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**Travel**  
**GUIDE**

**2014-2015**

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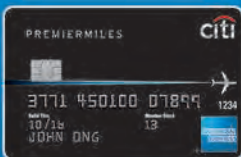


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# EDITOR'S LETTER



A photo from one of my own favourite getaways in the region: Rawa Island, Malaysia

**P**utting together this year's Travel Guide has sparked some interesting emotions in me – the strongest being envy! How can I ever hope to visit all these wonderful places in an average lifetime?

My curiosity about people and places has been seriously piqued. Why did they build the Dambulla Temple in such a precarious

place in Sri Lanka? Could anywhere make me feel smaller than New Zealand's Southern Alps? How safe would I be snuggling up with the tigers in Kanchanaburi, Thailand? Could I ever be fit enough to cycle from Tibet to Nepal? And when can I go and lie on one of the many exquisite beaches of Southeast Asia?

Admiration and thanks feature firmly in my backpack of emotions too. Having swallowed my envy, I've thoroughly enjoyed corresponding with the plucky and talented *Expat Living* readers and contributing photographers whose tales and images of adventure and discovery make up the 2014 Travel Guide. I know how easy it is to watch all those good intentions of cataloguing photos and completing travel diaries fade into thin air once the suitcase is unpacked; but these folk not only recorded their journeys, they have also generously chosen to share them with us.

For me, working on the Travel Guide has had exactly the effect it is designed to have – it's made me want to pack my bags, get out there and explore. I hope you'll feel the same way when you've finished browsing its pages. And please, when you get back from your own adventures, remember to write them down ready to send to us for next year's guide.

HILARY GALEA

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A scenic landscape of a mountain range with hikers in the foreground. The scene is captured from a low angle, looking up at the mountains. The sky is a clear, pale blue with some light clouds. The mountains are rugged and covered in patches of snow or light-colored rock. In the foreground, four hikers are seen from behind, standing on a grassy slope. They are wearing backpacks and outdoor gear. The overall mood is adventurous and serene.

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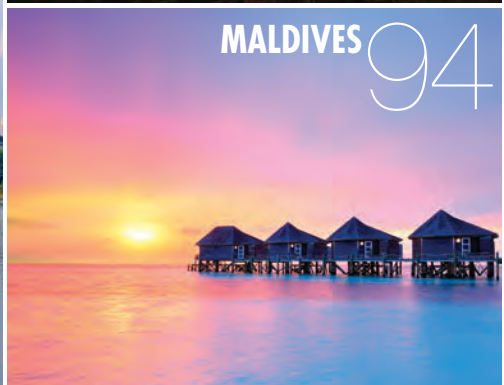
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- ☒ Ports-of-call: Kuala Lumpur (Port Klang)

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- ☒ Singapore Departures:  
2014 Nov 17<sup>^</sup>, 24, Dec 11, 15<sup>^</sup>, 22
- ☒ Ports-of-call: Kuala Lumpur (Port Klang),  
Langkawi<sup>^</sup> / Phuket

### 5-NIGHT SPICE OF SOUTHEAST ASIA CRUISE

- ☒ Singapore Departures:  
2014 Nov 12<sup>^</sup>, Dec 1<sup>^</sup>, 6<sup>+</sup>, 29<sup>+</sup>
  - ☒ Ports-of-call: Kuala Lumpur (Port Klang)/  
Langkawi<sup>^</sup>, Penang, Phuket
- <sup>+</sup>These sailings do not call at Penang;  
overnight at Phuket

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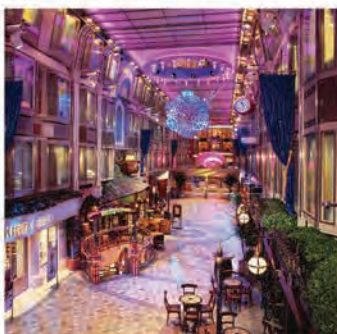
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Songkran Festival



Chaul Chnam Thmey

# FESTIVAL CALENDAR

## APRIL 2014 TO MARCH 2015

An eclectic selection of solemn, scary, fun, musical and just plain weird festivals happening around the region in the next 12 months.

### CHING MING FESTIVAL:

Also known as Tomb Sweeping Day or Mourning Day where Chinese families visit their ancestors' graves to offer incense and flowers.

**5 APRIL 2014**

### LAO NEW YEAR:

Laotians shower one another with water and white powder as a blessing, and pray at temples. Fun to watch, though it is the hottest time of the year.

**12 APRIL 2014**

### SONGKRAN FESTIVAL,

**THAILAND:** The Thai New Year often attracts droves of tourists and locals, where people splash water on one another as a blessing.

**13 APRIL 2014**

### CHAUL CHNAM THMEY,

**CAMBODIA:** Cambodian New Year involves dressing up, visiting temples and cooking feasts with family. Celebrations last three to four days. The Angkor temples will be packed.

**14 TO 16 APRIL 2014**

### MYANMAR NEW YEAR:

Burmese visit their elderly to pay respect, and visit the temples. A religious tradition is to release caged birds or fish into lakes and rivers to gain merit. The accompanying Thingyan Water Festival is great to watch.

**17 APRIL 2014**

### HAMAMATSU FESTIVAL,

**JAPAN:** For over 440 years, the Japanese have fiercely wielded their kites in kite fights at this festival. Fliers attempt to cut their opponents' 5mm hemp string by using their own kite string to create enough friction to break the line. The last kite still flying is the winner as it soars through the leftover smoke created by the friction.

**3 TO 5 MAY 2014**

### VESAK DAY:

Buddhists bring offerings of flowers, candles and joss sticks to temples where rituals are held to commemorate the birth, the Nirvana (enlightenment), and the Parinirvana (death) of Gautama Buddha. This is the most significant day of the Buddhist calendar. The different dates are due to variations in lunar calendars.

**6 MAY 2014**

*(South Korea, China)*

**13 MAY 2014**

*(Singapore, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and India)*

### NINGALOO WHALE SHARK FESTIVAL, EXMOUTH, WESTERN AUSTRALIA:

When the world's largest sharks visit in hordes, what do you do? Hold a festival, of course! Fortunately, whale sharks are completely harmless to humans so everyone can swim with these friendly giants. Floating parades, market stalls and plenty of beach game stations will be set up to celebrate the annual arrival of the whale sharks.

**23 TO 25 MAY 2014**

### DRAGON BOAT FESTIVAL:

Crowds munching on sticky rice dumplings (zongzi) will be streaming to this exciting event that originated in China over two thousand years ago and now takes place in Chinese communities all over the globe. A festival of many names, it's also known as Duanwu, Tuen Ng and Double Fifth Festival (falling on the fifth day of the fifth month).

**2 JUNE 2014**





Dragon Boat Festival

Legend has it that the Dragon Boat Festival commemorates the attempt to save the life of Qu Yuan, a Chinese poet and statesman of the ancient Chu kingdom. Court officials, jealous of Qu Yuan's wisdom, falsely accused him of conspiracy and he was exiled by the king. At the age of 61, Qu Yuan drowned himself by attaching a heavy stone to his chest and jumping into the Miluo River. The people of Chu took to their boats and tried to rescue Qu Yuan, believing he was an honourable man, but they were unable to save him. Instead, they threw sticky rice balls (zongzi) into the water so that the fish would eat these rather than Qu Yuan's body.

**RAINFOREST WORLD MUSIC FESTIVAL, SARAWAK, EAST MALAYSIA:**

This three-day musical celebration has grown and grown since its inauguration in 1997. Dance along with 20,000 others to anything from local native chants and African dance to American folk music and percussion troupes. **20 TO 22 JUNE 2014**

**BORYEONG MUD FESTIVAL, SOUTH KOREA:**

Since 1998, visitors have been getting down and dirty at the Boryeong Mud Festival, caking themselves in the nourishing, mineral-rich mud from the Boryeong mud flats while being entertained with bands, mud games, fireworks and more – all for around S\$10 a day. **18 TO 27 JULY 2014**

**MID-AUTUMN FESTIVAL:**

Chinese and Vietnamese families gather in the evening to admire the mid-autumn harvest moon while eating mooncakes and pomelos. **8 SEPTEMBER 2014**

**PCHUM BEN, CAMBODIA:**

Also known as the Festival of the Ancestors; food, flowers, rice and gifts are given to

monks, while religious rites are carried out on the streets. **26 TO 28 SEPTEMBER 2014**

**HARI RAYA HAJI:** Marks the end of the annual pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia by Muslims worldwide. There'll be bazaars to attend, and mosques and relatives to be visited. **5 OCTOBER 2014**

**DEEPAVALI:** The "Festival of Lights" is a joyous four-day Hindu celebration of the triumph of good over evil and light over darkness. Head down to Little India in Singapore to see the lights and street decorations, feast on festive delicacies, get a henna hand tattoo and join in the fun. **23 OCTOBER 2014**



Deepavali



Pushkar Camel Fair



Hornbill Festival, Nagaland

**PUSHKAR CAMEL FAIR, RAJASTHAN, INDIA:** One of India's most highly rated travel experiences, a spectacle on an epic scale, attracting more than 11,000 camels, horses and cattle and visited by over 400,000 people.  
**30 OCTOBER TO 6 NOVEMBER 2014**

**ALL SAINTS DAY, PHILIPPINES:** A day of remembrance of the dead and an important holiday for the Catholic Church. People attend Mass, decorate loved ones' tombs and spend the day in graveyards with picnics.  
**1 NOVEMBER 2014**

**BON OM TUK / WATER FESTIVAL, CAMBODIA:** Celebrate the end of monsoon season. Brightly decorated dragon boats will race over the three days and Phnom Penh will be super-crowded.  
**16 NOVEMBER 2014**

**HORNBILL FESTIVAL, NAGALAND, INDIA:** Launched in 2000 by the Government

of Nagaland to bring together the 16 major tribes of the region, the Hornbill Festival colourfully celebrates the Naga's cultural heritage. Buy yourself a hornbill headdress, practise your moves and join in the fun.  
**1 TO 10 DECEMBER 2014**

**THE EMPEROR'S BIRTHDAY, JAPAN:** This is one of only two occasions when the inner grounds of Tokyo's Imperial Palace are open to the public, and Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko will greet the flag-waving crowd.  
**23 DECEMBER**

**HARBIN ICE AND SNOW SCULPTURE FESTIVAL, CHINA:** Set in Harbin's coldest months (and we're talking minus 20 degrees Celsius or considerably lower!), this festival features stunning works of art, all created with over four million cubic feet of ice from the Songhua River – giving a whole new meaning to Winter Wonderland.  
**5 JANUARY UNTIL END FEBRUARY 2015**

**ATI-ATIHAN FESTIVAL, KALIBO, PANAY ISLANDS (VISAYAS), THE PHILIPPINES:** This flamboyant fiesta, dubbed "The Mother of all Philippine Festivals" began in the 13th century when a small group of Malay chieftains landed on the Panays and were sold

land by the local Ati people. To celebrate, the Malays painted their faces black to look like the tribe. This tribal celebration has now evolved into a wild, rhythmic, street party in honour of Santo Niño (the infant Jesus).  
**19 TO 26 JANUARY 2015**



Harbin Ice and Snow Sculpture Festival





**AUSTRALIA DAY:** Outdoor concerts, sporting competitions, fireworks shows and backyard barbecues are held all over the country to celebrate all things Australian.  
**26 JANUARY 2015**

**THAIPUSAM:** In Singapore, get up early to witness the 4.5-kilometre "Walk of Faith" by Hindu devotees carrying brightly decorated *kavadis*, burdensome metal frames with sharp skewers piercing their tongues, cheeks and bodies. Other major processions take place at the Batu Caves, just outside Kuala Lumpur, and George Town in Penang.  
**3 FEBRUARY 2015**

**WAITANGI DAY, NEW ZEALAND:** Commemorates the signing of Treaty of Waitangi, the founding document for New Zealand. Celebrations include flag-raising, naval salutes, Maori cultural performances, family-themed festivals, sports events and more.  
**6 FEBRUARY 2015**

**CHINESE NEW YEAR:** Traditional Chinese decorations and lights abound. Families have a reunion dinner on Chinese New Year's Eve and visit relatives over the next 1.5 days. Many businesses close for the whole week.  
**19 TO 20 FEBRUARY 2015**

**JAKARTA INTERNATIONAL JAVA JAZZ FESTIVAL:** The Java Jazz Festival, first held in 2005, was projected to attract around 120,000 visitors in 2014 with 180 acts, including Jamie Cullum, Natalie Cole, Roy Ayers and Incognito. Arguably the biggest jazz festival in the Southern Hemisphere.  
**6 TO 8 MARCH 2015**

**SAKURA (CHERRY BLOSSOM) SEASON, JAPAN:** Not really a festival, but a spectacular event nonetheless. The blossoming begins in Okinawa in January and reaches Kyoto and Tokyo late March to early April. When the blossoms are at their peak,

the Japanese turn out in large numbers at parks, shrines, and temples to picnic, relax and admire the flowers.  
**LATE JANUARY TO EARLY APRIL 2015**

**NYEPI, BALI, INDONESIA:** The evening before Nyepi (Balinese New Year and "Day of Silence"), loud street processions are held to drive away evil spirits with gongs, drums and huge, papier-mâché "ogoh-ogoh" monsters. On New Year's Day itself, Bali retreats into silence for 24 hours. No work. No travel. No cooking. No noise. Even the airport closes. Village wardens (Pecalang), there to enforce the rules, are the only people outdoors. The idea is that any demons and evils spirits will be deluded



into thinking that Bali is deserted, prompting them to leave the island.  
**21 MARCH 2015**

Write in and tell us about any new festival discoveries you might have made on your travels! [contribute@expatliving.sg](mailto:contribute@expatliving.sg)





# Australia

## At a glance

### Visa-vis

Unless you're an Australian or New Zealand citizen, you need a visa or Electronic Ticket Authority (ETA) to enter Australia. NZ passport holders can apply for a visa upon arrival. For info on visas, see [www.immi.gov.au](http://www.immi.gov.au).

### Air time

4 to 8 hours from Singapore.

### Cash & cards

Australian currency is the Australian Dollar (AUD). Banks throughout Australia will exchange currency and travellers cheques. ATMs can be found in most towns in.

### Weather report

Australia's climate varies greatly because of its size. The north generally benefits from warm weather and is more humid, and southern

states experience cooler winters. It's also one of the driest continents, with drought common in many areas. Temperatures can reach 40+ in the summer, and below zero in winter.

### Mother tongue

English.

### Salutations

Handshakes are the most common form of greeting.

### Clocking in

Australia has three different time zones. The west coast (Perth) is 8 hours ahead of GMT, same as Singapore; Central Australia (South Australia and Northern Territory) is 9.5 hours ahead and the east coast (Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane) is 10 hours ahead. From October to April, some states observe daylight savings.





Manly Cove, Sydney Harbour

### World Heritage Sites

Total: 19  
Highlights:

- Great Barrier Reef
- Kakadu National Park
- Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park (including Uluru / Ayers Rock)
- Fraser Island
- Greater Blue Mountains Area

### Must-try foods

Meat pies; Vegemite.

### National flower

Golden wattle.

### Must-buy souvenir

An Akubra hat, made of fur felt, or – if you're feeling daring – a purse made from a kangaroo's scrotum.

### Did you know?

- Melbourne has been voted the world's most liveable city for the past three years.
- In 2013, Australia

registered its hottest year since records began in 1910 with the highest temperature of 49.6C at Moomba in South Australia.

- Over 25 percent of Australians were born in another country.
- The oldest human remains found in Australia, at Lake Mungo in NSW, have been dated at roughly 40,000 years old.

- Melbourne has the third largest Greek-speaking population in the world, behind Athens and Thessaloniki.

### Must-read book

*The Shiralee* by Darcy Niland – a story that follows a father's journey across New South Wales, and captures the spirit of the outback.





### MARGARET RIVER WINE TOURS

For a great day out, sipping and savouring Margaret River's many epicurean delights, I highly recommend Margaret River Vintage Wine Tours ([winetoursmargaretriver.com.au](http://winetoursmargaretriver.com.au)). As soon as tour organiser Tony picked us up at our hotel, we knew we were in for a fun day. He knows his stuff and has a lovely sense of humor. Not only did we have an excellent tour of the wineries, but Tony slotted in visits to chocolate, cheese and venison factories too, as well as an olive oil and tapenade tasting.

MARIA PIA SOLIMAN

### SWAN VALLEY

Margaret River is the more famous wine region in Western Australia, but if you find yourself in Perth for only a couple of days, a trip to Swan Valley, only 25 minutes from Perth's CBD, might be all you need to quench your thirst.

ELAINE BRINDAMOUR

### CHANDLERS AT SMITH'S BEACH

With kangaroos in the garden, a beautiful stretch of beach just 200 metres down the road, sweeping views across the hills and coastline and the wineries of Margaret River on your doorstep, Chandlers Smith Beach Villas ([chandlerssmithsbeach.com.au](http://chandlerssmithsbeach.com.au)), a couple of kilometres south of Yallingup, make a hard-to-beat WA holiday base. We visited with teenage kids and grandma and everyone was happy. The two-bedroom self-catering villas (perhaps "chalets" is more accurate) are well equipped, spacious and come with big balconies for sunset tipples. It was quiet when we were there (April), and very beautiful.

HILARY GALEA





## SYDNEY ON A SHOESTRING

Given Sydney's high cost of living, our recent Christmas and New Year trip was shaping up to be eye-wateringly pricey. And what's more, hotel rooms during this peak season were like gold dust. Cue Airbnb, my favourite travel discovery of 2013. Through them, we rented a central Sydney apartment for the fraction of the price of a hotel. We got to know the Surry Hills neighbourhood well and were within walking distance of nearly everywhere we want to go. Staying in a private home really gave us a feel for urban-cool, but still beachy-bohemian, Sydney. I'm already looking at Airbnb options for other Asian adventures.

LOIS AVERY

### WHY THE NAME?

Airbnb was conceived when its founding partners, then roommates, could not afford the rent for their loft in San Francisco and so made their living room into a bed and breakfast, accommodating three guests on air beds. The online accommodation service changed its name from [Airbedandbreakfast.com](http://Airbedandbreakfast.com) to [Airbnb.com](http://Airbnb.com) in 2009.



## BUSHWALKING IN THE GLASSHOUSE MOUNTAINS

Last June we visited Queensland's Glass House Mountains Range (70 kilometres north of Brisbane and easily accessible by car or train) and trekked up 253-metre-high Mt Ngungun – a 2.8-kilometre round trip that takes about two hours.

It may not be the tallest or most challenging of the Glass House Mountains, but the view from the summit is amazing and the climb itself is rich with plant and wildlife (rumour has it you can spot glow worms at night!). The last part of the ascent is quite steep, but we rewarded ourselves with a picnic lunch and took our time to relax and enjoy the 360-degree panorama.

We really enjoyed our weekend adventure and definitely recommend this easy trek, with its breath-taking reward at the top.

MARCUS SIA

## MARCUS'S BUSHWALKING TIPS

- Bad weather, storm damage or bushfires can close tracks, so check with the Department of National Parks, Recreation, Sport and Racing ([nprsr.qld.gov.au](http://nprsr.qld.gov.au)) before setting off.
- While you don't necessarily need to spend a fortune, reliable walking shoes or cross trainers are a must.
- Be aware of your surroundings. Always check that the rock you are stepping on is stable, and look before you grab a branch. (I learned this the hard way when I was stabbed by a thorn!)
- Keep the noise down. If you want to spot wildlife, quiet and peaceful is the way to go.
- Don't forget your camera and sunscreen!
- Have fun! The journey may be hard, but the reward is worth it.







## COFFEE, GRAFFITI AND AUSTRALIA'S CONEY ISLAND

Here's why I love Melbourne:

- The cafe culture is amazing. You can pop in at any time of day to enjoy the laid-back ambience and some of the best coffees around!
- The street art is so creative and vibrant. Visit one of the graffiti lanes such as Hosier Lane and Rutledge Lane and let your imagination run free!
- A visit's not complete without a day at Luna Park. This 100-year-old amusement park has so much history and character; it's Australia's answer to Coney Island.

JANE KOH

## PHILIP ISLAND

A trip to Victoria wouldn't be complete without paying a visit to Philip Island, and as we discovered on our recent day trip, there's more to see here than the famous Penguin Parade.

①. **Philip Island Chocolate Factory.** At Panny's Amazing World of Chocolate you'll learn about the stages a cocoa bean goes through to transform it into chocolatey goodness, and witness some pretty amazing chocolate creations as you go. Kids (and perhaps others!) will love playing the interactive games to win more chocolate, and everyone's treated to a piece of their famous white truffle chocolate on arrival – just their way of saying hi!

②. **Churchill Island Heritage Farm.** Churchill Island lies just off Philip Island, and is home to a working heritage farm. For a small fee, you can take a guided tour giving a glimpse into the lives of early Australian settlers, as well as having the opportunity to interact with the animals, and even try sheep shearing.

③. **The Penguin Parade.** There's no getting away from it though, Philip Island is best known for its colony of Little Penguins. At sunset every evening, a legion of penguins make their way back to their burrows after a day of fishing and swimming. Penguin arrival times vary, so check the official site ([penguins.org.au](http://penguins.org.au)) and arrive early for a good view. Tickets aren't cheap, but I would say it's an opportunity not to be missed.

MARCUS SIA



### HOW BIG IS A LITTLE PENGUIN?

Little Penguins are the smallest penguin in the world at only 33 centimetres (13 inches) tall. They weigh in at around one kilogramme.

**How deep can a Little Penguin dive?** The deepest dive recorded is 72 metres. An average dive in search of fish is between five and 20 metres.

**How many Little Penguins live on Phillip Island?** Approximately 32,000.



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# CHRISTMAS ISLAND

## – THE GALAPAGOS OF THE INDIAN OCEAN

Ringed by dramatic sea cliffs, lapped by crystal clear water and topped with lush jungle, this extraordinary tip of an ancient volcano offers those adventurous enough to visit, an unparalleled wildlife experience.

Christmas Island is home to at least 24 species found nowhere else on the planet – that's more than any other Australian protected area. These include larger-than-life seabirds and the island's red land crab whose extraordinary annual migration was recently voted by naturalist Sir David Attenborough as one of his top ten nature experiences of all time.

Strap on a snorkel and mask and plunge into an underwater Garden of Eden where you can eyeball up to 170 species of tropical fish and countless colourful coral. A couple of hundred metres off shore, the shallow sea floor dramatically drops off to a depth of over 2.5km, providing for spectacular wall diving. You'll find no crowds here, just a couple of friendly whale sharks to welcome you into the deep blue yonder.

[christmas.net.au](http://christmas.net.au)

### CHRISTMAS ISLAND: AT A GLANCE

**Where is Christmas Island?** Christmas Island is a dot in the Indian Ocean, located 2,600km northwest of Perth, Western Australia. Even though it is an Australian Territory, its closest neighbour is Java, 360km away.

**Visa-vis:** Australian visa required (see Australia – At a Glance, page 18)

**Getting There:** Four flights weekly from Perth; one flight weekly from Jakarta

**Flight Time:** 3 hours 45 minutes from Perth; 50 minutes from Jakarta

**GMT+** Christmas Island is 7 hours ahead of GMT

**Size:** 135 square kilometres

**Currency:** Australian dollar

**Did you know?** Christmas Island is named after the day of its discovery in 1643



### TOP THREE BACK-TO-NATURE EVENTS ON CHRISTMAS ISLAND

- ①. Bird 'n' Nature Week: Expert guides, daily field trips, small groups, and extraordinary birdlife. First week of September.
- ②. Red Crab Migration: Be amazed by millions of endemic land crabs turning the island red as they stop for nothing on their annual mating migration. November to January – exact times vary.
- ③. Dive with whale sharks: Christmas Island is the only place in Australia where you can swim and scuba dive with these majestic beasts of the deep. November to April.



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# AIRLINE FOCUS: WHAT'S NEW AT QANTAS

It might be the world's second-oldest airline, but iconic Aussie brand Qantas likes to keep things fresh for travellers. Here are two services to look out for on Business Class flights to and from Singapore.

①. **Rockpool menus.** Customers travelling in Business between Singapore and Australia can use the **Select on Q-Eat** service to pre-order a meal online – and not just any meal, but one inspired by Neil Perry's Rockpool restaurant. You get more choice with the service, including an exclusive online-only dish on selected routes. You can also choose to skip meal service so the cabin crew know that you're keen to get some serious Zs; the range of refreshment options remains available at all times throughout the flight in any case.

②. **Luxury lounge.** Qantas' new Singapore Lounge has a bunch of luxury touches for travellers from Singapore, including "plate of the day" at the communal dining area, live cooking stations, an extensive buffet, and bar snacks. Cocktails inspired by Neil Perry's Spice Temple are available too, along with a full wine selection and barista service. Make use of the new **Qantas International Sleep Service** by eating in the lounge instead of when you board; it'll mean you can get the most out of the new mattresses and duvets in Business, accompanied by a T2 wellbeing tea to help you drift off.



## QANTAS BY NUMBERS

- The network of Qantas flights (including codeshare partner airlines) spans more than 220 destinations in over 50 countries.
- Qantas has 49 return services per week between Singapore and Australia (including flights with codeshare partner Emirates). Onward domestic connections in Australia lead to more than 55 destinations.
- Qantas was founded in 1920, in the Queensland outback.
- There are over 9 million members of the Qantas Frequent Flyer loyalty programme.

[qantas.com](http://qantas.com)



## 5 MELBOURNE MUST-DO'S

Legendary antipodean band Crowded House named one of their most famous songs after Melbourne. "Four Seasons in One Day" sums up the climatic and cultural diversity of Melbourne beautifully. And it's not just a dynamic city; it's also the gateway to many adventures.

**SEE** Head to Arts Centre Melbourne for theatre and exhibitions.

**SHOP** No visit to Melbourne would be complete without some serious retail therapy at the famous Block Arcade.

**EAT & DRINK** Taste heavenly food and wine fit for the gods at Mornington Peninsula, Yarra Valley, Macedon Ranges, Sunbury and the Geelong and Bellarine Peninsula.

**DRIVE** Take in the picturesque coast with a scenic drive along the Great Ocean Road. The sandy beaches amongst rugged coastline provide an exhilarating adventure.

**TAKE THE TRAIN** The Dandenong Ranges is home to the historic century-old Puffing Billy Steam Train and Devonshire Tea. Puffing Billy still runs along the original track and takes you through breathtaking scenic

mountains. Stop for a Devonshire Tea and get reacquainted with towering magical forests and hidden fern glades.

All of these fun days out and much more are within easy reach of **Boutique Stays'** holiday homes – a selection of fabulous one- to four-bedroom properties in and around Melbourne.

[bouticuestays.com.au](http://bouticuestays.com.au)



## Christmas Island A Natural Wonder



### What do you have when you combine...

A rugged coastline, pristine rainforest, world class diving, rare & exotic birds, abundant sea life, warm tropical waters... not to mention the fishing, snorkelling, golf, jungle walks, friendly locals and lots and lots of crabs?



[www.christmas.net.au](http://www.christmas.net.au)



[www.facebook.com/ChristmasIslandTourism](http://www.facebook.com/ChristmasIslandTourism)



**Christmas Island**  
A Natural Wonder



# TO BONDI AND BEYOND

## SYDNEY'S BEAUTIFUL BAYS AND BEACHES



Think of Sydney and images of its stunning harbour, iconic opera house and Bondi Beach lifeguards probably spring to mind. Not so famous but equally amazing are the many beaches dotted along the Sydney coastline. Base yourself in a holiday villa near one of these beautiful beaches and experience Sydney life as a local.

**Palm Beach:** Perhaps the most beautiful of the Northern Beaches, and a perfect spot for the kids to learn how to surf. Check out for The Boathouse, famous for its great ambience and food.

**Paradise Beach:** Calm waters and pristine sand make this a great family picnic beach, with a passing parade of yachts to keep the views dynamic. Cast your lines off the pier to catch the evening's dinner at this secret treasure tucked away in Clareville.

**Clareville Beach:** Bring along your beach ball and cricket set for a game on the large grassy area or the fine sands of Clareville Beach. Barbecue pits and picnic tables are at the ready.



Palm Beach

**Whale Beach:** Whales and dolphins can be spotted throughout the year at this popular, long, wide beach. Add to that great surfing, excellent swimming (always between the flags, please!), a small beach playground and free barbecue facilities and you're set for the ultimate day out.

**Avalon Beach:** Avalon has huge dunes, a long beach and perfect surf. Lounge over lunch at one of the many great beachside cafes or simply sit and people watch. Great for surfing swimming and boogie boarding, Avalon Beach has one of the best saltwater rock pools in the area too.



Avalon Beach





Collins Beach

Shelley Beach



**Bilgola Beach:** Another little treasure! The sand is gorgeous and the setting stunning. Bumbalino's, a casual beach-shack cafe has a terrific menu including the best egg-and-bacon rolls. A great way to start your day!

**Bungan Beach:** There's no road access to this beach but it's worth the small trek. A raw and natural beach with stunning dunes and wild surf, Bungan is usually pretty deserted making it even more special.

**Shelley Beach:** Just a 10-minute walk from the centre of Manly is the very special Shelley Beach. This little treasure, popular with divers and snorkellers, will win your heart. Enjoy a meal at restaurant Le Kiosk, across the footpath from the sand.

**Collins Beach:** Another spectacular beach near Manly. This one is set in bushland and feels like your own tropical island. If you're lucky, you may even spot a penguin or two.

**Bronte Beach:** Only 15 minutes from the city centre, Bronte oozes charm and its natural breakwater makes it a great beach for toddlers. Take the coastal walk from Bondi to Bronte and beyond and find out just how inspiring Sydney's eastern beaches can be!

**Bondi Beach:** Not only famous for the television show, Bondi is probably the most recognised beach in all of Australia. Go curl your toes in Bondi's sand – it just has to be done!

## WHERE TO STAY?

Kamekura Villa Specialists offer a stunning collection of private villas, including options at all of the beaches mentioned on these two pages. With their intimate knowledge of Sydney and its surrounds, they aim to provide five-star, personalised service and a perfect accommodation match for every guest.

[kamekura.com](http://kamekura.com)



WORDS AND PICTURES BY  
SHAUN AND ALIX RICHARDSON

Bamurru Plains ([bamurruplains.com](http://bamurruplains.com)), an upmarket safari lodge in Australia's Northern Territory, occupies a swathe of wetlands fringing Kakadu National Park. We got there via a one-hour flight from Darwin over swamps, rivers and beaches. Accommodation was in luxury safari tents with king-size beds, en-suite facilities and views across the floodplain. Evening meals were taken with the other guests at one long table; the excellent food was served with plenty of wine. Our daytime activities included a boat trip on the Mary River, a jeep safari and an airboat ride across the swamps and grasslands. Wildlife was prolific and we managed to get close to buffalo, crocodiles and masses of birdlife.



# BUSH LUXURY AT BAMURRU PLAINS

Airboat at Bamurru Plains. This takes visitors on a 2-3 hour excursion around the grasslands and swamps with a knowledgeable guide



Paperback trees on the Bamurru Plains wetlands



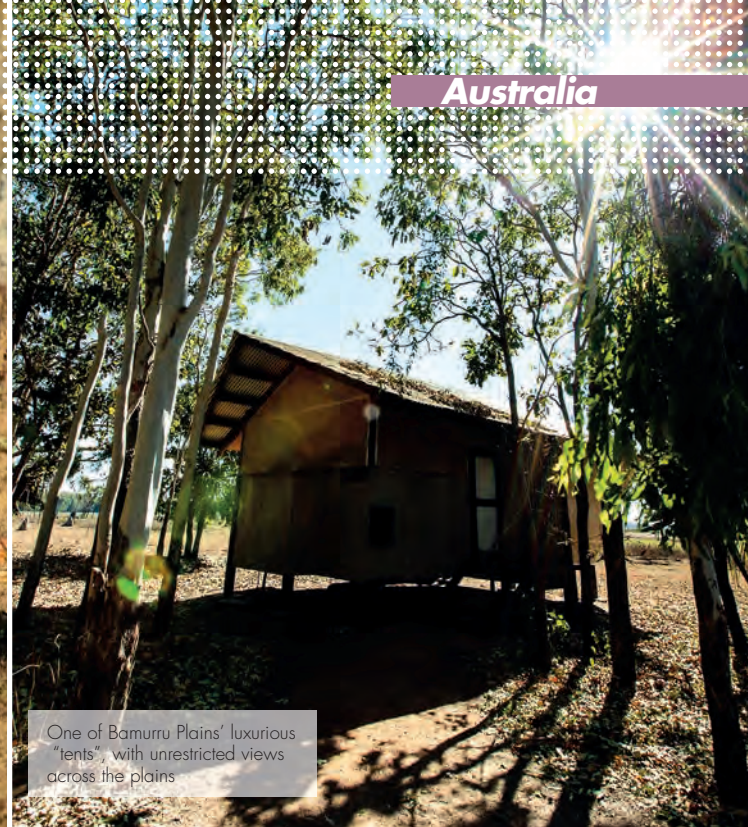




Water buffalo on the wetlands



Kangaroos playing in the early morning sunshine



One of Bamurru Plains' luxurious "tents", with unrestricted views across the plains

Female Jabiru in flight over the grasslands of the Bamurru Plains. These majestic birds have wingspans approaching three metres in length



Startled Magpie Geese taking flight at the approach of the airboat



A "saltie" (salt water crocodile) sits in the reeds waiting for prey





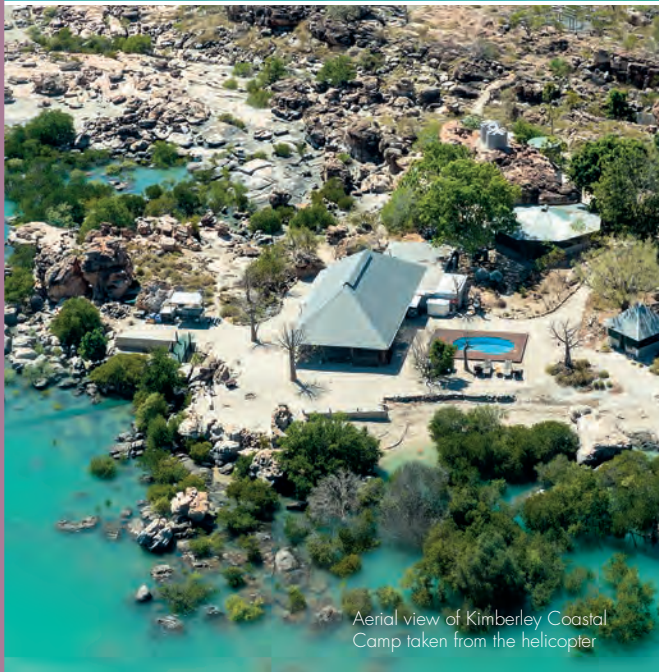
Australia



# AUSTRALIA'S WILD WILD WEST

WORDS AND PICTURES BY SHAUN AND ALIX RICHARDSON

Seaplane waiting to return guests to Kununurra from the camp



Aerial view of Kimberley Coastal Camp taken from the helicopter



Shaun with a Giant Trevally - his first catch of the day

We visited Kimberley Coastal Camp ([kimberleycoastalcamp.com.au](http://kimberleycoastalcamp.com.au)), at the northernmost tip of Western Australia, in August 2013 anticipating a busy resort with plenty of guests. As it turned out, we were the only ones there during our five-day stay!

Getting to the isolated camp is complicated: a scheduled flight from Darwin to Kununurra, a private flight to Mitchell Plains and then, finally, a short helicopter trip to the camp. Our return trip was by seaplane, which took off from the bay in front of the camp and landed on Lake Kununurra.

Accommodation at the camp is in chalets with a shared central bathroom and shower complex, and meals are taken with the guides and staff in an open-plan kitchen/dining room. Food is excellent and plentiful, and includes freshly caught fish and crabs. Days were spent on walks to view Aboriginal rock art, swimming in rock pools, learning about the fauna and flora, sea fishing and mud-crabbing.



Kimberley Coastal Camp's lounge, dining and kitchen facilities



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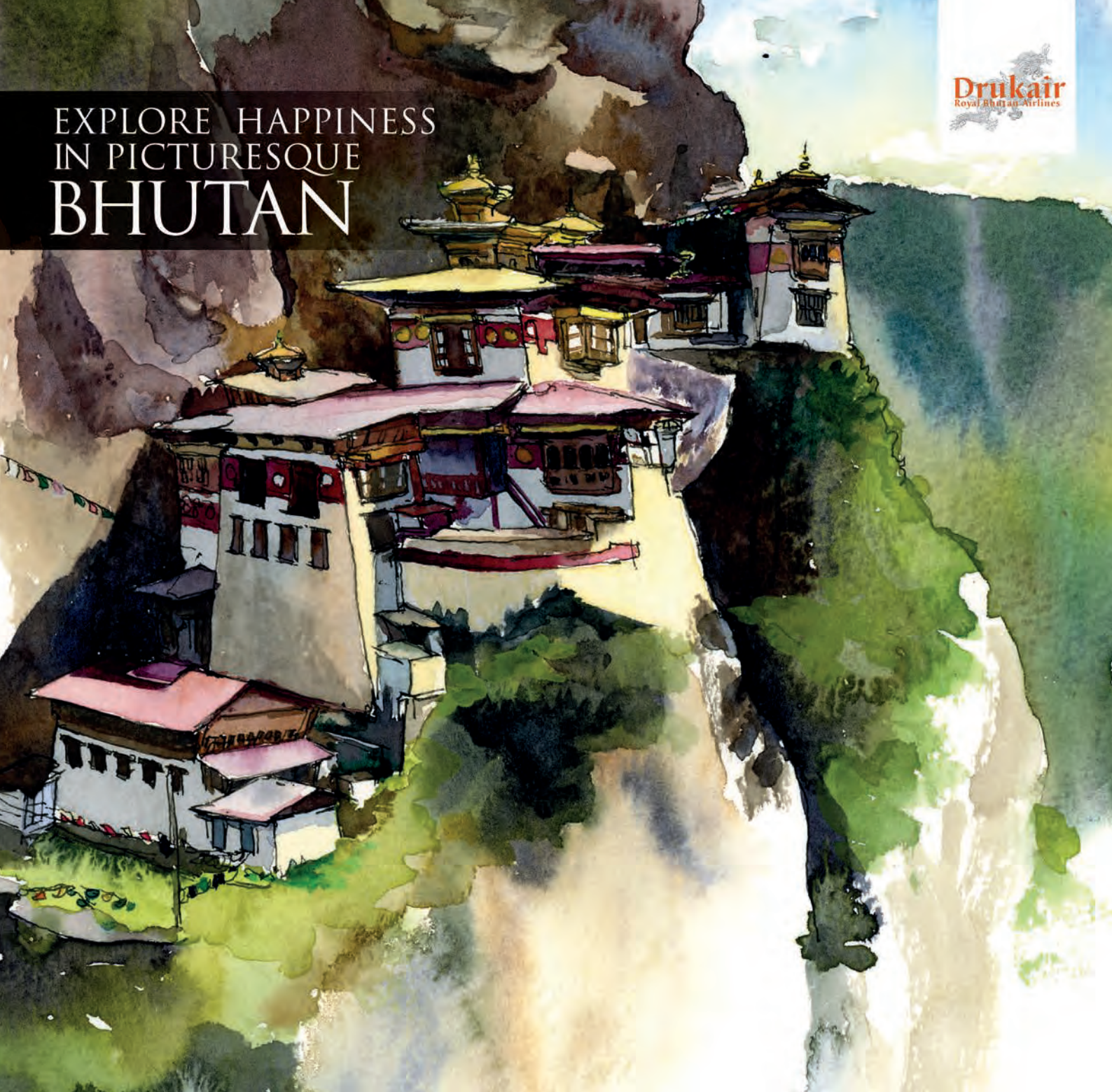
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Painting of Taktsang Monastery by © Lian Cherngzi, Erwin





# Bhutan

## At a glance

### Visa-vis

All tourists (excluding Indian, Bangladeshi and Maldivian passport holders) require a visa when visiting Bhutan and must book their holiday through a licensed Bhutanese tour operator or one of their international partners. The tour operator will take care of visa arrangements for visitors.

### Air time

5 hours from Singapore, with a 45-minute refuelling stopover in Kolkata.

### Cash & cards

Bhutanese currency is the Ngultrum (Nu). Indian Rupees are also accepted all over Bhutan, except in Rs500 and Rs1000 currency notes. ATMs accepting withdrawals using Visa or MasterCard found in main towns. Major

hotels and tourist shops also accept credit cards but travellers' cheques and cash are the easiest here.

### Weather report

Bhutan can be visited throughout the year but the best months are between March and May and September and November. Winter, from mid-November to mid-March, is mostly dry and sunny, with perfect blue

skies, temperatures peaking at around 15 degrees Celsius in the daytime and falling below zero at night. The monsoon usually arrives in mid-June, with light rain falling mainly in the afternoons and evenings.

### Mother tongue

Dzongkha is Bhutan's national language. English is commonly spoken in main towns.





Prayer flags with Tiger's Nest Monastery in the background; photo by Bamboo Shoots

### First words

Hello: *Kuzu Zangpo la*

What is your name? *Na gi*

Chen ga chi mo?

My name is \_\_\_:

*Nge gi ming \_\_\_ een*

How much? *Gademchi mo?*

Thank you: *Kaadinchey la*

Yes: *ing*

No thank you: *miju*

### World Heritage Sites

None (8 tentative).

### Salutations

A formal greeting is to bow with hands open and outstretched and the palms up.

### Clocking in

Bhutan time is 6 hours ahead of GMT, 2 hours behind Singapore.

### Must-try foods

*Emɑ datshi*, a chilli-and-cheese stew.

### National flower

Blue poppy.

### Must-buy souvenir

Postage stamps. Bhutan is a philatelist's dream. Visit the National Post Office at Chang Lam to buy colourful local stamps or a personalised stamp with your picture on it.

### Did you know?

■ National dress is compulsory for Bhutanese citizens

■ Bhutanese will refuse a gift three times before accepting it.

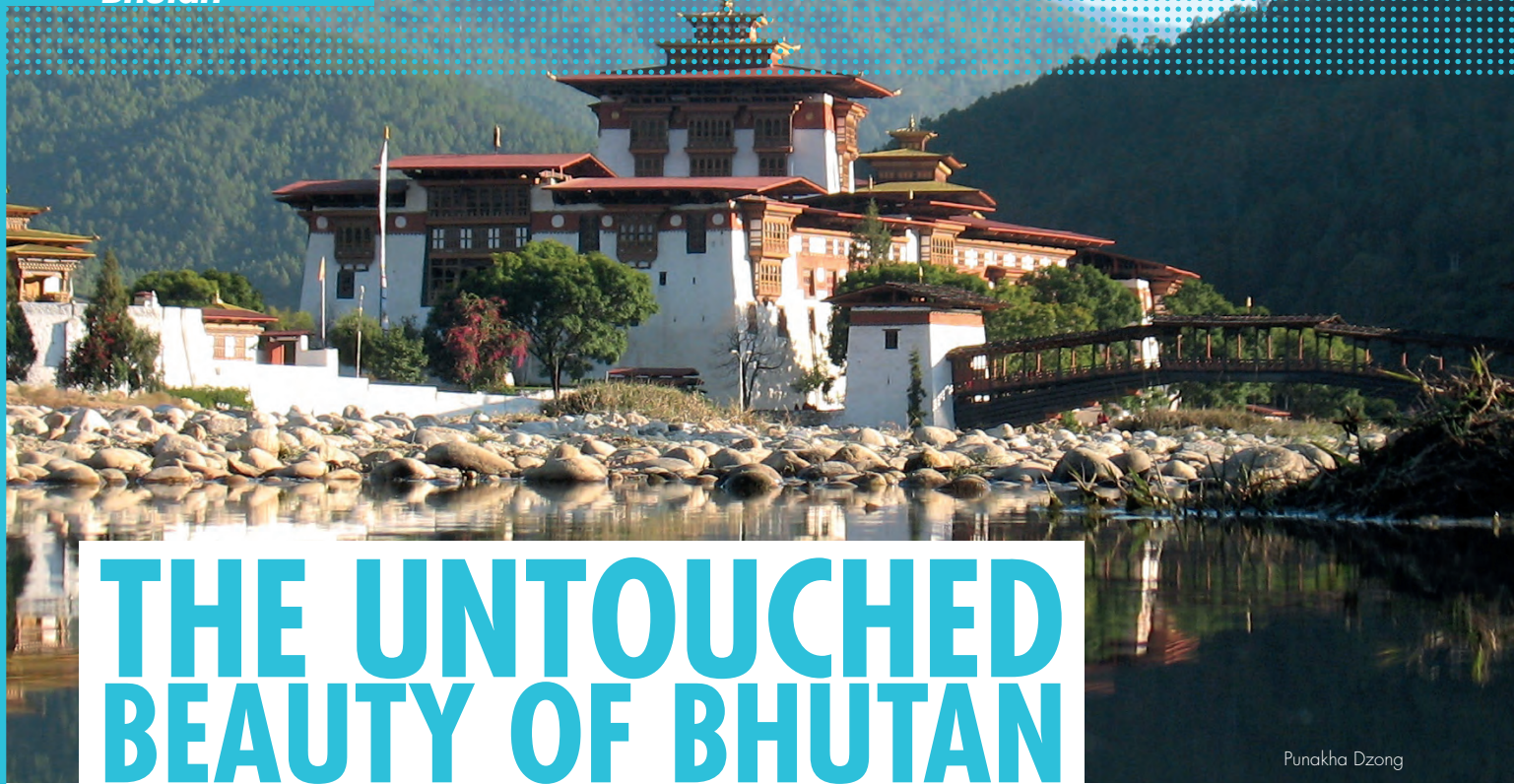
■ Archery is the national sport.

■ The sale of cigarettes is banned throughout the country.

### Must-read book

*Beyond the Sky and the Earth: a Journey into Bhutan* by Jamie Zeppa – the memoir of a Canadian woman's two-year stint in the country.





Punakha Dzong

# THE UNTOUCHED BEAUTY OF BHUTAN

The tiny kingdom of Bhutan is perched among the peaks of the mighty Himalaya. Bhutan offers a fascinating insight into a Buddhist culture where time has stood still, and the chance to experience Himalayan landscapes of astounding, untouched beauty.

Experienced Bhutan specialists, **Blue Poppy Tours and Treks**, who offer tailor made itineraries for independent travellers, share 10 cultural and natural highlights of a visit to this ancient and mysterious kingdom.

①. Take a day walk to the **Tiger's Nest**, the sacred Taktshang monastery which clings to the rock face 900 metres above the valley floor. Guru Rinpoche, who brought Buddhism to Bhutan in the 8th century, is said to have flown to the site riding on a tigress and subsequently meditated here for three months. This is one of Bhutan's holiest sites.

②. Visit the imposing **Punakha Dzong** (Palace of Great Happiness). Built in 1637, it is strategically placed at the confluence of two rivers, the Po Chu and the Mo Chu.

③. The **Druk Path trek** is a 5-day hike, starting from Paro and climbing through remote valleys and past mountain lakes to Bhutan's bustling capital, Thimphu; it's one of the most scenic and popular treks in Bhutan.



Tiger's Nest



Druk Path trek





Ting Valley

④. **Festivals** take place throughout the year in all the dzongs and monasteries across Bhutan. Attending one of these festivals is great way to experience Bhutan's culture and history through scenes and stories re-enacted in dance dramas.

⑤. **Biking in the Haa valley.**

This remote and beautiful valley is a great place to take to two wheels. A tough climb on a switchback road leads up to Chele La pass at 3,822 metres, from where you will have a view of Mount Jomolhari to the north as well as down the valley, before continuing down the switchback to Haa town.

⑥. If you're looking for luxury, COMO hotels offer the perfect stay with their luxury properties at Uma Paro and Uma Punakha allowing you to experience the cultural highlights of Bhutan in style.

⑦. Continuing the luxury theme, stay in the splendid **Gangtey Gompa Lodge** in the remote Phobjikha valley where you can see the rare black-necked cranes wintering in the valley from Tibet.

⑧. Take a **day hike in the Bumthang valleys**. Three hours' walk up the Bumthang river from Thangbi Gompa is the small region of Ngang Yul (Swan Land). The hike takes you through charming farm villages where

you'll witness scenes of traditional rural Bhutanese life.

⑨. Visit a farmhouse and try a **traditional hot stone bath**, before joining the farmer and his family for dinner for a real taste of local living.

⑩. To continue the cultural theme, try your hand at **archery**, Bhutan's national sport, or visit a fascinating and colourful **weekly market**.

[bluepoppybhutan.com](http://bluepoppybhutan.com)



Prayer room in farmhouse



Gangtey Gompa Lodge guest room



Masked dance at Paro festival



Weekly market



# Travels with a Sketchbook



LIAN CHERNGZHI is a 34-year-old visual artist from Singapore who goes travelling with his sketchbook and watercolours whenever he can. Up to now, he has sketched Rome, Florence, Barcelona, Amsterdam, Paris, Berlin, Cambodia, Nanjing, Beijing, Sydney and Taiwan. More recently, he had the opportunity to visit the Land of the Thunder Dragon.

I've been lucky enough to visit Bhutan twice. My travel agent, **Drukasia**, saw the Bhutan sketches from my original visit and asked to use them for their 2014 Calendar. In return, they compensated me with a second trip back to Bhutan, one of the most interesting and inspiring places that I have visited.

Truth be told, I'd never heard of Bhutan until I learned about Gross National Happiness. For the last four decades, Bhutan has championed this new approach to development, which

measures well-being through formal principles of gross national happiness rather than according to material growth. Intrigued, I went on to read more about Bhutan and eventually decided I must see it for myself.

Drukasia includes just about everything in its tour packages: visa, personal guide and driver, entrance fees, meals and accommodation are all taken care of. Being a solo traveller who enjoys the freedom of aimless adventure, the thought



of having a driver and guide did bug me a little. However, in this country of 70-percent forest cover and little access to public transport, the driver and guide were more than just a basic necessity.

As I opened up my sketchbook to try and capture the visual beauty of Bhutan, I couldn't help but feel a sense of peace. Everywhere I looked I saw lush green landscapes complemented by the warm colours of magnificent monasteries and fortresses (dzongs).

Animals roam freely in Bhutan; I didn't once see a dog on a leash and whenever I sat down to sketch, cows, horses and dogs would stroll by. This inspired me to believe that humans can truly live in harmony with nature.

I was impressed that Thimphu is the only capital city in the world without a traffic light. But what I was most pleased about was the fact that – unlike in so many other countries I've visited – no one hustled me when I stood in the street to sketch at night!

Once out of Thimphu, the countryside greeted me with its grand beauty. Prayer flags decorated the mountainsides, and occasionally I would pass by a waterfall rigged to spinning prayer wheels. I even had the good fortune to catch a glimpse of Bhutan's King and Queen as they drove by while I was painting one day. How exciting to see a real live king!

One of the most beautiful places I painted in Bhutan was the Punakha Dzong. This very ornate dzong lies between two magnificent rivers, the Pho Chu and Mo Chu. Although it was really challenging to paint this highly detailed

building, it gave me a great sense of achievement when it was done.

Of course, no trip to Bhutan is complete without visiting famous Paro Taktsang. This iconic monastery, also known as the Tiger's Nest, hangs on a precipitous cliff at 3,120 metres and can only be reached by a two-and-a-half hour hike.

The Bhutan tourist board markets its country as the happiest place on earth.

Though it's perhaps not true to say that *everyone* is happy in Bhutan, I certainly found it hard to be unhappy in such an idyllic and peaceful environment, and I will definitely return again.

**drukasia.com**  
**drukair.com.sg**  
**cherngzi.com**



GET THERE NOW  
BHUTAN

We asked travel specialists Country Holidays to pinpoint the Asian destinations they feel are especially ripe for visiting right now – before they lose their charm!

Since opening up the country and its economy, Bhutan's popular king has done a good job in securing much-needed foreign investments without cultural deterioration and environmental detriment. The forests of the Himalayan foothills remain pristine, and traditional Bhutanese architecture continues to dominate towns and villages. Locals still wear their *gho* and *kira* daily on the street. At the same time, luxury hotel chains such as Aman, Taj and COMO have started to arrive – and thankfully all are conscientious

in maintaining the local charm and pristine environment. For a perfect long weekend and great intro to the country, explore Paro, with iconic Tiger Nest Temple perched on a cliff, and take a visit to the capital Thimphu. Those with longer to spare should venture to Punakha for adventure: hiking, rafting and mountain biking opportunities abound.

**countryholidays.com.sg**  
**countryholidays.com.hk**





# Cambodia

## At a glance

### Visa-vis

All visitors to Cambodia require a visa with the exception of passport holders of Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Vietnam, Thailand, and Indonesia. Most other passport holders can apply for an e-visa at [www.evisa.mfaic.gov.kh](http://www.evisa.mfaic.gov.kh). You can also get a visa on arrival at most

ports of entry (\$US20, bring two passport photos).

### Air time

2 hours from Singapore.

### Cash & cards

Cambodian currency is the Cambodian Riel (KHR). US dollars are widely used in Cambodia, though it's useful to have some Cambodian currency for small purchases. ATM withdrawals using Visa

or MasterCard are available in the major cities. Credit cards are accepted in many upmarket hotels, boutiques and restaurants.

### Weather report

Cambodia is a year-round destination, with average temperatures around 27 to 28 degrees Celsius. Cambodia has four seasons: ■ November to February, cool and dry

- March to May, hot and dry
- June to August, hot and wet
- September to October, cool and wet.

### Mother tongue

The official language of Cambodia is Khmer. English and French are also spoken.

### First words

Hello: *Chum reap sour*  
What is your name?  
*Naek chmuah ey?*





Monks at Angkor Wat

**My name is \_\_\_:**  
*Knyom chmuah \_\_\_*

**How much?**

*Nih th'lay pohnmaan?*

**Thank you:** *Aw kohn*

**Yes:** *Baht (for males) and  
joah (for females)*

**No thank you:** *Teh ar-kun*

#### **World Heritage Sites**

*Total: 2*

- Angkor
- Temple of Preah Vihear

#### **Salutations**

For a formal greeting, place your hands together close to your chest and face; dip your head at the same time in a slight bow.

#### **Clocking in**

7 hours ahead of GMT and 1 hour behind Singapore.

#### **Must-try foods**

*Fish amok*, a fish mousse with fresh coconut milk and

*kroeung*, a type of Khmer curry paste.

#### **National flower**

Romduol.

#### **Must-buy souvenir**

Khmer Silk.

#### **Did you know?**

- The Cambodian flag is the only flag in the world to feature a building.
- Angkor Wat is the largest

religious monument in the world.

- The flow of the Tonlé Sap river changes direction twice a year.
- Tarantula kebabs are a popular delicacy in Cambodia.

#### **Must-read book**

*The Gate* by Francois Bizot – an account of the fall of Phnom Penh and the early days of the Pol Pot era.





# TEMPLE MAGIC

## NAVIGATING ANGKOR

The Angkor Archaeological Park covers 400 square kilometres and contains the remains of several Khmer Empire capitals from the ninth to the 15th centuries, the most well known being Angkor Wat, Angkor Thom and Ta Prohm. The park entrance is six kilometres from Siem Reap.

- Passes are required to enter the Park: 1-day (US\$20), 3-day (US\$40), or 7-day (\$60). Children under 12 go free (may need to show a passport). The ticket office lies on the road between Siem



- Reap and Angkor Wat; your guide or tuk-tuk driver will take you through the office on the way to the temples.
- Buy your one-day pass after 5pm and see a temple sunset on the day of purchase as well as having access to the park the following day.
- Visit the Angkor National Museum in Siem Reap to learn a bit about the temples before heading out to them.
- Tuk-tuks can be hired for around US\$15 a day, and guides for about US\$20 a day, available for most major languages. Either ask your hotel concierge to book you one or try [khmerangkortourguide.com](http://khmerangkortourguide.com), whose guides are trained by the Ministry of Tourism and UNESCO.
- Arrive early to beat the crowds (and the sun). The Park opens at 5am. Take a break at your hotel in the middle of the day and then head out again late afternoon to watch the sunset.



- The temples are still holy spaces for Cambodians, so be respectful and follow the dress code of long trousers or skirt, and covered shoulders.
- Banteay Srei temple is well worth the extra distance (it lies 35 kilometres northeast of Siem Reap). Made of red sandstone, this pretty temple is known for its beautiful and intricate carvings.

HILARY GALEA





### WHERE TO STAY:

Sala Lodges ([salalodges.com](http://salalodges.com)) was my favourite hotel find in 2013. The traditional wooden stilt houses that make up this “village” create a unique and enchanting place.

The creators of Sala Lodges have re-erected and meticulously restored eleven Khmer houses on a plot of land just outside Siem Reap. While the exteriors of the houses have been conserved, the interiors are comfortable and luxurious. Each house has its own individual history and architecture, with tiny imperfections that only add to its uniqueness. Beautiful gardens replicate the Cambodian countryside and the sounds of local life are very much a part of the experience.

The contemporary-styled communal areas – restaurant, bar, outdoor lounge and 20-metre pool – offer a stark contrast to the traditional houses with their clean modern lines and make convivial spots for would-be Indiana Joneses to swap tales of adventure to little-known Angkor temples.

SIÂN JONES



### GET A GUIDE

We’d been debating a family trip to Angkor for quite some time. I felt it was somewhere we should go without the children, dreading their complaints about having to visit temples all day, but my husband thought that they would really enjoy it.

Friends had recommended a guide and we thought that having someone show us around would make things more interesting and fun for everyone. On day one of our three-day trip, our

guide, Mr Kim, deeply impressed the boys by showing them an old bullet wound from the civil war. From then on he was considered a hero.

We visited some of the most famous temples, including Angkor Wat, Angkor Thom, Bayon Temple (the Temple of Faces), and Ta Prohm (the Jungle Temple) and our boys were even more delighted when they found out they were allowed to climb on some of the ruins!

Mr Kim was very modest, did not expect any “extras” and was happy to tailor our itinerary as we went along. His excellent command of English made travelling with him very easy and enjoyable.

Take a look at Mr Kim’s website, [angkor-guides.com](http://angkor-guides.com); it has lots of useful info.

LUCY RICHARDSON



# Cambodia



Countryside



Royal Palace



Central Market

Street 240





# FIVE DAYS IN PHNOM PENH

WORDS AND PICTURES BY HILARY GALEA

This was, primarily, a house-building trip. A group of ten of us were treading in the footsteps of our 16-year-old kids who had previously been to Cambodia with The Tabitha House Building Programme, so we could see for ourselves what it was all about.

As part of our orientation, Janne Ritskes, the founder of Tabitha ([tabitha-cambodia.org](http://tabitha-cambodia.org)), gave us background on Cambodia's turbulent history and information about the people we were there to build houses for. Perhaps one of the most daunting realisations that I took away from this trip was that during my teenage years back in the UK, I had been oblivious to the events that were taking place in Cambodia. After visiting Tuol Seng Genocide Museum and The Killing Fields on day two of our trip, it seemed impossible that all this could have happened in such a relatively recent past.

The next day, armed with hammers, gloves and kneepads, we headed out into the glorious Cambodian



countryside, somewhat apprehensive about our house-building capabilities – a feeling that was accentuated when we met the families who were depending on us! But as it turned out, despite the language barriers, we had the satisfaction of working as a team with these poorest of Cambodian citizens, and ended the day with eight

houses built. We had hardly hammered the last nail before families had moved in, rice had been spread out on mats between the stilts, chickens and children making themselves at home, and smiles all round.

Our house-building duties done, we explored Phnom Penh and discovered a charming, welcoming city with a big heart.

**We flew** on Jetstar. Just over two hours from Changi direct to Phnom Penh.

**We stayed** at The Kabiki ([thekabiki.com](http://thekabiki.com)).

**We ate** at The FCC (Foreign Correspondents' Club) – clichéd, but has to be done! Friends Restaurant ([tree-alliance.org](http://tree-alliance.org)) – expect gorgeous food, delicious daiquiris and smiling service at this must-visit restaurant set up to train and help build brighter futures for Phnom Penh's street children.

**We shopped** and were totally charmed by the pretty boutiques in and around Street 240.

**We visited** Central Market – an art deco gem filled with flowers, clothes, watches and lots and lots of jewellery. Toul Tom Pong, The Russian Market (named after

the hordes of Eastern Bloc tourists who visited Phnom Penh in the 1980s), for handicrafts, fabrics and "antiques". The Royal Palace – beautiful, but we only saw it only from the outside (it's closed between 11am and 2pm every day). The huge stretch of water alongside which Phnom Penh is built, where the Tonle Sap and Mekong rivers converge.

#### Also worth a visit:

- The **Khmer Surin** ([khmersurin.com.kh](http://khmersurin.com.kh)) for excellent Khmer fare in a particularly atmospheric setting.
- **Bodhi Tree Umma** ([bodhitree.com](http://bodhitree.com)), a pleasant

restaurant with a shady garden courtyard, almost opposite Tuol Sleng Museum.

- **Le Rit's** guesthouse and restaurant, managed by an NGO set up to help vulnerable women in Phnom Penh. Much quieter and more low-key than Friends, but still well worth a visit – we enjoyed our dinner, and service was sweet and attentive.
- **Wat Phnom**, Phnom Penh's only hill, topped by lovely temple and offering some great views over the city.
- **Raffles Hotel Le Royal**, highly recommended for happy hour cocktails.







# KHMER CAFÉ CULTURE

WORDS AND PICTURES BY JOHN K. JOHNSON

Café culture is thriving on the streets of Boeung Keng Kang – an expat enclave of Phnom Penh (PP) – close to the Angkor-inspired Independence Monument, just ten tuk-tuk minutes from the city centre.

Walk down the alley connecting the bizarrely named One Up Banana Hotel to Pasteur Street (#51) and take a left. Within three blocks you'll pass bright and inviting brand-name coffee emporiums like Costa Coffee, Brown Coffee and Bakery, and Gloria Jeans. Intermixed with these are local cafés each with its own unique ambiance.

Other parts of the city may not have the slick name brands, but there is a plethora of places to have a meal or café to loll in for an hour or two, book or iPad in hand, watching the captivating carnival of Cambodian street life.

Towards Sisowath Quay and the city centre, on street 240, a slightly unusual venue for a hearty western breakfast is the Freebird Bar and Grill. Once inside, with the doors closed, windows shaded, bar stools lined up, waitresses on duty, it might as well be midnight, but no, it's morning, and the *huevos rancheros* are hot and tasty. Just shade your eyes when returning to the bright sunshine.

## GETTING AROUND

Getting around "PP" is half the fun. If the weather is mild, walking (watch your step!) is a viable, healthy, sensory-rich option. Sidewalk barbers, vegetable and fruit stands, used books, bicycle repair shops, local foods – you'll find it all. The best motorised alternative is a local tuk-tuk. With a motorbike in front and a covered (rain curtains at the ready) trailer behind, these PP people movers are the most elegant iteration of the tuk-tuk paradigm in Southeast Asia. Two or three US dollars will take you just about anywhere within the city.



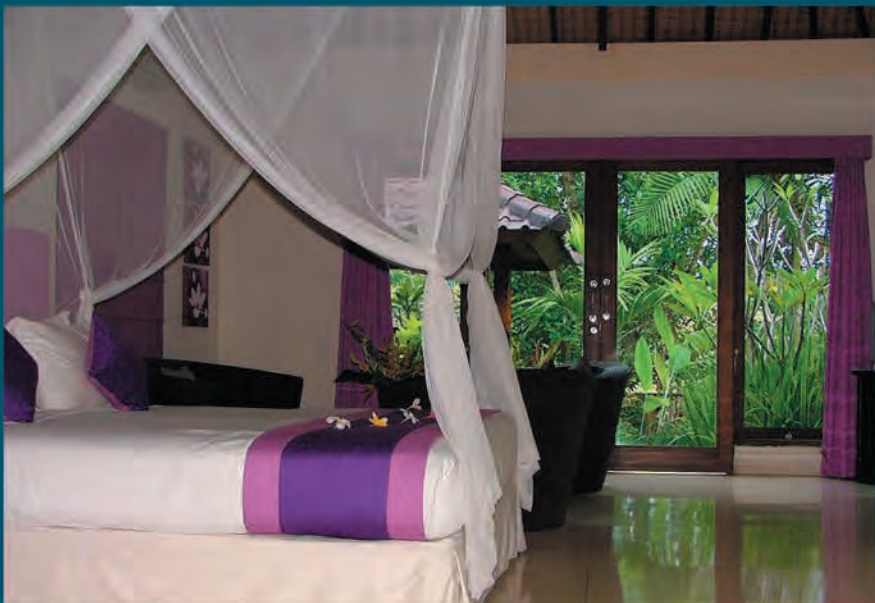




VILLA  
*Kylie*

Canggu Village, Bali  
contact - [bkvot@hotmail.com](mailto:bkvot@hotmail.com)  
for reservations

[www.villakylie-bali.com](http://www.villakylie-bali.com)







## At a glance

### Visa-vis

All visitors to China need a visa with the exception of citizens of Singapore, Brunei and Japan. For further info, visit [www.visaforchina.org](http://www.visaforchina.org).

### Air time

4 to 7 hours from Singapore.

### Cash & cards

The official currency in China

is the Renminbi (RMB); the basic unit of this currency is the Yuan. Credit card use is largely limited to high-end hotels, restaurants and shops so do carry cash. You will find ATMs in most major towns throughout China.

### Weather report

Visit during the spring and summer seasons, though weather varies enormously depending on the location. It

can be bitterly cold between December and February, especially in the north, where temperatures can get down to -40° Celsius. In the south, Hong Kong's best weather is generally from March to May and November to December.

### Mother tongue

The official language of China is Mandarin. Cantonese is the other main

language, serving as the predominant language of Hong Kong, Macau and Guangdong province.

### First words

Hello: *Ni hao*

What is your name?

*Nǐ jiào shén me míngzi?*

My name is     : *Wǒ jiào*

How much? *Duōshǎo?*

Thank you: *Xiè xie*

Yes: *Shì de*

No thank you: *Búyào xièxie*





Yuantong Temple, Kunming

### Salutations

A handshake is the formal way of greeting people.

### Clocking in

There is no time difference between China and Singapore but Xinjiang and Tibet in the far west use an unofficial time that is two hours behind Singapore.

### National flower

Plum Blossom (*Prunus Mei*)

### World Heritage Sites

Total: 45

Highlights:

- The Great Wall
- Historic Ensemble of the Potala Palace, Lhasa
- Temple of Heaven, Beijing
- Jiuzhaigou Valley Scenic and Historic Interest Area
- Fujian Tulou

### Must-try foods

Peking duck – roasted duck meat and skin topped with

scallions and a sweet sauce, wrapped in thin pancakes.

### Must-buy souvenir

Porcelain from Jingdezhen.

### Did you know?

- Fortune cookies are not a Chinese custom; they were invented in San Francisco.
- One third of the world's socks are produced in one district of Zhuji city.
- On the bridge linking

mainland China and Macau, cars switch from left to right-hand drive and vice versa.

- The Chinese invented paper, the compass, gunpowder and printing.

### Must-read book

*The Good Earth* by Pearl S. Buck – this story of family life in a Chinese village before World War I won the author a Nobel Prize in 1938.



# CYCLING THE ROOFTOP OF THE WORLD

Cycling Tours have gained huge popularity in recent years. While they are pretty well established in many European destinations, places such as China, Tibet and Myanmar have gained a lot of attention lately. Professional cycling tours operator **Shangrila Adventure** specialises in fully supported bike tours to China, specifically the regions including Sichuan, Yunnan and Guizhou Provinces. If you're looking for an epic journey with high altitudes and snow-capped mountains, then a 14 or 18-day bike tour on the friendship highway from Tibet to Nepal is a "must-do"!

**F**rom ancient Buddhist monasteries to breathtaking lakes and awesome views of the world's highest mountain, Everest, this 1,000-kilometre journey has it all. The epic trip starts from Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. You will traverse several mountain-passes, spending a night at Everest base camp, before crossing the border between Tibet and Nepal to

end in the lush greenery of the Kathmandu valley.

**Lhasa to Gyantse:** In Lhasa, the most prominent structure is the 12-storey Potala Palace. Built in the seventh century as the chief residence of the Dalai Lama, it has more than 1,000 rooms, and houses many statues and shrines. Other key sights in Lhasa include Barkhor Square, where Tibetan pilgrims prostrate themselves at the sacred Jokhang monastery, and Norbu Lingka, the former summer palace of the Dalai Lama.

The bike tour takes a southern route that passes Yamdrok-tso Lake with views of Karola glacier. At the top of Khampa La mountain-pass, you're rewarded with stunning views of Yamdrok-tso and Bhutan's Kula Kangri mountain in the distance.







**Gyantse to Shigatse:** Gyantse has a large Tibetan population and is at the important crossroads linking Tibet Ngari prefecture in the west and Yadong and the India border in the south. Visit the sprawling Palchoi Monastery, with its mix of Tibetan and Chinese design, and 10,000 Buddha statues and *thangkas*.

**Shigatse to Rongbuk:** The 600-year-old city of Shigatse is the second largest city in Tibet. The most important monastery is

Tashilungpo, which stands in the heart of the city with its shiny golden roof and bright red walls. Within the monastery is a 22-metre-tall standing Buddha.

From Shigatse, the vast Tibetan plateau spreads out along the route, which climbs to its highest point, Gyatso La (5,260m), decorated with many colourful prayer flags. You'll stay in Shegar for a night, the last town before entering the Everest conservation area.

From the windy Pang La mountain pass, you can catch

your first glimpse of Everest, or Chomolungma, and the Himalayas range. You can also visit the world's highest monastery, Rongbuk, before riding on to Everest base camp. This is a highlight of the trip – on a clear day you can see the entire mountain, from base to summit. An awesome sight!

**Rongbuk to Kathmandu:** From Everest base camp, we head towards the old town of Tingri, and then bike up the last mountain pass of the

journey, Thong La.

After spending a lung-busting nine days above 3,600 metres, the road starts to dip along one of the most exhilarating downhill rides into Nepal.

The journey continues through the lush Sun Kosi valley towards Dhulikhel and the UNESCO heritage site of Bhaktapur. Then it's time to start celebrating the completion of the 1,000 kilometres!





# HONG KONG SUMMER



Hong Kong is full of surprises; here are a dozen quirky tips on how to see some very different sides to the city, especially if you're visiting in the warmer months of the year.

- ①. Go butterfly viewing: The Fung Yuen Butterfly Reserve in Tai Po is home to more than 200 different species of butterflies, including the rare White Dragontail and Birdwing Swallowtail. Learn about Hong Kong's ecology on a guided tour or stop by the Fung Yuen Nature and Culture Education Centre to further your knowledge of Hong Kong's various flora and fauna. [fungyuen.org](http://fungyuen.org)
- ②. Explore Hong Kong's natural wildlife; Tin Shui Wai is home to one of Asia's best wetland parks. View a plethora of local animal life there, including birds, freshwater critters and Pui Pui the crocodile. [wetlandpark.gov.hk](http://wetlandpark.gov.hk)
- ③. Buy some picnic supplies (your hotel might offer them – check at reception) and hop on the Disneyland MTR to Inspiration Lake. You can relax on the lawn, walk the promenade or rent a pedal boat on the lake itself. [hongkongdisneyland.com](http://hongkongdisneyland.com)
- ④. Engage in a variety of water sports at the St Stephen's Beach Water Sports Centre. Rent from their supply of sailing dinghies, windsurfing boards, kayaks and canoes for a twist to a simple beach day. [lcsd.gov.hk/watersport/en/inde\\_stephen.php](http://lcsd.gov.hk/watersport/en/inde_stephen.php)





- ⑤. Take a trip down the city's memory lane by walking through Hong Kong's old abandoned oyster beds in Lau Fau Shan. Have a chat with the elderly oyster farmers who live in the area, then enjoy some fresh seafood on the shore.
- ⑥. Take to the ice. Where better to cool off than at one of Hong Kong's ice rinks? The ones at Megabox in Kowloon and Elements in Tsim Sha Tsui both boast international-sized ice rinks that offer plenty of room to unleash your inner figure skater. [megaice.com.hk](http://megaice.com.hk)  
[rink.com.hk](http://rink.com.hk)
- ⑦. If your little one is in the mood to play pretend, visit the Dreams Come True Education Park located in Hong Kong airport. Kids can dress up in various costumes and uniforms and try their hands at being firefighters, astronauts or whatever their dreams may be. [dreamscometrue.com.hk](http://dreamscometrue.com.hk)
- ⑧. Experience a renaissance: for an insight into a neighbourhood in the midst of a cultural re-birth, take a trip to Chai Wan, Hong Kong's East Side. This area, formerly an industrial neighbourhood, now houses small stores, galleries, and cafés in its warehouse towers.
- ⑨. The government pool at Sai Kung is a great way to keep cool; pack the towels, sunscreen and snacks and head to Wai Man Road to enjoy both the lap pool and the family-friendly kids' pool and water slides. Or, if you're feeling adventurous, take the one-hour hike through the East Country Park to Sai Kung's freshwater river pools. After a dip, make for the nearby beachside village of Sai Wan for a snack and a drink. [lcsd.gov.hk/beach/en/swim-address-sk.php](http://lcsd.gov.hk/beach/en/swim-address-sk.php)
- ⑩. Hire a junk or fishing boat at Sai Kung Ferry Pier and journey to Big or Little Millionaire's Beach. Relax and enjoy the serenity of the lagoon-fed coast, then finish the night with seafood on the pier.
11. Go market shopping. Journey to Kowloon Park and peruse a farmers' market of arts and crafts. These stalls are set up each Sunday and public holiday from 1pm to 7pm, and the focus is on painting, photography and sketching. [lcsd.gov.hk/parks/kp/en/arts\\_and\\_crafts.php](http://lcsd.gov.hk/parks/kp/en/arts_and_crafts.php)
12. Go for a dive. Yes, there is diving in Hong Kong, with plenty of aquatic life to see. Book with one of the various clubs, such as the South China Diving Club, or forge your own path at one of the recognised diving locations. Good places to start include Ho Ha Wan Bay (known for starfish and jellyfish) or Little Palm Beach East (known for sea horses, cuttlefish, and pufferfish). [sdc.org.hk](http://sdc.org.hk)

SERENA KINI CRAMER





# YUNNAN HIGHLIGHTS

BY REBECCA BISSET

My first trips to China – Beijing and Shanghai – hadn't really impressed me (aside from Shanghai's Bund); it was all a bit grey.

But a visit to Yunnan Province in the south helped me understand a different side of the country. The scenery, the traditional costumes and different way of life are mind-altering and definitely worth seeing while you're living in the region.

Since Lijiang was registered as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1997 it has become very touristy, but as an example of an ancient canal town it's still interesting. There are some smaller towns in the area – Shuhe, for instance – if you want something quieter. We stayed north of Lijiang at the Banyan Tree, within walking distance of the quaint and well-preserved town of



Dayan, which has plenty of little places to shop, wander around, eat or just sit and have a coffee.

The highlight of the trip – and probably most of my travelling life (which is saying a lot) – was a spectacular dance/music performance, the Lijiang Impressions Show. It's set on a manmade mountain face with the real Jade Dragon Snow Mountain in the background, and the costumes, horses, music and drama are just awesome.

The trip from Lijiang to Shangri-la was interesting, even if the actual city (formerly known as Dukezong but renamed Shangri-La in 2001) wasn't that impressive. The area is worth exploring on foot or horse (though they look more like donkeys), but do be aware that the heart of the historical area was destroyed by a huge fire in early 2014.

We stayed out of town in a fairly remote spot:

Ringha is another Banyan Tree resort, this one set in original Tibetan-style homes. It's definitely a great way to get a taste of the architectural style of the region – with some luxurious touches.

Back in Kunming, the provincial capital, we had another brilliant experience at the Dynamic Yunnan show. We weren't really sure what to expect, but it was amazing – a mixture of dance and drums (68 of them), featuring various ethnic groups from the region. Kunming itself is pretty and easy to walk around, and there are lakes and temples to keep your camera occupied.

Yunnan borders on to Laos, Burma, Vietnam and Tibet as well as other areas of China so it has a fantastic mix of ethnic influences; it's also a good base for further travel.

We flew from Kunming to Lijiang, went by car to Shangri-la and then flew from Shangri-la back to Kunming.









# India

## At a glance

### Visa-vis

Citizens of Singapore, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Philippines, Myanmar, Indonesia, Finland, Japan, Luxembourg and New Zealand are eligible for a visa on arrival. All other nationalities should apply online. Visit [www.vfsglobal.com/india/singapore](http://www.vfsglobal.com/india/singapore) or the Indian High Commission in Singapore ([hcisingapore.gov.in](http://hcisingapore.gov.in)) for further information.

### Air time

Between 4 and 5.5 hours from Singapore.

### Cash & cards

The official currency of India is the Indian Rupee (INR). You will find ATMs in most large centres. If you're travelling out of town ensure you have enough cash. Major currencies can be changed at banks and private money changers. MasterCard and Visa are the most commonly accepted cards but are

limited to mid- to high-end hotels, restaurants and shops.

### Weather report

The best time to visit most areas is from October to March, although January to September is a good time to visit the south, while north-eastern India tends to be best between March and August. Kashmir and the mountainous regions of Himachal Pradesh are most accessible between May and September. Skiing is popular from January through

March, while trekking in the Indian Himalayas is recommended from April to November. Beach-goers tend to head to Kerala and Goa from December to May, when the weather is clear and dry.

### Mother tongue

The official languages of India are Hindi and English.

### First words

Hello: *Namaste*  
What is your name?  
Aapka naam Kya hai?





Ancient city of Varanasi on the Banks of the Ganges

My name is \_\_\_:

Mera nama \_\_\_ hai

How much? Kitna

Thank you: Dhanyavaad

Yes: Haan (Ha)

No thank you: Nahin  
dhan'yavada

### Salutations

Press your palms pressed together at chest level saying, "Namaste". This is often followed by a light handshake. Always allow Indian women to initiate contact.

### Clocking in

5.5 hours ahead of GMT,  
2.5 hours behind Singapore.

### World Heritage Sites

Total: 30

Highlights:

- Churches and Convents of Goa
- Ellora Caves
- Qutb Minar and its Monuments, Delhi
- Red Fort Complex
- Taj Mahal

### Must-try food

Kati roll. Traditional street

food consisting of a wrap of kebabs, eggs, vegetables, and spices rolled into *paratha*.

### National flower

Lotus.

### Must-buy souvenir

Indian bling: bold, bright and beautiful.

### Did you know?

- Chess and Snakes & Ladders originated in India.
- Approximately 5,000 Mumbai dabbawalas

("ones who carry the boxes") deliver 200,000 lunchboxes of fresh food to customers' offices each day.

- Indian Railways is the eighth largest employer in the world (1.4 million workers).
- Khari Booli in New Delhi is Asia's largest wholesale spice market.

### Must-read book

*A Suitable Boy* by Vikram Seth – follows four families as a mother searches for a suitable boy for her daughter.



READERS  
TIPS

# PARADISE ON EARTH?

The Kashmir Valley has long been famed for its natural beauty. Kings have coveted it and Jehangir, a Mughal emperor, said of it, "If there is a paradise on earth, it is this, it is this, it is this."

Nestled in the foothills of the Himalayas, Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar is framed by awe-inspiring mountains and boasts a beautiful

lake lined with luxurious houseboats, famous Mughal gardens including Nishaat and Shalimar, and imposing chinar trees, many of them planted centuries ago by Mughal kings.

The mountain air of the Kashmir Valley is invigorating and the landscape is beautiful. The Gulmarg resort offers skiing in winter, and gondola rides to 13,000 feet in summer, with views of lush meadows, forests of evergreen trees, and tall

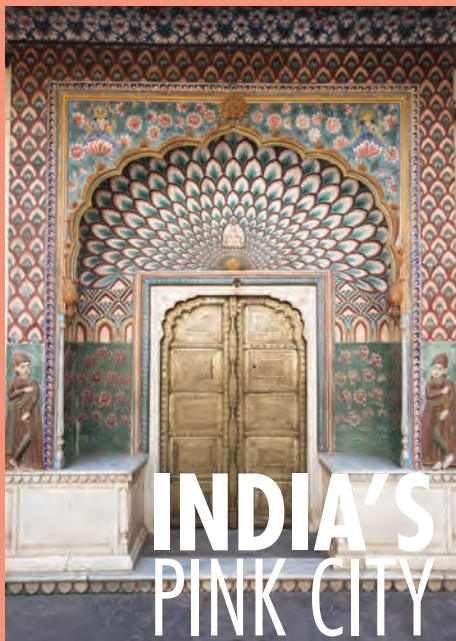
mountains. In spring, the tulip gardens (the largest in Asia) and the fruit orchards are in full bloom and carpets of yellow mustard fields – the same fields which produce saffron flowers in early November – are everywhere. Autumn, with its changing colours, is also a popular time to visit. Every season is special here.

Then there's the ancient eighth-century temple to the Sun God Martanda – more Greek than Indian in style

– and the opportunity to shop for gossamer-thin finely embroidered pashminas, intricate carved wood and embroidered tapestries, or sample the famous Kashmiri cuisine and wazwans (celebratory banquets).

Kashmir is not only a paradise on earth, but one with a seemingly infinite choice of activities for all.

TARA DHAR HASNAIN



Travelling from Delhi to Agra to view the Taj Mahal is a popular tourist route. But going a step further than the Taj to visit "The Pink City" of Jaipur (considered to be the third point of India's Golden triangle), is well worth consideration

The journey from Delhi to Jaipur takes about five hours by car. In Jaipur, if one wants to have an authentic Rajasthani experience, then Chokhi Dhani is a must-visit place, with elephant, camel and horse rides aplenty, much to kids' delight. You'll also see puppet shows, women dancing with earthenware pots on their heads, snake charmers, people balancing on tightropes, sumptuous Rajasthani platters. Chokhi Dhani seems to have everything to keep tourists enthralled.

Hawa Mahal or The Palace of Winds is the most popular

landmark in Jaipur. The 953 stone-carved screens on the building are designed to allow the passage of wind and keep the structure cool.

Adjoining the Hawa Mahal is The City Palace. It consists of a vast museum featuring all kinds of handcrafted artefacts, the fashions of the royals, equipment used by warriors and many other exhibits showcasing the royal heritage. Of all the various forts and palaces in Jaipur, this is undoubtedly the most famous and deserving of a visit.

RUCHI GUPTA





# DELHI TEA BREAK

Exploring Delhi can be hard work – I doubt many travellers would disagree. But the small moments of magic, in my view, make it all worthwhile. One such moment on my recent visit came after I'd battled the morning heat and traffic to explore the banks of the Yamuna River on bicycle – including visiting a *gaushala* (shelter) where the city's free-roaming cows are brought to eat and sleep.

Close to the shelter, a teenage *chai walla* (tea maker) was brewing *masala chai* at a hole-in-the-wall store, and it looked like just the tonic I needed. To a saucepan of boiling water (not just any saucepan, but the most used saucepan on the planet), the fellow added two or three glasses of milk, a pinch of mixed spices and a couple of whole cloves, then he upped the flame on his cooker with a few quick hand-pumps on the external gas tank. Once the liquid started to boil, in went two teaspoons of black tea, and Shiva-knows-how-many teaspoons of sugar. The whole thing turned a chocolately colour in a minute or so, at which point the vendor upended a stream of the stuff into the tiniest of glasses and handed it to me. In return, I gave him a rupee note whose value I couldn't detect beneath its grime but which seemed to do the job.

Then I sat there on a concrete step, flanked by a pair of yellow guardian lion statues, listening to the nearby sounds of braying cattle, a Bollywood song on a crackling radio and, rising above both, the buzzing cacophony of India's capital at large, and I thought, "This is one of the more interesting cups of tea I've had in my life."

SHAMUS SILLAR





# KUMBH MELA FESTIVAL

WORDS AND PICTURES BY SHAUN & ALIX RICHARDSON

The Kumbh Mela is a Hindu festival held every four years when devotees bathe in the holy rivers of northeast India. The 2013 festival was a special one; only once every 12 years is it held in Allahabad on the banks of the Ganges River.

It was a huge gathering of several million people sleeping in tented "cities"; we were also sleeping in tents, but luxury ones! The journey took half a day from Varanasi along heavily flooded roads, and the festival was a little subdued because of the wet weather. However it was a memorable event seeing so many *sadhus* (holy men), *nagas* (naked *sadhus*) and devotees in one place. Everyone was welcoming but also slightly bemused about why we would want to be there with them!



One of the many tented cities erected to house festival attendees



Daily feeding of the poor; this takes place in designated areas and is locally policed





Sadhu at work in his tent



Nagars never wear clothes and they cover themselves in ash



Head shaving or the "mundane ceremony" is a ritual for male attendees as a sign of humility



Sadhu transporting his worldly goods; Sadhus travel from across India to attend the Kumbh Mela festival





# Indonesia

## At a glance

### Visa-vis

Passport holders of the following countries do not need a visa for Indonesia: Brunei, Chile, Hong Kong, Macao, Malaysia, Morocco, Peru, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. Most other nationalities can make their application on arrival. A 30-day visitors visa costs US\$25.

### Air time

1.5 hours (Jakarta) or 2.5 hours (Bali) flying time from Singapore.

### Cash & cards

The official currency of Indonesia is the Indonesia Rupiah (Rp). MasterCard and Visa are the most widely accepted credit cards and ATMs are common throughout the country.

### Weather report

While the weather is warm year round, rainfall is very common from November to March. May to September is generally considered the driest months, but parts of the north receive rain throughout the year.

### Mother tongue

Official language is Bahasa Indonesia, but English is also widely spoken.

### First words

Hello: *Hello/Selamat pagi*

What is your name?

*Apa nama anda?*

My name is \_\_:

*Nama saya \_\_*

How much?

*Berapa banyak*

Thank you: *Terima kasih*

Yes: *Ya*

No thank you:

*Tidak terima kasih*





Sunrise at Borobudur Temple, Java

### Salutations

Indonesians typically shake hands as a greeting. Only shake an Indonesian woman's hand if she initiates it.

### Clocking in

Indonesia is between 7 and 9 hours ahead of GMT.

### World Heritage Sites

Total: 8

Including:

- Borobudur Temple

- Komodo National Park
- Tropical Rainforest Heritage of Sumatra

### Must-try foods

*Gado gado* – a salad of boiled vegetables served with a peanut sauce dressing.

### National flower

Indonesia has three national flowers, the Moon Orchid, Melati or Arabian Jasmine, and Rafflesia

### Must-buy souvenir

Shadow puppets (*wayang kulit*), or wooden doll puppets (*wayang golek*).

### Did you know?

- Indonesia is one of the largest producers of nutmeg in the world.
- Indonesia is made up of 17,508 islands; only a third are inhabited.
- Krakatoa's 1883 eruption may have been the most

destructive in modern history, but the 1815 eruption of Mount Tambora was bigger.

- Indonesia is home to the Komodo Dragon, the largest living species of lizard (up to three metres).

### Must-read book

*The Rainbow Troops* by Andrea Hirata – a tight-knit group of students and their teachers fight for education and dignity on Belitung Island.



# BALI OFFSHORE



## LOVELY LEMBONGAN

Our twelve-year-old daughter wrote this story after our recent holiday on Nusa Lembongan, a small island close to Bali.

"The boat crashed through the waves and the salty air sent a tingle up my nose as we approached the exotic island. I had been waiting for this holiday for a long time! We jumped into the bright turquoise water and splashed our way up to the beach where we were greeted by the smiling face of Ketut, who put our bags into the back of his little truck. We bounced and bumped the short distance to The Island House. Wow! What a view. The house was perched on a cliff overlooking the Devil's Tears where the waves smashed spectacularly onto the rocks.

On our first day we took a boat trip to the mangroves. The water was so clear we could see the colorful fish darting over the coral. The next day we went snorkelling, and this time we could see the fish face to face as they nibbled on bread straight from our hands. The last day was the best of all! Just before we left, a group of maybe two dozen dolphins came to say their goodbyes. We couldn't help ourselves, and we jumped into the water to join them. It was something I will never forget and it was the perfect ending to my best holiday ever."

MIRIAM AND MADELEINE BECKER



## LEMBONGAN LOGISTICS

- Stay at The Island House, contact [mark@sandybaylembongan.com](mailto:mark@sandybaylembongan.com).
- For snorkelling and diving go to [world-diving.com](http://world-diving.com).
- Eat at Dream Beach Café, and the Mangrove Café.
- Get to Nusa Lembongan from Sanur, Bali, with Rocky Fast Cruises, or arrange a private speedboat with villa manager Mark. The boat trip takes about 25 minutes.





## Vacation Fun for the Family

Vacation at Montigo Resorts Nongsa, just a hop and a jump from Singapore. Arrive in style onboard a Montigo yacht for a romantic getaway or a fun-filled family escape. Each spacious pool-villa boasts a sky terrace and panoramic sea views.

Distractions in the form of fabulous restaurants, a beach club, water sports, pampering spa treatments, golf and activities for little ones promise to entertain both the young and the young at heart.

With so much to do, Montigo Resorts Nongsa will keep you returning, **For Generations To Come.**



Find us on Facebook. [www.facebook.com/MontigoResortNongsa](http://www.facebook.com/MontigoResortNongsa)  
Montigo Resorts, Nongsa, Jl. Hang Lekir, Nongsa, Batam, Indonesia

For reservations, call +65 65 059 381 or email [reservations@montigoresorts.com](mailto:reservations@montigoresorts.com)

For ownership opportunities, call +65 83 834 808





## MENJANGAN MAGIC

There's another small island just off Bali – this time far to the northwest – that offers a view to a different world. The seas around the sacred Menjangan Island, named after the small deer that are its only permanent residents, has some of the best diving and snorkelling in Bali.

The volcanic peaks of Java form the backdrop to this island, which is home to four Hindu temples and a huge statue of Ganesha. The low cliffs surrounding much of Menjangan are undercut by the tides and pierced with small bat caves. In the water, shoals of batfish, curious, graceful and solemn, can often be spotted.

Most visitors to Menjangan stay in the seaside village of Pemuteran, offering a growing number of boutique hotels and guesthouses and a smattering of shops. Alternatively, there are a couple of resorts (try Mimpi Resort) at Labuhan Lalang, the small fishing harbour from where boats to Menjangan depart for the 40-minute crossing.

HILARY GALEA

## TRAVEL TIPS

*Accommodation:* Taman Sari and Amertha Bali Villas on the beachfront in Pemuteran. Villa Merah, a private villa with huge gardens and a pool, about 800 metres back from Pemuteran's main drag.

*Highly recommended dive operator (for all Bali dive sites):* Aquamarine ([aquamarinediving.com](http://aquamarinediving.com)) can arrange diving and transport.





# BALI SOUL

On a recent trip to Bali, we avoided the hustle and bustle of the beaches and headed to the spiritual heart and soul of the island: Ubud.

**We stayed** at Alam Jiwa, a boutique hotel in the small village of Nyuhkuning, and were overwhelmed with the beauty and peace of the environment.

**We harvested** rice (or at least our nine-year-old daughter did) alongside the farmers in the paddy fields we overlooked from our room.

**We adventured** on a downhill bike ride from the volcano, finishing with a beautiful Balinese lunch.

**We cooked** up a Balinese feast in a traditional family compound with Paon Bali.

**We toured** The Green School – an inspiring school that shows just how education can work hand in hand with the environment. Our son's comment? "I really, really, really want to go to this school – can I stay?"

PENNY MARTIN



## AN UBUD BARGAIN BREAK

Who doesn't love a bargain? Risking the uncertainties of the monsoon season, we took advantage of a great travel deal early last December and headed to Ubud. Far from being a bad time to visit, Ubud was wonderfully quiet – cheaper taxis, no queues at the restaurants and great service wherever we went. All delivered with that mile-wide Balinese smile.

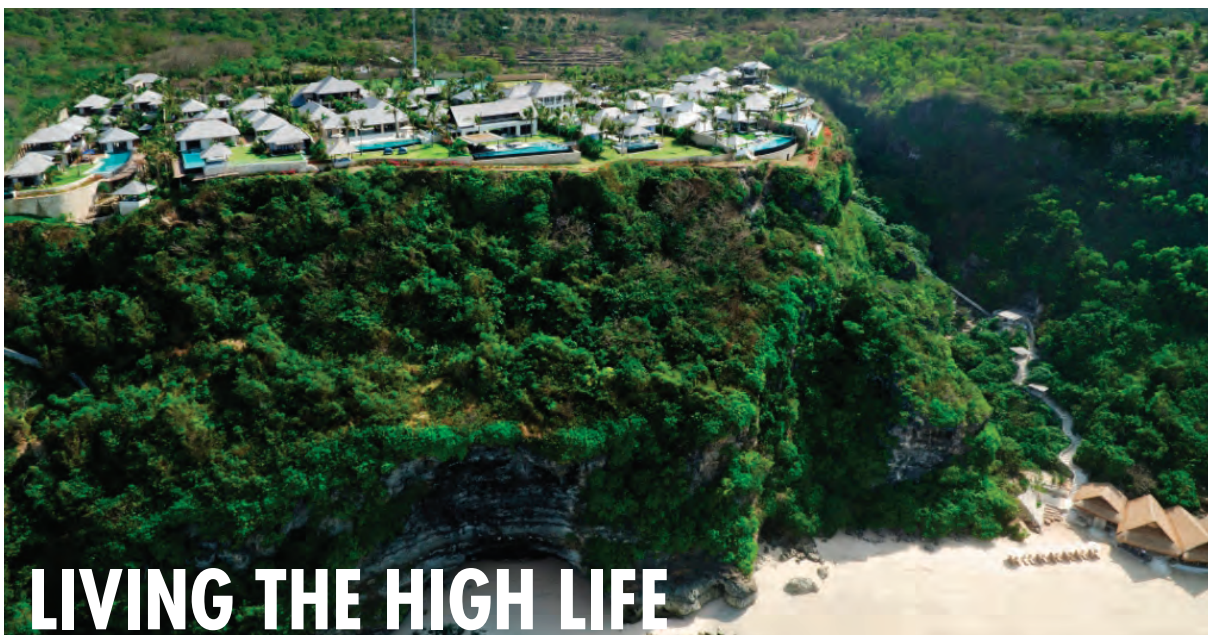
We stayed at The Payogan Villa Resort and Spa, which is like a movie set of how Bali is supposed to be. Think majestic stone structures covered with moss and littered with frangipanis, large, private villas complete with plunge pools and yard space for the kids, tropical birds flying overhead, and the gentle bubbling of the plunge pool lulling you to sleep.

The days could have slipped away so easily from lounge chairs by the pool, but with young children in tow, there was more in store for us. From wood-carving lessons and a guided hike through the rice paddies to a trip through the Monkey Forest and a stroll down town (is there a prettier Starbucks in the world than the Ubud branch?) we were well entertained throughout our stay.

We'll return to Ubud, but we'll wait till next December when we can have a slice of Bali to ourselves once again.

VERONICA IACONO





## LIVING THE HIGH LIFE

The south coast of the Bukit Peninsula offers a very different side of Bali to Kuta or Seminyak. It's much quieter for one thing, since there are no busy roads or shopping streets nearby (though they're not so far away if you need some retail therapy). Then there are the cliff-top views: you'd be hard-pressed to find a better ocean panorama in Bali – or anywhere for that matter.

One resort taking advantage of the vistas is **Semara Uluwatu**. Set at the edge of white limestone cliffs, the property is comprised of a cluster of villas that are available in various configurations from two to ten bedrooms – ideal for families and groups of friends. The Guest Suite Rooms, meanwhile, are a great option for couples.

Semara Uluwatu is also

a sought-after location for business conferences and executive retreats and is especially popular as a wedding venue. Professional organisers can take care of all the details, leaving guests free to relax and enjoy their event.

Facilities include a spa, swimming pools, tennis courts, putting green, fitness centre and restaurant. Personal butlers and chefs

staff each villa, offering in-villa dining for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

On the private white-sand beach below Semara Uluwatu, accessible via a rather exciting inclinator that transports you up and down the cliff face, is Finn's Beach Club, with an open-air restaurant and sunbeds on the sand.

[semarauluwatu.com](http://semarauluwatu.com)

## BALI ISLAND BLISS

If an exotic island hideaway in a private luxury villa has only been a dream until now, perhaps it's time to make it a reality? Villa holidays offer privacy, peace and flexibility – the when, where and what of each day is completely up to you: laze the time away by your private pool, relax in the shade with a good book, explore the beautiful Bali countryside, watch a traditional dance, or wine and dine at a world-class restaurant – the choice is yours.

Bali is one of the world's most popular holiday destinations: from sandy beaches to scenic rice terraces, and from spectacular sunsets to a shopper's paradise, the island has so much to offer.

**Exotic Hideaways** have hand picked some of the most desirable villas in Bali – places where you'll be made to feel like royalty from the moment you arrive. All



their villas offer luxurious, modern facilities, are fully staffed and beautifully furnished. Whether you're after a secluded romantic honeymoon or a fun relaxed vacation with friends or family, they're sure to have the perfect property for you.

[exotic-hideaways.com](http://exotic-hideaways.com)





# JAVANESE JEWELS

## BOROBUDUR ADVENTURE

Our exciting family adventure began as we drove through Central Java to the UNESCO World Heritage site of Borobudur. Our temporary home was a beautifully carved teak *joglo* nestled high in the valley. Our view was of Borobudur Temple and, on a clear day, the perfect outline of the magnificent volcano, Mount Sumbing.

Our children, Sam (5) and Isla (2), loved travelling by horse and cart, clip-clopping past waving families, plantations of chillies and papaya, trays of drying tobacco, chickens and sleeping cats.

Alighting at the temple we met a lone monk who told us he had journeyed from Nepal to worship at one of the world's greatest Buddhist temples.

We climbed stone steps, admired the distinctive

"pepper-pot" stupas, enjoyed perusing the incredible wall reliefs, identifying animals, trees, jewellery and guessing the stories of Buddha being told.

Returning to our oasis on the hill we splashed in the pool and chatted about our morning adventure. At sunrise, I lay awake listening to the call to prayer emanating from the valley below, feeling at one with this different land. No time for daydreaming though;

we were ready to move on to our next adventure, the Mount Merapi volcano. But that's another story!

MANDY BROWN

We flew direct from to Yogyakarta (options include AirAsia, Tiger and SilkAir), and stayed at Villa Borobudur in a Borobudur Suite.



## MOUNT BROMO SURABAYA

You don't have to be super fit and up for a hard day of hiking to see the most beautiful views of an active volcano. Instead, after a four-hour drive from Surabaya to the base of Mount Bromo, you can reach the summit with a short horseback ride, followed by a 10-minute climb up some stairs. My tip is to stay overnight at Bromo Cottages which is 90 minutes from the base, then wake up extra early to catch the sunrise over neighbouring Mount Batok.

ELAINE BRINDAMOUR

## TRAVEL ADVISORY

Before you book a trip, be sure to check on the status of Indonesia's many volcanoes. Java is especially active, as this year's eruptions of Mt Sinabung (1 February) and Mt Kelud (13 February) clearly indicate.



## JAKARTA JOTTINGS

WORDS AND PICTURES BY CATHY WARD

Jakarta is a fascinating city. I say this about many places we visit, but each one brings unique experiences. Yes, it's not the cleanest place in the world, and it has few historical sights, but if you scratch the surface there's lots to enjoy on a visit to Indonesia's sprawling capital. Here's what we discovered on our recent trip.



©1. It was pouring down with rain, so we visited the textile museum and learned how to make Batik. It is easy to do, but very hard to do well!

©2. Traffic is a nightmare in Jakarta – we think it's even worse than Bangkok. We took the local buses several times as they move much faster than the taxis – and it only costs about 35 cents to go to most locations.

©3. The biggest wholesale market in Southeast Asia, Tanah Abang Textile Market, is in Jakarta. Tanah Abang is said to be 300 years old and it started as an animal market.

Now stalls sell mainly textiles, clothes, shoes, and purses, but you could find almost anything. We only scratched the surface, but were so loaded with shopping bags we had to leave. I tried on a batik shirt but the usual happened: a large was too small. A girl could really get a complex living in the land of the tiny...

©4. We wandered into Giyanti Coffee Roastery (just across from a row of antique shops so a fun area to visit) and had an excellent cup of coffee. Hendrik, the owner, knows quite a bit about coffees, and is a perfectionist – as we evidenced when he "pulled" our cups. We

liked this place so much we went back again.

©5. Sunday was our day of rest. We went to a very posh spa for a massage and facial. Our treatments lasted an hour and a half, cost a total of \$75, and were wonderful. Afterwards we went to Koi Kemang ([koiindonesia.com](http://koiindonesia.com)) for a delicious East-meets-West brunch. We had a great time in Jakarta. I'll definitely be back.

Donald and Cathy are from the US and have travelled to over 50 countries around the world, eating, meeting people, taking lots of photos and learning about different cultures. Read more about their adventures on Cathy's blog, [thextrasuitcase.com](http://thextrasuitcase.com).



# TAKE A BREAK TO BATAM

The beauty of **Montigo Resorts Nongsa**, on Batam Island, is you'll feel like you're staying in your own private townhouse-style villa yet with all the perks of a resort. Here are some of the other reasons we think you'll enjoy Montigo.

①. Montigo Resort Nongsa is just 20 kilometres south of Singapore and a 30-minute boat ride away, either via the resort's own posh private motor yacht or the public ferry. It's a fresh alternative to Bintan for a quick and easy break.

②. Each of the 88 contemporary three-story villas has floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking a one-kilometre private sea-front and the South China Sea. Sunsets are especially dramatic and you can even see the Singapore skyline and Marina Bay Sands from the roof terrace.

③. The villas accommodate up to five guests, so they're great for families, and a dedicated concierge is on hand to assist with rooftop barbecues as an alternative to dining in the resort's restaurants.

④. Each villa has its own private infinity pool and one grand double bedroom overlooking the sea and a huge bathroom. A second bedroom with sea views on the same floor has twin beds that can be made into a double.

⑤. Free Wi-Fi, kitchenette and mini bar come as standard in all the villas.

⑥. The resort is right next to some of the best golf courses in the region, plus there's a tennis court, a gym, lap pool, kids' club and a spa, of course.

⑦. The newly opened poolside Tiigo Bar and Beach Club joins the resort's two restaurants – Tadd's for all-day dining, and Pantai for Asian-style seafood – providing a wide choice of places to relax, socialise and have fun.



[montigoresorts.com](http://montigoresorts.com)



# NUSA DUA DELIGHTS



Set along 30 hectares of sprawling landscape, on the dramatic coastline of Nusa Dua in south Bali, is The Mulia, Mulia Resort & Villas, a three-in-one holiday destination. Here's what you can expect from a stay.

## Accommodation

- Located on Nusa Dua Bay, The Mulia is home to 111 nobly named suites (choose from a Marquess, Earl or Baron Suite) all with butler service.
- Mulia Resort offers 526 rooms and suites (including lagoon suites).
- Ranging in size from one to six bedrooms, the 108 Mulia Villas are the largest of their kind on the island.

## Spa

"Healing through water" is the principle behind The Mulia Spa's holistic approach – the menu of Balinese, Indonesian and a fusion of Asian and Western techniques includes some stimulating water therapies. You'll also find Asia Pacific's only ice fountain room, 20 treatment rooms, Hammam tables, a sauna, steam room with emotional showers, meditation area for yoga and a spa bar offering healthy juices and herbal infusions.

## Eats & Drinks

Wining and dining at The Mulia will

be tough for the indecisive. Aside from three restaurants – all-day dining with lake and ocean views at The Cafe, Japanese cuisine at Edogin, and Mediterranean and pan-Asian dishes at Soleil – there's coffee and cocktails at the Cascade Lounge, and French pastries and gourmet meals to go at Mulia Deli. After your dinner or snack, you can head to one of three bars – The Bar, ZJ's Bar & Lounge and the Sky Bar – for alfresco relaxation and Indian Ocean views.

## Weddings & Events

The appropriately named Eternity, Unity and Harmony chapels at The Mulia can each seat up to 250 guests for wedding celebrations, while The Grand Ballroom and 15 conference rooms set the stage for executive retreats and social events.

## For Children

Mulia Kidz will keep the little ones happy with arts and crafts, their own children's splash pool and a clubhouse stacked with toys and games and climbing frames.



[themulia.com](http://themulia.com)





# PARADISE FOUND



**S**tepping on to the jetty at Nikoi Island ([nikoi.com](http://nikoi.com)) convinced me we'd made the right choice for our three-night, pre-Christmas escape. Travelling with my mother and our five-year-old daughter, we wanted a holiday that was both relaxing for adults and engaging for kids, and Nikoi Island was all we'd hoped for. After nearly 10 years of living in Asia, it seemed that paradise had been found.

Greeted with friendly smiles and cool wet towels, we were shown to our two-bedroom, beautifully presented "driftwood" villa overlooking the ocean. The island is small and yet the layout makes it seem spacious, and with only 15 villas it really does feel like a private island experience.

Staff are friendly, genuine and helpful and the food is mouthwateringly good. There are two separate dining areas – one for families with children, and the other for peace-seeking adults – who I will admit to being slightly envious of at times!

The kids' club offers jungle walks, jetty jumping, woodcarving, treasure hunts, marshmallow roasting on the beach, and movie nights. Our daughter didn't want to leave and told us quite categorically that she wanted to live on Nikoi and go to school at the kids' club!

Daily activities include snorkelling in the clear waters, sailing, paddleboarding, kayaking – there's even a water trampoline. The shaded swimming pool is surrounded by spectacular granite boulders, and sandy pathways through the lush jungle take you from one side of the island to the other.

Nikoi's eco-friendly concept makes it unique, and we also found it reassuring to learn that the island gives back to the Bintan community through The Island Foundation, which works to improve income, health and education at local schools.

If you're looking for a holiday that brings you back to nature without compromising on comfort and style, then Nikoi is an excellent choice.

CATHERINE HOPE

## HOW TO GET THERE

Nikoi lies eight kilometres off the east coast of Bintan, and is less than 85 kilometres from Singapore. Travel time from Singapore's Tanah Merah ferry terminal is about two-and-a-half hours.





# Japan

## At a glance

### Visa-vis

Citizens of 62 countries, including Singapore, Australia, New Zealand, France, Germany, UK, Canada and the US, do not require a visa to visit Japan. Stays are generally allowed for up to three months at a time. For further information, visit [www.sg.emb-japan.go.jp](http://www.sg.emb-japan.go.jp).

### Air time

Between 6 and 7 hours from Singapore.

### Cash & cards

The official currency in Japan is the Japanese Yen (JPY). Many ATMs in Japan do not accept foreign cards and credit card use is limited so carry sufficient cash. Cash withdrawals are possible at ATMs at post offices and 7-Eleven stores. Banks and post offices will exchange major foreign currency and travellers cheques.

### Weather report

Late March to April is Sakura (cherry blossom season), a

popular time to visit. June tends to be wet, while high temperatures and powerful storms can strike throughout July and August (with the exception of Hokkaido, mountaintop resorts like Hakone and the Japanese Alps). The autumn months of September to November are cooler and aesthetically beautiful. December typically kicks off the ski seasons in the north.

### Mother tongue

Japanese.

### First words

**Hello:** *Konnichiwa*  
**What is your name?** *Anata no onamae wa nan desu ka*  
**My name is \_\_\_:** *Watashi no namae wa \_\_\_ desu*  
**How much?** *Kore wa ikura desu ka*  
**Thank you:** *Arigato*  
**Yes:** *Hai*  
**No thank you:** *Ie, arigato*

### Salutations

Japanese people greet each other with a bow. For foreigners, a bow followed by a gentle handshake is fine.





Swans on a lake near Mount Fuji

### Clocking in

Japan is 9 hours ahead of GMT,  
1 hour ahead of Singapore.

### World Heritage Sites

Total: 17

Highlights:

- Buddhist Monuments in the Horyu-ji Area
- Fujiisan, Sacred Place and Source of Artistic Inspiration (Mt Fuji)
- Hiroshima Peace Memorial (Genbaku Dome)
- Historic Monuments of Ancient Kyoto (Kyoto, Uji and Otsu Cities)

### Must-try food

*Ramen*, a noodle soup combining a meat or fish broth flavoured with miso or soy, and served with a variety of toppings depending on the region and the chef.

### National flower

The unofficial flower of Japan is the cherry blossom.

### Must-buy souvenir

*Wagasa*, a traditional Japanese umbrella made from paper and bamboo.

### Did you know?

- The world's oldest continuously operating independent company, in business for over 1,400 years, was the Japanese construction company Kongō Gumi.
- It is considered incredibly rude to blow your nose in public.
- In Kamikatsu, a zero-waste village in Japan, rubbish is sorted into 34 different categories with all food waste used for compost.

- Tsukiji market in Tokyo is the largest fish market in the world.

### Must-read book

*Kitchen* by Banana Yoshimoto – a story about mothers, love, tragedy, and the power of the kitchen and home in the lives of a pair of free-spirited young women in contemporary Japan.





# JAPAN HERE WE COME!

BY SIOBHAN SPILLANE

My husband's "Let's go to Japan" was greeted with a shrug and a pensive "Hmmm". It wasn't that I was against the idea – I just hadn't given it much thought. But after tempting me with a delicious meal of sushi, sashimi and the warming properties of a sake or two, flights were booked, accommodation sussed and a flexible itinerary planned. Japan, here we come. Luckily my husband knows the way to this girl's heart!

**A**rriving early evening at Narita International Airport, we stayed at the nearby Mercure Hotel. The hotel was simple, reasonable and perfect for our needs. All we wanted to do was eat and sleep and rejuvenate for a fun-filled few days. English translations were scarce so meals were chosen based on the enticing pictures on the menu. We were curious at times, but not disappointed.

Tokyo, wow! What an amazing city: fast-moving, trendy, big, busy. We could have walked the city streets for days, people-watching, browsing shops and admiring the cityscape. We stayed at the wonderful Children's Castle (kodomonoshiro).

The kids were so excited when they saw we were all sleeping on futons in one huge room.

On our visits to parks to see the beautiful cherry blossoms we came across aspects of Japanese culture we'd never known about: the Japanese neatly set up their blue tarpaulins under a sky of pink blossom, line their shoes up in an orderly fashion and sit to chat, laugh and drink copious amounts of sake, beer and whatever else takes their fancy – all in an extremely civilised Japanese manner, of course.

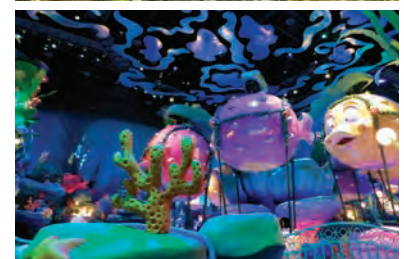
On a recommendation from friends we visited Nikko, a picturesque, historic town a couple of hours' train ride from Tokyo, where we all

enjoyed the shrines, temples and national park. The food continued to be of excellent quality and our kids became more adventurous, adding tuna and salmon sushi and sashimi to their repertoire.

We stayed on the outskirts of town at The Nikko Inn, which offers authentic Japanese housing – interesting with three young children and paper walls! It was a lovely mix of traditional and modern. The toilet was straight out of *Star Wars*: the lid lifted and the toilet bowl lit up upon entering the room, and the many buttons kept the kids entertained for hours.

Our last two days in Japan were all about the kids (well, perhaps we grown-ups enjoyed it just a little too). We stayed at the Sheraton Grande Tokyo Bay and had one day at Disneyland and one at Disneysea. The hotel is perfectly suited to families and we watched the spectacular Disney fireworks from our bedroom balcony. The Disneys were a pleasure, if such a thing can be said of these parks!

So would we recommend Japan? Absolutely. Given the chance, we'd go back without any hesitation.







# NIGHT ON A HOLY MOUNTAIN

WORDS AND PICTURES BY SHAMUS SILLAR

Pilgrimage has a long tradition in Japan, and exploring the country's centuries-old highway systems followed by pilgrims in the past can be a wonderful experience.

One such route leads through the enchanting Dewa Sanzan ("three mountains of Dewa") in northern Honshu, the highlight of which is the 2446-step ascent of Mount Haguro. The climb is breathtaking in more ways than one; it passes through a towering forest, and takes in dramatic sights including a five-storey timber pagoda that is one of Japan's national treasures.

At the top is a Shinto shrine complex where you'll find an unadorned but atmospheric lodging called Saikan. It's connected to the main shrine by a long corridor that you can follow in the early morning to watch the first prayer ritual of the day. Food at Saikan is mostly vegetarian, but it's also superb, with delicately prepared tofu and foraged mushrooms, eggplant and other vegetables.

The grounds of the shrine complex, meanwhile, are picturesque and fascinating, with old *torii* gates, forest paths, and ancient cemeteries sitting side by side with more recent memorials.

**Getting there:** The easiest and most interesting way is with tour company Walk Japan. Their 10-day Bashi Tour is a fully guided journey from Tokyo to Kyoto that includes the ascent of Haguro-san and the overnight stay at Saikan on Day 6. Visit [walkjapan.com](http://walkjapan.com) for details of this and many other walking tours offered by the company.







# SPRINGTIME IN JAPAN

Signalling the arrival of spring, cherry blossom season is highly anticipated amongst travellers to Japan, and Kyoto is one of the most popular spots for tourists to see the *sakura*.

**T**here's no better way to simultaneously experience this spectacular season and immerse yourself in Japanese culture than to stay at a *ryokan*. Originating in the Edo period (1603-1867), these traditional Japanese inns provide travellers with a unique taste of Japanese lifestyle and will usually include the following special features:

**Onsen:** Traditionally used as public bathing places, *onsen* derive their water from geothermally heated springs, believed to have healing elements thanks to the water's mineral content.

**Tatami rooms:** Bedrooms are furnished with futons placed on natural tatami flooring. After a relaxing dip in the *onsen*, a good night's rest is easy to come by on these Japanese-style padded mattresses.

**Kaiseki:** *Ryokans* pride themselves in serving a variety of traditional Japanese delicacies, composed of many small dishes, often prepared with local and seasonal ingredients.



## Hotels.com recommends 5 Kyoto ryokans for sakura season:

- Nishiyama Ryokan
- Gion Hatanaka
- Japanese Inn Yoshimizu
- Seikoro Ryokan (pictured, above)
- Gion Maifukan

## RYOKAN ETIQUETTE

The whole *ryokan* experience may be unnerving for first-timers, so here are some tips on etiquette from expert Zoe Chan of Hotels.com.

1. Take off your shoes when entering a *ryokan* and put on the slippers prepared for you. Wear the *geta* wooden sandals provided when you take a walk outdoors.
2. Wear your *yukata* with the left side over the right side (the other way around is for corpses!). The *yukata* can be worn during your whole stay – to the bath, during meals or when relaxing.
3. Take a shower before entering the *onsen*. Swimsuits are not allowed and small towels will be provided. Note that an *onsen* is usually separated by gender, so be careful not to enter the wrong side. Generally, men's baths are indicated in blue and women's baths in red.
4. Do not make loud noises in an *onsen*; they are meant for relaxation and quiet conversation.
5. Be prepared for a typical Japanese breakfast of rice, fish, miso soup and vegetables. It's quite rare for *ryokans* to offer toast and coffee.







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# Laos



## At a glance

### Visa-vis

Most visitors require a visa to visit Laos. Visas can be obtained on arrival at major points of entry and are valid for 30 days. You will need two passport-size photographs, a passport valid for at least six months, and US dollars to pay the visa fee. For more information or to arrange your visa before you travel, visit the Laos Embassy in Singapore or email [laoembsg@singnet.com.sg](mailto:laoembsg@singnet.com.sg).

### Air time

3 hours from Singapore.

### Cash & cards

The official national currency in Laos is the Lao Kip (LAK), although US dollars and Thai baht are generally accepted. Make sure you have sufficient of both if you're heading out of the larger towns. You're likely to find ATMs in all major towns in Laos, but the majority will allow only a maximum of 1,000,000 kip (US\$125) per withdrawal. Only big hotels and higher-

end shops and restaurants in Luang Prabang will accept credit cards, usually for a small charge.

### Weather report

December and January are considered the best time to travel, but November through March is also recommended. The dry, hot season is from March through May, followed by the rainy season from May through October. September is generally the rainiest month of the year.

### Mother tongue

Lao. French and English are spoken in larger cities and tourist spots.

### First words

Hello: *Sa bai dee*

What is your name?

*Jão seu nyāng?*

My name is \_\_\_:

*Khāvý seu*

How much?

*Anh nee thao dai?*

Thank you: *Khwap jai*

Yes: *Jão*

No thank you:

*Bokhokhobchai*





### Salutations

Place your hands together just below your chin and dip your head at the same time in a slight bow saying “Sa bai dee”.

### Clocking in

Laos is 7 hours ahead of GMT and 1 hour behind Singapore.

### World Heritage Sites

Total: 2

- Town of Luang Prabang
- Vat Phou and Associated Ancient Settlements within the Champasak Cultural Landscape

### Must-try foods

*Laap (larb)*, a salad with a meat base, flavoured with lime, garlic, fish sauce, mint leaves, spring onion and ground toasted rice. A vegetarian version is also an option, with a base of mushroom or tofu.

### National flower

Frangipani.

### Must-buy souvenir

Laos silk.

### Did you know?

- Laos is the only landlocked country in Southeast Asia. It shares borders with China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand and Myanmar.
- The Khone Pha Pheng waterfall, located in Champasak Province, is the largest waterfall in southeast Asia
- The Lao national sport is *kataw*, similar to volleyball but using a rattan ball and feet instead of hands.

- Laos was a French protectorate until 1954 (apart from one year when it was occupied by the Japanese towards the end of World War II). Many of Laos' older population still speak French.

### Must-read book

*The River's Tale: A Year on the Mekong* by Edward Gargan – the personal tale of a year-long journey along the nearly 3,000 miles of the Mekong River, from Tibet to the South China Sea.



# MAKING THE MOST OF LUANG PRABANG

CINDY FAN is a Canadian writer and photographer who has been based in Luang Prabang for the last couple of years. Here are her top recommendations for places to stay, places to eat and things to do on a trip to this fascinating UNESCO World Heritage town.

## Some background

Located on a promontory of the Mekong River and surrounded by the mountains of Northern Laos, Luang

Prabang is famed for its ancient temples, its deep connection to Buddhism, French colonial architecture, stunning natural beauty and

laidback, friendly people. A journey to Luang Prabang is like stepping back in time.

## Hotels

Once the residence of a Prince of Laos, the historic **Maison Souvannaphoum Hotel by Angsana** ([angsana.com/en/maison\\_souvannaphoum](http://angsana.com/en/maison_souvannaphoum)) blends

French colonial architecture with traditional Lao motifs, old-world charm and modern comforts. Surrounded by large tropical gardens, with a spa and swimming pool, the 24-room hotel is an oasis. It has the best location for discovering Luang Prabang – within short walking distance of all the sights and the river, but away from the crowds and the noise.

Set on a quiet section of the Nam Khan river, the 21-room **Burasari Heritage** ([burasariheritage.com](http://burasariheritage.com)) is ideal for those looking to stay in the heart of the peninsula. Fully renovated in 2012, the hotel is a contemporary update on a heritage building with stunning decorative details.

## Restaurants

Intimate and refined, **Le Tangor** ([letangor.com](http://letangor.com)) impresses with Asian dishes and local flavours, but with a French twist. Here, Indochine



Maison Souvannaphoum Hotel





Kuang Si Waterfalls

is chic. Old maps, antique Buddhas and vintage posters of women in cheongsams adorn red walls. The restaurant's prime location in the heart of the main street means it's the perfect spot for a drink while people watching.

Also try...

**Blue Lagoon:** Lao and European ([blue-lagoon-cafe.com](http://blue-lagoon-cafe.com))

**L'Elephant:** French bistro ([elephant-restau.com](http://elephant-restau.com))

**The Terrace:** Thai and Lao ([burasariheritage.com](http://burasariheritage.com))

**La Belle Epoque at Luang Say:** luxurious French bistro ([luangsayresidence.com](http://luangsayresidence.com))

**Pizza Phan Luang:** wood-fired pizza

### Cafés

The baguettes and croissants of Luang Prabang rival those in France. Coffee is also one of Laos' main agricultural exports – needless to say, you'll find an excellent cup at one of the towns many sidewalk cafes. The **Café de Laos** is charmingly decorated and a great spot on the main street, and the only place in Luang Prabang serving siphon-brewed coffee and TWG tea.

Also try ...

**Le Banneton:** traditional French bakery and patisserie

**Cafe Ban Vat Sene:** French bistro café

**Joma:** North American-style bakery-café

### Bars and Lounges

**Icon Klub:** cocktail bar ([iconklub.com](http://iconklub.com))

**Le Tangor:** restaurant, bar and lounge ([letangor.com](http://letangor.com))

**Chez Matt:** wine bar

**Opera:** wine bar

### Things to do

- Swim at Kuang Si Waterfalls

- Take a banana boat tour on the Mekong River ([bananaboatlaos.com](http://bananaboatlaos.com))

- Cycle through town



stopping to admire some of the 34 UNESCO-protected temples, the French colonial architecture, then relaxing with a coffee at a sidewalk cafe or on the riverside with a Beer Lao

- Watch the sun set (or rise) from the top of Phosi Hill
- Learn to cook Lao food with a cookery class at The Terrace Restaurant ([burasariheritage.com](http://burasariheritage.com))
- Bathe elephants in the river at The Elephant Village Sanctuary ([elephantvillage-laos.com](http://elephantvillage-laos.com))
- Respectfully observe the morning alms (where hundreds of monks walk through the streets collecting rice)
- Learn all about growing rice at Living Land Farm ([livinglandlao.com](http://livinglandlao.com))

**Relax** and be pampered at **Angsana Spa** ([angsanaspa.com/en/angsana-spa-luang-prabang-laos](http://angsanaspa.com/en/angsana-spa-luang-prabang-laos))

### Shop

**Caruso Lao:** fine carved-wood housewares ([carusolao.com](http://carusolao.com))

**Matesai:** Fair Trade products, textiles and handicraft from all over Laos ([matesai.com](http://matesai.com))

**Naga Creations:** jewellery and handicrafts

**Aman Boutique at Amantaka Hotel:** shop at Luang Prabang's most expensive hotel

**Passa Paa:** hand-printed textiles by a British designer ([passa-paa.com](http://passa-paa.com))

See more of Cindy's travel tips, stories and photos on her website [somanymiles.com](http://somanymiles.com).



Le Tangor Restaurant





# LUXURY TRAIN TO LAOS, THAILAND & MALAYSIA

It doesn't get much better than watching the enchanting landscapes of Southeast Asia slipping by from the plush observation cart of the **Eastern & Oriental Express train**.

Below are some details of the range of sublime journeys you can experience on the train, taking in vibrant cities, tranquil hill stations, ancient temples and beautiful beach resorts.

## CLASSIC JOURNEYS

The route from Singapore to Bangkok and vice versa provides the perfect introduction to Asia, with visits to colonial Georgetown, with its pre-World War II mosques, temples, churches, bazaars and shophouses, and the infamous River Kwai, home to the Thailand-Burma Railway Centre and the Don Rak War Cemetery.

## Did you know?

Built in 1972, the Eastern & Oriental Express is the sister train to Europe's legendary Venice Simplon-Orient-Express.

## CHRONICLES OF SOUTHEAST ASIA

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### Fables of the Hills (7 days/6 nights)

Highlights: Kuala Lumpur, Cameron Highlands, Penang, Tham Kasae Viaduct, River Kwai.

### Tales of Laos (4 days/3 nights)

Highlights: Phimai, Khao Yai vineyards, Friendship Bridge over the Mekong River.





## A MAGIC MOMENT ON THE EASTERN & ORIENTAL EXPRESS

Laos isn't known for its rail network – in fact, while there is plenty of talk about new rail projects connecting the country to China and Vietnam, the current size of operational railway is just 3.5km. That's the length of a special extension of the Thailand railway network that crosses the Mekong River to a railway station near the Laotian capital, Vientiane.

On the morning of Day 3 of the Chronicles journey, *Tales of Laos*, the Eastern & Oriental Express train makes the rare trip across the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge and into Laos. It's an exciting moment for guests on board the train, many of whom take up a position in the Observation Car for the border crossing, and to catch get a glimpse of one of Asia's most famous rivers.

On arrival at the station, a local dance troupe entertains disembarking passengers with a variety of colourful performances. A full tour of the Laotian capital follows, including lunch at the historic Settha Palace Hotel, and exploration of gilded Buddhist temples and French colonial architecture.

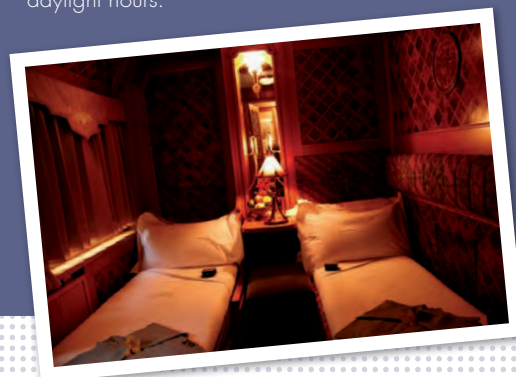
The day ends with guests boarding the train again at dusk, and crossing the bridge back into Thailand while sipping cocktails and preparing for another silver-service dinner.

To discover more about all the Eastern & Oriental Express journeys and onboard experiences, visit [www.orient-express.com](http://www.orient-express.com). To make a reservation, email [oereservations.singapore@orient-express.com](mailto:oereservations.singapore@orient-express.com) or call 6395 0678.

## Onboard highlights:

The Eastern & Oriental Express offers guests four categories of elegant private cabin: Pullman single, Pullman, State Cabin and Presidential Cabin. Most offer twin-sharing accommodation; all are fully air-conditioned with en-suite shower and toilet. Cherrywood and elm burr panelling provide the backdrop for decorative marquetry friezes and intricate design inlays that enhance the fine fabrics and carpets.

Located at the very end of the train, the Observation Car is the perfect place to enjoy cocktails amid a colonial "veranda" ambience. There is also an outdoor Observation Area from which to enjoy the panoramic scenery during daylight hours.





## 5 THINGS TO DO IN VIENTIANE

Expat Living editor Shamus Sillar recently experienced the sublime journey on the Eastern & Oriental Express from Bangkok to Laos and back (see previous pages). The trip included a free afternoon in the Laotian capital, Vientiane. Here are his recommendations.



### ①. Visit a temple

Wat Si Saket, just shy of its 200th birthday, is the most famous temple in Vientiane. The pretty courtyard houses countless Buddha statues in niches, while in a separate temple complex next door you'll find a huge reclining Buddha (pictured).

### ②. Stop for coffee

Thanks to the French influence, you can find fantastic coffees and pastries in Vientiane. An old favourite is Le Banneton café on Sakkaline Road, one block back from the Mekong.

### ③. Go shopping

Silk is the big ticket item in Vientiane, and there are several craft emporiums and shops where you can watch artisans at work, making modern cotton weavings with traditional motifs. Lao Textiles (laotextiles.com) is among the best regarded.

### ④. Sample street food

By all means try the national favourite dish of *laap* (minced meat with ground rice and herbs), but a quicker option is a superb French-style baguette crammed with pâté, pork, pickles and chillies.

### ⑤. Enjoy a sundowner

Vientiane's waterfront isn't the prettiest in Asia, but there's still something mesmerising about the wide sweep of the Mekong here, and the atmosphere in the riverside bars tends to have a mellow charm – perfect for a cold Laobeer before returning to the train for the next leg of the adventure.



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# UP THE MEKONG

WORDS AND PICTURES BY KATIE ROBERTS

One only has to travel about two hours up the Mekong River from the well-touristed Laotian town of Luang Prabang to escape civilisation as we know it. The villages along the river are only accessible by boat, and they rely on crude hydro- and solar-power for electricity. There's no phone coverage up here either. Regular boats bring supplies but otherwise the villages survive on what they can produce. It's a life that's set to change, though, with roads currently under construction to connect this remote mountainous region with the 21st century.







## At a glance

### Visa-vis

Most nationalities do not need a visa to enter Malaysia for up to three months. However, citizens of China, India and Taiwan must obtain a visa prior to entry.

### Air time

1 hour (Kuala Lumpur) or 2.5 hours (Kota Kinabalu) flying time from Singapore.

### Cash & cards

The official currency of Malaysia is the Malaysian Ringgit (RM). Credit cards are widely accepted and ATMs available in most places.

### Weather report

Many resorts on the peninsular east coast close from October to February due to the monsoon weather. The west coast, including Langkawi, Penang and Malacca, receive the most

rain from July to mid-September. Malaysian Borneo has a typical equatorial climate. Most rainfall occurs between November and January, while the dry season runs from May to September.

### Mother tongue

The official language is Bahasa Malaysia (Malay or Bahasa Melayu). English, Cantonese and Tamil are also spoken.

### First words

Hello/Good morning:

*Hello/Selamat pagi*

What is your name?

*Apaka nama anda?*

My name is \_\_\_:

*Nama saya \_\_\_*

How much?

*Berapa banyak*

Thank you:

*Terima kasih*

Yes: Ya

No thank you:

*Tidak terima kasih*



# Malaysia



Putra Mosque, Putrajaya, near Kuala Lumpur

## Salutations

Handshakes are the most common form of greeting. They are usually gentle and not too prolonged. You should wait for a Malaysian woman to initiate a handshake.

## Air time

8 hours ahead of GMT, the same as Singapore.

## Must-buy souvenir

Some Royal Selangor pewter.

## World Heritage Sites

Total: 4

- Gunung Mulu National Park, Sarawak
- Kinabalu Park, Sabah
- Melaka and George Town, historic cities of the Straits of Melacca
- Archaeological Heritage of the Lenggong Valley

## Must-try foods

*Nasi lemak* – rice cooked in coconut milk and pandan leaves, usually eaten with fried

anchovies, cucumber slices, roasted peanuts, hard-boiled egg and sambal chilli paste.

## National flower

Bunga raya (Hibiscus).

## Did you know?

- The Sarawak Chamber in Gunung Mulu National Park is the world's largest underground cave.
- Sabah is home to the Rafflesia, the largest flower in the world.

- The longest King Cobra in the world was captured in Port Dickson in April 1937 and grew to 5.71 metres in London Zoo.

- Penang Free School (1816) is the oldest English school in Southeast Asia.

## Must-read book

*The Rice Mother* by Rani Manicka – Lakshmi, a Ceylonese girl, is brought to Malaya in 1930 as the young bride of an older man.





# 6 SUPER SHORE EXCURSIONS

Want to explore some of the exciting cultural and natural attractions along the Malacca Straits without any of the hassle of switching hotels, catching planes, or spending hours behind the wheel? Enter **Royal Caribbean International's Mariner of the Seas**, ready to transport you from port to port while you relax and enjoy the voyage. And you'll only need to unpack once! Here are some of the on-shore highlights available.



①. At the **Mah Meri Experience**, near Malaysia's Port Klang, get an insight into the animistic and superstitious beliefs of the Mah Meri tribe as they welcome you to their cultural village. Watch a mask dance, learn about the seven wedding rituals and try your hand at the art of leaf origami.



②. Drop into the **Forest Research Institute Malaysia**, a popular spot for picnickers, joggers and nature lovers, and a delight for bird watchers, jungle trekkers and nature photographers. On the way back to the ship, try *pun choi* or "Big Bowl Feast", a traditional dish originating from the Chinese Hakka cuisine.



③. Moving up the coast, **explore Langkawi's fascinating rainforest** with an experienced nature guide. Be prepared for the possibility of close encounters with monkeys, birds, flying lemurs, mouse deer, wild boars and civet cats on this exotic island known as the "Jewel of Kedah".



④. Still in Langkawi, go **island hopping** in a long boat to see the legendary Pregnant Maiden Lake, go eagle watching, and make a visit to Pulau Beras Basah, where you can soak up the sun or splash around in the turquoise-blue waters.



⑤. Moving north into Thailand, explore the crystal-clear waters of the Andaman Sea on a snorkelling trip. Travel by speedboat to Maya Bay where *The Beach* was filmed, then **swim and snorkel among the coral reefs** of Phi Phi Ley or Phi Phi Don. See the area's magnificent limestone karsts, before a stop at Bamboo Island, a tropical paradise with a pristine white sandy beach.



⑥. Take a **sea cave adventure** in Phang Nga Bay National Park. Travelling by canoe is the only way to enter this memorable spot; after passing through the sea caves you'll enter interior lagoon, created by centuries of sea and wind action.

To find out more, visit [www.royalcaribbean.com](http://www.royalcaribbean.com) or call +65 6305 0033.





# THE COLOURS OF GEORGE TOWN

WORDS AND PICTURES BY CATHY WARD



## OUR HOTEL

We stayed in a charming boutique hotel called the Campbell House ([campbellhousepenang.com](http://campbellhousepenang.com)). Originally built in 1903, the building was lovingly restored in 2011 to the beautiful hotel it is today.

In 1786, Captain Francis Light took possession of the island of Penang on behalf of the East India Trading Company and George Town was established. The city became a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2008, and with a population of around two million “Penangites” from three main ethnicities – Chinese, Malay, and Indian – Penang is Malaysia’s only island state.

Bahasa or Malay is the national language, but English is widely spoken due to the long period of British colonial rule. Penang is famous for having the best food on the Malay Peninsula. People go on vacation to Penang just to eat!

George Town reminded us of what Singapore was probably like 30 years ago, and we really enjoyed our recent trip.

## SHOPPING TIP

George Town is a great place to get a new pair of glasses. We went to Patrick at Vision First Optics, who provided an excellent service and had contemporary frames at a fraction of the cost you would pay in the US or Singapore.

## Hotel Penaga

Converted from 15 pre-war terraces and shophouses, Hotel Penaga ([hotelpenaga.com](http://hotelpenaga.com)) is in the heart of Georgetown, surrounded by the heritage architecture that the area is famous for. Gorgeous rooms, done up in an artsy-modern-meets-traditional style.

ELAINE BRINDAMOUR





# BACK TO NATURE MALAYSIA'S ISLANDS AND PARKS

## TURTLES AND DRAGONS IN TIOMAN

At the southern tip of a string of islands off the east coast of peninsula Malaysia, Tioman is part of the Mersing Marine Park. *Time* magazine selected Tioman as one of the world's most beautiful islands, and it was the setting for the movie *South Pacific*.

Most visitors arrive by ferry from Mersing on the mainland, but last August we took the direct, one-hour flight from Singapore with Berjaya Air. Beware: this is listed as one of the 10 scariest landings in the world, and it was!

A trip to Tioman is a true back-to-nature experience. We spotted the most enormous monitor lizards we'd ever seen, lazily swishing through a canal. We jumped off the pier and then snorkelled under it, surrounded by schools of fish that would suddenly, and hypnotically, scatter en masse.

A must-visit is the Juara Turtle Project, where you can marvel at the "old man faces" of day-old turtle hatchlings. Watch the sun set into the ocean and the large bats feeding overhead at dusk. Take a boat trip around the island and visit Juara Beach with its perfect arc of white sand. Walk to the Asah waterfalls, past the jungle-clad "dragon spikes" of Tioman legend. Relax in a true island paradise a world away from Singapore.

ROBYN NEGRI-CLARKE





## BAKO – A BORNEAN ADVENTURE

Bako National Park, in Sarawak, East Malaysia, is the perfect Bornean adventure for beginners. Bako is home to a huge variety of vegetation and wildlife, and one of the main highlights is the strong possibility of seeing the proboscis monkey, which is endemic to Borneo.

Bako can be done as a day trip from Kuching by catching the local Rapid Kuching no. 1 (red bus, every hour from 7am) or a white mini bus (leaves the open-air market when full). After the 45-minute trip to Kampung Bako, rent a boat to take you into Bako National Park. The boat trip provides spectacular vistas and is an attraction in its own right. Be sure to agree on a time and place to meet your boat for the return journey. As a side-trip, ask your boatman to take you to the “sea stack”, an interesting limestone formation surrounded by the sea.



The trails at Bako are colour coded and well marked. There are various routes to explore, each one offering different vantage points to enjoy the jungle and beach views and a chance to see the park’s many animals.

You are more likely to hear the proboscis monkeys playing high up in the leafy canopy before you spot them. If you’re lucky, you might also get a glimpse of silver leaf monkeys and wild boars – the latter often found hanging around Park HQ!

Park staff are happy to advise on the most suitable trails and which places offer the best chance of spotting wildlife. Basic chalet accommodation is available for those who want to stay overnight.

MONIKA BAIGRIE

## SIPADAN – THE DIVE OF A LIFETIME



Turtles and jack fish and sharks, oh my! The variety and abundance of sea life I saw while diving Sipadan was overwhelming: if I had a dollar for every turtle I saw, I’d still be travelling, and not stuck here working.

Famous for being one of Jacques Cousteau’s favourite dive spots, Sipadan is a small island off the east coast of Sabah. This Island Marine Park is so well protected that only 120 divers can visit each day.

It’s hard to put the magic of Sipadan into words. The sea creatures were incredible to see, but it wasn’t just the abundance of sharks and turtles that amazed me; the wall of coral was breathtaking too.

I feel blessed to have been one of the few to experience Sipadan, but almost wish I hadn’t visited so early in my dive career, because I suspect nothing else will come close.

CARMEN ANG





# Maldives

## At a glance

### Visa-vis

A 30-day free visa is issued on arrival for all nationalities, provided you possess a valid passport, a return ticket, and enough funds to cover the expenses for the duration of your stay in Maldives (US\$ 100 plus \$50 dollars per day or a confirmation of reservation in a tourist resort or a hotel).

### Air time

4.5 hours (to Malé) from Singapore.

### Cash & cards

The official currency of the Maldives is the Maldivian Rufiyaa (MVR). Generally you will not need rufiyaa as everything will be billed to your room at resorts and hotels and your bill can be settled with cash, credit cards or traveller's cheques. Most local shops will accept US dollars; tipping is acceptable

in this currency. There are no ATMs outside Malé.

### Weather report

Maldives has a tropical climate and can be visited at any time, although it does have two seasons: Dry (December to April), April being the hottest month and December the coolest; Wet (May to November), when temperatures remain warm but rain and storms should be expected. May and October are the wettest months.

### Mother tongue

Dhivehi and English.

### First words

Hello: *Assalaa mu alaikum*

What is your name?

*Kon nameh kiyanee?*

My name is \_\_:

*Ahareng namakee \_\_*

How much? *Agu*

*kihaavareh?*

Thank you: *Shukuriyaa*

Yes: *Aan*

No: *Noon*





The over-water villas of a Maldivian resort

### **Salutations**

Maldivian's greet each other with a smile or the raising of eyebrows.

### **Clocking in**

The Maldives is 5 hours ahead of GMT (some islands are 6 hours ahead) and 3 hours behind Singapore.

### **World Heritage Sites**

Total: 0 (1 on the tentative list)

### **Must-try foods**

*Garudhiya*, a light fish soup served with steamed rice, lemon and chillies.

### **National flower**

The pink rose.

### **Must-buy souvenir**

Some underwater photos.

### **Did you know?**

- The Maldives is the lowest country in the world, averaging 1.5 metres above sea level.
- The Maldives is a Muslim country and as such you cannot bring alcohol into the country or consume it outside resort hotels.
- In 2009, the Maldives held an underwater cabinet meeting to raise awareness on climate change.

- The Maldives is creating the largest marine reserve in the world.

### **Must-read book**

*Dhon Hiyala and Ali Fulhu* by Abdullah Sadiq (translation: Fareesha Abdullah and Michael O'Shea) – a Maldivian Romeo and Juliet.



READERS  
TIPS

# AN OCEAN OF CHOICE

Browsing their websites, you'll find that every resort in the Maldives seems as picture-perfect as the next, and with nearly a hundred idyllic coral-fringed islands to choose from, how on earth do you decide? Here are a couple of personal recommendations from readers who have already walked on the sand and "tested the water".

## BLISSFUL BAROS



Only 25 minutes by speedboat from the international airport is Baros Maldives ([baros.com](http://baros.com)). Pictures don't do justice to this amazing place. Highlights during our stay included learning how to scuba dive in the crystal clear waters of the resort's own reef, going on a sunset dolphin cruise, and taking a great day-trip to Malé. The friendly staff remembered our names from the first day and really made us feel at home. We had eight nights but could easily have stayed longer. It's the perfect honeymoon destination!



DOMINIKA MACKENZIE





## SHANGRI-LA'S VILLINGILI RESORT & SPA

My husband and I just returned from a vacation to the Maldives that definitely lived up to our big expectations. Tears welled in my eyes as our speedboat approached the Shangri-La's Villingili Resort & Spa ([shangri-la.com/male/villingiliresort](http://shangri-la.com/male/villingiliresort)): pure white sand, coconut palms, and the most turquoise water I'd ever seen.

The resort is on Addu, the most southern of the Maldives' 26 atolls. It's not the easiest destination to get to (flight from Singapore, 70-minute flight from Malé to Gan airport, eight-minute boat ride), but it's well worth the journey. Beautiful beaches, warm shallow water and plenty of activities – snorkelling, cycling, kayaking, paddle boarding – to keep you entertained. There's also a fabulous nature trail around Villingili, an amazing spa for some self-indulgence, plus fishing trips, sunset cruises and diving excursions for the more adventurous.

But we enjoyed simply lounging on our deck, cocktail in hand, watching the turtles and deciding whose turn it was to plunge into the blue from our spectacular over-the-water villa, which was meticulously presented and beautifully decorated down to the smallest detail.

The resort's staff was discreet, friendly, professional, and eager to accommodate our needs. And true to Shangri-La's reputation, the restaurants at this resort were excellent – the seafood beach barbecue and breakfast buffet were particular highlights.

A highly recommended treat for all the senses.

SAMANTHA HILTON







## GETTING AROUND THE MALDIVES

**F**lights to Malé land at the Ibrahim Nasir International Airport (previously known as Hulhulé Airport), located just outside of the capital city. From there, travellers typically use one of three methods to reach their destinations: boat, seaplane or domestic flight.

- The resorts closest to Malé can be reached by boat. The trade-off for the short travel time, however, is that these areas tend to be busy, with many of the resorts in close proximity.
- Resorts located a little farther away are accessed via seaplane, which can be somewhat pricey for a rather short, but thrilling ride.
- Lastly, reaching resorts on the outermost edge of the country may require a domestic flight, followed by a boat ride. The travel time is longer, but your patience is typically rewarded with complete peace and quiet.

### *Making arrangements*

Once you have booked your tickets to Malé, most resorts handle the rest of the travel details, which makes planning a trip to the Maldives a breeze. Many resorts also have attendants at the airport to help with luggage and assist with the transportation process.



### *Travelling into Malé*

As seaplanes do not normally operate in the dark, sometimes a one-night stay in Malé is necessary upon arrival or departure. As the airport is very small, you may want to consider taking a short boat ride over to Malé to check out the city if you have a long wait for your flight. Ask your resort to help arrange a guide for a walking tour of the city's highlights.

MONICA PITRELLI



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(+ taxes \$490)

**INCLUDES** 4 nights accommodation at Rydges Auckland with daily breakfast and return transfers. Half-day guided tour to Hobbiton Movie Set, lunch at Shire's Rest Cafe, and a Hobbiton Beer (or other drink) at Green Dragon Inn. Round trip transportation by coach.

**Fly & Drive Floral Delights**



**Hokkaido**  
Flights + 4 nights 4-star  
from **\$1,798\***  
(+ taxes \$445)

**INCLUDES** 4 nights accommodation with daily breakfast and 2 dinners. 4 days car rental with English Navigation System and transfer to Toyota Rental Car Shin-Chitose Airport Shop.

**Early Bird Special**



**Queenstown Ski**  
Flights + 7 nights 4½-star  
from **\$1,860\***  
(+ taxes \$485)

**INCLUDES** 7 nights accommodation in Deluxe Non-Lakeview Room at Heritage Hotel & Villas. 3 days ski pass. 7 days compact car rental.

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# Myanmar

## At a glance

### Visa-vis

All visitors will need a visa. Make an online appointment for your visa application at the Myanmar embassy. Writers, journalists, editors, film producers and photographers may have trouble obtaining a visa; stating these occupations on your application may result in your visa being declined. For further information, visit [www.mesingapore.org.sg](http://www.mesingapore.org.sg).

### Air time

3 hours from Singapore.

### Cash & cards

Myanmar's national currency is the Burmese Kyat. The use of credit cards and travellers' cheques are very limited (high-end hotels) so it is advisable to have enough US dollars to fund your entire trip. You can exchange US dollars for local currency at banks and hotels.

### Weather report

The monsoon season lasts from May to October, after which temperatures are cooler between November and February before heating back up between March and April. The climate in the higher altitudes of northern Myanmar is temperate throughout the year, but is humid in lower Myanmar, along the coastlines and around the delta region, which includes Yangon.

### Mother tongue

Burmese.

### First words

Hello: *Min ga lar par*

What is your name?

*Na mal bal loe kall lal?*

My name is \_\_\_:

*Chun ma nan mae ma \_\_\_ ba (f)*

*Chun daw nan mae \_\_\_ ba (m)*

How much? *Be lau'le*

Thank you: *Kyei zu tin ba de*

Yes: *Hoke kae*

No: *Mah hoke*





The sun sets over the ancient stupas of Bagan

### Salutations

Greetings vary depending on the gender of the individuals meeting. It is usually a combination of a handshake, a wave, a nod and a smile.

### Clocking in

Myanmar is 6.5 hours ahead of GMT and 1.5 hours behind Singapore.

### World Heritage Sites

Total: 0 (8 on the tentative list)

### Must-try food

Widely regarded as Myanmar's national dish, *mohinga* is rice vermicelli in a fish soup topped with sliced banana blossom, boiled eggs and fritters.

### National flower

Padauk (*Pterocarpus Indicus*).

### Must-buy souvenir

Burmese laquerware.

### Did you know?

- Many Burmese people avoid cutting their hair on a Monday, Friday or their birthday.
- The Taukkyan War Cemetery contains 6,374 Commonwealth burials of the Second World War, 867 of them unidentified.
- Winemaking is a budding industry in Myanmar.
- *Thanaka* cream is a yellow paste used by Burmese people as sunscreen, makeup and insect

repellent. It's made by grinding the bark, wood, or roots of a *Thanaka* tree with a small amount of water.

### Must-read book

*From the Land of Green Ghosts: A Burmese Odyssey* by Pascal Khoo Thwe – an autobiographical account of the author's upbringing in a remote tribal village in Myanmar and his journey from his strife-torn country to Cambridge.





# EIGHT DAYS IN MYANMAR

BY FRANK KUIJSTERS

On the first day of our eight-day tour through Myanmar we visited the legendary Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon, a massive gold stupa rising more than a hundred metres into the sky, which sits at the centre of dozens of smaller temples. Watching the changing colours of the pagoda at sunset was a highlight of our time in Yangon. While travelling around the city (the capital of Myanmar until 2006, replaced by Naypyidaw), we also caught glimpses of many crumbling grand colonial buildings.

The next day we flew to Bagan, “the land of one thousand temples”. (In reality, its fields are strewn with well over two thousand temples.) Bagan, like Luxor

or Angkor Wat, cannot be comprehended until you see it for yourself. In every direction, the spires of stupas in varying degrees of decay rise like ancient prayers laid in brick over the centuries. It’s impossible to see all the amazing structures, but highlights include the Ananda, Manuha and Nanphaya temples, and the Shwezigone and Mingalar Zedi stupas. For great sunset views, try the Shwesandaw, Bupaya, Lawkananda and Mingalar stupas.

After two nights in Bagan we took a one-hour flight to Mandalay, the last royal capital of Myanmar before British colonial rule. The traditional industries of gold-leaf beating, tapestry, turnery, marble carving, silk weaving and jade cutting

are all represented here and the markets and workshops are worth visiting. Mandalay is not as attractive as other towns in the country, but we loved walking around the markets and we also enjoyed a relaxing boat tour on the Ayeyarwady River to the small town off Mingun.

Our next stop was Inle Lake, 900 metres above sea level and surrounded by hazy blue mountains. Around 100,000 people inhabit

this vast lake and its shores, including the Intha, Pa-O and Shan tribes, whose markets, floating gardens, and leg-rowing fishermen are the big tourist attractions.

Eight days Myanmar is not enough, but it was a wonderful experience that gave us a taste of a traditional, time-honoured way of life. Go soon to experience this complex, vibrant, profound and beautiful country.

## The leg-rowing fishermen of Inle Lake

The Intha fishermen of Inle Lake paddle with one leg wrapped around their wooden oar, huge conical nets resting on long wooden boats, as they move through the water. Standing on the bow of the boat, they can see down to the lake floor, only a few feet below, as their legs powerfully row through the marshy weeds.



# RIVER VOYAGES



Golden pagodas and colourful festivals, spectacular natural beauty and exotic wildlife. Myanmar is a country that seems untouched by time.

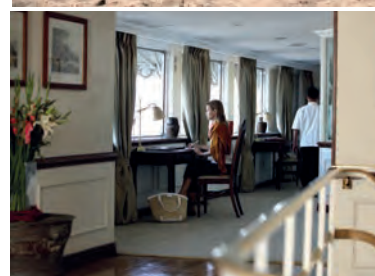
**B**ordered by China, India and Thailand, Myanmar boasts a rich cultural heritage that co-exists in perfect harmony with its great lakes and rivers, lush jungle and emerald rice fields. It continues to capture the hearts and minds of travellers as it has done for centuries, with a unique ambiance that harks back to more tranquil times. Ox-drawn carts trundle along dusty roads, saffron-robed monks worship at revered shrines and the charming locals greet travellers with warm and generous smiles.

There's no better vantage point from which to glimpse these wonders than the two luxury river cruisers, Road To Mandalay and Orcaella by Belmond.

**Road To Mandalay** gently cruises the Ayeyarwady River between Bagan and Bhamo via Mandalay, stopping off at such awe-inspiring wonders as the spectacular ancient city of Bagan – the royal capital of Mandalay – and the sacred Sagaing hills. A collection of cruises ranging from three- to 11-nights, take in all that the country has to offer. With its wooden furniture and swimming pool, the ship's observation deck is the perfect place to admire stunning views of the Ayeyarwady River and the village life along its banks.

**Orcaella**, the newest ship, offers a collection of seven- and 11-night cruises along both the Ayeyarwady and Chindwin Rivers. The ship's smaller size allows it to navigate the two rivers' more remote regions, giving passengers even greater insight into Myanmar's cultural and natural wonders. An open sundeck, lounge bar and swimming pool, provide the perfect retreat for guests to relax, drink in hand, and soak up the changing river vistas.

[voyagesinmyanmar.com](http://voyagesinmyanmar.com)



## ONBOARD HIGHLIGHTS

- Private en-suite cabins are decorated with beautiful fabrics and luxurious furnishings handmade by Burmese artisans.
- Attentive on-board staff provide outstanding but unobtrusive service.
- The ships' menus showcase gourmet Eastern and Western delicacies, served with Burmese courtesy and charm.
- A qualified guide with strong connections to the local communities escorts small groups of guests on fascinating excursions, offering a genuine and personal perspective on the country.





## DISCOVERING A BURMESE BEACH

WORDS AND PICTURES BY ANNE MØLLESKOV HANSEN

**A**t first, we thought that Yoma Cherry Lodge (yomacherrylodge.com) seemed much the same as many other seaside resorts we'd visited in Southeast Asia: it's situated right on the beach (at Ngapali, on Myanmar's west coast), surrounded by a lush garden, has clean rooms, very friendly staff, and yummy food. But what made it such a special place for us was the opportunity to learn so much about local village life.

British manager Sue and her husband have founded a trust that runs an English afternoon school for the local children right behind the lodge. We were invited to drop in anytime, and when we showed interest Sue asked if we'd like to be shown around in the village.

We were all delighted (especially our children, aged between 10 and 13 years) when four super-cool local kids, speaking brilliant

English, gave us a guided tour along the narrow gravel roads amongst the palm-leaf huts, introducing us to people and places we could never have approached on our own. We visited the local library, were invited to a wedding, saw the coconut workstation, the pagoda, the local school, and met the children's teacher. We watched traditionally dressed women working on the beach – many villagers fish for their livelihood; spending

the night out at sea and drying their catch on the beach by day.

This quiet village (most of the – still few – tourists stay in a bay further along the coast) and its people touched us all deeply. As we left, the last photos I shot were of workers cutting stone to make a paved road to the airport. I think things are going to change fast around Ngapali – so hurry up and plan your trip.



### How to get there

Flight time from Yangon to Thandwe Airport (Ngapali) is approximately 45 minutes, with regular flights during the dry season, between October and April. Yoma Cherry Lodge provides complimentary airport transfers in their classic "Super Dodge" coach – a 15-minute leisurely drive.



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For those preferring serenity, guests might wish to stroll the resort's twenty-acre grounds, swim in three ozonated pools, peruse the library, or indulge in treatments at the famed Anumba Spa.

Or simply watch the world go by. [www.tberacha.com](http://www.tberacha.com)

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# POPA PILGRIMAGE



If you can peel yourself away from the astonishing vista of 2,000-or-so temples at Bagan, an interesting diversion is Mount Popa, a 90-minute drive away to the east. This plug of volcanic rock rises 750 metres into the sky and is crowned by a ramshackle assortment of Buddhist architecture. The climb to the top is mostly under a sheltered pilgrims' staircase and takes about 20 minutes. You'll be accompanied by feisty monkeys the whole way, but if you've spent any time in Singapore's MacRitchie Reservoir this won't be especially daunting. They do seem hungrier than their Singapore counterparts, though, and the merest hint of an open bag will have them leaping on your back to help themselves. Survive the monkey-fest and the reward is 360-degree views of central Myanmar, with the fat, snaking Ayeyarwady River in the distance.

SHAMUS SILLAR





## GET THERE NOW MYANMAR

We asked travel specialists Country Holidays to pinpoint the Asian destinations they feel are especially ripe for visiting right now – before they lose their charm!

Just a few short years ago, Myanmar seemed caught in a time warp as the rest of Asia was propelling into the 21st century. Then two women seemed to change everything: Hilary Clinton visited the country amidst improving international relations, and Michelle Yeoh appeared as Aung San Sun Kyi in a Hollywood film. Myanmar had suddenly found its mojo. There are just so many “wow” moments here: hot-air ballooning over thousands of temples in Bagan; taking in glorious sunsets along the Ayeyarwady River; exploring high-altitude Inle Lake with its one-legged rowers. At the same time, luxury options are available with charming

boutique hotels or cruises by Belmond (formerly the Orient-Express Group). A typical itinerary takes in the capital Yangon, plus Bagan, Inle Lake and Mandalay, while the more adventurous might like to hike on the Shan Plateau or explore the ruins of Mrauk Oo. You could perhaps end your trip lazing on Ngapali Beach, not quite the measure of its Thai counterparts but a great insight into rural Asian fishing villages before the arrival of mass tourism.

[countryholidays.com.sg](http://countryholidays.com.sg)  
[countryholidays.com.hk](http://countryholidays.com.hk)





## At a glance

### Visa-vis

Most visitors to New Zealand do not require visas for visits of less than three months. Those not on the visa-waiver list can find more information about applying for a visa at [www.immigration.govt.nz](http://www.immigration.govt.nz).

### Air time

10 hours to Auckland from Singapore.

### Cash & cards

The New Zealand Dollar (NZD) is the national currency of New Zealand. Foreign currency and travellers cheques can be changed at most banks or licenced money changers. Credit cards are widely accepted and ATM withdrawals possible at the many machines located throughout the country.

### Weather report

New Zealand has a temperate climate all year round. Regions vary from extremely wet to semi-arid to subtropical, so check your destination beforehand. Most skiers book between June and September.

### Mother tongue

English.

### Salutations

A handshake is the formal way of greeting someone in New Zealand. The traditional Māori greeting is the *hongi*, expressed by the rubbing or touching of noses.

### Clocking in

New Zealand is 12 hours ahead of GMT (13 hours during daylight saving time, April to September) and 4 hours ahead of Singapore.





Lupines are an early summer attraction at Lake Tekapo

### World Heritage Sites

Total: 3

- New Zealand Sub-Antarctic Islands
- Te Wahipounamu – South West New Zealand
- Tongariro National Park

### Must-try foods

Pavlova – a sweet meringue-like crust filled with whipped cream and topped with fresh fruit. (The debate continues as to its country of origin with

Australia and New Zealand both laying claim.)

### National flower

No national flower, but the silver fern (*Cyathea dealbata*) is an unofficial national emblem.

### Must-buy souvenir

“Cryovaced” New Zealand lamb, or an All Blacks rugby shirt.

### Did you know?

- New Zealand was the first country to have its three top positions of power held simultaneously by women: Prime Minister (Helen Clark), Governor General (Dame Silvia Cartwright) and Chief Justice (Sian Elias).
- In 1893, New Zealand was the first major nation to have universal suffrage.
- New Zealand has two national anthems: *God*

*Save The Queen and God Defend New Zealand.*

- Sir Edmund Hillary, the first man to summit Everest (with his climbing partner Tenzing Norgay), was a New Zealander; his face is on the New Zealand \$5 bill.

### Must-read book

*The Bone People* by Keri Hulme (1984) – a story woven with Maori myths and European heritage.





# NEW ZEALAND WONDERS

New Zealand's unique wildlife and stunning scenery make it the perfect holiday destination – especially for those who enjoy capturing amazing photos to document their travels. **Flight Centre** arranges flights and holiday packages to a huge range of New Zealand destinations. Here are just a few ideas to whet your appetite.

**Movie fanatic?** With the third film in The Hobbit trilogy scheduled for release at the end of 2014, now is the perfect time to visit the land where the Lord of the Rings and Hobbit series were filmed. Peep into the life of a Hobbit and discover Middle-earth for yourself at the Hobbiton Movie Set ([hobbitontours.com](http://hobbitontours.com)) near Matamata in the North Island. Have lunch at Shire's Rest Café, get your hands on the exclusive items in the Shire Store and chill out at the Green Dragon Inn.

**Nature lover?** Due to its remoteness and isolation, New Zealand was one of the last lands to be settled by humans. This gives the country a rich and distinctive biodiversity of animal, bird and plant life as well as an abundant marine life. Whales, seals and penguins can all be spotted here, along with the Hector's dolphin, the world's rarest dolphin, unique to New Zealand. Why not try some

whale-watching while exploring the historic coastal township of Kaikoura? Or visit the seal colony and end the day with a winery tour in Christchurch.

**Adventure seeker?** Go skiing in Queenstown between June and October. Don't forget to leave some time for bungy jumping, sky-diving, canyon-swinging and other adrenaline-inducing activities which are available all-year round.

**Culture culture?** Even if you're not crazy about culture and heritage, it's hard not be aware of how strongly the Māori culture impresses itself upon the contemporary life of New Zealanders with so many amazing Māori historic sites dotted throughout the country.

[flightcentre.com.sg](http://flightcentre.com.sg)





# THE SKY'S THE LIMIT

The Kiwis' love for adventure is matched by their appreciation of New Zealand's great outdoors, and this is never limited to having one's feet planted firmly on the ground.



## AVIATION ADVENTURES: KIWIS CAN FLY

What better way to experience New Zealand's stunning panorama than flying over it – be it in a helicopter, plane, hot air balloon, or sky diving? The country's diverse landscapes offer an ever-unfolding natural backdrop for aerial adventures, making this one of the most popular activities in the land of the long white cloud.

Cruise high up in the air, or watch the ground rush up to meet you as vast coastal expanses, high mountain peaks, and deep fresh-water lakes give way to braided rivers, dramatic fjords and colourful volcanic landforms.

Both North and South Islands offer aviation adventures and activities that range from flight-seeing and helicopter landings on an active marine volcano, to a grand tour of the highest peaks in the Southern Alps, to champagne picnics in wilderness locations, West Coast glacier heli-hikes or heli-ski excursions into remote snowy expanses.

A large number of luxury accommodations have helipads offering easy access, transfers to and from, and the-sky-is-the-limit activity options.

## STAR GAZING: INTERNATIONAL DARK SKY RESERVE

Astro-tourism is a small but rapidly growing activity in New Zealand's South Island. Low light pollution and crystal clear skies have won the Mackenzie Basin the International Dark Sky Reserve gold rating, making it the perfect place to watch and observe heavenly bodies.

The Aoraki Mackenzie International Dark Sky Reserve encompasses 4,300 square kilometres of land, including the country's highest peak, Aoraki / Mt Cook, the Aoraki / Mt Cook National Park and the Mackenzie Basin – the largest starlight reserve in the world.

The Mount John Observatory in Tekapo, a research facility and a centre for astro-tourism experiences run by Earth & Sky, offers some of the world's best star gazing conditions in an easy-to-access location.



Tourism New Zealand  
[tourismnewzealand.com](http://tourismnewzealand.com)



# READERS TIPS

Reader **Nicole Tan** has passed on some great tips for those visiting New Zealand, whether as a free-spirited lone traveller or with family in tow.

- If you're **travelling solo**, check out websites such as [www.couchsurfing.org](http://www.couchsurfing.org) or the New Zealand backpacker site [www.bbh.co.nz](http://www.bbh.co.nz) to find people to travel with. The possibilities are endless!
- The seaside village of **Devonport** ([devonport.co.nz](http://devonport.co.nz)), **One Tree Hill** (Auckland's second largest intact volcanic cone) and **Auckland City** itself will take you a day or two to make the most of before you head further afield. Make sure to have comfortable walking shoes with all the hills around.
- Gorgeous **Lake Taupo** is about the size of Singapore; if you don't have time to stay the night, be sure to drop by the (free) hot pools and Huka Falls. The lake also has a "Tarzan-style" rope swing you can play with.
- New Zealand's capital, **Wellington**, is a beautiful city that lives up to its "windy" nickname; don't forget to bring your jacket – you'll be thankful for it in the evenings. Oriental Bay is perfect on a sunny day, while the Te Papa National Museum is a must. Mt Victoria and the Botanical Gardens are amazing too, especially with the gardens' super-cool kids' playground.
- **Napier** is like an art film come-to-life: the architecture is just beautiful, and so is the beach. Try to go on a Saturday morning when the farmers' market is on.
- There's no getting away from it, the thermal region of **Rotorua** does stink of sulphur, but it's okay once you get used to it. The Wai-O-Tapu Wonderland makes for a cool little day trip (entry a bit pricey, but worth it), and you can chill out after because almost all nearby accommodation has a hot pool or spa!



### AUCKLAND MUST-DO'S

- Indulge in a shopping spree in trendy and chic **Newmarket**.
- Explore the quirky and hidden side streets of **Queen Street**.
- Enjoy a picnic in **Albert's Park** with the kids.
- Treat yourselves to a lovely dinner at **Foodstore** ([thefoodstore.tv](http://thefoodstore.tv)), at the **Viaduct Harbor**, situated on Auckland's picturesque Marina.
- Go up the **Sky Tower** for panoramic, 360-degree views. Admission costs \$28 per adult; children under five are free.

MARIAM OTTIMOFIORE

### A WINE-COUNTRY GEM

On a recent trip to the South Island of New Zealand, we found a gem of a place to use as a base when exploring the lovely wineries and vineyards of the Marlborough region.

Walnut Block Cottages ([walnutblockcottages.co.nz](http://walnutblockcottages.co.nz)) is made up of two self-contained one-bedroomed cottages overlooking the vineyards of boutique winemakers, brothers Clyde and Nigel Sowman. Away from it all, but only a five-minute drive from the town of Blenheim, Walnut Block was the perfect choice for us. The cottages are extremely well appointed with a lovely contemporary design, open-plan bedroom with sitting/dining area and a small but well-fitted kitchenette. The bathroom had a huge walk-in shower and under-floor heating – a nice touch.

Our fridge was pre-stocked with supplies, which meant we could have a leisurely breakfast before setting out to explore the area. And the small "stoop" outside the

cottage was the perfect spot to watch the sun go down over the vineyards while enjoying a glass of wine – from Walnut Block or one of the many other fabulous wineries nearby.

LYNN LEES







# A MAGNIFICENT MOMENT IN NZ

WORDS AND PICTURES BY MARIAM OTTIMOIORE

Lake Wakatipu

**T**hey say you should save the best for last, and that's just what we did when we crossed over to the South Island at the end of our New Zealand trip.

Magnificent is the only way to describe this place; it transports you right to the breathtaking landscapes of Middle-earth. Rugged mountains, unspoiled forests, majestic lakes, clean air and a sense of truly raw wilderness blend together to give a glimpse of a pure,

fantastic world.

Nestled on the shores of beautiful Lake Wakatipu, the mountain resort of Queenstown is framed by the imposing Remarkables mountain range, and serves as the perfect launch pad to explore the region (though the town itself has developed into a highly commercialised tourist centre).

The scenery from the lakeside road to Glenorchy is truly stunning, but what is most remarkable (just like the

mountain range) is the fact that only a few miles out of Queenstown you're in pristine nature, bare of any trace of human settlement.

Glenorchy, at the northern tip of Lake Wakatipu, is a village so small that if you drive too fast you might miss it. But it serves as the gateway to a place that could not have a more appropriate name: Paradise, a wooded valley between snow-capped mountain peaks, covering the delta of

the Dart River as it empties into Lake Wakatipu.

The combination of an alpine wonderland and the crystal-clear waters of a Thai island beach made this place unlike any other I've visited. The pureness of the glacial water is aptly captured in the name of nearby Diamond Lake, and looking at the reflection of the mountain peaks in the almost impossibly clear water, I have never felt more connected to the planet.

## MARIAM'S MUST-DO'S IN AND AROUND QUEENSTOWN

- Visit the quaint Gold Rush town of **Arrowtown**, a 15-minute drive from Queenstown.
- Take a drive on the scenic lakeside route to **Glenorchy**.
- Stop for lunch at the only café in Glenorchy, the aptly named **Glenorchy Café**.
- Take a lake cruise on the historic Edwardian steamship **TSS Earnslaw** from Queenstown to Walter's Peak sheep farming station on the opposite shore of Lake Wakatipu.



Rotorua's Geothermal Landscape



Paradise



Middle-earth



# EDITORS TIPS



## GOLDEN BAY GETAWAY

Long-time Singapore residents Mandy and John realised early on that a special place to retreat to from the fast-paced life in Singapore was on their wish list. They found that special place in the form of this beautiful beachfront location in the heart of Golden Bay, about an hour from Nelson on New Zealand's South Island.

Villa on the Bay ([villaonthebay.co.nz](http://villaonthebay.co.nz)) offers guests a special retreat from which to enjoy this magical part of the world, gateway to the famous Abel Tasman National Park.

With a wonderfully safe beach at the doorstep and a gorgeous links golf course next door, there are outdoor activities galore; you can add fishing, hiking and tennis to those, too. Golden Bay is also home to a number of talented artisans so it's a great place to pick up a fabulous artwork or perhaps a bespoke piece of jewellery.

Once all that energy has been depleted, settle down with nice cold Sauvignon Blanc on one of the expansive balconies while taking in the spectacular views. Or you could take advantage of New Zealand's mild winter climate and swap the Sauv Blanc for a nice Otago Pinot in front of the fire or while soaking in the outdoor spa; attractive off-peak rates make this a great option.

There are great restaurants and cafes within walking distance of the villa or a short drive away – don't miss the iconic Mussell Inn brewery ([musselinn.co.nz](http://musselinn.co.nz)).

Villa on the Bay can accommodate up to four couples, or a family or two, allowing everyone to be under one roof while maintaining a sense of privacy when needed.

## CLASSIC CARS, WEARABLE ART & MORE

The World of WearableArt (WOW) Awards Show held in Wellington is amazing, but it only happens once a year (usually in late September – check [www.wowcars.co.nz](http://www.wowcars.co.nz)) so it's easy to miss. Luckily, the organisers have been able to put a lot of their pieces into a museum in Nelson where WOW first started, so you can get a taste of the incredible outfits all year round.

What I was even more impressed by at the museum was its accompanying selection of classic cars. Bearing in mind I am female, and not one who's very into cars, it was just so brilliant to see all these wonderful vehicles in one place. Some I remember from my childhood, others were even older than me!

The museum also has displays of some home-grown artists' work to round off the experience. Definitely worth a visit if you are in the region – perhaps before you head off to some of the surrounding wine tours. For more of a day trip, meanwhile, make a beeline for Abel Tasman National Park ([abeltasman.co.nz](http://abeltasman.co.nz)).

REBECCA BISSET





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# The Philippines

## At a glance

### Visa-vis

Most nationalities don't need a visa when visiting the Philippines, provided you do not stay longer than 30 days, and have return tickets and a passport valid for at least six months. Citizens of India, China and a select group of other countries require a visa – see [www.philippine-embassy.org.sg](http://www.philippine-embassy.org.sg).

### Air time

3.5 hours (Manila) from Singapore.

### Cash & cards

Filipino currency is the Philippine Peso (Php). US Dollars are widely accepted and ATMs readily available in major cities. Remember to have cash available in the rural areas where ATM access and exchange rates may be less favourable.

### Weather report

The weather is generally tropical with hot and humid conditions. June to November often experience heavy rainfall and occasional typhoons, and March to May are the hottest months. It's generally recommended to visit from November to April, when the weather is dry.

### Mother tongue

Tagalog and English.

### Salutations

Filipinos usually greet each other with a smile and eye contact. As soon as they make eye contact they raise and lower their eyebrows as an additional greeting sign.

### Clocking in

The Philippines, like Singapore, is 8 hours ahead of GMT.



A village in the mountains;  
photo by Ken Koh



### First words

Hello: *Kumusta*

What is your name? *Anóng pangalan mo?*

My name is \_\_\_:

\_\_\_ *ang pangalan ko.*

How much? *Magkano?*

Thank you: *Salamat*

Yes: *Oo*

No thank you:

*Walang anuman*

### National flower

*Sampaguita* (jasmine)

### World Heritage Sites

Total: 5

- The historic town of Vigan
- The rice terraces of the Philippine Cordilleras
- Puerto-Princesa Subterranean River National Park
- Tubbataha Reefs Natural Park

### Must-try foods

*Adobo*, chicken or pork stewed in vinegar, garlic,

soy sauce, bay leaves, and peppercorns.

### Must-buy souvenir

Something woven with *abaca* (Manila hemp) such as rugs, hats or handbags.

### Did you know?

- The Philippine flag is the only flag that is displayed differently in times of peace and war. In peacetime, blue is on top; in wartime, red.

- The University of Santo Tomas (UST) in Manila is the oldest existing university in Asia.

- The world's longest underground river system accessible to man can be found at the St Paul National Park in the province of Palawan.

### Must-read book

*Eye of the Fish* by Luis H. Fracia – essays by a journalist born in Manila but raised in New York.



READERS  
TIPS

# MABUHAY BORACAY!

WORDS AND PICTURES BY SHERMIN CHEN

The outriggers splashed violently against the turquoise waters as we cruised away from the mainland towards the spectacular beaches of Boracay. Once on the island, we were quickly whisked away to our hotel, The District Boracay – a brand new boutique hotel on Station 2 of the famed White Beach. This hotel embodies the best of Filipino hospitality and is a great choice for those seeking an indulgent stay close to all the best restaurants and bars on the island. We loved the rooftop balcony, where we relaxed in comfort and admired the stunning sunset.

## THINGS TO DO

①. Boracay's famed **White Beach** is a 4km stretch of sand, behind which you'll find a string of hotels, souvenir shops, restaurants and bars. The beach is split into three stations: Station 1, where most of the high-end hotels are; Station 2, where most of the bars and restaurants are; and Station 3, an up-and-coming area, much of which is currently under development.

②. **Puka Beach** at the northern end of the island is a hidden gem. Waves are a little rougher than on White Beach but the waters are a stunning turquoise and those who prefer swimming in slightly deeper ocean will be happy here.

## ③. Go island hopping.

Rent a private boat or join a small group. Adventure-seekers will enjoy cliff diving at Ariel's Point. Those not inclined to jump from heights can go canoeing in a native canoe or snorkelling in the open waters. We were blown away by the huge array of colourful tropical fish and stunning corals. The beautiful caves and beaches of Crystal Cove are also well worth a visit.

④. Landlubbers will enjoy **an ATV ride**. Venture into the Filipino countryside and take a break at the top of Mount Luho, the highest point of the island, with bird's-eye views.



## ⑤. Sample some

**Filipino cuisine.** Gerry's Grill has an authentic and fairly inexpensive menu – we thoroughly enjoyed the barbecued pork in sweet sauce, chicken kebabs, grilled squid and Filipino stir-fried noodles. And don't miss their mango shake.



# Why everyone flies

# Singapore



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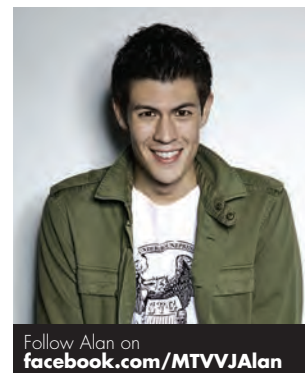
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# TOP 10 THINGS TO DO IN MANILA

BY GUEST CONTRIBUTOR, MTV VJ ALAN WONG

Born in California, VJ Alan Wong joined MTV in March 2013. On his second trip to Asia, Alan visited the Philippines and, in his own words, enjoyed "an amazing journey". Here are his tips for things to do in the nation's capital.



Follow Alan on [facebook.com/MTVVJAlan](https://www.facebook.com/MTVVJAlan)

PHOTO BY KEVIN OU

- ①. *Try the chicken inasal.* Among the amazing foods to sample, my favourite was the seasoned *inasal* chicken with coconut vinegar and garlic rice.
- ②. *Ride in a jeepney.* Not the quickest or most comfortable way to travel but the colorful jam-packed buses are definitely an experience! To pay the bus fare, hand your coins to the person next to you and they'll pass them along up to the driver. Never seen anything like it.



- ③. *Talk to anyone and everyone!* The people in Manila were the most memorable part of my trip. Everyone was so friendly and helpful, and interested in my travels.
- ④. *If you're travelling around a lot, get a personal driver* if you can afford one. Traffic can be a nightmare at times and navigating Manila can be difficult and confusing. Much easier to have a local show you around and keep you safe.
- ⑤. *Check out the beaches!* I got to experience Bacolod; it was beautiful. But I've also heard great things about Palawan and Boracay.
- ⑥. *Visit during Christmas season.* This isn't hard, as Christmas starts way early in the Philippines. There is something like three months of celebrations, and they take it seriously. The decorations are outstanding and the cheer is contagious.
- ⑦. *Go to Starbucks and get a drink with coffee jellies!* The Philippines is the only country I've been to where Starbucks' iced coffee has small coffee jellies at the bottom. Similar to pearl tea but coffee-flavoured.
- ⑧. *For a night out, spend some time in Metro Manila.* There are a bunch of restaurants and bars where you can hang out.
- ⑨. *Get some shopping done.* There are malls literally everywhere. Prices are good and it's a great way to escape the heat and humidity.
- ⑩. *Bring a friend!* I'm a firm believer that travelling alone can be fun, but travelling with others can be even better.



## MANILA SIDE DISHES

Perhaps not at the top of everyone's list of "must-see places in Southeast Asia", Manila, nonetheless, has its charms. These two excursions provided some brilliant travel memories.

**1.** An afternoon on the bay: For a reasonable 550 pesos (about S\$16), Sun Cruises offers a three-hour cruise with a set dinner buffet. A young folk singer provided mellow entertainment as the sun set, the glassy new buildings along the shore shimmering in its reflection.

[corregidorphilippines.com](http://corregidorphilippines.com)

**2.** Old Manila Walks: The company's promise was hard to resist: "We'll horse around the streets, taking in Tsinoy (Chinese-Philippine) history, chomping down food and gorging on specialty treats as we nibble our way down through Chinatown!" The lumpia (Philippine spring rolls) were my favourite. But, everything was fresh, tasty and delicious. OK, I didn't try the pig bowel soup that was offered. Next time?

[oldmanilawalks.com](http://oldmanilawalks.com)

JOHN K JOHNSON





# LITTLE & LARGE AT SARDINE CITY

Divers – especially those who are keen photographers – are drawn to rare underwater sights. Moalboal, in the Philippine province of Cebu, offers a great opportunity to dive with (and film) the ocean’s biggest fish and some of its biggest shoals. CHRIS WHITE of **Turtle Bay Dive Resort** tells us more about these two unusual Moalboal dive experiences.

## WHALE SHARKS

Let’s start with the big boys. The entrepreneurial fishermen of Cebu’s Tan-awan Oslob – a previously sleepy little fishing village just 77 kilometres from Moalboal – discovered in 2011 that when they fed visiting whale sharks a daily supply of krill (their natural diet) it was enough of a temptation to convince them to stick around. This soon caught the attention of the international media and all of a sudden Oslob was on the world dive map.

The attraction for divers is that they are guaranteed an up-close encounter with many whale sharks (mature adults and juveniles) every day of the year from a shore-entry dive. The whale sharks are also accessible to snorkellers and even passengers in paddle boats operated by the local municipality.

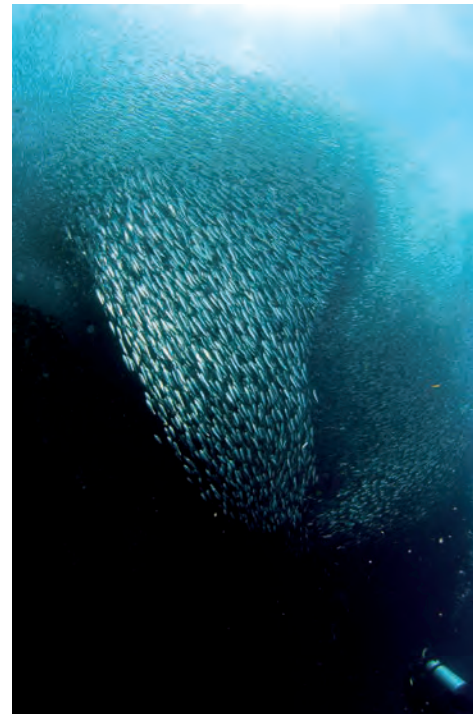
While fish feeding is a controversial topic, frowned upon by many naturalists as it can disrupt the natural behaviour of

fish, the whale sharks in Oslob are well protected, with strict rules in place for all divers and snorkellers, and are now the subject of scientific study.

## SARDINES

Moving down to the other end of the spectrum, for a number of years (with a few gaps in between) divers in Moalboal have been able to experience diving among the swirling clouds of sardines that have made Moalboal their temporary home, and provided its nickname of “Sardine City”.

They started out at Pescador Island but later, inexplicably moved to Panagsama Beach, Moalboal, where they swim just metres from the shore. Not only can divers witness the countless sardines swimming in formation with the sunlight flashing off their scales, but they will also see the many predator fish attracted by a free meal – schools of jacks, needle fish and, occasionally, thresher sharks.



The family-run Turtle Bay Dive Resort has 28 air-conditioned rooms set in landscaped tropical gardens, facing the bay at Moalboal. Relax around the lagoon pool, or enjoy a soothing massage between dives.  
[turtlebaydiveresort.com](http://turtlebaydiveresort.com)





# VIGAN:

## A SPANISH COLONIAL GEM

When JEFF SAMANIEGO and his wife visited the World Heritage-listed town of Vigan in the Philippines, they were impressed by its unique and rich history. This coastal town, 400km northwest of Manila, is the greatest example of 16th-century Spanish colonisation in Asia. And prior to the arrival of the Spanish, Vigan played a major role as a trading settlement between the Chinese and indigenous people.

**A**s you enter Vigan, you'll find yourself transported through time as horse-drawn carriages work their way down cobblestoned streets bordered by architecture from the days of old.

You'll come across shops selling *pasalubong*, the Tagalog term for souvenirs to take home for friends and family, including textiles from local weavers, woodwork, pottery, wine and especially the popular Vigan *longganisa* sausage (the Filipino version of chorizo). Grab a coffee at one of the many cafes, and – if you must – catch up on your e-mails. Eat at Café Leona Restaurant for a taste of traditional local fare and don't forget to pick up a Vigan empanada for a savory snack.

Among the most popular attractions are the horse-drawn carriages. These *kalesas* were made popular during Spanish colonisation and fit right in with the surrounding historical architecture. You can expect to hear from a few *cocheros* offering tours around the town and its surrounding attractions. Head over to Vigan's Hidden Garden for lunch and to pick up some beautiful local pottery before returning to the town centre for some vibrant nightlife.

### WHERE TO STAY IN VIGAN

Try the newly renovated Hotel Felicidad ([hotelfelicidadvigan.com](http://hotelfelicidadvigan.com)), on the corner of Florentino Street, a traditional Spanish villa with 21 guest rooms and suites.





# FESTIVE PHILIPPINES

Now is a great time to visit the Philippines and explore its rich heritage, with Cebu Pacific Air's unbeatable year-round low fare of S\$163 to Iloilo in the Western Visaya, a town famous for its colonial past.

As a gateway to some of the most colourful and vibrant festivals in the country, Iloilo recently entranced visitors with its famous Dinagyang Festival, an annual celebration held in January, where the whole city is awash in celebration and colour to honour Santo Niño, the child Jesus.

The neighbouring city of Bacolod is home to the equally jubilant Masskara Festival. Held over the third weekend of October, this festival allows travellers to fully immerse themselves in the history of the region through vibrant street dances and a wide variety of traditional food stalls. Bacolod is a beautiful and laidback destination easily accessible by ferry from Iloilo or plane from Manila.

Whether you're looking for a relaxing break or a unique cultural experience, Iloilo and Bacolod offer plenty for visitors, including the warm and relentlessly upbeat spirit of the people of the Philippines.

Aside from Iloilo, Cebu Pacific Air flies from Singapore to Manila 25 times weekly and to Clark daily, for as low as S\$147. It also flies daily to Cebu for as low as \$153.

[cebuspacificair.com](http://cebuspacificair.com)



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# Sri Lanka

## At a glance

### Visa-vis

All visitors, with the exception of citizens of Singapore, Seychelles and the Maldives, will need a visa to enter Sri Lanka. You can get a short-stay visa online at [eta.gov.lk/slvisa/](http://eta.gov.lk/slvisa/). Although it is still possible to get a tourist visa on arrival, it's recommended that you do this before you travel.

### Air time

4 hours from Singapore.

### Cash & cards

The official currency of Sri Lanka is the Sri Lankan Rupee (LKR). Most major banks will change US dollars, Euro and GBP. Visa and MasterCard are the commonly accepted credit cards at top-end hotels and restaurants. You will find ATMs in major cities but do carry cash for small purchases or if you're heading out of town.

### Weather report

The best time to travel to the western and southern coasts and hill country is between December and March. May to September is a prime time to see the eastern coastlines.

### Mother tongue

The official languages of Sri Lanka are Sinhala and Tamil. English is widely spoken.

### First words

Hello: *Ayubowan*

What is your name?

*Oya geh nàma monadha?*

My name is \_\_: *Mageh nàma* \_\_

How much? *Keeyah the?*

Thank you: *Bohomus isthuthi*

Yes: *Ohw*

No thank you: *Nah isthuti*

### Salutations

The Sinhalese greeting is "Ayubowan", with hands pressed together at chest level. Light handshakes are common among the younger generation.



Golden Temple of Dambulla;  
photo by Ken Koh



### Clocking in

Sri Lanka is 5.5 hours ahead of GMT and 2.5 hours behind Singapore.

### World Heritage Sites

Total: 8

#### Highlights:

- Ancient City of Polonnaruwa
- Ancient City of Sigiriya
- Old Town of Galle
- Sacred City of Kandy
- Golden Temple of Dambulla

### Must-try foods

Curry and rice, variations include beetroot, jackfruit, daal, fish, chicken and many others.

### National flower

Blue water lily.

### Must-buy souvenir

Wooden masks.

### Did you know?

- Sri Lanka became famous for tea only after its coffee

fields were wiped out by leaf blight in the 1870s.

- The Sri Lankan flag is the only one in the world to recognise different religious groups. The yellow border and pipul leaves symbolise Buddhism, while the green and saffron bands represent Muslim and Hindu communities.
- The world's first female prime minister was Sirimavo Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka.

- A footprint found on the sacred mountain, Sri Pada (Adam's Peak), is believed by Buddhists to belong to Buddha, by Muslims to Adam, by Christians to St Thomas and by Hindus to Lord Shiva.

### Must-read book

*Running in the Family* by Michael Ondaatje – a fictionalised account of the author's return to his native Sri Lanka in the late 1970s.





# LUXURY STEEPED IN TRADITION

BY AMY GREENBURG

Sri Lanka has become a popular travel destination in recent years – particularly its coasts, but further inland, the country's pristine tea country makes a perfect retreat for travellers seeking both luxury and seclusion.

Last May, eager for a relaxing getaway, but tired of our usual beach routine, my husband and I opted for a romantic escape to Sri Lanka's **Ceylon Tea Trails**.

We knew that our five-hour journey from Sri Lanka's international airport in Colombo had been worth every minute from the moment we arrived at Summerville, one of four restored, colonial-era tea bungalows that comprise Tea Trails, Sri Lanka's first and only Relais & Chateaux resort.

While various tours and activities could easily be arranged through our butler, our accommodation was so luxurious that it was hard to envisage doing anything but lazing around. Luckily, we managed to do a bit of both. Here are some highlights from our fabulous five-star stay:

**Wining & dining:** All food and drinks at Tea Trails are included in the rates, from morning "bed tea" service and multi-course alfresco meals, to afternoon tea and pre-

dinner cocktails. The chefs use fresh, locally grown vegetables, herbs and teas from the surrounding estates to create western and traditional Sri Lankan cuisine, as well as tea-inspired gourmet specialties – Moroccan minttea smoked chicken, Earl Grey-infused dark chocolate desserts and peppermint tea parfait, to name a few.

**Plantation tour:** You don't have to be a tea buff to enjoy this behind-the-scenes look at the Norwood factory. The resident tea planter walked us through the age-old tea-making process from start to finish, before ending the tour with a tasting of different grades of the region's tea.

**Tea time:** High tea is always a nice treat, but it's extra special when you're perched on a terrace overlooking the very fields in which the tea leaves were picked. We sipped on every type of tea from cinnamon, mint and chamomile, to cream tea and the region's famed black brew. The selection of scones and cake wasn't too shabby either!

**The great outdoors:** Tea Trails provided the perfect setting for biking and hiking against the breathtaking backdrop of mountains and lush tea fields. We worked off our scones with a scenic hike through the hills, followed by a private, guide-accompanied bike tour through surrounding villages.

**Living-room lounging:** When we weren't curled up with a good book on the sofa, we were playing Scrabble over a glass of wine or whiskey by the bungalow's living room fireplace. Pure bliss, if you ask me.



[teatrails.com](http://teatrails.com)





# GALLE TOP 5

BY GUEST CONTRIBUTOR, MTV VJ HANLI HOEFER

I think everyone should go to Galle at least once in their lives. This amazing town has something for families, couples and groups of friends.

It holds adventure, culture, history, and an abundance of natural beauty. Here are my five recommendations for what to do while you are there.

**1 HEAD TO THE BEACH.** What I love about Sri Lanka is that it isn't your typical overcrowded beach destination. There is space and privacy. Your midday nap on the sand won't be ruined by cackling tourists or screaming babies; the crowd here tends to be of a more mellow type, reading novels and writing poetry.

**2 RENT A BICYCLE** and explore the rice paddies. Inland, village and farming communities work hard and live humble. As you cycle along, feel the breeze perfumed with a combination of fresh air, coconut oil, and the aroma of exotic spices wafting out of kitchens.

**3 WALK THE FORT.** This grand fort is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Built by the Portuguese, captured by the Dutch and eventually colonised by the British, this place has a rich history. It survived the devastating tsunami in 2004 too, so there's definitely some serious respect for the centuries-old site.

**4 EAT.** Everything. Sri Lankan cuisine is one of the most complex in the world. Although it's similar to the food of South India, it has adopted its own unique flavor due to the many and varied cultural influences passing through its ports. Thanks to fresh seafood, garden-grown greens, and insane levels of spiciness, Sri Lanka is the perfect destination for foodies.

**5 STAY IN A BOUTIQUE HOTEL.** I stay at either Apa Villa or Illuketia when I go to Galle. Apa Villa is on the beachfront. It has its own private infinity pool overlooking the ocean, and each room is perfectly designed so that you would never want to leave. Illuketia is a magical boutique hotel situated in the middle of a village and next to a temple. The estate was previously a tea plantation so the original structure has architecture dating back to colonial times. With a private pool and a giant garden dotted with peacocks and a variety of tropical birds and monkeys, it's a true modern Eden.



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READERS  
TIPS

# HAVE YOUR CURRY AND EAT IT TOO

Can't decide what kind of holiday to have next? Visit Sri Lanka and there's no need to stress, because in the Pearl of the Indian Ocean (or India's Teardrop, as it's also known) you can have your curry and eat it too!

- Yearning for a rejuvenating **mountain retreat** where you can breath in fresh, misty mountain air and enjoy a game of croquet? Stay at The Heritage Tea Factory – the highest hotel in Sri Lanka at 2,000 metres above sea level. Pick your own tea and then enjoy sipping on it by a crackling log fire. [heritancehotels.com/teafactory](http://heritancehotels.com/teafactory)
- If you're after **adventure and culture**, and into exploring ancient ruins like you're Indiana Jones, then take a walk through the ancient ruins of Pollonaruwa or climb to the summit of the formidable Sigiriya.
- Or perhaps getting **up close and personal with nature** is your thing? You can watch hundreds of elephants gathering together in Minneriya or Kaudulla National Parks and, later, take a dip in your private plunge pool surrounded by wildlife at Jetwing Vil Uyana near Sigiriya. [jetwinghotels.com/jetwingviluyana](http://jetwinghotels.com/jetwingviluyana)

- For a relaxing, sunny, palm-fringed **beach holiday**, sipping on a coconut by your poolside villa, try The Villa Bentota. You'll never want to leave. Ever. [paradiseroadhotels.com/villabentota](http://paradiseroadhotels.com/villabentota)



We booked our holiday through Sri Journeys ([srijourneys.com](http://srijourneys.com)): safe, reliable transport with English-speaking driver, great family-friendly accommodation, and all the little details in between handled capably.

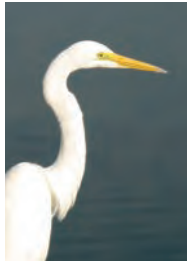
KATHRINE HILDEBRANDT



## A CORNER OF COLOMBO

BY DAVID HUBBINS

With plenty of resident birds and the city's modest skyline reflected on its calm waters, Beira Lake is one of Colombo's prettier hideaways. On one side of the lake you'll find the Simamalaka Shrine, an assembly hall for monks from the nearby Gangaramaya Temple. During Vesak celebrations (usually in May) the shrine is lit-up in spectacular fashion in the evening – otherwise, try to visit during the Navam Perahera, a colourful festival in February that includes a procession of 100 elephants.



## THE GREAT OUTDOORS

Moonstone Expeditions specialises in unique adventure trips to Sri Lanka, including trekking, mountain biking and surfing, while also getting to the heart of the country's culture, heritage and famously friendly people. Here are their 5 essential Sri Lanka outdoor experiences.

- ①. **TREK IN THE KNUCKLES RANGE.** The area east of Kandy remains a wilderness offering breath-taking scenery and top-class trekking without the crowds.
- ②. **BIKE THROUGH LOWLAND FOREST.** Ride through plantations of cinnamon, rubber, cashew nuts and bananas, see giant Buddhas perched on top of jungly hills and secluded temples overlooking the rice paddies.
- ③. **CLIMB ADAM'S PEAK.** The soaring summit of Adam's Peak (Sri Pada) is a place of pilgrimage for Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and Christians alike.
- ④. **CYCLE THROUGH THE HILL COUNTRY.** Enjoy the cool climate while riding through scenic tea plantations with magnificent views and old-fashioned colonial charm.
- ⑤. **CANOE ALONG THE GINGANGA RIVER.** Paddle along at your ease past amazing plants, flowers and wildlife along the banks of this beautiful river near Galle.

[moonstone-expeditions.com](http://moonstone-expeditions.com)





# SLOWING THE PACE IN SRI LANKA

A new trend is emerging among Sri Lankan aficionados. Those in the know are making a beeline for the country's inland villas to get the best of both worlds – the peace and privacy of a jungle setting yet within easy reach of the best beaches and culture.

**S**atori Villa, located three kilometres inland from Unawatuna on the south coast, is a perfect example. Perched high on a hilltop and surrounded by lush jungle, it's a totally secluded natural setting. Panoramic views greet the gaze in every direction. And yet just 15 minutes away by *tuk tuk* are miles of pristine tropical beaches, and the lively shops and restaurants of UNESCO

World Heritage Site and cultural capital, Galle Fort.

"Many visitors to Sri Lanka seem reluctant to spend time away from the beach, but really miss out as a result," says independent travel agent, Anna Richards. "The inland scenery is simply stunning, and the local villages, picturesque paddy fields, ancient Buddhist temples and quiet rural lanes really add something special to any trip here."

Not that guests want to leave. Surrounded by two acres of landscaped tropical gardens alive with chattering monkeys and colourful darting birds, Satori Villa is a destination in itself. This luxury Dutch colonial-style retreat sleeps up to eight in four elegant en-suite bedrooms with four-poster beds and polished terrazzo floors that feel wonderfully cool underfoot.

When the midday heat gets too much, slip into the crystal-clear pool shaded by a canopy of fruit trees, or retreat with a chilled coconut water to the hammocks on the veranda, all to the melodic sounds of tropical birdsong and chanting from a distant temple.

Attentive and friendly, Satori Villa staff will make you feel part of the family – especially the chef, Mr Madhawa, famous among guests for his exquisite Sri Lankan specialties and impromptu cooking lessons.

In short, everything at Satori Villa is designed to help you relax into the slow-paced spirit of Sri Lankan life.

[satorivillainsrilanka.com](http://satorivillainsrilanka.com)



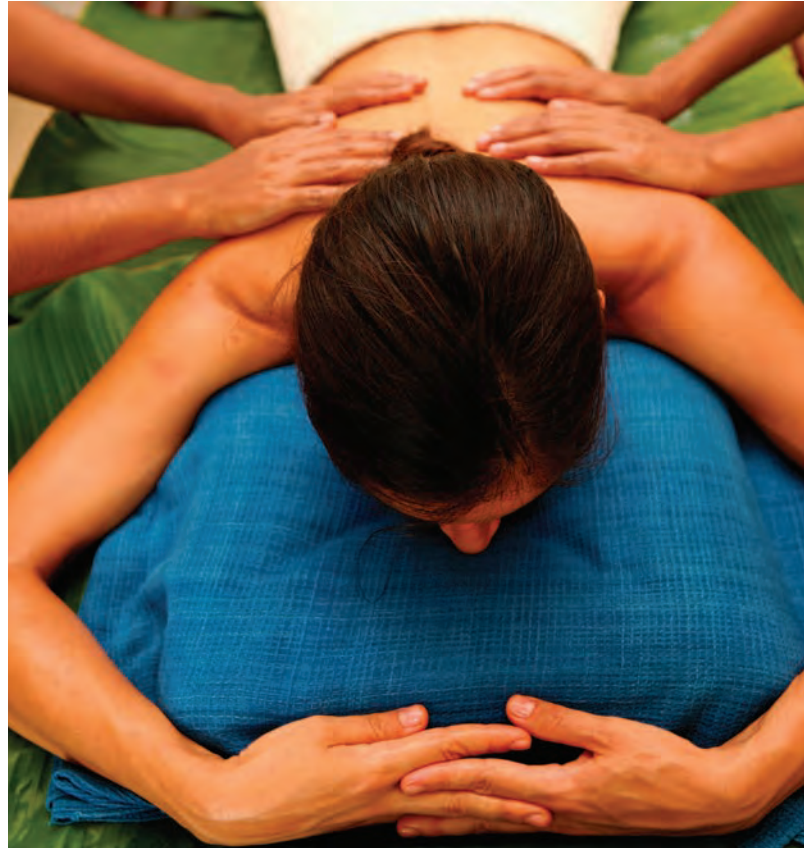


## NATURAL ENERGY BOOST

Today's life, with its fast pace and daily challenges, can be stressful and draining. Although it's more than 5,000 years old, Ayurveda is a perfect modern-day antidote to stress and burn-out. Through its time-tested, relaxing and soothing treatments, Ayurveda helps to restore the vitality, health and harmony of the body, mind and soul. Unlike conventional medicine, Ayurveda takes a holistic and very individual approach to healing.

**The Ayurveda Paragon** in Sri Lanka has made its name as one of the best Ayurveda health resorts in Asia. Located on the palm-fringed beaches of the Indian Ocean, the resort combines authentic, traditional Ayurveda treatments with a relaxing beach holiday. Guests of The Ayurveda Paragon especially value the balance of effective, professional Ayurveda treatments together with delicious Ayurvedic cuisine, daily yoga classes and spiritual guidance through meditation.

The resort has 68 rooms, four specialised Ayurvedic doctors and a host of helping hands, all aimed at giving guests a natural energy boost.



[paragonsrilanka.com](http://paragonsrilanka.com)



## MARRIAGE MADE IN HEAVEN

Who doesn't dream of starting married life on a high? **Reef Villa and Spa**, in the unspoilt hamlet of Wadduwa on Sri Lanka's southwest coast, can make that dream a reality – quite literally!

Reef can arrange an intimate wedding ceremony in a hot-air balloon, high above the jungle and rice fields. After their early morning flight, the newlyweds enjoy a traditional Champagne breakfast under the nearest palm tree accompanied by Kandyan dancers and drummers to welcome them back to earth. End your special day with a five-course celebratory dinner and a personal firework display.

Marriages in a hot-air balloon can take place between November and April each year, weather permitting.

[reefvilla.com](http://reefvilla.com)





## SERENDIPITOUS ENCOUNTERS

Sri Lanka travel company **Red Dot** was born in early 2000 over a few bottles of Lion Lager in Colombo's Cricket Club café. It came about because of a deep affection for a beautiful country, and a wish to tell people about one of the world's most delightful travel destinations. Today, Red Dot offers nearly 50 itineraries, with a free tailor-made service to satisfy all budgets and aspirations. Here's just a handful of the company's favourite journeys in the land of Serendipity.

**1. BOUTIQUE CEYLON** is a classic but leisurely journey around the most interesting and beautiful parts of the island. Experience the ancient heritage of the Cultural

Triangle, the tea plantations of the hill country, and finally the glorious beaches of the Deep South. Unique and stylish accommodation will make this a truly unforgettable holiday.

### 2. ADVENTUROUS SRI LANKA

is an exciting journey through Sri Lanka's wonderful landscapes. Trek through mountainous villages, camp in the wilderness, climb a sacred mountain at night, raft down the white water rapids of the Kelani River, and set sail into the deep seas in search of whales and dolphins.

**3. SRI LANKA NATURE TREK** was one of our first tours and it remains one of our favourites. It's aimed at rambles who want to sample some of Sri Lanka's finest scenery while still having some wonderful hotels to look forward to at the end of the day.



**4. THE FAMILY ADVENTURER** is one of two tours specifically aimed at families with teenaged children. It offers elephant treks, rock climbs, golf, mountain biking, white-water rafting, mountain train rides, camping in safari parks and watersports on beautiful sandy beaches.

[reddottours.com](http://reddottours.com)

GET THERE NOW  
SRI LANKA

We asked travel specialists Country Holidays to pinpoint the Asian destinations they feel are especially ripe for visiting right now – before they lose their charm!

Peace has returned to Sri Lanka – and so have the tourists. The island offers wide diversity in a small area: archaeological ruins to the north, tea plantations for hiking and adventure in the centre, and miles of golden beaches to the south. Charming boutique hotels provide luxury at great value and also bring out the beauty of the destination. For a perfect short retreat, combine hiking in the hilly tea area with a walking tour of historical Galle Fort, and some beach time further around the coast. If you have time to spare, consider adding a safari excursion or the historical northern Buddhist circuit.

[countryholidays.com.sg](http://countryholidays.com.sg)  
[countryholidays.com.hk](http://countryholidays.com.hk)





The Hotel Ayurveda Paragon in Sri Lanka is the perfect get-away to regain health and high spirits, while enjoying the palm-fringed beaches of the Indian Ocean.

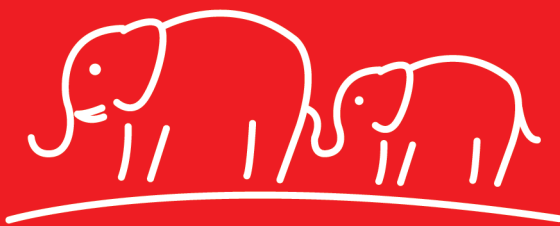
For questions and inquiries simply write to us [info@paragonsrilanka.com](mailto:info@paragonsrilanka.com) or visit us on [www.paragonsrilanka.com](http://www.paragonsrilanka.com).

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[www.reefvilla.com](http://www.reefvilla.com)





# Thailand

## At a glance

### Visa-vis

Passport holders from 41 countries, including Australia, UK, US and Canada, do not require a visa for stays not exceeding 30 days. Visit [www.thaiembassy.sg](http://www.thaiembassy.sg) for the full list.

### Air time

2 hours (Phuket), 2.5 hours (Bangkok), 3 hours (Chiang Mai) from Singapore.

### Cash & cards

The official currency of

Thailand is the Thai Baht (THB). Foreign currency and travellers cheques can be exchanged at banks and baht withdrawn at ATMs throughout the country. Credit cards are widely accepted.

### Weather report

The weather in Thailand is generally hot and humid across most of the country throughout most of the year. Avoid Bangkok and the inland areas in April when the weather is scorching. Beach-lovers should be

aware that the weather varies on the east and west coasts. On the west coast (Phuket, Phi Phi and Krabi), the southwest monsoon brings heavy storms from April to October. On the east coast (Koh Samui, Koh Phangan) most rainfall is between September and December.

### Mother tongue

Thai is the official language, but most locals have at least a rudimentary understanding of English.

### First words

**Hello:** *Sawadee ka (female)*

*Sawadee krab (male)*

**What is your name?**

*Khun cheu arai?*

**My name is \_\_:**

*di-chan chuh \_\_ (female)*

*pom chuh \_\_ (male)*

**How much?**

*Tao rai ka? (female)*

*Tao rai krub? (male)*

**Thank you:**

*Khorb khun ka (female)*

*Khorb khun krab (male)*

**Yes:** *Chi*

**No thank you:** *Mai ao ka (female); Mai ao krab (male)*





Loi Krathong and Yi Peng Festival, Chiang Mai

### Salutations

To say hello in Thai, place your hands together close to your chest and dip your head in a slight bow. This greeting is referred to as the *wai*.

### Clocking in

Thailand is 7 hours ahead of GMT and 1 hour behind Singapore.

### World Heritage Sites

Total: 5

- Ban Chiang Archaeological Site
- Historic City of Ayutthaya
- Historic Town of Sukhothai

and Associated Historic Towns

- Dong Phrayayen-Khao Yai Forest Complex
- Thungyai-Huai Kha Khaeng Wildlife Sanctuaries

### Must-try food

*Pad Thai* – rice noodles stir-fried with eggs and chopped firm tofu, flavoured with tamarind pulp, fish sauce, dried shrimp, garlic or shallots, red chilli pepper, palm sugar, and served with lime wedges and often chopped roasted peanuts.

### National flower

The flowers of the Ratchaphruek tree.

### Must-buy souvenir

Thai silk.

### Did you know?

- The town of Kanchanburi is home to the famous “Bridge Over the River Kwai”, part of the Burma-Siam railway. An estimated 80,000 to 100,000 people died constructing the project.
- It is strictly against Thai law to criticise the monarchy.

- Thailand is the only country in Southeast Asia that has not been colonised by Europeans.

- At 127 metres high, Phra Pathommachedi in Nakhon Pathom is the tallest stupa in the world.

### Must-read book

*Bangkok 8* by John Burdett – the seamier side of Thailand is represented in these pages (namely, the bars and brothels) but it’s a suspenseful and entertaining read.





# BANGKOK STYLE

Five reasons to consider a stay at contemporary design hotel, Metropolitan by COMO, on your next trip to the Thai capital.

①. **NAHM**

Yes, Metropolitan is home to *that* Nahm, the 110-seat Thai eatery by Aussie chef David Thompson that was recently voted the very best restaurant in all of Asia. Not a bad selling point for a hotel! And after dinner you can hit the popular Met Bar for a martini.

②. **LOCATION**

On South Sathorn Road, in Bangkok's CBD, Metropolitan is close to major shopping areas, the Chao Phraya River, and the city's nightlife – plus there's a complimentary hotel shuttle service to the nearest Skytrain station.

③. **ROOMS**

The hotel has 169 recently refurbished rooms, including a variety of spacious two-storey suites. Interiors are by Singaporean Kathryn Kng; luxury touches include mosaic

and limestone bathrooms, and Thai silk cushions and curtains. Floor-to-ceiling windows mean the rooms are soaked in natural light.

④. **HEALTH**

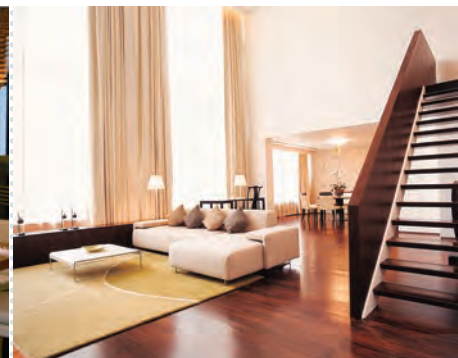
The COMO Shambhala Urban Escape is a 1,200-square-metre retreat that includes a yoga studio, fully equipped gym, hydro pool and a 20-metre outdoor pool. Available therapies range from specific body treatments to facials and massages; plus, the Urban Escape is complemented

by Glow, a restaurant showcasing natural and organic cuisine with an emphasis on fresh ingredients.

⑤. **EASE**

Bangkok is a hectic place, but Metropolitan aims to make guests feel completely comfortable with a 24-hour concierge service, 24-hour room service, personal shopping assistance, multilingual staff and more.

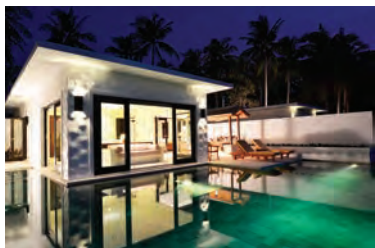
[comohotels.com/metropolitanbangkok](http://comohotels.com/metropolitanbangkok)





# RELAXING RACHA YAI

Twelve nautical miles from Phuket lies one of the Andaman Sea's prettiest island destinations, Racha Yai. It's only about 35 minutes by speedboat from Chalong Bay on the southern tip of Phuket, but once you reach the white sand and azure waters of Batok Bay, you'll feel like you've really escaped – especially if you're staying in the private surrounds of **The Racha**. Here are a few key features of this beachfront boutique resort.



**DWELL:** The Racha's 85 luxurious eco-chic villas are spread over 20 acres of verdant tropical landscape. Many have their own pool, and all have Wi-Fi access, iPod docks, Bose sound, satellite TV and more. And for quirky accommodation with a difference, The Racha has one of the more unusual hotel rooms you'll find; called The Lighthouse, it's a five-storey villa with private pool, terrace, sun deck and observation lounge offering 360-degree views over the island and the ocean.

**DINE:** Earth Café serves Western and Thai food in air-con or on the terrace; Fire Grill offers pizza and pasta for lunch and fine-dining dinners; Sunset Beach Restaurant is where to grab your beachside barbecued seafood; and Club Del Mar is for cocktails and chill-out tunes.

**DIVE:** The PADI dive centre is well appointed, with a 3-metre deep purpose-built instructional pool, and excellent hard-coral reefs in the clear waters off the island.

**DO:** The Racha offers a fitness centre, canoeing, ATV rides, nature walks, mountain biking, tennis and other activities. Or book in for a signature "Thai Flower Ritual" at the Anumba Spa.

## Other highlights

- 3 ozonated pools (in addition to private pools)
- personalised sea and land experiences
- wedding packages available for both Thai and Western-style ceremonies

[theracha.com](http://theracha.com)



# SLIP AWAY TO SAMUI

With beautiful beaches, a championship golf course, lush rainforest and dramatic waterfalls, all wrapped in smiling Thai hospitality and service, and less than two hours' flight time from Singapore, Koh Samui has a lot going for it. This popular island also has a fabulous range of accommodation. Here are three great accommodation choices for a totally tropical Thai break.

## OCEAN VISTAS

Situated on a scenic hillside above the beach on the southwest tip of the island, the secluded **Conrad Koh Samui** overlooks the azure reefs of the Gulf of Thailand, taking in views of the fabled five islands and some majestic sunsets.

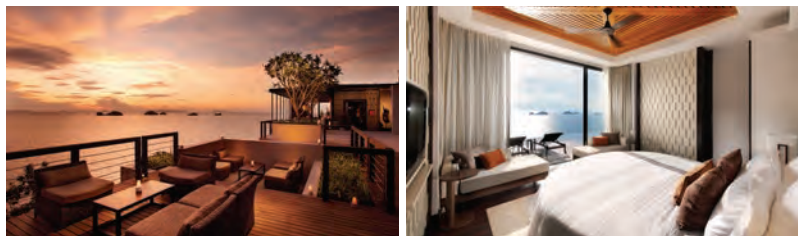
The Conrad's 81 one-, two- and three-bedrooms pool villas, all offer ocean views (with full-height windows to maximise the panoramas), luxurious Thai-inspired interiors furnished with original artwork and artefacts, spacious bedrooms and sprawling terraces.

Three innovative restaurants provide Conrad guests with an array of dining experiences, including the resort's award-winning fine-dining restaurant, Jahn, and the sophisticated Aura Bar & Lounge with its spectacular sunset views.

The Spa at Conrad Koh Samui combines international treatments and Thai spa techniques in single and couple treatment rooms. Signature treatments include Samui Enriched, Romance Ritual, Crystal Healing and Divine Sunset. One of each, please!

## BOATING ADVENTURES

Conrad Koh Samui is now offering guests a deserted-island experience unique to the region. Departing three-times daily, this complimentary luxury boat excursion takes in breathtaking views before arriving at a private island where guests can enjoy a gourmet picnic.



[conradkohsamui.com](http://conradkohsamui.com)



A PLACE THAT FEELS LIKE  
IT WAS MADE FOR YOU.  
BECAUSE IT WAS.

At Conrad Koh Samui, luxury isn't just about feeling pampered; it's about feeling understood.

It's about a style you connect with and service that's attuned to your every need, like our complimentary luxury boat trips and activities for couples and families alike. Our range of options has it all, even when what you need is to do nothing at all.

For bookings and information  
visit [conradkohsamui.com](http://conradkohsamui.com)



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## TROPICAL CELEBRATIONS

BY HELEN TANDAVANITJ

We recently returned from a gorgeous two weeks in Thailand, where we were lucky enough to celebrate not only our wedding and honeymoon, but also two family 40th birthdays.

I'm a wedding journalist specialising in honeymoon hotels, so choosing the perfect place to tie the knot and enjoy a family vacation was always going to be a challenge. After much internet searching (with the vague brief of "gorgeous beachfront villa on a Thai beach"), we tracked down beautiful **Lotus Terraces** on Koh Samui. It looked to be exactly what we'd been searching for and from our very first contact with the reservations manager, we knew we were onto a winner.

Once the villas were booked, we made contact with the resort's professional wedding planner. She patiently persevered with my ever-changing ideas and helped us create

an amazing wedding – her attention to detail was tremendous.

During our stay, Sue, the resort manager, took care of everything for us, from elephant riding to a Thai dance show – and she was available on her mobile pretty much 24/7 to deal with our every need; in all my years reviewing wedding/honeymoon hotels, such personal service is rare. A special mention should go to the smiling housekeeping staff who also looked after us, even though we were possibly the messiest guests ever – thanks, largely, to having six children in our party, ranging in age from two to 10 years. It's difficult to find a stylish, contemporary place that welcomes children, but our girls were welcomed with open arms. The staff happily



cooked kids' food, let the girls turn the lounge into a movie theatre and didn't balk at our general chaos.

So, couples who want a contemporary, blissful, tropical beach experience in a stylish, sleek villa that's up there with the Banyan Trees will feel at home here at The Lotus Terraces – even with a big handful of children in tow!

[lotusterraces.com](http://lotusterraces.com)





# PARADISE

HAS NEVER BEEN CLOSER

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[www.lotusterraces.com](http://www.lotusterraces.com)  
Koh Samui, Thailand

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## INTIMATE OASIS

Tucked away in a private cove south of Lamai Beach on Koh Samui is **Rocky's Boutique Resort**, comprising 47 luxuriously appointed cottages and three spacious pool villas.

The warmth and personality of the staff is a key feature at Rocky's – the resort is a family business and the owners and general manager are often in the restaurant in the evening, chatting with the guests.

Overlooking the sea and surrounded by lush gardens, Rocky's features two free-form swimming pools, a fine-dining restaurant, a bistro and pool bar, a billiards room and a child's playroom. Other facilities include free Wi-Fi and sea

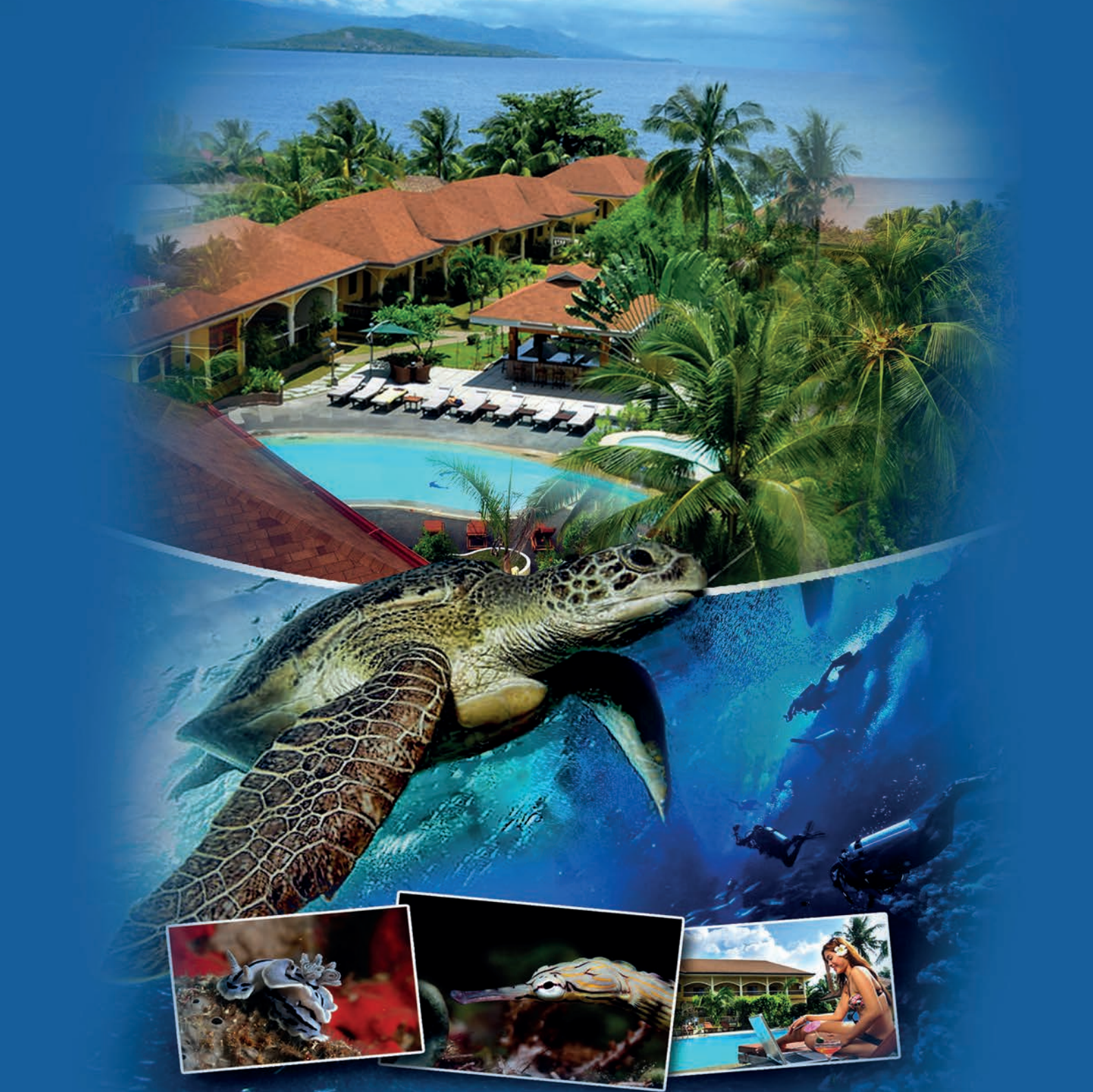
kayaks for guests to use. The resort also owns a traditional Thai long-tail boat, the Josephine, which makes snorkelling and fishing trips to the neighbouring islands two or three times per week.

While Rocky's is popular with couples looking for a romantic getaway and families wanting to spend some quality time together, it's also an ideal wedding destination, with a wedding co-ordinator and a banquet team available to create dream nuptials for small groups or parties of up to 100 people.

[rockyresort.com](http://rockyresort.com)







Turtle Bay is more than just a dive resort. We have a full range of amenities to help you relax and chill out when you are not diving or snorkelling. Our villas and 2 story hotel building are set in sprawling landscaped tropical gardens. We offer the following amenities:

- bar • beach front • children's pool • Dive Center (PADI registered) • games room (darts, pool table, table tennis, etc.) • guest lounge with satellite TV and DVD player • house reef - great for snorkelling and scuba • kayak rental • landscaped tropical gardens • library of books and magazines • local excursions in the resort jeepney • motorbike and mountain bike rental • restaurant serving gourmet family style meals • petanque / bocce • safe deposit • scuba diving lessons • spa with massage services and sauna • swimming pool (19m) • Whale shark diving/snorkelling excursions • Wi-Fi internet access

email: [reservations@turtlebaydiveresort.com](mailto:reservations@turtlebaydiveresort.com) \* Mobile: 0917 631 4261

[www.turtlebaydiveresort.com](http://www.turtlebaydiveresort.com)



## Thailand



# PHUKET PARADISE

Phuket is a favourite holiday escape from Singapore, especially for those who seek little more than sun, sand, relaxation and great food to keep them happy. (That's all of us, right?) Here we profile two of the newest luxury accommodations on the island.

## KATA ROCKS

### What it is:

A boutique resort and residence that offers a combination of the intimacy of a luxury villa stay with the convenience and comfort of a major hotel.

### Where to find it:

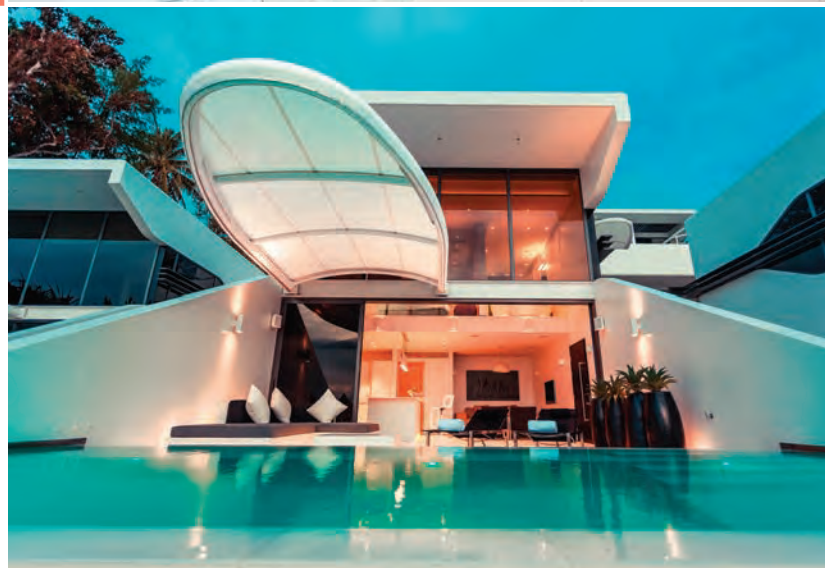
Directly on the oceanfront at the southern end of Kata Beach, a beautiful palm-lined bay south of Patong on Phuket's west coast. A chauffeured private vehicle can provide airport pick-up for the 48-kilometre drive to the resort.

### Where you'll stay:

The property's 34 Sky Villas range in size from one to four bedrooms, each with its own private infinity pool, large dining and living area, fully fitted European kitchen, and interactive iPad technology for setting the Villa's ambience just the way you like it.

### What we like:

- The design of Kata Rocks takes advantage of the natural slope of the headland on this southern tip of the beach, which means uninterrupted views of the Andaman Sea, with its longtail boats and brilliant sunsets.
- Kata Rocks has an oceanfront restaurant, lounge, library, bar, 35-metre oceanfront lap pool, fitness centre and function room for weddings and events.
- There are plenty of techie touches at Kata Rocks: HD LCD audio-visual system, free high-speed Wi-Fi, interactive guest services and entertainment via complimentary iPads, and more.
- The wellness and spa centre has everything you need to put the icing on the cake of a great beach



- holiday in Asia: infra-red sauna, Thai-herbal steam, colonic-hydrotherapy programmes, healthy juicing, facials, massages, colour-therapy treatments – even a Metronap Rest-pod and an innovative water-massage-bed from Italy.
- Dine at the poolside restaurant, on the rocks, or in the privacy of your villa. The menu includes everything from healthy spa cuisine to traditional Thai, Asian-fusion and fresh seafood.



[katarocks.com](http://katarocks.com)



## POINT YAMU BY COMO

### What it is:

A newly opened luxury resort by Singapore-based COMO Hotels and Resorts.

### Where to find it:

On the eastern side of Phuket, on the tip of Cape Yamu, around 25 minutes from Phuket International Airport.

### Where you'll stay:

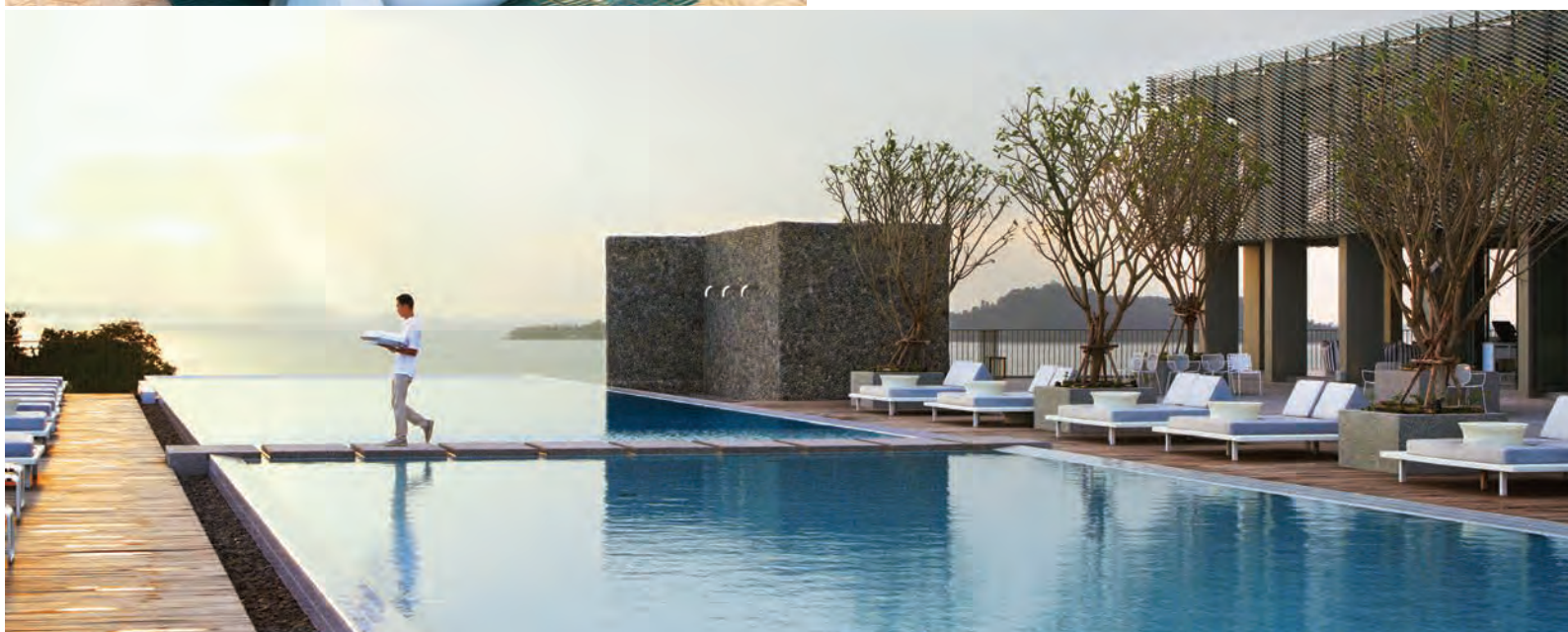
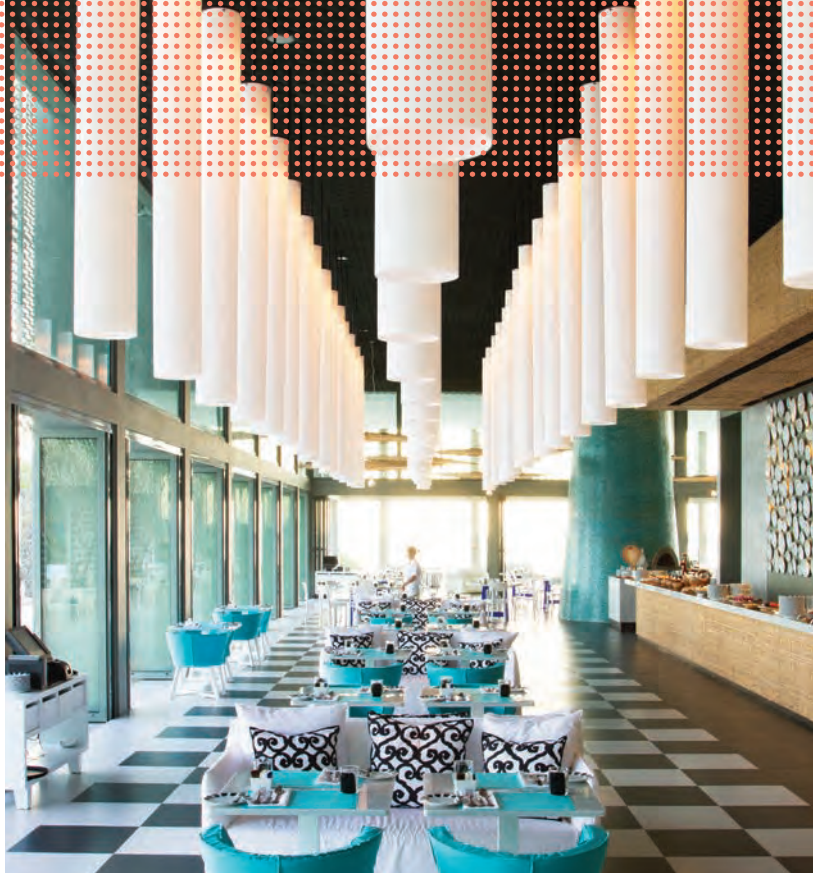
The 106 rooms, suites and private villas feature interiors by renowned Italian designer Paola Navone, combining colourful eclecticism with Thai artisanal techniques. Many have their own pools (up to 48 square metres in size), or multiple bedrooms configured for families, and all feature luxury touches such as Egyptian cotton bed linen, multimedia hubs, free Wi-Fi, and floor-to-ceiling windows to maximise the gorgeous sea views.

### What we like:

■ The aforementioned views take in the Andaman Sea and also the ancient limestone karsts of UNESCO-protected Phang Nga Bay, which featured in the 1974 James Bond film, *The Man With The Golden Gun*.

- The resort's COMO Shambhala Retreat offers holistic treatments and yoga for those seeking to refresh their mental, physical and spiritual balance. There are multiple treatment rooms, Thai massage alcoves, separate male and female steam rooms and saunas, two Jacuzzis, a gym, yoga studio and more.
- Dining options include poolside pastas, wood-fired pizzas and seafood dishes at La Sirena Italian restaurant, traditional Thai cooking with a deluxe twist at Nahmyaa, and snacks and drinks at Aqua Bar. Also available: a 24-hour room service menu, and signature COMO Shambhala Cuisine menus with a focus on raw foods rich in living enzymes, vitamins and sea minerals.
- Those with an active streak can enjoy everything from rock climbing and scuba diving (beginner and advanced) to snorkelling, golf, and private yacht and speedboat hire. There's also a children's activity area – Play by COMO – with programmes for children aged 3 to 9, and a games room for older children and adults.

[comohotels.com/](http://comohotels.com/)  
[pointyamu](http://pointyamu)





READERS  
TIPS



## HEAD NORTH TO NATAI

Beautiful Natai Beach extends along the west coast of the southern Thai province of Phang Nga, just north of Phuket. The two provinces are separated geographically by the Sarasin Bridge, but seem worlds apart when you compare the busy tourist hub of Phuket to the tranquil luxury of Phang Nga.

With clear waters, white sands and gentle waves (depending on the time of year!), Natai Beach is home to an exclusive community of

luxury properties, attracting expats from Asia and beyond who come to enjoy a seclusion that is becoming increasingly difficult to find in the Phuket area.

The rural landscape of Natai (meaning "Southern Rice Fields") remains intact, with fishing villages, lotus ponds, coconut groves and green fields where water buffalo roam. In the town of Kokkloy (five minutes from the beach), the locals still greet visitors with slightly bewildered smiles and there's nary a souvenir shop in sight.

Neighbouring the private villas that line this five-kilometre stretch of beach are a few high-end resorts, most

notably **Aleenta**, a popular escape for honeymooning couples. Aleenta's The Edge bar is perfect for an evening cocktail, with jazz and chill-out tunes turned up as the sun goes down.

**Maikhao Dream** is another beachfront five-star resort serving up Thai and Mediterranean specialties in a stylish setting; at night, head upstairs to the Firefly bar for some fine wine and a hookah session. Last, but not least, you could try the new **Iniala** villa resort, which boasts a three Michelin-starred chef.

Phang Nga is home to a breathtaking series of eco parks, from Phang Nga Bay

in the east to Khao Lak-Lam Ru National Park, which the Thailand government has thankfully protected from the ravages of tourism. The turquoise bays and limestone cliffs provide a spectacular backdrop to the rural simplicity of fishing villages that pepper the coastline. Rainforests, limestone caves, waterfalls and protected marine parks provide a plethora of once-in-a-lifetime opportunities to return to nature. Sail to James Bond Island, kayak through a maze of majestic limestone caves or trek to the magnificent Tamnang Waterfall.

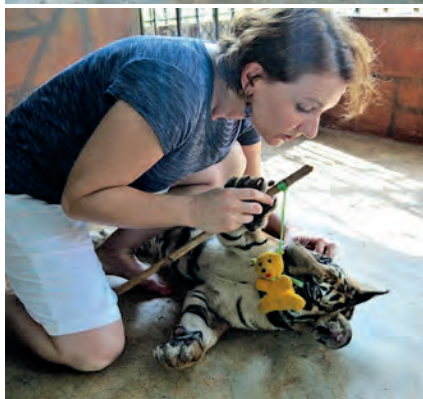
LANA WILLOCKS





## THAILAND'S TIGER TEMPLE

WORDS AND PICTURES BY CATHY WARD



Wat Pha Luang Ta Bua is a fully functioning Buddhist temple near the town of Kanchanaburi, about 130 kilometres west of Bangkok. But it's better known as "Tiger Temple".

In Thailand, temples frequently take in abandoned animals because their Buddhist doctrine compels the monks to care for them. Wat Pha Luang Ta Bua was founded in 1994 as a forest monastery and sanctuary for numerous wild animals; in 1999, it received its first tiger cub. There are now about 124 tigers and various other animals being cared for at the temple. Not all of them are able to interact with humans.

Many of the staff and volunteers work with each and every tiger in the park, but each tiger has one primary monk who cares for them.

There's a lot of controversy about the temple. Is it safe? Humane? Do they drug the animals? We came away with a very positive opinion of Tiger Temple. Many of the animals would be dead if they did not live there.

Is it safe? I can't answer this with 100-percent certainty. They're wild animals after all. But if you have the chance to visit the temple I would say: absolutely!

### When in ~~Rome~~ Thailand



①. Ride the ubiquitous *tuk-tuks* (motorised rickshaws). They're lots of fun, but remember to agree on the price before you hop on.

②. Eat loads of mango sticky rice; with its sweet-salty blend of tastes, this is the best dessert I've ever had.

③. Remember that a dress code is strictly enforced at Thai temples, so ladies should always take along a scarf (that can double up as a long skirt), men should wear long pants, and everyone should take off their shoes before they go in.

④. Feel free to seek the locals' help with directions or simply to strike up a conversation. The Thais are among the friendliest people you'll ever meet. Thailand isn't known as the Land of Smiles for nothing.

JANE KOH

Read more about Cathy's adventures at [thextrasuitcase.com](http://thextrasuitcase.com).





## BANGKOK WITH KIDS

I never really thought that Bangkok was a family-friendly destination, but on our three-day trip to the busy Thai capital last summer I was pleasantly surprised. My sons, Nathan and Noah, now consider it their favourite holiday destination.



### DAY 1: SAFARI WORLD

We stayed at the Renaissance Bangkok, walking distance from two of the attractions we were planning to visit. On Day 1, though, we set off instead for Safari World, on the outskirts of town, near the airport. Tickets (free for children under four) include entrance to the safari park and the marine park. It's a drive-in safari, but since we were carless, we boarded the bus, and I was amazed at the number of animals we got to see.

Afterwards, we all enjoyed the dolphin show at the marine park. But be warned: the Spy War show, with all its loud noises, is a little too scary for young kids!

The highlight of our visit was feeding the giraffes. For the equivalent of S\$2, we were given a bucket of bananas and a long stick. We held the bananas out on the stick and the giraffes promptly gobbled them down.

### DAY 2: SIAM OCEAN WORLD

I liked how Siam Ocean World (just 15 minutes' walk from the hotel, at Siam Paragon) had so many shows scheduled throughout the day. We watched scuba divers feed the sharks and wondered why they didn't seem all that keen on the frozen tuna they were being given. Turns out it was mating season, when they apparently lose their appetites ... or have their minds on other things. We also watched the otters and penguins being fed – they definitely ate more enthusiastically.

The aquarium displays over 30,000 sea creatures from around the world, and as well as seeing them in their tanks and through the tunnels, we had a "behind the scenes" tour in a glass-bottom boat.

The place is completely stroller-friendly, and I was able to navigate the grounds with two kids very easily. Thumbs up for a family-friendly attraction.

### DAY 3: KIDZANIA

We spent a full day at Kidzania (also at Siam Paragon), and Nathan had a blast. It's a city built just for kids with over 80 professions they can try their hand at. They get paid for the work they do (albeit with Kidzania's currency), but it's as close to the working world one can get at that age. The whole city setup is very realistic, just smaller. Kids don costumes and use "actual" equipment to carry out their work. Fun!

#### Editor's Tip

Kidzania Singapore is opening at Palawan Beach, Sentosa, in 2015.

NG LING SIEW

To read more of Ling Siew's travels with kids, visit [blog.mamashoppe.com](http://blog.mamashoppe.com).





## BANGKOK FOR THE BELLY

When I go to Bangkok I tend to see more woks than wats. You can't blame me: this is one of the world's great food cities, with amazing eats being cooked up by street vendors and fancy restaurants alike. And it's not just Thai food – on my last visit I grabbed a pita stuffed with falafel from a mobile cart up a side alley and it was a revelation.

It was also during this recent trip to the Thai capital that I managed to check out the pair of restaurants owned and run by American food writer and restaurateur Jarrett Wrisley. His **Soul Food Mahanakorn** (soulfoodmahanakorn.com) and **Appia** (pictured, appia-bangkok.com) have been creating plenty of buzz in Bangkok since their

launches in 2010 and 2013 respectively.

The two restaurants are both located just to the north of Sukumvit Road, about 1.5km apart. They both double as excellent bars, too (strong, innovative cocktails), so you can feasibly spend a night starting at one and ending at the other.

Soul Food Mahanakorn serves regional Thai dishes – everything from fiery, robust Isaan flavours to southern curries. Outstandingly fresh ingredients help raise the likes of smoked duck *laab* and *mieng kham* lettuce wraps with grilled pork jowl to the next level.

Appia is Italian, of course, but the road it hoes is different from your average pizza joint. Roman family recipes are the focus, including slow-roasted rotisserie meats – the organic *porchetta* with fennel,

rosemary and garlic is a firm favourite. The pasta list features a lamb-shoulder *ragu* and a ricotta ravioli, and there are plenty of tasty sides and small plates.

Both restaurants deliver on their promise of wholesome, home-style cooking, and both boast cool, comfortable interiors and a great vibe. Reservations recommended.

SHAMUS SILLAR



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# Vietnam

## At a glance

### Visa-vis

Most ASEAN (and Scandinavian) passport holders do not require a visa for a short visit to Vietnam. Other nationalities can download an application form from [www.vietnamembassy-singapore.org/en](http://www.vietnamembassy-singapore.org/en). Arrangements can also be made to collect a visa on arrival at major ports of entry, see [www.vietnamvisa.govt.vn](http://www.vietnamvisa.govt.vn).

### Air time

Between 2 and 3.5 hours from Singapore.

### Cash & cards

The official currency of Vietnam is the Vietnamese Dong (VND). US Dollars are widely accepted as are credit cards. ATM withdrawals are available in major cities and tourist destinations.

### Weather report

Opposing monsoon seasons in the north and south mean that

seasonal changes are different around Vietnam. It is always high season somewhere in the country, and the tropical south is always warm. Head to the north between May and October and the south between November and February. The popular central beaches can be wet between December and February.

### Mother tongue

The official language is Vietnamese. French and English are also spoken.

### First words

Hello: *Chào*

What is your name?

*Ban tên gì?*

My name is \_\_: *Tôi tên là ...*

How much? *Bao nhiêu*

Thank you: *Cảm ơn bạn*

Yes: *Vâng*

No thank you:

*Không cảm ơn bạn*

### Salutations

Vietnamese show respect with a slight bow when greeting elders.





Sapa, Northern Vietnam

### **Clocking in**

Vietnam is 7 hours ahead of GMT and 1 hour behind Singapore.

### **World Heritage Sites**

Total: 9

Highlights:

- Complex of Huế Monuments
- Ha Long Bay
- Hoi An Ancient Town
- My Son Sanctuary
- Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park

### **Must-try foods**

*Pho*, a noodle soup with chicken or beef and herbs.

### **National flower**

Pink Lotus.

### **Must-buy souvenir**

*Non la* (palm-leaf conical hat), the traditional symbol of Vietnamese people.

### **Did you know?**

- Approximately 40 percent of all Vietnamese, or more than 30 million people, share the same family name, Nguyen.
- Through history, Hanoi has had at least five different names including Long Biên, Tông Bình Long Do and Dai La.
- Vietnam is the largest exporter of cashews in the world, and the second largest exporter of rice.

- Instead of bells, traditional gongs are used to call Vietnamese children to school.

### **Must-read book**

*Catfish and Mandala* by Andrew X Pham – the author, who left Vietnam as a “boat person” and grew up in California, returns to his home country.





# HALONG BAY



We wanted a break from Singapore city life and so, with our four- and six-year-old children in tow, we headed to Halong Bay. It turned out to be the best short holiday we could have asked for.

**W**e stayed two nights on a private two-bedroom junk. Looked after by four staff (captain, mechanic, chef and guide), we were treated like royalty, feasting on amazing Vietnamese meals throughout the day. While not eating, we toured floating villages, caves, beaches, oyster farms and swam or canoed whenever we felt like it. As the junk sailed around the ancient limestone islands that rise dramatically up from the sea, it was super-quiet. Days moved at our own pace and life was simple.

We sailed with Indochina Junk ([indochina-junk.com](http://indochina-junk.com)), a huge operation that places a high priority on boat maintenance. They have access to parts of the bay which others don't due to their environmental projects and boat sizes.

We travelled in the last week of June (note: the Man-of-War jelly fish season starts in July!) The weather was warm (bedrooms were air-conditioned), and a morning of peaceful rain provided the opportunity for board games in the dining room.

Topping and tailing in Hanoi. Hanoi

was our stepping stone to Halong Bay and we spent a night there at both ends of our holiday. On the first night we stayed at Hanoi Charming 2 Hotel ([hanoi charminghotel.com](http://hanoi charminghotel.com)), an inexpensive hotel filled with Vietnamese smiles and generosity.

In contrast, our last night was spent at The InterContinental ([ihg.com/intercontinental](http://ihg.com/intercontinental)), with its beautiful pools (rare in Hanoi). After dragging the kids around the old quarter looking for art, we thought this was a fair trade-off!

SAM MORISON

## TWO TIPS

- Hanoi offers art galleries who'll paint to order. Commission a picture on your first day and it's ready for collection when you leave.
- I wouldn't recommend this holiday for younger kids – relaxing on the boat would be compromised!



## BOATS & BIKES ON THE MEKONG

BY LAURENCE CHEHAB-FABRY

On day two of our trip to Ho Chi Minh City over Chinese New Year, we booked a Mekong river trip with tour operator Innoviet (innoviet.com). Although the drive to the starting point was long (2.5 hours), it gave us time to observe the countryside – and all the families on the way to their new-year celebrations. And the great day ahead of us turned out to be well worth the ride.

We arrived at Ben Tre, and after hopping onto a motorboat for the first part of the journey, switched to a smaller rowing boat that guided us further up the branches of the Mekong where we were surrounded by the incredibly beautiful countryside of the Mekong



Delta. We were welcomed into a local home and enjoyed chatting with three generations of the family – all with wonderful smiling faces. We ate delicious homegrown fruits and watched the ladies prepare some sticky rice rolled in banana leaves.

After a short walk and a healthy Vietnamese lunch, we jumped on bikes for a 10-kilometre ride through the countryside, accompanied by more smiles, waves and “hellos”. Families were spending the holiday relaxing at home, and we heard

several karaoke sing-a-longs as we cycled past!

All five of us loved the day. Our guide, Cong, was wonderful – smiling, funny, kind and knowledgeable. Vietnam and the Vietnamese have us hooked and we promised ourselves we’d be back soon.



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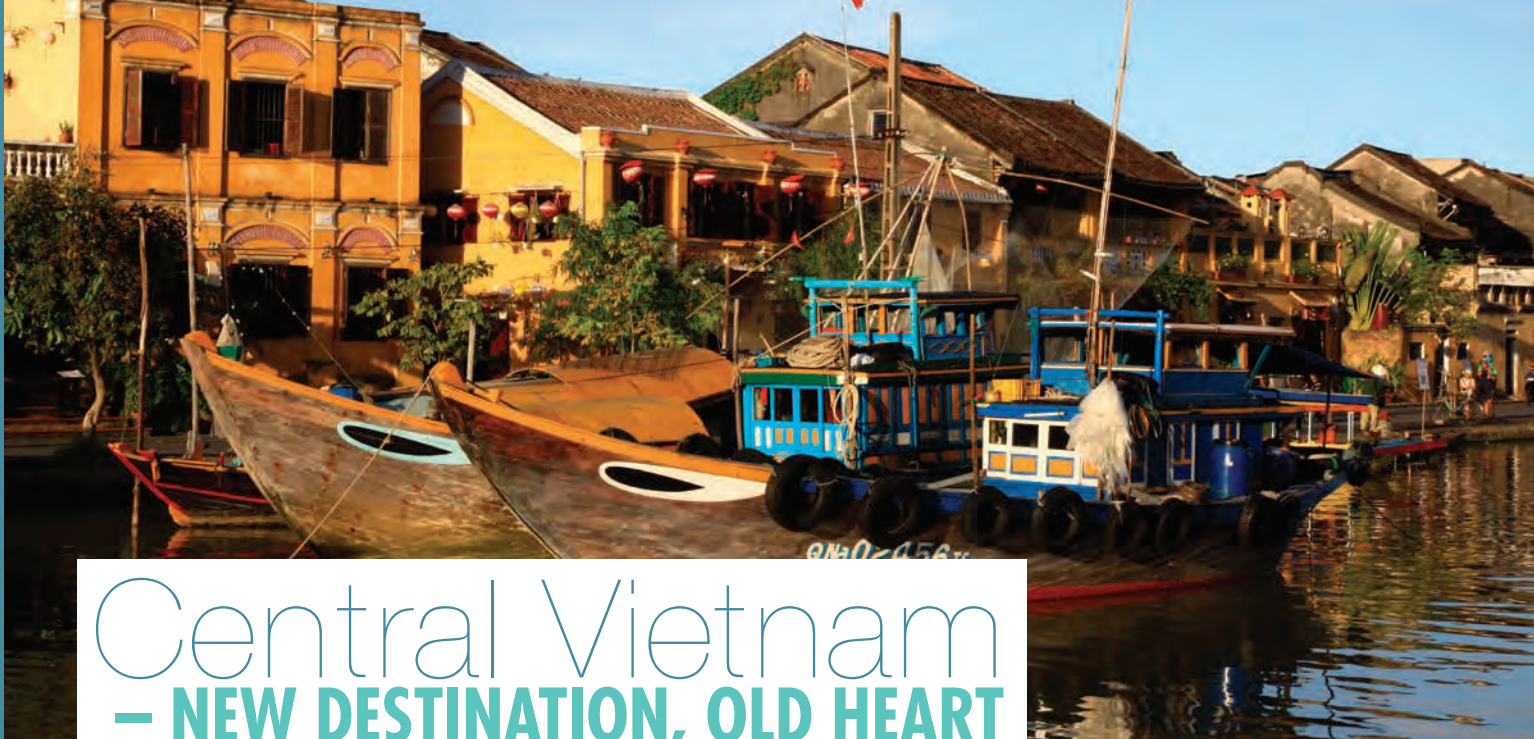
  
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# Central Vietnam – NEW DESTINATION, OLD HEART

Central Vietnam offers amazing culture and nature, and great adventure and food. The region's tourist services are being developed and new tourist activities and businesses encouraged. At the same time, it still maintains its natural appeal and the authenticity of its people is intact.

BY KATARIINA BENEDETTI

## HISTORY AND HERITAGE

Central Vietnam encompasses three UNESCO World Heritage cultural sites and one natural site, all within a short distance of each other.

**Hoi An:** In the vibrant and picturesque ancient harbour town of Hoi An, with its small streets and lights, the Japanese, French, Chinese, Portuguese and Cham people have all left their mark.

When Da Nang took over as the region's commercial centre, Hoi An was more or less "abandoned" for about 200 years. This seclusion left the town untouched by modernisation, and that turned out to be its fortune. Now that Hoi An has been rediscovered, it is once again living up to its name as a "peaceful meeting place". There are plenty of shopping opportunities, too: handicrafts and excellent tailor-made clothes are the specialties here.

### The Hue monuments complex:

Hue was the imperial capital of the Nguyen dynasty and the national capital until 1945. Many buildings were destroyed during the war but an attentive restoration

operation has been taking place in recent years.

**The My Son sanctuary:** This collection of beautiful Hindu temples was built in the middle of the wild forest by the kings of Champa to honour Shiva.

### Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park:

One of the most spectacular national parks in the country, stretching up to the border with Laos and featuring 65 kilometres of caves and underground rivers.

## Tips from a repeat visitor

BY KARIN VO VAN

We've been travelling to Vietnam for 20 years now – first with our kids, and now, most of the time, just the two of us. Last summer, we introduced our little grandson to this beautiful country – his grandfather's country. Here are some of our tips for Da Nang and Hoi An.

- To relax we always stay at the Fusion Maia in Da Nang ([maiadanang.fusion-resorts.com](http://maiadanang.fusion-resorts.com)). It's an exceptional resort, with unlimited spa treatments on offer for guests during our last visit. The resort is on the 30-kilometre long beach, perfect for long walks or your jogging.
- From the resort, take a taxi or hotel shuttle bus to the UNESCO village of Hoi An. Our absolute favourite restaurant there is Morning Glory.
- There are plenty of tailors in the little town; we like Yaly Couture ([yalycouture.com](http://yalycouture.com)).
- Another must is a visit to the Marble Mountains close to Da Nang.
- SilkAir has direct flights from Singapore, but check the schedule – on some days you have a stopover in Siem Reap.
- Weather-wise, too, Da Nang isn't really a year-round destination, so check things out before you plan a trip.



## BEACH BLISS

South of Da Nang many exclusive and elegant resorts have opened on one of the most beautiful beaches in the world. Here you really can sit back, relax, enjoy the breeze, the views of the Cham islands or the Monkey Mountains, the extraordinary, unbelievable sunsets and forget your worries.

TripAdvisor's number one traveller's choice for accommodation in Da Nang is Fusion Maia ([maidanang.fusion-resorts.com](http://maidanang.fusion-resorts.com)), a five-star luxury boutique resort featuring different sized private pool villas. It's a place with its own life-style philosophy, offering total relaxation – and complimentary spa treatments!

## THE GOLF COAST

Cultural sites are still the main attraction in the area of Da Nang and Hoi An, but golf has become quite popular too in the past two years.

Golf Coast Vietnam ([golfcoastvietnam.com](http://golfcoastvietnam.com)) is the name of a trio of golf courses newly opened in the area: the Danang Golf Club designed by Greg Norman, the Colin Montgomery-designed Montgomery links, and the Laguna Lang Co Golf Club, designed by Nick Faldo. The courses are of the highest international standard and the views from their clubhouses are simply stunning.

## AND MORE...

Central Vietnam offers plenty of other outdoor activities: kite surfing, parasailing, jet skiing, kayaking, surfing, diving and cycling tours. Ba Na hills, the green mountains, offer spectacular views and the third largest indoor amusement park in the world, a real castle built inside a mountain.

After a few days in Central Vietnam you'll be asking yourself, "Why didn't I come here before?"



## Let it Rain!

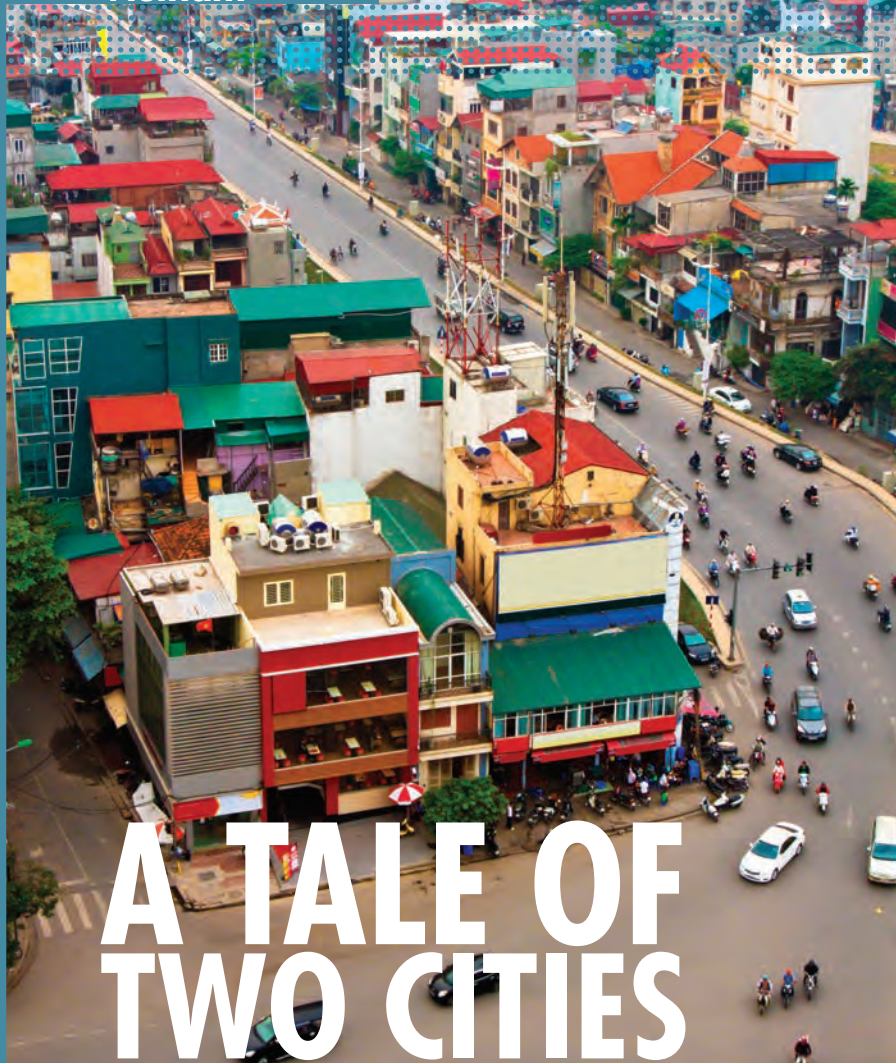
My other half spends most of his time commuting between Singapore and Jakarta, so when business takes him to a more exotic destination we're always very enthusiastic about joining him. Last November we jumped on a plane and headed off for a weekend at the Hyatt Regency Resort and Spa in Da Nang ([danang.regency.hyatt.com](http://danang.regency.hyatt.com)).

We'd chosen to ignore the weather forecast of rain, rain and more rain and just hope for the best. But the rain and monsoon winds didn't let up, except for two brief periods when my four-year-old son and I sprinted down to the beach. We built sandcastles then dived into the Arctic pool (noting there were plenty of people, no doubt from colder climates, who clearly found it refreshing!).

None of this mattered, however. What could have been a disastrous weekend ended up being lots of fun. It's amazing what a difference a great hotel with fantastic staff and excellent food can make to a holiday. Hopefully the weather will be more obliging should we go back to enjoy what looks like a very beautiful part of Vietnam.

KERRY BLEWETT





# A TALE OF TWO CITIES

BY MARIAM OTTIMOFIORE

Quaint cafes serving baguettes and croissants, wide tree-lined boulevards, majestic colonial French architecture, colourfully rich pagodas, beautiful lakes, serene parks, delicious Vietnamese cuisine and the friendly locals combine to give the Vietnamese cities of **Hanoi** and **Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon)** a charismatic, old-world, European charm while maintaining their distinctly Asian feel and appeal.

**N**one of this is surprising when you consider the diverse history of this nation, with its decades-old Chinese influences (hence the temples and pagodas), its rich history of French colonialism (noticeable in the grandiose architecture and almost romantic feel of the boulevards), the Soviet legacy of communism (some areas of Hanoi truly resemble parts of East Berlin in the 60s), the unmistakable American stamp of consumerism and capitalism (evident by the chain of Pizza Huts, KFCs and international brands), and of course the Vietnamese vibe conveyed through the people and its food.

It's no wonder that a few days in Vietnam feel like the best of Asia, Europe and America combined in one easy package – a feat not many countries can attest to!

Vietnam is a truly versatile destination; not only culturally, but also in its ability to cater to both family holidays and fun getaways without kids in tow. Now is a better time than ever to visit this fascinating country and witness its journey from a troubled past to a more optimistic future.

Here are some tips and recommendations for things to do and places to stay in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City based on my own travels.

## HANOI

**Where to stay:** Sofitel Legend Metropole Hotel, Hanoi for an incredible colonial-inspired feel, right in the centre of Hanoi's French Quarter. It is the perfect place to revel in the contrasting old and new feel of the city.

**Where to shop:** Vietnam is rightly famous for its art, and if you intend to pick up a few pieces, check out one of the numerous art galleries in the bustling lanes immediately west of Hanoi's Hoan Kiem Lake, on the fringe of the Old Town, such as on Hang Trong Street. These places showcase their best pieces right on the sidewalk, and they rub shoulders with handicraft boutiques and French-style cafes, giving the whole precinct a bohemian and artistic feel. Even if you do not end up buying anything, browsing around and soaking up the atmosphere is an experience in itself. South of the lake, Trang Tien Street is a major thoroughfare lined with upmarket art galleries and foreign language bookstores, inviting a leisurely stroll towards the Opera house.

**Where to eat:** Le Beaulieu, Sofitel Legend Metropole Hotel, for classic French cuisine and a great Sunday brunch.

**What not to miss:** The Temple of Literature. This historically rich temple is dedicated to Confucius and when it was first built Vietnam's first university adjoined the temple grounds. The place is brimming with tourists and local students for whom a visit promises good fortune and good grades.





## HO CHI MINH CITY (SAIGON)

**Where to stay:** The InterContinental Hotel, right in the centre of the city, walking distance from the Opera House.

**Where to shop:** Saigon's District 1 boast outlets of all the big-name designers, which only adds to the area's Parisian-style atmosphere. In fact, you can find quite a bargain here as compared to Singapore. If you need to escape the Saigon midday heat and indulge in some retail therapy, Diamond Plaza (adjacent to the Notre Dame Cathedral) and the Vincom Centre (next to the City Hall) are the places where fashionable locals and tourists like to see and be seen.

**Where to eat:** For a wonderfully authentic and traditional Vietnamese experience, book a table at the SH Garden Restaurant (98 Nguyen Hue). The entrance is via an old, unique wooden elevator that takes you to the top terrace where memories of a romantic old Saigon transport you back in time, as you enjoy fantastic city views and authentic Vietnamese food.

**What not to miss:** A visit to one of Vietnam's unique Water Puppet shows is an entertaining way to get closer to the country's heritage and culture, and it guarantees a fun afternoon for the kids. The art form is said to take its inspiration from the regular flooding of the lowlands and rice paddies. Catch a show at the Golden Dragon Water Puppet Theatre near the Reunification Palace; daily performances go for 50 minutes.



### MORE TIPS!

**Check the menu:** It's not uncommon practice for a restaurant to have an expensive English menu and a cheaper Vietnamese one. If you're watching your Dong, ask to see the Vietnamese version too, to compare prices.

### Travelling with family:

Navigating both Hanoi and Saigon is quite manageable, making them perfect city breaks for families. Most of the streets, especially in the French quarters, are easily accessible with prams and strollers, while the bustling old parts of the cities are best explored in one of the cheap and readily available taxis. If you're feeling more adventurous, hop on a rickshaw (for less than a dollar) to appreciate the cities in their true colours as you whiz through a sea of never-ending motorbikes and faces.

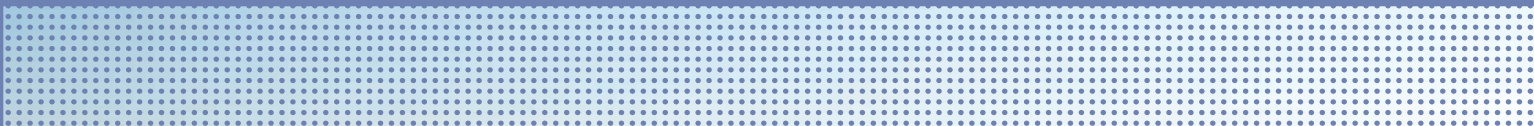


### HCMC Restaurant Recommendation

If you only go to one restaurant in Ho Chi Minh City, go to Nha Hang Ngon, housed in a beautiful yellow heritage building at 160 Pasteur Street – and introduced to us by some American friends who live in HCMC. You can wander around to see the different types of Vietnamese food being prepared, and then pick whatever appeals. For such a beautiful restaurant, the prices are still very reasonable and it's not packed full of tourists.

ELAINE BRINDAMOUR





# Farther Afield



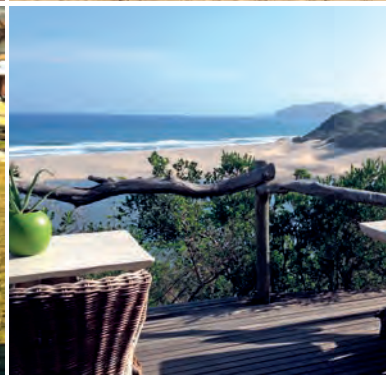






# FAMILY TIME IN SOUTH AFRICA

WORDS AND PICTURES BY LARA SAGE





In the Transkei (Eastern Cape of South Africa) is an unspoilt beach resort where children are entertained, supervised, even babysat, and the hard work of a family trip is artfully removed, leaving priceless quality time for all.

**M**andela's funeral brought the world's attention to this part of South Africa, and millions who tuned in got a glimpse of the overgrazed rolling hills full of ambling goats and cattle in this far from touristy region.

The region's ubiquitous thatched huts are the inspiration for the accommodation design at Umngazi River Bungalows & Spa, a family resort and hilltop spa overlooking the sea and a lagoon. The 69 tastefully appointed huts at the resort come in various configurations to meet all needs; there are couple and family units, or deluxe adults-only bungalows.

A highlight of Umngazi is that trained nannies are available to oversee children on the giant jungle gyms, or to escort toddlers to their special Kiddies Diner or the Kids' Club. They'll even bath them and tuck them into bed while parents dine under trees strung with lights, or on a wooden deck overlooking the river. Buffet meals, worthy of top restaurants, are included in the price.

A ferry shuttles guests across the river to the beach, where Nguni cows amble onto the shore, drink from the river, and return to the grassy hillside. During our stay, we whiled away hours with our kids on the dunes and in the waves. Others knocked tennis balls on the riverside court, read books on pool loungers, or played games in the bar.

Our young ones joined the staff at Creative Corner one day, and came back with pictures and crafts. (The loo-roll binoculars proved surprisingly useful for watching Fish Eagles!) There's fishing for youngsters too, with experienced ghillies on hand to tirelessly re-bait rods. Other activities on offer include dune surfing, ball games, sand castle building, a twilight water boat cruise, crab chasing, marshmallow bonfires, and children's movies on beanbags in the pavilion.

There's Wi-Fi for those seeking it, yet guests seem to willingly subscribe to the phone-free philosophy in communal areas; it's fitting in this environment. The lounge is cool and inviting with colorful sofas of lime, pink and turquoise, below low-slung lampshades and driftwood fittings.

It's heartening to know that this resort employs 170 staff from the neighbouring communities where the unemployment rate is high. Guests can have fun while supporting

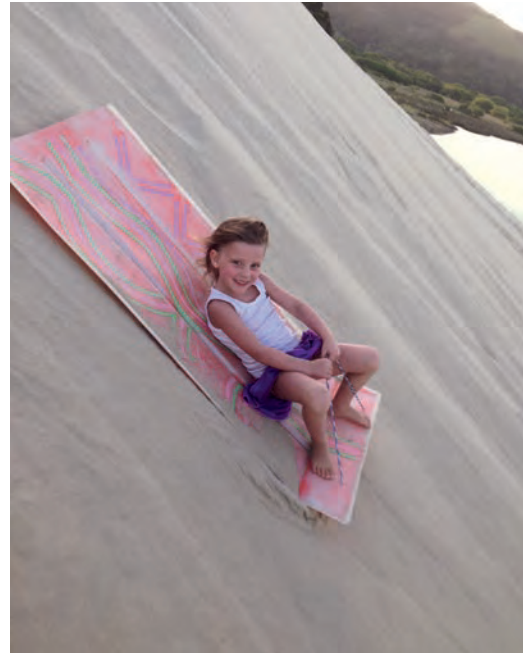
community projects like Cwebeni horse riding on the beach. Guided walks and hikes are arranged to mangrove swamps, or you can see local beading crafts in the villages.

My children had the kind of holiday I recall from my youth: splashing in the pool, climbing trees, befriending other youngsters, and we all left feeling relaxed and refreshed.

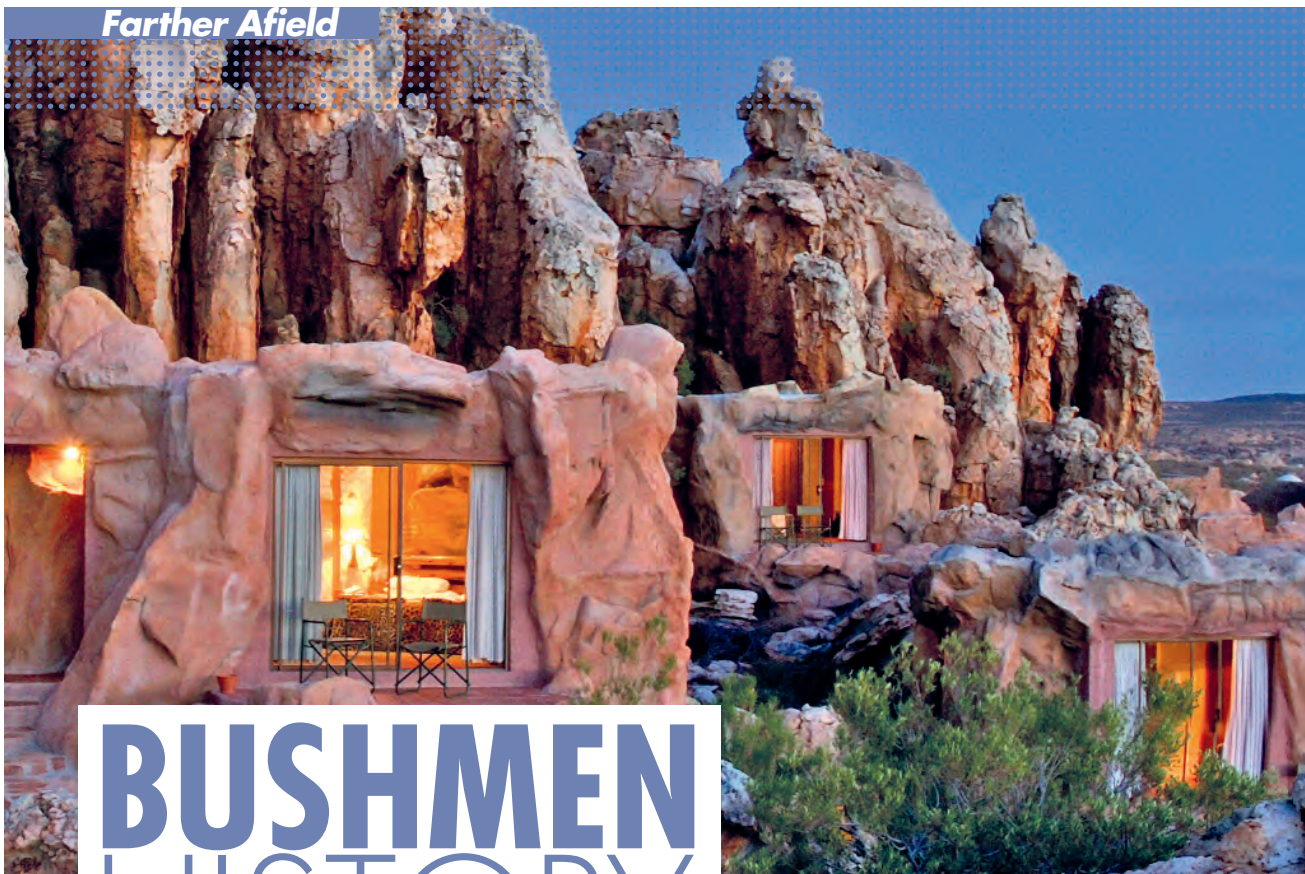
[umngazi.co.za](http://umngazi.co.za)

**GETTING THERE:**

Six-hour drive from Durban, or fly in on a weekly package. It's wise to plan ahead – Umngazi is so popular that guests often reserve their next booking upon check out.







# BUSHMEN HISTORY

BY LARA SAGE

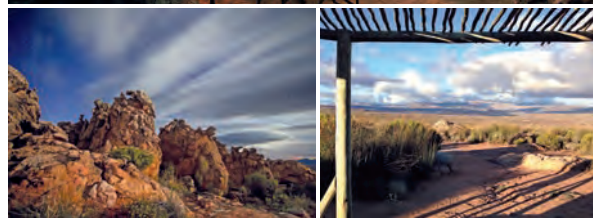
Three hours' drive from Cape Town you'll find the enriching and remote Kagga Kamma Nature Reserve, which holds a fascinating collection of small creatures, antelope, wildebeest, and ostriches. This is a place to escape from modern life, and to marvel at the weathered sandstone formations and craggy rock outcrops which dominate the expansive open terrain, with only insects and birds peacefully interrupting the silence.

Human history adds to the uniqueness of Kagga Kamma: you can view several well-preserved and interesting Bushmen rock paintings that have survived 4,000 years of exposure to the elements. It's currently accepted that many of the rock paintings relate to the religious beliefs and practices of this nomadic people. Our guide gave us some interesting facts about how Bushmen lived in this

harsh terrain thousands of years ago, using indigenous fynbos plants for everyday meals, medicine, and to interact with their ancestors and subconscious through hallucinatory trance dancing. Bushmen focused on positive energy and didn't carry the baggage of modern ages. Without possessions, their needs were simple, and they apparently existed with an ease that our generation finds hard to fathom.

We also enjoyed the expertise of our field ranger who took us on an open vehicle drive where we saw two types of antelope, the graceful Gemsbok and white-faced Bontebok. Astoundingly, Bontebok were hunted down to the last 17 animals last century, but through carefully protecting this endangered species, numbers are back up – to around 5,000 in the Cape.

The accommodation at Kagga Kamma is simple



and creative, with thatched rondavels (round huts) and cave rooms built unobtrusively into the rock. The views are phenomenal. Despite the arid setting, inviting swimming pools and yummy meals gave us creature comforts. We enjoyed outdoor dining beside an open fire in the boma, followed by bright

stargazing, without a city light in sight.

This place takes your breath away with its unique ecosystem and expansive scenery. I have yet to experience such quiet solitude in any other place.

[kaggakamma.co.za](http://kaggakamma.co.za)





# KOREA'S JEJU ISLAND

Whether you're travelling in South Korea as a couple, with friends or with family, Jeju Island has plenty to offer. Here are five tips from ABIGAIL LAM's recent trip to this fun destination.

- ①. A climb up **Hallasan Mountain** to appreciate Jeju's natural beauty from on high is a must-do. First-timers can opt for one of the easier trails, such as the Yongsil Trail; it's shorter and slightly less steep. But if you're ready for an adventure, go for the Seongpanak Trail; nearly 10 kilometres long and four and a half hours straight up! Pack a jacket even in warm weather as it can get windy near the top.
- ②. After all that activity you'll be starving, so grab some **black pork** (a Jeju Island specialty), or try **live octopus**: beware, the tentacles still squirm in your mouth, even after they've been chopped up!
- ③. One of the most puzzling attractions on the island is **The Mysterious Road**. Turn off your engine and watch your vehicle move up the hill, or so it seems.
- ④. The **Trick Art Museum** is fun for kids. Filled with magical optical illusions, it provides plenty of photo opportunities. Watch as murals and frescoes come to life, and look out for the room that makes one person look like a giant and the other a dwarf.
- ⑤. End your day with a visit to the **Nanta show** at Jeju theatre. This high-intensity comedy musical uses all sorts of kitchen utensils as props, is full of acrobatic moves, and has a rhythmic beat that keeps your toes tapping.



## GETTING AROUND

Public transport in Jeju is not easily available, so renting a car at the airport is essential. Get the phone numbers of where you plan to visit because GPS recognises phone numbers better than addresses. And, as the locals only speak Korean, use pictures and actions when you need to ask for directions.

## JEJU FACTS

- Jeju is an oval-shaped volcanic island measuring 73 kilometres from west to east, and 31 kilometres from north to south.
- At 1,950 metres, Hallasan Mountain is Jeju's most distinctive landmark, and South Korea's highest peak. It's also a UNESCO World Heritage Site.
- The *haenyeo* or "mermaids of Jeju" free-dive to depths of 20 metres to gather clams, abalone and seaweed. These amazing women (most of them grandmothers) have trained themselves to stay underwater for several minutes with no equipment other than a wetsuit and goggles.
- As well as the Trick Art Museum, Jeju has museums dedicated to chocolate, teddy bears and green tea, and an impressive number of natural and theme parks.
- Jeju is one of the top honeymoon destinations in the world.



# SKY-HIGH IN SWITZERLAND

BY KATIE ROBERTS

The beautiful old Swiss town of Lucerne is an access point to an incredible number of mountains for recreation and leisure activities. On any day at Lucerne train station there are dozens of hiking-shoe-clad, walking-stick-carrying adventurers on their way to walk the trails or, in winter, ski. Here are two easily accessible mountainous day-trips from Lucerne that don't require any preparation or exertion.



## TITLIS

Snowball fights are guaranteed year-round on Mount Titlis and the permanent glacier is the big attraction.

**Nearest village:** Engelberg.

**Height:** 3,238 metres.

**Accommodation:** The Berghotel at Trusbsee (halfway up at 1,800m) is a handy base for summer hiking and winter skiing. There's also lots of accommodation in pretty Engelberg.

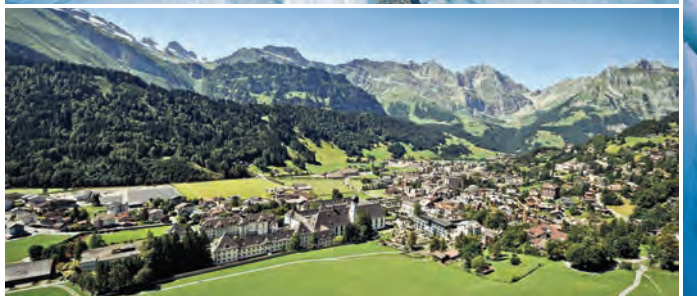
**Food:** Try the Berghotel or the bustling buffet dining area at Titlis station.

**Getting there:** Catch the regular Zentralbahn train from Lucerne to Engelberg, a scenic 47-minute journey. Walk five minutes from the train station and take the gondola to Trusbsee station. Then take a cable car to Stand station. Change onto the Titlis rotating gondola, for 360-degree views all the way to the top.

**Cost:** Lucerne to Engelberg is about 18 Swiss francs return (S\$25). Engelberg to Titlis is SFr89 return. The IceFlyer chairlift is SFr12; other activities are at additional cost.

**Adventure opportunities:** You'll need to hurry to do everything in one day. Everyone can do the grotto walk through an icy-cold tunnel 20 metres below the glacier, and there's a 150-step cliff walk on a steel suspension bridge 500 metres above the snow. There are snowy walks, and the IceFlyer chairlift for fabulous views. The more adventurous can try tubing down the snowy slopes and abseiling. Thermal underwear, a good coat and warm shoes are a must for this day out. On the descent, there are mountain bikes for hire at Trusbsee station so you can complete the downhill stretch with the wind in your hair. Just avoid the cows.

engelberg.ch | titlis.ch







## PILATUS

"The steepest cogwheel railway in the world", which opened in 1889, is absolutely captivating. The 4.6-kilometre track, 48-percent-gradient ascent up Mount Pilatus takes 30 minutes. Expect incredible views over the surrounding mountains and Lake Lucerne while gliding silently past paddocks, grazing cows and sheer rock faces.

**Nearest village:** Alpnachstad.

**Height:** 2,128 metres.

**Accommodation:** Built in 1890, the historic Pilatus-Kulm Mountain Hotel and the smaller Hotel Bellevue offer incredible views.

**Food:** Indoor and outdoor restaurants offer a variety of eating options.

**Getting there:** Take a scenic 90-minute boat cruise from Lucerne to Alpnachstad. There is a train option, but a cruise on beautiful Lake Lucerne is a must. Return via the railway, or ascend the other side of the mountain on the aerial cableway to Frakmentegg, then change to the gondola that terminates at Kriens. Walk 10 minutes to catch the return bus to Lucerne.

**Cost:** 97 Swiss francs (return).

**Adventure opportunities:**

There's a range of hiking trails of various levels on Mount Pilatus, and a trail from Alpnachstad to the summit. Alight at Frakmentegg and Krienseregg for a toboggan run, an aerial rope course, a luge ride, playgrounds and pretty picnic grounds.

[pilatus.ch](http://pilatus.ch)







# CUBA: LAND OF SALSA, SUGAR & SERENADE

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY CINDY FAN

Cucu Ramos is serenading me with his guitar under a mango tree. He sings of *Guantanamera* – the woman from Guantanamo – singing it oh so tenderly, and as I sip a glass of freshly pressed cane sugar juice, I can't help but wonder if the world could learn a thing or two about romance from a wiry old Cuban farmer who has tufts of hair sprouting from his ears.

I'm in the fertile countryside of Valle de los Ingenios, or Valley of the Sugar Mills, 12 kilometres from Trinidad, a small time-warped town in the province of Sancti Spiritus in central Cuba. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, the town's indulgently decorated colonial mansions, along with the ruins of 75 mills that dot the valley are a testament to the sugar industry that once flourished here from the 18th to 19th century.

Trinidad is a photographer's dream. Terracotta roofs, wrought-iron gates and lovely Spanish tiles adorn buildings painted a sunbaked tropical candy-box of colours, all of which you can fully appreciate by climbing the tower at the Museo Histórico Municipal for a panoramic view. To the north, the rolling Escambray Mountains; to the south, white-sand beaches and the





sparkling Caribbean Sea. And sandwiched in between is the prettiest town of the whole island.

The mix of Moorish, Andalusian and European-neoclassical architecture is apparent as you hit the cobblestone streets that have been laid out in an inexplicable fashion. They zigzag erratically and one is content to wander the beguiling lanes until walking around in circles becomes too much and it's time for a strong mojito. To escape this real life Escher drawing, follow your ears to the exuberant beats at Casa de la Música, where crowds gather on the church steps to partake in three of Cuba's national pastimes: salsa dancing, rum and flirting.

At times Cuba feels like an insider's secret. Long known for its communist rule, its confounding eccentricities and iconic old-world oddities – American classic cars, cocotaxis, crumbling buildings – the country is slowly opening up. Recent free-market reforms have boosted private enterprise. New foreign cars are for sale, albeit at loco prices.

See it before a gust of change blows through – and gentlemen, learn from the Cubans: Some sugar and a song can go a long way.

## Highlights of Cuba

- In 2014 Trinidad celebrates its 500th anniversary. Stay at Iberostar Grand Hotel or do a homestay at 200-year-old Casa Colonial Muñoz owned by horse whisperer Julio Muñoz who does horseback riding and photography tours ([casa.trinidadphoto.com](http://casa.trinidadphoto.com)).
- Get off the beaten track in Baracoa, a town that was isolated from the rest of the island for 453 years.
- If all-inclusive resorts are your style, head to the beaches of Varadero.
- Explore Havana's four districts and its plethora of live music venues. Go to Coppelia's for two-cent ice cream; have a daiquiri at Floridita, Hemingway's favourite hangout.



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