbreaker cliff for favourable winds to continue their journey upriver.

Did the relatively small size of the boat present any special advantages or disadvantages on the trip?
Mainly advantages. She was so light I could lift her off sandbanks in the river and pull her easily onto beaches if I needed to, apart from when I got stuck in the mud crossing into Thailand on an ebb tide. The customs and immigration officials must have thought I was the Monster from the Bog as I walked in barefoot caked in mud up to my thighs. I think it helped with formalities as they saw the humour in the spectacle. She was very manoeuvrable.

We understand you were retracing a journey completed by Scotsman Henry Cadell in 1899. Who was he and why did his story interest you?
When I had zeroed in on the Irrawaddy (or Ayerawady) I went to visit the Explorers Club in New York and the Royal Geographical Society in London, of which I was a fellow. They have a tremendous archive of explorers' tales, and his report on the river was the most comprehensive and took in the length of the river, which appeared in the Scottish Geographical Magazine in 1899. He was a Scottish geologist and geographer. Cadell starts by writing:

In any one special characteristic the Irrawaddy may no doubt be easily surpassed by other great rivers, but I venture to think that few, if any, of the explored waterways of the Old or New World can be said to display for 1000 miles such a varied combination of interesting and attractive scenes, and are so well fitted to appeal to the traveler's taste, whether it be for sport, antiquities, scenery, geology, ethnography, natural history or commercial geography.

He wrote for some twenty-six pages and his descriptions of what he encountered provided a base for comparison. I wanted an old reference, if there was one, and found it through Doctor Henry Cadell.

Tell us about the Ayerawady River. How fast does it flow? What types of obstacles?
The Ayerawady River runs for some 2,170 km down from the eastern Himalayas to an extensive delta on the Bay of Bengal and is the main highway through Myanmar. The river's width and depth vary depending on locality and season: at high water (May - September) melting snow from the Himalayas increases the depth in the narrow defiles by up to 40 feet over the dry season level. Typically, the lowest water level is reached by March, which is when I commenced the voyage. Between Mandalay and Pagan the river is between one and four miles wide. The only bridge on the entire navigable river is at Sagaing, sixteen miles downstream from Mandalay.

ABOVE— Burmese lad fishing in midstream.

The river passes through three defiles (gorges). The first defile, respected for its "raging torrents," makes navigation difficult. South of Bhamo the river passes through the second defile, an 11 km area of rugged beauty bordered by 270 meter cliffs 90 meters apart. Below here lies the third defile, not quite so dramatic, but 64 km in length. I would guess that the river was flowing anywhere between three and five knots.

The main challenge I faced was navigation to find the right channel, but an escort vessel was provided for the entire twenty-three days on the river to help me navigate. Food was never a problem, and I must say I could not wait for the next meal. The food was outstanding. I had no problems with the guts, and drank bottled water—and beer helped. I swam and washed in the river for 2/3rds of the journey, until it got very muddy. Then I resorted to rigging up a shower on deck and filling containers from villages I passed. I dropped anchor for the night usually just outside villages, out of view for some privacy.

How would you typically secure the boat at night? What was your anchoring system?
I slept on board every night, either inside or outside under a mosquito net. This was stifling as the temperature remained oppressive at night and there was little breeze at times. The cabin was lockable but I had no problems with theft. The locals were very curious but not intrusive.

I had an anchor chain and rope, which was more than secure for the sandy bottom of the river. At sea it was sometimes more problematic, but I would occasionally secure two lines from the stern to land and the anchor to the bow.

Were you able to sail much of the voyage? What type(s) of auxiliary propulsion did you have aboard?
On the river the breeze was light and sometimes not strong enough to carry the craft faster than the current, which is when I had to use the 4 hp outboard. This was a little frustrating as steerage became a small issue. Because of the transition from the northeast monsoon to the southwest monsoon, there were some still days. The sea sectors were fine with some more enjoyable sailing.

We understand the country teems with interesting wildlife. Was this a factor for you?
Sadly this was not the case. Like most places around habitation the wildlife has been reduced vastly. I saw a lot of different fish at markets, had some rare sightings of Irrawaddy dolphins on three occasions, a rather lengthy Burmese python, lots of bird-life, but cannot remember spotting mammals at all. Having

ABOVE— The official escort vessel forges a path through the second defile

descended rivers like the Zambezi, where it teems with wildlife, the Irrawaddy was disappointing. It, however, made up for that in what you don't get on the Zambezi—that of history and culture in abundance.

What did this adventure teach you about human nature?
Burma is undoubtedly a most interesting country in which to travel. The picture painted of Burma's leaders is not a positive one, yet one rarely hears of its peoples and the flipside of the coin. It is an enchanting country with enchanting people, seemingly unaffected by its neighbours and mass tourism, which makes it so appealing to the traveller. There is an apparent gentleness of this Buddhist country, but there are contradictions, as it has a bloodcurdling history. I had many moving experiences, mainly because of the characters I had the good fortune to meet. We did not talk politics but we did share life's experiences, and even though there were language and cultural barriers it did not seem to matter, especially when we shared a beer.

What surprised you most about the people of Myanmar?
Any visitor to Burma is likely to be spellbound. The Burmese peoples could not have been more welcoming, generous, openhearted, friendly, dignified, interested and interesting. It was the most surprising, and rewarding, element of the voyage.

Did you ever feel threatened? Are pirates in the area?
Not really, although I had two encounters which were potentially threatening. Both happened in Thai waters. One was a fishing boat that was a little curious. A fisherman boarded the boat at night uninvited. I gave him a pack of sesame snaps and a pack of cigarettes and after a quick look around he disembarked and vanished into the night. I moved after that to another location just in case they returned. It was exhilarating sailing at night, silently, navigating by moonlight.

The second was when I arrived at anchorage after dark, off a beach. It sounded like a local party was in full swing. A Thai, who'd had a few tots of something strong, swam out to the boat and boarded, while his mates egged him on from the shore. I gave him a half-bottle of whisky and some cigarettes and he swam back to shore. I didn't hang around, and motored out into the bay and on around the coast for an hour, expecting some lights and a boat to follow but nothing happened. Moral of the story: Be polite and welcoming, and then get the hell out when you can!

Which was more difficult, negotiating 1,000 miles of river or negotiating with government officials?
To get the relevant permissions to enter Burma took time and the right contacts. Without the preparation there is no

ABOVE— Curious onlookers at the spot we glimpsed three rare Irrawaddy Dolphins, it was the first time the government had given permission for a foreign vessel to enter the river system, since the Japanese invaded in 1945.

way this would have happened. The actual execution happened without many grey hairs. I spent time with the Burmese Ambassador in London, who I got to know personally. I went through in detail what I wanted to do and he managed to open some doors for me. I also had the Chairman of the Myanmar Yachting Association behind the expedition, who was very influential, and a magical Master Mariner, Captain John Hinchliffe, who was unwavering in his support. These three contacts were instrumental in opening the doors at a high level.

Do you plan any similar adventures?
Always scheming new expeditions. Lately they have been more land-based into Africa. I have just returned from Angola and Zimbabwe—can't keep away from the controversial ones. In fact I have started an Explorers Club down here on the southern tip of Africa. Come and stay!

No sea voyages planned yet but I'd love to return to the Cape Cutter 19 if I do. The thought of sailing all the rift valley lakes in Africa, or circumnavigating Madagascar appeals to me.

Bandoola was sold after the expedition and now resides in Kota Kinabalu.
www.explorersclub.co.za
www.explorersclubfh.wordpress.com •SCA•

Cape Cutter 19
LOA: 19' Beam: 7' 3"
Draft: 1' 6" / 4' Displacement: 1918 lb
Ballast: 838 lb Sail Area: 253 sq ft

Designed by and plans available from Dudley Dix
www.dixdesign.com (757) 962-9273