

Tailor-made
Southeast Asia

Vietnam | Cambodia | Laos | Myanmar
Thailand | Malaysia | Indonesia | Singapore



Welcome to TransIndus

With its sublime landscapes, vibrant ethnic diversity, sophisticated cultural traditions and astounding historic monuments, Southeast Asia could define the word 'exotic'. In few regions of the world can you gaze on ruined cities as splendid as Angkor in Cambodia, swim in seawater as transparent as those lapping the karst islets of Thailand, or walk through rainforest as pristine as those of inland Borneo. Nor are there many parts of the planet where traditional ways of life flourish as they do in the remote valleys of northern Vietnam, Laos and Sulawesi.

Moreover, Southeast Asia boasts a world-class visitor infrastructure these days, enabling you to travel in considerable comfort. Development has taken place at a particularly brisk speed in the tourism sector. Each year, our team uncovers ever more inspirational places to visit, whether homestays with minority communities along obscure stretches of the Mekong River or Dutch-era coffee plantations hidden amid the volcanic uplands of Java.

Sublime landscapes and distinctive local traditions are a constant source of fascination, wherever you travel. But what makes Southeast Asia such a uniquely rewarding one to explore, as anyone who has taken a holiday there will confirm, is the great openness and warmth of its people. This pervasive generosity of spirit was very apparent to me while growing up in Myanmar (then Burma), where I was born and raised, and is a big part of why I feel such an affection for the country and its neighbouring states today. Like me, all of our consultants have lived, worked and travelled extensively throughout the region, and return there regularly.

Sharing one's love of a destination and translating it into enjoyable holidays for our guests are among the most enjoyable aspects of our job. At TransIndus we also take great pride in our standards of personal care and attention to detail –

qualities that have repeatedly made us an award-winning tour operator. We hope you'll agree that this passion and expertise shines through the writing and photographs presented in the following pages.

Our goal has been to gather together our favourite destinations for each country, in order to provide you with an inspirational overview of Southeast Asia – whether you are a first-time visitor, or an old hand. It includes the must-see monuments, of course, from Angkor Wat to Borobudur and Bagan, but also a selection of lesser known gems.

One particularly relaxing and luxurious way to get off the beaten track is on a river cruise. The great waterways of Myanmar, Cambodia and Vietnam lend themselves supremely well to boat travel. Many excellent options are available and you'll find the cream of the trips described in special feature pages. Throughout the brochure, we also include suggestions for activity-based excursions where you can join local people as they go about their everyday lives – cycling, walking or at work in craft workshops, potteries, farms and local monasteries.

Finally, at the end of each country section we feature a round-up of our preferred accommodation choices, whether heritage boutique properties in dreamy spots away from the wider world, or characterful colonial-era, five-star hotels in the heart of the city. The short profiles will give a first impression of the kind of places on offer, but any of our team will be happy to discuss these, and other hotels, at greater length, having tried and tested them on the ground.

Producing this brochure has rekindled wonderful travel memories for us, and we hope it will provide plenty of fresh inspiration for your own journeys through these astonishing countries over the coming year.



Amrit Singh
Managing Director



Southeast Asia

Extending from the ice peaks of the eastern Himalayas to the fringes of Melanesia, the countries of Southeast Asia encompass a region of incomparable scenic and cultural diversity. Indonesia alone holds over 17,000 islands, with a staggering 742 official languages and dialects. In just a day's journey from modern cities such as Bangkok or Singapore, you can be gazing at the sunset in mountains inhabited by minority people whose way of life has altered little in centuries; be walking on pristine shell-sand beaches unchanged since they were fought over by spice traders in the Elizabethan era, or peering through primary rainforest in search of some of the world's rarest mammals.

Melting Pot | Lying between the great civilizations of India and China, Southeast Asia has for thousands of years served as a conduit for exotic merchandise, ideas and inventions. Buddhism and Hinduism mingled with indigenous beliefs to create temple complexes as in Myanmar (Burma), Thailand (Siam) and Khmer-era Cambodia, whose scale and sophistication would not be rivalled in Europe for centuries.

Today, the region remains a vast melting pot of people drawn from the four corners of Asia – one that has given rise to some of the most compelling and diverse cultural forms on the planet. Ancient Tamil sculpture springs to life in the classical dance of Mandalay. Motifs woven in the ikat workshops of Java would have been familiar to the ladies of the late-medieval Portuguese court. And in the restaurants of Georgetown and Melaka you can feast on dishes whose flavours still bear the imprint of colonial trade with the Hague and Peking.

Surviving too, in more remote corners, are numerous indigenous communities whose isolation has preserved their unique ways of life. Indeed, one of the great joys of travelling around Southeast Asia is the chance to experience these minority cultures at close hand, whether amid the forests of Sarawak, remote atolls of eastern Indonesia or uplands of Myanmar and Indochina.

Varied Experiences: Great Value | Perhaps the most remarkable thing of all, though, is that these days it's possible to travel to even the most far-flung corners of Southeast Asia in great comfort. Tracts of dense jungle in Borneo, which a generation ago required weeks of gruelling travel to reach, are now equipped with stylish ecolodges, while tiny islets on a reef-edged archipelago in Indonesia or coastal Borneo sport gorgeous barefoot-luxury diving resorts. You can track orangutans, explore distant stretches of the Mekong and discover forgotten Buddhist monuments along Myanmar's Ayeyarwady River from the seclusion of a luxury cruise boat – all at prices unimaginable in Europe or North America.

Moreover, first-class transport infrastructures enable travellers to splice an astonishing range of experiences into a single itinerary. A typical two or three-week holiday may incorporate a visit to a UNESCO World Heritage monument such as Angkor Wat or Bagan, with a spell on an idyllic beach, hill tribe trek, city break, stay at an elephant camp in the jungle or a relaxing river cruise. Whatever your dream holiday, Southeast Asia is guaranteed to surpass your expectations!

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Tailor-made Holidays



TransIndus tailor-made holidays

Tailor-made holidays are devised bespoke to suit your requirements. After an in-depth consultation, we'll put together an itinerary which we think best meets your requirements, taking into account the kind of holiday you want, how long you have to spend away, and your budget, but the shape and substance of your trip will be determined essentially by you.

Flexibility | Travelling tailor-made instead of opting for an off-the-peg trip gives you much greater flexibility. Although every country and sub-region has its unmissable highlights, there's rarely a single route around them. You may have specific interests which you'd like to pursue, or a list of less well known destinations that you'd like to tie into your trip. This is where our expertise comes in: having explored each destination in depth, often several times over, our consultants will be able to suggest the best order in which to visit them, as well as the most suitable hotels.

Smooth Travel | We'll also discuss meal plans with you, and make all your transport arrangements in advance. Chauffeur driven, air-conditioned cars tend to be our preferred option for most Southeast Asian countries, as they allow you to stop to engage with much along the way – though you may well

need to add some domestic flights to cover longer distances. One of our expert, English-speaking guides will also be assigned to you for day trips to historic and religious sites, markets and other destinations where in-depth local knowledge is desirable.

A critical element we take care of, of course, is your international flight. Experience has shown us the best routings, stopovers and departure times for Southeast Asian hubs, and we'll be able to suggest the most comfortable, time-saving option for you, whether you're travelling alone, as a couple or in larger family group with children.

Special Places to Stay | TransIndus understand how important accommodation is to one's overall enjoyment of a country while travelling, which is why we go to great lengths to find the loveliest hotels and guest houses in all of our destinations. Landmark luxury hotels, particularly those with a colonial-era pedigree, are perennial favourites among our clients, but we also favour smaller heritage and boutique properties where greater emphasis is placed on traditional architecture and interior design, and where the setting of the hotel itself is central to its appeal.



Why TransIndus?

Among the UK's largest and most successful operators of tailor-made tours to Asia, TransIndus features twenty different countries in the continent. With decades of experience designing journeys and a wealth of hard-won travel knowledge and local contacts to draw on, we are able to create trips of the highest possible quality, featuring the most desirable destinations and memorable activities. This expertise, backed by gold-standard customer service, has ensured our company consistently generates satisfaction ratings of 99%. Over half our clients travel more than once with us, or else have been referred by family, friends or colleagues.

'Your journey. Our expertise' | Our goal is simple: to devise holidays that are both relaxing and culturally stimulating, and perfectly tailored for your needs. To do this, this we first have to gain a clear sense of what you're hoping to experience – ideally face-to-face over a glass of wine, cup of tea or coffee at our office ('The Old Fire Station', in Ealing, London; see p142), but over the phone is fine too!

Inspired by an extensive, first-hand knowledge of Southeast Asia, one of our consultants will draw up an initial itinerary, which can be further refined according to your wishes. All TransIndus team members travel regularly to their specialist regions to keep abreast of the latest developments, and are passionate about sharing their discoveries. If a beautiful new boutique hotel opens in an off-track location, they'll know if it's worth staying there and which its best rooms are. If a particular coastal resort has grown too crowded, they'll be able to suggest a lesser frequented alternative, and the best monuments, nature sanctuaries and lunch stops to pause at en route. Or if you want to spend a few days river cruising, they'll know which of the boats offer the most varied routes and best value for your budget.

Sound Advice | Throughout, 'authenticity' is our watchword. We want our clients to enjoy not just a revitalizing, inspirational holiday, but return home feeling that they have had a genuine insight into the countries visited. Whether you're dreaming of a cultural trip highlighting historic monuments and the arts, or a nature-based one with wildlife as its focus, you will find us passionate about our destinations and committed to offering you quality at every step of your journey.

Financial Protection: Peace of Mind

All our clients are financially protected. When booking with TransIndus, you can rest assured that your arrangements will be fully refunded should circumstances beyond your control disrupt your holiday. Flight-inclusive holidays are covered by our Air Travel Organiser's License (ATOL 3429), granted by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), while those without flights are protected by our financial bond with the Association of Bonded Travel Organisers Trust (ABTOT 5510). In an unlikely emergency, we, the CAA and ABTOT, ensure you will not be stranded abroad. If you haven't yet left the UK for your holiday, we will collectively ensure your money is fully refunded. In addition, we are proud members of the Association of Independent Tour Operators (AITO 5131), whose 'Client Charter' assures you of the highest service standards.





Few countries in the world elicit such a passionate response among travellers as Vietnam. Blessed with beautiful landscapes, evocative monuments and great cultural diversity, the nation has emerged from decades of war to become one of the world's most beguiling destinations. While the capital, Hanoi, retains the gentility of colonial times, go-ahead Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), in the south, showcases the nation's more upbeat, modern face. Between the two lie a chain of former Imperial capitals, replete with ancient temples and palaces, as well as colonial ports and villas. Trips along the southern Mekong Delta or into the northern mountains of the Tonkin Alps bring you face to face with a timeless vision of Vietnam, where buffalo plod along dirt tracks and women in conical straw *non la* hats work the rice fields. Poverty is far from absent here but is on the wane. Vietnam is now officially the fastest developing country in Asia. For visitors, this dramatic transformation is most discernible in the country's new beach resorts and bijoux historic towns. Travelling between them, you cannot fail to be impressed by the understated warmth and gentleness of the Vietnamese people themselves – a testament to this country's astonishing capacity for rejuvenation.



Highlights of Vietnam

- Old Quarter, Hanoi |** Lined with medieval tube houses and merchants' mansions, the packed streets of old Hanoi's market district make for a fascinating area to wander, people watch and shop for authentic souvenirs.
- Sapa |** Set amid cascading rice terraces, Sapa is a delightful hill station offering treks, walks and colourful weekly markets which local minority communities attend wearing vibrant traditional costumes.
- Halong Bay |** Vietnam's most spectacular scenery: stunning limestone and dolomite outcrops, rising from a blue bay, which visitors can explore on photogenic wooden junks.
- Mekong Delta |** An obligatory trip while in Vietnam is a journey along the mighty Mekong River, whose silty waters flow across the country's southern alluvial plain – a world little changed in centuries.
- Hoi An |** The ancient trading town of Hoi An retains much of its old-world, cosmopolitan character, as well as great museums, galleries, restaurants and shops.
- Floating Market, Cai Rang |** In the market towns of the Mekong Delta, traders in conical straw hats paddle their wares around congested waterways in heavily laden sampan – a glorious spectacle.
- Phu Quoc Island |** Luxuriate in the translucent waters of Phu Quoc, the pristine, tear-shaped island located in the Gulf of Thailand, only a 50-minute hop by plane from Ho Chi Minh City.

Travel Information

Time zone: UTC+7 hours

Flying time: 13 hours

Currency: Dong

Capital: Hanoi

When to go

Month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Temperature °C	16	17	20	24	28	30	30	29	28	25	22	18
Rainfall mm	19	26	44	90	189	240	288	318	265	131	43	23
Best to travel	●	●●	●●●	●●●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●

●● The best time to travel

● A good time to travel

● Low season

Be inspired

Speak with one of our Vietnam specialists who will be delighted to help you plan your ideal holiday.

Tel: 020 8566 3739

Web: [www.transindus.com](#)



Hanoi

Tran Quoc Pagoda, Hanoi

Vietnam’s charismatic capital, on the Red River, may be expanding and modernizing at an extraordinary pace, but it’s a great city to explore on foot. Surrounded by parks and tranquil lakes, the core is a medieval Old Quarter – one of the most atmospheric square kilometres in all of Asia – where traditional craftsmen ply their trade in narrow alleyways lined with antique tube and shop houses. Uptown, colonial mansions and relaxing cafés flank the boulevards and leafy shores of Hoan Kiem Lake, but the prime attraction in the wider city is Ho Chi Minh’s Mausoleum, where the Great Leader’s remains are embalmed in a sombre marble tomb. Other iconic landmarks include the 11th-century One Pillar Pagoda, and Temple of Literature; a feast of medieval Vietnamese architecture erected in 1070 AD.

After a busy day’s sightseeing, unwind in one of the city’s traditional Vietnamese restaurants, or catch a performance of old-style puppetry, where performers stand waist-deep in water wielding elaborate fire-breathing dragons and other ornate figures to a soundtrack of exotic live music.



Presidential Palace, Hanoi



Hoa Binh | Mai Chau | Puluong

Surrounded by lush green hills the valleys villages and nature reserves West of Hanoi are home to several ethnic minority communities such as the H’mong, Zao and White Thai. Not only are these areas easily accessible and incredibly beautiful, but they also provide excellent opportunities for overnight excursions for gentle trekking, mountain biking and interacting with some of Vietnam’s hill tribes. Puluong Nature Reserve provides a chance to see cascading views of rice fields, where you can trek along hidden paths and picturesque valley with ever-changing scenery for a nature retreat like no other. as well as interact with mountainous life of Muong & Thai people.



Craft Villages, Hanoi

Scattered around Hanoi, and reachable in easy day trips by car, are a string of little bamboo-screen villages where visitors may visit traditional crafts workshops and farms. Home to silk weavers, carpenters, snake breeders and ceramicists, the settlements are repositories of old skills fast dying out elsewhere in the country. One specializes in the conical straw hats known as *non la*, that are ubiquitous in the markets and fields of Vietnam.

Ninh Binh

Ninh Binh Province is home to the Trang An Landscape Complex, a UNESCO World Heritage Site encompassing the Hoa Lu ancient capital and the Tam Coc-Trang An. Known as “Halong Bay on land”, Tam Coc and Trang An are flanked by limestone karsts rising from the surrounding rice paddies dotted with authentic and pretty villages where traditional life has remained unchanged for hundreds of years. You can experience the region as you row leisurely along the calm waterways of its canals. The Van Long Natural Reserve, at the heart of Ninh Binh, is the largest wetland reserve in the Red River Delta and home to rare species of birds, some of which are included in the Red Book and migratory birds, such as the white stork and the grey heron.



Street Food Tour

Hanoi’s five stars don’t have a monopoly on fine dining. In fact, some of the most authentic and delicious dishes in the city are served in the open-air kitchens of the old quarter. Join our popular ‘Street Food Tour’ for a trip around the district’s hidden culinary hot spots, led by local expert foodies. Set off on a morning tour, and you’ll be able to sample the quintessential Hanoi breakfast of hot pho – a fragrant beef noodle soup served from large, steaming cauldrons to punters perched on low stools. Another local favourite is *banh cuon*, silky, steamed rice pancakes of pork mince and black mushrooms, topped with crunchy caramelised shallots and a twist of lime. At lunchtime, braziers belch clouds of aromatic smoke from skewers of squid or spicy pork. Cult cafés also feature prominently on the tour where you can sample that rarest and most exotic of all Vietnam’s brews: *chon*, a smokey, chocolately and utterly delicious coffee made with beans harvested from the dung of civet cats!





Halong Bay

Rising in majestic fashion from the northern shore of Vietnam, the karst limestone formations of Halong Bay create a unique, spellbinding landscape. Around 2,000 islands, islets, outcrops and towering mountains, draped in vegetation and riddled with grottos, soar above the green-blue waters of the Gulf of Tonkin. A fleet of converted junks guide visitors around the finest viewpoints and beauty spots, the most popular of them grouped on the western side of the bay, which is best visited on an overnight excursion from Halong City (the area’s main hub). However, to reach the lesser frequented caverns, lagoons and beaches on the more distant and quieter shores, we recommend a longer cruise of at least two nights and three days.



Cruising Halong

On an overnight trip, it’s possible to take in the more famous landmarks, such as Hang Dau Go (the ‘Cave of Marvels’), with its extraordinary stalactites and stalagmites, and Hang Sung Sot (‘Cave of Awe’), famed for its phallic rock formation. But with two nights, you’ll have time to explore the more rarely visited eastern fringes, or venture further south to idyllic Lan Ha Bay, where many of the islands are fringed by exquisite white sand

beaches. Whichever option you choose, superb landscape is guaranteed, along with opportunities to swim, lounge on deck, sunbathe or kayak and enjoy guided cycle or jungle treks on the larger islands. The following number among our favoured cruisers at Halong Bay. All operate to the highest international standards of safety and service, ensuring a matchless experience of Halong’s iconic landscapes.

Au Co | Au Co’s state-of-the-art, triple decker cruiser is one of the newest vessels in the Halong Bay fleet. A floating five-star hotel, complete with on-board spa, Jacuzzi and gourmet restaurant, it boasts 32 cabins with French balconies that allow you to savour the views from the exclusive comfort of your own bed. Aside from the high levels of luxury it offers, Au Co’s main selling point is that it is the only operator with permission to run longer, 3-day/2-night trips that take to remote areas such as Lan Ha Bay, to the south of Halong – beyond the range of other outfits. Hiking, kayaking and fishing excursions are optional extras.



Heritage Line | Heritage Line operate three boutique cruisers in Halong Bay. Launched in 2006, Halong Ginger combines the traditional elegance of a Vietnamese junk with cutting-edge design. It is custom built with three decks, and features ten luxury en-suite cabins, two bars and a restaurant. Halong Jasmine is a rather grander affair, with polished wood décor that harks back to French Indochina of the 1930s. It holds 23 cabins, a bar, lounge and restaurant. Halong Violet offers a more intimate and exclusive experience, with five luxury cabins each with floor-to-ceiling windows. The cruise also features a gym, sauna, spa, restaurant, lounge and a rooftop sundeck.

Indochina Sails | This outfit was one of the first to operate overnight cruises in the Halong Bay area, and has continually raised its standards of service over the years. The Valentine, an intimate 5-cabin, double-decker junk is of a classic oriental design, sporting two fan-shaped sails. Each of the rooms have large picture windows and polished wood panelled walls, with luxury silk bedding for extra comfort. The on-board restaurant specializes in fresh local seafood.



Legend Halong | With a choice of one, two, three and four-cabin boats, Legend Halong offers total exclusivity and is ideal for couples, families or groups of friends who want to enjoy an intimate cruise. By chartering a vessel, you get to choose the itinerary and enjoy personalized service from a dedicated crew, including a gourmet chef. Legend can offer unique experiences such as candlelit dinners on deserted coves, and individually guided canoe, cycling or trekking trips on the larger islands.

The Junks of Halong Bay

Wooden junks with trademark fan-shaped sails have for centuries been used to transport goods around the coast of Vietnam. You still see the odd antique vessel chugging around Halong Bay, but the majority cruising the UNESCO World Heritage Site are of more recent vintage. Literally hundreds operate in the area, holding anywhere between one and 36 cabins ranged over two or three storeys, surmounted by cotton sails dyed a traditional dark ochre or burgundy colour. Traditionally, the prows of junks are carved in the shape of a sea monster – an echo of the legend that the limestone islands were created by the flailing tail of a mighty dragon (whence the name ‘Halong’, which means ‘where the dragon descends to the sea’).





Sapa

French colonials originally founded this hill station, scattered over the eastern slopes of the Hoang Lien Mountains (the ‘Tonkin Alps’), as a summer retreat. It was badly damaged by the Japanese in the 1940s, and again during the Vietnam-China War of 1979, but is today enjoying a new lease of life as a holiday destination thanks to its relaxing climate and proximity to some glorious hill country, where minority communities such as the Black H’mong and Red Dao (known locally as the ‘montagnards’) are famed for their traditional costumes.

Over the years, TransIndus has identified a handful of welcoming local homestays and ecolodges where you can experience village life at close quarters. For the more adventurous, a network of trails also leads to far-flung upland settlements where life has altered little in centuries.



Homestays and trekking with the Sapa Sisters

Homestays and trekking with the Sapa Sisters Whether you choose a gentle walking route or a more strenuous trek in Sapa, opting for a local Hmong guide will elevate your experience and bring it to life. We work with a group of young and enterprising local women who have established one of the few Hmong-owned businesses in the region to provide specialised guiding tours and homestays. Entirely owned and run by women, the initiative provides vital new opportunities to earn a sustainable income and help their families and communities prosper. For you, it is an opportunity to meet local farmers and villagers in an easy, relaxed fashion, and if you wish, you may choose to visit a family home or a craft workshop.



Ha Giang

In the extreme north of the country along the Chinese border, Ha Giang is Vietnam’s most remote and mountainous province. Local markets provide the best opportunities to meet its ethnic minority people, dressed in their dazzling attire, and to shop for the vividly patterned, hand-woven textiles and silver jewellery that are a local speciality. Overland journeys in Ha Giang tend to be long and winding, but enthralling from start to finish. A mix of limestone outcrops and dramatic gorges interspersed by rice fields and orchards, the scenery ranks among the most spectacular anywhere in Southeast Asia. Highpoints include the awesome Ma Pi Leng Pass (1500m/4921ft) between Dong Van and Meo Vac, and the equally spectacular Quan Bai Valley (‘Heaven’s Gate’), a vale of bucolic minority villages swathed in groves of plum and peach trees, where ginseng and cinnamon are widely cultivated.



Ba Be National Park

One of the unsung delights of Vietnam’s far north is beautiful Ba Be Lake, focal point of an eponymous national park that preserves a tract of superb limestone mountains and forest. Hills dotted with ancient pines surge from the glassy waters of the lake, providing sanctuary for a range of rare creatures, including the endangered Tonkin snub-nosed langur. Few visitors travel here outside the summer holiday season, ensuring a tranquil experience of this pristine area. Excursion boats are on hand for leisurely trips on the lake to hidden waterfalls, caves and minority villages. The most popular excursion is the one into Hang Pong Cave, a 300-metre-long grotto which tunnels through the base of a mountain. The jungle area around the lake is also dotted with ethnic minority villages belonging to the H’mong, Dao and Tay, some of which hold attractive homestays.



Mai Chau

The remote Mai Chau Valley, a couple of hours’ drive out of Hanoi in the lower reaches of the Truong Son Mountains, makes an excellent base for treks into the nearby hills, inhabited by a mix of ethnic minority communities, including the H’mong and Tai. Staying in local houses, you’ll have opportunities to meet local people and go for extended cycle rides through rice fields and villages of wooden stilt houses in which the livestock are stabled on the ground floor. In the evenings, be sure to sample rice wine, or *ruou can*, drunk communally from large jars using bamboo straws – the perfect primer for sessions of traditional music and dance, which many homestays offer as entertainment. Standards of both hospitality and hygiene are high in the valley, making its homestays comfortable bases from which to make treks deeper in the surrounding hills.

Ethnic Minorities of North Vietnam

Around six million minority people inhabit the northern provinces of Vietnam, bordering Laos and China. The most numerous are the Muong and Tai in the northwest, the Tay and Nung in the northeast, and the H’mong and Dao, who are scattered across the region. Originally migrants from southern China, the groups are distinguishable by their varied and colourful forms of traditional dress. Sunday markets in the towns of Sapa and Bac Ha attract large numbers of minority people, including the most



vibrantly dressed of all, the Flower H’mong. With more time, you can also drive to the extreme north to the area around Ha Giang, where the landscape is wilder and visitors fewer in number. Whichever route you opt for, experienced guides are essential. Apart from translating and advising on etiquette, they’ll also help you to learn a few phrases in the local dialects, which serve to break the ice with your hosts. Guides employed by TransIndus are chosen for their expertise on the region and its people.





Hue

During the 143-year reign of the Nguyen dynasty (1802-1945), the last ruling family of Vietnam, Hue was an imperial capital famed for the piety of its monasteries and splendour of its royal palaces and mausoleums. Much damage was inflicted on its monuments by the Indochina wars, but extensive restoration work has revived some of the town’s former glory. Hue’s north side is dominated by the Imperial City or Dai Noi (literally ‘Great Enclosure’) – a splendid fortress of interlocking courtyards encircled by high ramparts. At its heart lies the ‘Forbidden Purple City’ where the Emperor, his Queen and five ranks of concubines, servants and eunuchs resided amid fabulous pomp. No less architecturally impressive are the Nguyen’s ornate tombs, dotted over pretty farmland to the south of the town, best reached by bicycle or river cruise.



Hoi An

A thriving port before it was eclipsed by nearby Da Nang, Hoi An’s Old Quarter preserves a unique cultural legacy spanning more than three-hundred years of colonial trade. Wandering its grid of 17th-century streets, you’ll pass some fine examples of old tube houses, Chinese pagodas, elaborately decorated community halls and shrines, and a wonderful Japanese covered bridge, as well as a restored French enclave. Tourism has certainly made its mark here, but most of the town is traffic free and ideal for relaxed wanderings. Savour the traditional Vietnamese atmosphere of the riverfront and market district, and the old-world, hybrid charm of antique houses. Or shop for locally made art, crafts and silk garments, displayed in numerous boutiques around the backstreets. Hoi An’s traditional tea shops and restaurants are also good places to sample local dishes such as spicy steamed mackerel in banana leaf, *cau lau* noodles, and white-rose dumplings.



Da Lat

Developed by the French as a refuge from the stifling humidity of Saigon, Da Lat is today Vietnam’s most popular hill resort. Its refreshing climate and faded Gallic ambiance have made it a favourite destination for Vietnamese newly-weds and courting couples, who flock here to enjoy trips in swan shaped paddle boats on the Lake of Sighs, admire views of the Valley of Love and giggle their way around the quirky Hang Na Crazy House – a cross between an amusement park ghost castle and guest house made of concrete mushrooms and tunnels. Foreign visitors, meanwhile, come for the fresh air, delightful scenery and crafts produce sold at the local markets and out in the surrounding villages, where members of the Kh’o, Chill and Ma ethnic minorities produce a fabulous array of hand woven and embroidered textiles. Buying is typically conducted at a leisurely pace over cups of fragrant green tea.



My Son

Foremost among the attractions around Hoi An are the ruins of ancient My Son, an important Cham religious centre between the 4th and 13th century, which was badly damaged by American bombing in 1968. Classed as a World Heritage monument by UNESCO, the site originally comprised 70 structures, although only around 20 remain intact today. The most striking of them feature tall sanctuary towers, or kalan, adorned with decorative brickwork and exquisite sculpture. Depicting Hindu deities, celestial nymphs (apsaras), dancing girls, demons and musicians, the figures exhibit traits drawn from both Javanese and Indian tradition. The valley setting of My Son is wonderful: lush forested hills enfold the ruins, which are thought to have been the longest inhabited ancient city in Southeast Asia. Hoi An or the resort of nearby Cua Dai Beach lie around 40 minutes’ drive away and make ideal bases for visits.



Visiting the DMZ

The so-called ‘DMZ’, or ‘De-militarized Zone’, is a tract of rough jungle and hills that formerly separated North and South Vietnam, and which saw some of the most intense fighting during the war. For anyone with even a passing interest in the conflict, a day visit to the area is worth considering. Tours generally include stops at US marine and artillery outposts, such as the infamous Khe San Combat Base

(KSCB), scene of a particularly fierce and protracted battle in 1968, and the Vinh Moc Tunnels, where an entire village lived underground for two and a half years. As the sites are spread out and retain scant physical remains, knowledgeable and enthusiastic experts such as the local guides we use are essential for appreciating the wider historical context of the DMZ.



Cooking Classes in Hoi An

Should you feel inspired to find out more about the town’s distinctive culinary traditions, join our highly recommended cookery classes, staged in one of Hoi An’s most famous restaurants. The day begins with a guided shopping trip around the fresh produce market to source ingredients, such as saw-tooth coriander and local mint, then moves on to sessions in an al fresco kitchen where you’ll learn how to prepare a number of different dishes for a slap-up supper, served for travelling companions.





Ho Chi Minh City

Thien Hau Pagoda

Ho Chi Minh City – or ‘HCMC’ as it’s more often referred to these days – epitomizes the contrasting facets of modern Vietnam. Vibrant, dynamic and evolving at a breathless pace, it also retains strong connections with its past. As ‘Saigon’, the metropolis served as the capital of French Indochina, acquiring a spread of suave buildings and boulevards that earned for it the epithet ‘Paris of the Orient’. More than a hint of Gallic grandeur survives in the swanky Dong Khoi district, setting for Graham Greene’s era-defining novel, *The Quiet American*, where now designer boutiques line up alongside some of Asia’s finest restaurants and smartest hotels.

In 1975, tanks crashed through the gates of the presidential palace a few blocks away from Dong Khoi to signal the end of the Vietnam War. Since re-christened ‘Reunification Hall’, the 1960s concrete behemoth has been turned into an extraordinary museum where visitors can marvel at the kitsch furniture and decadent décor installed by the leaders of South Vietnam, who ran the war from a command centre in the basement.

No less extravagant, though on a smaller scale and more traditionally Asian, is the resplendent Jade Emperor Pagoda, the loveliest of HCMC’s many Chinese-style temples. Roofed with green ceramic tiles, its salmon-pink walls enclose chambers filled with colourful papier-maché deities and richly carved wood. The building was erected by Cantonese merchants at the start of the 20th century, along with many others in the atmospheric Cholon quarter, whose markets are brimming with silk, spices and jade souvenirs.



Cao Dai Holy See

Another highly recommended day trip from HCMC is to the Great Divine Temple of the Cao Dai religion at Long Hoa village, 59 miles (96km) northwest of the city. Founded in 1926, Cao Dai is an amalgam of Taoism, Confucism, Christianity and Islam and its holiest place of worship reflects this diverse mix of influences. Around 3 million worshippers come here annually, dressed in white or coloured robes, to participate in the ceremony held at noon each day. Visitors are welcome to watch from the balcony, which yields a jaw-dropping view of the elaborately decorated Prayer Hall, with its polychrome pillars and dramatic ‘Altar of the All-Seeing Eye’.



Cu Chi Tunnels

During the Vietnam War, among the tactics used by Vietcong guerrillas to evade capture, was the digging of extensive tunnel networks, protected by hidden entrances. One of the largest of these secret underworlds survives at Cu Chi village, just north of HCMC, where visitors can explore a small section of a staggering 125 miles (200km) of cavities carved on various levels – a testament to the tenacity of the North Vietnamese forces in the face of the American onslaught. At nearby Ben Duoc, a smaller tunnel system purpose-built for tourists offers a less claustrophobic experience.

Vespa Tour of HCMC

A great way to pack a lot of sights into a short time while in HCMC is to join a guided Vespa tour. Visitors travel pillion or on their own vintage Vespa while their English speaking guide leads them through the swirling HCMC traffic to visit some quirky, off-beat and quintessentially

Vietnamese attractions, such as the ‘Bird Lovers’ Club’ in Tao Dan Park, the flower market on Nghi Tam Avenue, a funeral home (to experience a traditional funeral service), traditional textile bazaar and Chinese medicine quarter. Other tours focus on street food, music and nightlife.





The Mekong Delta

The Delta of the Mekong River begins a couple of hours' drive south of Ho Chi Minh City, and extends west over 15,000 sq miles (39,000 sq km) to the Gulf of Thailand. Known as 'Vietnam's Rice Bowl', it's one of the most intensively farmed, densely inhabited regions in Asia. Mile upon mile of lush paddy fields carpet the flat landscape, lined by fruit orchards and coconut groves. Encompassing a chequerboard of cultures, this is also one of the most ethnically diverse parts of the country – a fact reflected in the rich architectural heritage of the larger towns, many of whose inhabitants live crammed into houseboats on the river, or in stilt houses perched above it.

As picturesque as it is fascinating for the visitor, the Delta's unique way of life can only really be observed from the water, and travelling around the region you'll have numerous opportunities to take a boat trip – whether a short foray to a local market, or an overnight cruise north towards the Cambodian border.

Either way, the scenes of everyday local life glimpsed from the water are likely to leave the most lasting impressions: field workers in conical straw hats hunched over fields of ripe rice paddy; houseboats piled high with cargoes of pink dragon fruit and pineapples; children sluicing water over their buffaloes in the morning, or pedalling home from school in immaculate uniforms later in the day, as fishermen cast handnets from tiny canoes, and saffron-robed monks stroll to evening prayers through shafts of angled sunlight.

A great way to experience life in the Delta at close quarters is to take a cruise on a *song xanh* river boat. These stately craft may be used for short day cruises and longer multi-night trips. For more, see our special section on river cruising in Indochina, p26.



Can Tho

Although the Delta is primarily a rural region, it holds plenty of large, bustling towns too, and Can Tho is the liveliest of them. It's also the most rewarding to explore, thanks to the wealth of Vietnamese pagodas, Chinese and Khmer temples, mosques and churches lining its streets. Most visitors, however, come to visit the wonderful floating markets a short trip upriver, where local people buy and sell a prodigious array of fresh produce, piled on to an equally amazing selection of craft, ranging from tiny rowed sampans to lumbering houseboats. Easily reachable on a day trip from Can Tho is the delightful Bang Lang Bird Sanctuary, a 1.2-hectare wetland area famous above all for its population of resident storks, egrets and cormorants. Whether perched in the reserve's partly submerged trees or wheeling through the air in spectacular flocks, the birds create a mesmerizing spectacle.



Floating Markets

The daily fresh produce markets of the Mekong Delta provide the best opportunity for visitors to experience local life at its most colourful and compelling. As with most other activities in this riverine world, business is typically conducted on the water. An early start is essential. Farmers begin to gather shortly before dawn, advertising whatever produce they may have to sell that day by tying samples to tall bamboo poles (in the absence of space for stalls) and hoisting them into the air. Buyers chug or paddle around the wholesale vessels in smaller craft to compare prices, serviced by a flotilla of longtailed boats selling hot-noodles-and-crab-broth breakfasts, with steaming cups of coffee.



Chau Doc and Sam Mountain

Like Can Tho, this busy border town is an important market hub with an ethnically mixed population of Cham, Chinese, Khmer and Muslims, many of whom live in large houseboats or rickety stilt houses. Located on the Hau Giang River, it's also a major staging post for water-borne traffic heading to or from Phnom Penh. Well worth a side trip from the town is Sam Mountain, a few miles southwest, whose wooded slopes rise from a sea of viridescent rice paddy. Vietnamese visitors pour through to pray at the cluster of gaudily decorated shrines and pagodas at the foot of the hill, from where a pathway winds through boulders and trees to a spectacular viewpoint at the summit. Also nearby is a beautiful bird sanctuary called Tra Su, where visitors are paddled in canoes under a canopy of cajuput trees teeming with colourful birdlife and butterflies.



Cycling in the Mekong Delta

The flat countryside of the Delta makes perfect pedaling terrain, and bicycles afford an enjoyable way to immerse yourself deep in the bucolic life of rural Vietnam. We offer a choice of different guided trips, starting from various hubs (including Ho Chi Minh City) and taking you to fruit orchards and farms, paper-making factories, floating markets, local rice mills and boatyards. Lunch is typically served in a village house, giving you an opportunity to sample traditional Mekong food in an authentic setting. Longer excursions of 12-18 miles (20-30km) may also be arranged for more committed cyclists. Tours may be self-guided or accompanied, as desired. The terrain is flat throughout and there's generally plenty of shade, with regular tea stops at local cafes.



Beaches of Vietnam

At some stage in their holiday, many visitors to Vietnam wish to experience the translucent, blue-green water, white sand and tropical greenery of the country’s beautiful coastline, and there are a wealth of resorts to choose from, ranging from boutique places on big-city beachfronts to Robinson-Crusoe-esque hideaways on tiny coral-edged islets. Midway down the coastline of the South China Sea, Lang Co, Hoi An and Da Nang all lie on the fringes of Vietnam’s cultural hub. With accommodation options to suit every budget, their beautiful beaches and lagoons provide relaxing bases from which to explore the Cham ruins, pretty merchants’ towns and former royal centres inland. Relaxing spells on the beach may be mixed with visits to traditional fishing settlements, floating markets and cruises along narrow canals.

Thanks to its spectacular, 4-mile (6km) arc of golden sand and surf, Nha Trang, in south central Vietnam, ranks amongst the country’s top beach destinations. Offshore, a scattering of islands hold world-class scuba diving and snorkeling, and provide targets for leisurely boat excursions that pause in hidden coves for wild swims and fresh seafood barbeques. Further south, and closer to Ho Chi Minh City, Phan Thiet has in recent years been upstaged by its livelier neighbour, Mui Ne, but as a consequence offers more peace and quiet, and some great value accommodation overlooking the town’s superb, golden sand beach. The red dunes and palm-shaded lanes of nearby fishing villages also make ideal terrain for short cycle rides. If you’re looking for somewhere really far-flung to unwind, the teardrop-shaped island of Phu Quoc in the Gulf of Thailand, 9 miles (15km) south of the Cambodian coast, is hard to beat. A brace of idyllic hideaways have sprung up in recent years alongside its powder-soft, white-sand beaches. The island also boasts one of Vietnam’s most highly rated diving and snorkelling sites – the An Thoi archipelago – where dugong, grouper and parrot fish are regularly sighted amid colourful coral reefs.



Furama Resort, Da Nang | A lavish, award-winning five-star resort, set against a backdrop of forested mountains, the Furama occupies a prime stretch of famous Da Nang Beach, to the south of Da Nang city. Its spacious villas and suites come in four categories and are all conceived in a blend of French colonial and traditional Vietnamese styles. A big plus of this resort is its proximity to the exquisite Son Tra (‘Monkey Mountain’) peninsula – perfect terrain for leisurely walks, cycle rides and fishing trips. There are also two world-class, 18-hole golf courses nearby.



Nam Hai, Hoi An | A shrine to high-design on golden Ha My Beach, the Nam Hai is the hippest, sleekest, most effortlessly stylish address in central Vietnam, and quite simply one of the world’s coolest hotels. It’s 100 free-standing villas are widely spaced around artfully landscaped, sea-facing gardens. Dark, tropical woods and egg-shell lacquer infuse a classical Asian feel to the contemporary interiors. For those who can bear to tear themselves away, Hoi An is only a 20-minute minibus ride away.



Sailing Club Resort, Mui Ne | Located on a pristine beach, this is a gem of a hotel tucked away in lush green gardens with spectacular sea views. Blending in thoughtfully with its surroundings, sustainability is at the heart of this resort. The in-room amenities are all eco-friendly, bamboo straws have replaced plastic and initiatives such as meat-free Mondays are in place. The accommodation ranges from smartly designed rooms to spacious bungalows, all incorporating chic designer furnishings and private terraces overlooking the gardens or beach.



The Anantara, Quy Nhon Villas | This is a wonderful addition to Vietnam’s delightful crop of beach properties. The upcoming Quy Nhon beach, once served as the capital of the Kingdom of Champa in the 11th century and as an important US naval and military base during the Vietnam War and some wonderful distractions. The ambience of the hotel is all about romantic beachside luxury, where the large windows, open-air showers, and sun decks with private plunge pools merge with the open beach and give a sense of being part of the landscape.

Banyan Tree, Lang Co | This luxury beach property was the first big name hotel to spot the potential of the heavenly stretch of coast dividing Hue and Hoi An. It enjoys a sublime location at the head of a gently curving bay, framed by a backdrop of jungle and soaring mountain ridges. The rooms are all red-roofed villas featuring ultra-stylish interiors and their own plunge pools overlooking the beach. Wood beams and little private courtyards lend the feel of a traditional Hue dwelling.

La Veranda, Phu Quoc | Oozing Indochina chic, this is the smartest option on the island’s famous ‘Long Beach’, with an old-world elegance created by its butter-yellow exteriors, paddle fans and deep, sea-facing verandas. The rooms are simple and airy, opening on to lush tropical gardens where there’s a generous sized pool (try the heavenly sorbets served straight to your sun lounger). Nicest of all, and closest to the waves, are the detached ‘Deluxe Villas’, which boast their own four-posters and breezy terraces.



Six Senses Luxury - Vietnam

Six Senses are an international, multi-award-winning chain of boutique hotels and spa resorts specializing in modern eco luxe – exclusive retreats at incredibly beautiful locations across the world, with an emphasis on deep relaxation. ‘Low-key, high style’ could be their moto. Natural wood, stone and white silk are used to create irresistibly stylish, elemental hideaways where you can indulge in cutting-edge cuisine, holistic spa therapies and tailor-made activities amid settings of undreamed-of scenic splendour. In Vietnam, Six Senses currently run two separate properties. Hidden on a remote peninsula midway down the east coast, the Ninh Vanh Bay can

only be reached by boat. Staying here feels like becoming a pampered castaway. Each of its villas have their own pools, nestled amid the granite boulders or overlooking the treetops to the turquoise water and white sand of the bay below. The complex is interconnected by rope bridges, achieving a perfect equilibrium between nature and contemporary luxury. The other is further south at Con Dao. Set above a gloriously far-flung bay of turquoise water and soft, golden sand, its teak villas feature antique, carved panels from old Vietnamese houses, and are all split-levelled, with private plunge pools and heavenly views over the beach to jungle-covered islands in the distance.

Some of our favourite hotels, Vietnam

Vietnam holds numerous hotels of great sophistication and character, allowing you to experience the country in considerable style. Thankfully, many of those developed during the boom of the past two decades draw heavily on its historic architectural traditions, whether those of the French Indochina era or medieval past. Whether you're enjoying the bright lights of a grand hotel in Hanoi or a barefoot beach resort on a remote island, distinctive, high-quality accommodation lies very much at the heart of Vietnam's appeal.



Victoria Sapa Resort & Spa, Sapa | On a hilltop overlooking the town of Sapa, the Victoria Sapa Resort and Spa is the region's top hotel – a four-star offering unrivalled levels of comfort and service. It's set in its own manicured grounds, with grandstand views of the surrounding peaks. Varnished wood floors, exposed stone walls and flickering log fires give the place the feel of a grand Alpine lodge; and the chalet style is carried through to the rooms, where warm toned ethnic bedspreads add a dash of Vietnamese luxury.



Vedana Lagoon Resort, Hue | Nestled amidst lush greenery on the banks of one of Southeast Asia's largest lagoons, Vedana Resort is a 45-minute drive from Hue's city centre. Equally enticing to honeymooners and families, the resort boasts of Vietnam's first over-water bungalows and each of its 29 luxury villas have a private sundeck and a balcony overlooking the expansive lagoon or a private garden. Start your day with a Tai Chi or yoga class, rounding off your restful stay with sumptuous Vietnamese cuisine at the Horizon restaurant or the sunset seafood restaurant.



Anantara Hoi An Resort, Hoi An | It's just as well Hoi An holds so much fascination or you'd be tempted to squander your entire holiday idling at this delightful faux-colonial hotel on the banks of the Thu Bon River. Since it opened in 2005, the Anantara has been our first choice in the town, thanks to its gracious, retro style and plum location on the waterfront. Facing either the courtyard garden or river, the rooms are simple, smart and spacious, the bathrooms large, and pool ideal for revitalizing dips between trips into town.



Sofitel Legend Metropole, Hanoi | The Metropole Hanoi is a classic, colonial-style grand hotel – large, imposing, elegant and a city landmark since it first opened in 1901. For maximum historic ambiance, stay in the Old Wing, whose high ceilings, wood panelling and teak shutters have changed little since the Chaplins honeymooned here, and Graham Greene used to hang out in the bar. The restaurants are superb (don't miss the legendary afternoon chocolate buffet) and the location, with Hoan Kiem Lake on the doorstep, is perfect for explorations of old Hanoi. An early morning walk around the parks and streets close to the hotel reveals a calm and peaceful side of the city's French quarter, with its citizens engaging in Tai Chi, badminton and yoga. Rejuvenation facilities on site include a luxury spa complex, serene outdoor pool and gym.



Emeralda Ninh Binh Resort & Spa, Ninh Binh | Resembling the country palace of a medieval Emperor, this beautifully designed retreat outside Hanoi rises from vivid green rice paddy, it's traditional pagoda roofs set against an awe-inspiring backdrop of karst mountains draped in vegetation. Lotus ponds flank the pathways leading to the spacious villas, which come in three categories: we recommend upgrading to Deluxe for the additional sitting space; and families will enjoy the Duplex suites, which comfortably sleep four. A fitness centre and couple of large pools (one heated, the other outdoors) number among the modern amenities on your doorstep. Bicycles are also on offer for leisurely pedals around the nearby villages. A blissful escape from the brouhaha of the nearby city, Emeralda Resort is perfectly placed for explorations of the Ninh Binh's iconic landscape and monuments.



Park Hyatt Saigon, HCMC | In the colonial mould but with all the glitz and modern amenities you'd expect of a world-class five-star, the 9-storey Park Hyatt is regarded by many as the city's top hotel. Its rooms are classically stylish and enjoy a prime location overlooking Lam Son Square, a few blocks from the Opera House, Notre Dame Cathedral and Reunification Palace. Guests may choose between two award-winning gourmet restaurants (one specializing in Italian, the other, Vietnamese seafood and Western steaks). There's a beautiful spa, and a large pool, as well as fitness complex, bar and business center. The hotel also has an inviting tropical landscape garden as well as some new, tastefully redesigned rooms, following a major refurbishment programme in the first half of 2015, completely revamping its interiors, furnishings and fixtures.

Travel information & Itineraries, Vietnam

When to travel to Vietnam

As a rule of thumb, autumn (October–December) and spring (February–April) tend to be the most congenial. The southwest monsoon, from March through September, affects Southern Vietnam more, while the cooler, northwest monsoon, which blows from October until April, largely impacts Central and Northern Vietnam. Bear in mind that to catch the beach resorts of the south at their sunniest, the dry period between December and March is the optimum period but the north may see some rain during January and early February. Average maximum temperatures are much higher in the south, hovering around 27–30°C in HCMC. In Hanoi, temperatures drop to a cool 17–20°C from December–March, peaking at 30°C in the summer months. Higher elevations such as those in Sapa, of course, mean lower temperatures.

How to travel to Vietnam

Thai Airways flies daily to Vietnam via Bangkok. Travelling through Singapore or one of the Gulf hubs are other options, and recently, Vietnam Airlines direct flights from London Heathrow to Hanoi and HCMC have become increasingly popular. On arrival, TransIndus clients are met by one of our representatives and transferred by chauffeured, air-conditioned car to their chosen hotel. Transport around the country is also by similar chauffeur-driven car. English speaking guides accompany you for the sightseeing sessions. All our guides specialize in specific destinations so you'll be assigned different ones at each stage, which ensures consistent levels of expertise across the country.



Classic Vietnam | 14Days

Alternating city stays with forays up the Mekong and into the mountains, this trip strings together Vietnam's signature experiences into an exceptionally varied fortnight.

- Day 1** Overnight flight from UK to Hanoi.
- Day 2** Arrive Hanoi; stay two nights.
- Day 3** Discover the atmospheric old quarter, Ho Chi Minh's mausoleum and One-Pillar Pagoda.
- Day 4** Travel by road to Halong Bay and board a traditional junk boat for an overnight cruise.
- Day 5** Return to Hanoi, and take a late-afternoon flight to Hue; stay two nights.
- Day 6** Explore historic palaces and tombs of the Imperial City, on the banks of the Perfume River.
- Day 7** Drive to Hoi An over the spectacular Hai Van Pass, visiting Danang en route; stay three nights.
- Day 8** Explore the riverfront and old town in the morning. Afternoon at leisure for cycle rides, cookery classes or a trip to the Cham ruins at My Son.
- Day 9** Day at leisure to visit nearby Cua Dai beach or the former DMZ.
- Day 10** Fly to Ho Chi Minh City in the morning and continue by road to the Mekong Delta. Board a private sampan for a three-day/two-night cruise.
- Day 11** Visits various monuments, and craft and farming villages in the Delta.
- Day 12** An early start is recommended to see the largest and most vibrant floating market in the Delta, before returning to Ho Chi Minh City by road; stay two nights.
- Day 13** Sightseeing of Cu Chi Tunnels and Ho Chi Minh City.
- Day 14** Fly back to UK.



Ethnic Vietnam | 19Days

Experience the richness and colour of Vietnam's ethnic minority villages in this 19 days tour, which combines city and town stays with explorations of the Central Highlands and Tonkin Alps.

- Day 1** Fly overnight from UK to HCMC.
- Day 2** Arrive HCMC; stay one night.
- Day 3** Fly to Ban Me Thuot and drive to Buôn Ma Thout. Visit Jun ethnic villages and take a canoe ride on the Lak Lake; stay two nights.
- Day 4** Trek through Yok Don National Park today and visit M'ngong ethnic villages.
- Day 5** Drive to Kon Tum, visit Jarai ethnic villages; stay two nights.
- Day 6** Explore Kon Tum town and visit Bahnar ethnic villages.
- Day 7** Drive to Hoi An; stay two nights.
- Day 8** Walking tour of the old town in the morning. Afternoon at leisure.
- Day 9** Fly to Hanoi; stay one night. Afternoon city tour.
- Day 10** Morning city tour. In the evening, board the overnight train to Lao Cai.
- Day 11** Explore Tay and Dzao ethnic villages. Homestay for one night.
- Day 12** Full day trekking today to explore Xi Pho ethnic villages. Homestay for one night.
- Day 13** Visit a morning ethnic market. Day at leisure. Stay in Sapa for one night.
- Day 14** Transfer to Ha Giang; stay one night.
- Day 15** Drive to Dong Van over scenic Ma Pi Leng Pass. Stay for one night.
- Day 16** Visit the French Fortress of Pu Lo and drive to Ba Be Lake, visiting Tay ethnic villages en route; stay two nights.
- Day 17** Explore the three lakes by boat and visit Thac Dau Dang waterfall.
- Day 18** Drive back to Hanoi; stay one night.
- Day 19** Return flight to UK.



Discover Vietnam | 19Days

This 19 days itinerary covers the best of what Vietnam has to offer, including the country's iconic sights, its beautiful coastline, and giving you a glimpse of life in the villages of the Central Highlands.

- Day 1** Fly overnight from UK to Hanoi.
- Day 2** Arrive Hanoi; stay two nights.
- Day 3** Experience the iconic sights of Hanoi.
- Day 4** Travel to Halong Bay and board a traditional junk boat for an overnight cruise.
- Day 5** Return to Hanoi by road and take an overnight train to Hue.
- Day 6** Arrive Hue; stay two nights. Visit the splendid Imperial City and tombs.
- Day 7** Explore the pretty streets and river-front of Hue town, before taking a boat ride along the Perfume River.
- Day 8** Drive to Hoi An over the Hai Van Pass, visiting Danang en route. Stay two nights.
- Day 9** Walking tour of the old town in the morning. Afternoon at leisure.
- Day 10** Travel by road to the coastal town of Quy Nhon; stay two nights.
- Day 11** Day at leisure to relax by the beach or enjoy spa treatments at your resort.
- Day 12** Travel by road to the beach town of Nha Trang; stay two nights.
- Day 13** Day at leisure for swimming, sun bathing and boat trips.
- Day 14** Travel to the hill station of Da Lat, in the Central Highlands; stay two nights.
- Day 15** Explore the town's markets and minority villages in the surrounding hills.
- Day 16** Travel by road to Ho Chi Minh City; stay three nights.
- Day 17** Explore Cu Chi Tunnels and the city.
- Day 18** Excursion to the Mekong Delta to visit craft villages and floating markets.
- Day 19** Fly back to UK.

River Cruising Vietnam & Cambodia



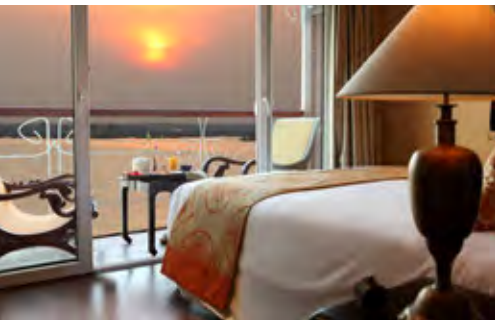
The Mekong and Red River provide gateways to some of the most compelling landscapes and cultural centres in Southeast Asia, from the ruins of ancient Angkor and great capitals such as Phnom Penh, to the vibrant market towns of the Mekong Delta and hill tribe villages of the Tonkin Alps. Moreover, thanks to a handful of impressive cruise companies, it's possible to savour this extraordinary richness in a style not seen since the colonial era. A small fleet of elegant, triple-decker steamers and Rhine-style cruisers ply the Mekong and Red rivers, pausing at the world-famous sights along the way, as well as a host of lesser visited monuments, craft settlements and religious sites. Travelling via the water yields a completely different perspective on the region. Life along Indochina's great rivers tends to be lived at a slower, more organic pace. Fishing, farming and religious rituals are often based around them, and a floating boutique hotel makes a wonderful base from which to enjoy the constantly changing tableaux. All of the luxury cruisers have breezy observation decks and partially shaded sun terraces, where you can savour the views from the comfort of a Jacuzzi or plunge pool. You'll also have plenty of opportunities to step off the boat and engage with local life along the river banks. Varied programmes of excursions are laid on for guests during the day, and music and dance recitals, or lectures by experts on the region, are offered as after-dinner entertainment. Here's a rundown of our favourite cruise vessels operating in the region. For more information on departure dates and routes, contact one of our Indochina consultants.



Cruising Vietnam & Cambodia

Pandaw | The Scottish-run Pandaw company spearheaded river cruising in the region and continues to set the benchmark with its fleet of replica 1920s steamers. Polished brass and teak enhance the romantic colonial feel of the vessels, whose beautiful air-conditioned staterooms (twin or double) are lined with varnished wood and enlivened with silk bedspreads and bolsters. Kick back in the cocktail bar or lounge on the semi-shaded sun deck, long drink in hand, as the river views unfold. Routes range from the standard 7-day cruise from HCMC (Saigon) to Siem Reap to shorter 3 or 4-night trips between the major cities. In addition, Pandaw offers an extended, 11-day 'Mekong Undiscovered' tour, pressing on as far upriver as Kratie (home to a pod of rare Irrawaddy dolphins; see p37), and Kampong Cham.

Heritage Line: Jayavarman & Jahan | Heritage Line runs cruises of various lengths on the Mekong, from the classic 7-night trip from HCMC (Saigon) to Siem Reap, to shorter river stages or Delta tours of 2 or 3 nights, aboard its two luxury cruisers, the Jayavarman and Jahan. The design of the former takes its cue from the steamers of the French Indochina era, incorporating suave Art Deco touches, blended with exquisite Khmer woodcarvings and Vietnamese lacquerwork. It holds 27 staterooms in total, along with a 1930s-inspired bar and dining hall. Conceived as a floating Maharaja's palace, the Jahan recreates the feel of old India, as the Viceroy and Vicereine might have experienced it on trips upcountry at the end of the 19th century. Its 26 staterooms, which come in 5 different categories, are spread over two decks; all have private balconies and external windows. The upper deck holds the largest pool of any Mekong cruiser.



Song Xanh Sampans | One of the defining features of the waterways interlacing the Mekong Delta are the song xanh river boats, which were formerly used to transport produce around the region, but are nowadays more often deployed as floating guest houses, inspired by similar craft plying the backwaters of Kerala. Spanned by a woven palm-leaf canopy, the en-suite bedrooms are beautifully furnished. Guests are cared for by liveried crews who serve meals and drinks on board, and act as guides as you glide through waterways thick with water hyacinth and lotus blooms, pausing now and again to visit villages, local craft workshops and markets. You can opt for an overnight cruise, or for one lasting two nights, taking you to lesser frequented corners of the Delta.

The Red River Cruise | A recent addition to Indochina's cruise scene has been Pandaw's ground-breaking 10-day trip along Vietnam's Red River. Starting with a tour of Halong Bay's iconic islets and limestone caves, it heads inland for a day's sightseeing around Hanoi, before proceeding up the Red River proper, via a succession of rarely visited villages where you can watch ceramicists, folk painters and silk weavers at work. Elsewhere, the elegant Pandaw Angkor pauses in the Tonkin Alps around Sapa to visit settlements of ethnic minority groups such as the Muon, Black Tai and White Tai, and some astonishing Buddhist temples dating from the 8th-11th centuries. Taking guests to some of the region's true backwater gems, this journey is unique. Pandaw's famous attention to detail also ensures you'll enjoy superlative levels of comfort and service throughout.





Cambodia

Cambodia is still finding its feet after the dark decades of the Pol Pot era, but the future looks promising for this proud nation, whose ancient monuments alone ensure its prominence on most travellers' must-see lists. Chief among the country's historic vestiges, of course, is Angkor – the sprawling religious complex assembled by the Khmer kings in the north of the country. Thanks to the international airport at nearby Siem Reap, it's possible to fly directly to the site these days, bypassing the rest of the country completely. But in doing so you'd miss some of the most enthralling, and unspoiled, destinations in Southeast Asia, ranging from the jungle-covered Cardamom Mountains and charming coastal towns, to the laid-back, traditional market hubs of the Mekong River.



Highlights of Cambodia

Temples of Angkor | No pictures can fully prepare you for the magnificence, scale and sheer exoticism of Angkor's medieval temples, many of which remain entwined by tree roots and jungle creepers.

Kep | Lined with crumbling old villas, the seaside resort of Kep is popular among Cambodians for its king-sized crabs, but also serves as a springboard for trips to nearby nature reserves and hidden beaches.

Prek Toal Bird Sanctuary | On the northern tip of Tonle Sap Lake, this reserve hosts an extraordinary concentration of wetland birds, among them large flocks of pelicans and rare adjutant storks.

Kratie | Savour the legendary sunsets over the Mekong from the riverfront of this atmospheric market town, famous for its pod of critically endangered Irrawaddy Dolphins.

Phnom Penh | A typically Southeast Asian mix of chaotic streets, tree-lined boulevards and riverfront promenades, the capital centres on a palace complex featuring Buddhas made of solid gold, emeralds and diamonds.

Sen Monorom | Hub of remote, fascinating Mondulkiri province, Sen Monorom lies close to the spectacular Bou Sra Waterfalls as well as numerous ethnic minority villages – and a heart-warming elephant rescue centre.

Battambang | The riverside location and colonial-era architecture of Cambodia's second city give it a relaxed, small town feel which many visitors love. Beautiful hilltop temples and pretty villages dot the surrounding countryside.

Cruising the Mekong | Relive the glamour of the colonial era by travelling on the Mekong in the stylish comfort of a luxury river cruiser, calling at a string of off-track temples, monasteries and market villages along the way.

Travel Information

Time zone: UTC+7 hours

Flying time: 13.5 hours

Currency: Riel

Capital: Phnom Penh

When to go

Month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Temperature °C	26	27	30	30	30	30	29	28	28	27	26	25
Rainfall mm	1	4	28	61	176	221	237	151	276	248	82	10
Best to travel	●●	●●	●●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●●	●●

●● The best time to travel

● A good time to travel

● Low season

Be inspired

Speak with one of our Cambodia specialists who will be delighted to help you plan your ideal holiday.

Tel: **020 8566 3739**

Web: **www.transindus.com**



Banteay Srei temple

The Temples of Angkor

Few ancient wonders on the planet cast a spell like Angkor, capital of the Khmer Empire, where generations of megalomaniac kings erected giant temple complexes amid the jungle of what is now northern Cambodia. Conceived on a truly astonishing scale, the shrines that today loom over the surrounding forest canopy and paddy fields are all the more miraculous for having lain forgotten for five centuries. Not until 1858 did the wider world rediscover the monuments, which have since become the most iconic in Southeast Asia.

The crowning achievement of the Khmers, Angkor Wat, along with neighbouring Angkor Thom, receive the lion's share of public attention. Yet the site encompasses dozens of less well known temples, many of them in a state of collapse, their doorways, carved friezes and sanctuary towers engulfed by tree roots.

Spread across a wide area of farmland, fruit orchards and forest to the north of shimmering Tonle Sap Lake, Angkor served as the capital of the Khmer Empire for 649 years and was, in its heyday, the largest and most sophisticated city in the world, with a population of around one million. The secret of its success was an extensive water management system of huge reservoirs and canals (many of them still in use today). These boosted agricultural output, and thus revenues for the Khmer 'God-Kings', who emptied lavish fortunes glorifying their rule and that of their most beloved deities with shrines the like of which have never been seen since in Southeast Asia.

Visiting Angkor | We recommend a minimum of at least three days at Angkor – enough to see its centrepieces, but little more. Extend that by another day or two and you'll have time to venture off the beaten track to lesser frequented sites beyond the reach of the tour group trail. Our guides know great ways to sidestep the crowds, enabling you to savour the majesty of the ruins in relative peace, and will be on hand throughout your tour to advise on the best routes and sightseeing options.

Siem Reap | A provincial market town until the tourism explosion of the post-Pol Pot era, Siem Reap is today the principal gateway to Angkor. Over a million visitors pour through its airport each year and most stay in or around the town, which makes a perfect hub for day trips to a range of destinations in the area, including the atmospheric Phnom Kulen National Park further north, and Tonle Sap lake to the east, site of the wonderful Prek Toal bird sanctuary. From Siem Reap, the riverside town of Battambang, with its French-era villas and temple-topped hills, also lies a few hours' scenic drive away.

The upside of Siem Reap's popularity as a base is a wide choice of quality hotels, restaurants and bars, as well as a plethora of shopping opportunities. A few pockets of authentic Cambodian atmosphere also survive in the local fresh produce market, and numerous performances of Khmer Apsara dance, music and shadow puppetry are staged in the evenings. Visitors interested in traditional Cambodian arts and crafts may also visit workshops of the renowned Artisans Angkor company, which has spearheaded the revival of sericulture, stone and wood carving, lacquering and painting in the area.





Angkor Wat

The greatest of all the shrines created by the Khmers – in fact, the single largest religious building anywhere in the world – is Angkor Wat. Dedicated to Vishnu (the Hindu deity of whom King Suryavarman II considered himself a reincarnation), the temple is a vivid testament to the power, ambition and unbridled narcissism of the region’s ancient rulers. Early morning, before the tour buses arrive, is the best time to admire its colonnaded galleries of exquisite stone-carved apsaras (celestial dancers) and soaring corn-cob towers, reflected to sublime effect in the lotus-dappled moat.



Overnight Temple Safaris

A wonderful way to explore ancient Angkor is to join one of our popular Temple Safaris out of Siem Reap. As well as taking you to several less well-known archeological sites, this soft adventure involves a night under canvas at a specially erected forest camp, where you can enjoy the vivid atmosphere of the Cambodian jungle at night. Typical of the locations visited on the safari is Beng Mealea, an impressive complex almost as large as Angkor Wat, but which has not yet been restored. Clamber among the blocks of collapsed masonry, where fertility goddesses and finely carved cobra heads peer from arched niches, and sinuous kapok roots smother intricately sculpted walkways. Our camp is also sited within easy reach of Koh Ker, the spectacular, but little visited ruined capital of Jayavarman IV, renowned for its colossal statues and weed-choked, 7-storey, pyramidal sanctuary tower of Prasat Thom. Among the highlights of the safari is seeing these remote ruins and its surrounding jungle canopy at sunrise from the top of the tower – a magical experience.



Angkor Thom

The remains of the Khmers’s last great city, Angkor Thom, stand just north of Angkor Wat, enclosed by massive laterite walls and a broad moat. From its centre soars the central sanctuary tower of the mighty Bayon temple, which is perhaps best known for the colossal face-towers that adorn it. No one knows for sure who, or what, the smiling faces represent: they may have been images of the emperor himself, or guardian deities.

Also at Angkor Thom is the famous ‘Elephant Terrace’, the plinth of a now disappeared audience hall whose sides are decorated with striking bas reliefs of parading pachyderms. Jayavarman VI used to sit on this great platform to view his armies returning from victorious battles, such as the one with the Cham dynasty that took place on nearby Tonle Sap Lake in 1177 AD, also featured in the carvings, which are regarded as the finest to have survived from the Khmer era.



Banteay Srei

Made of salmon-hued sandstone, Banteay Srei, 17 miles (27km) north of Angkor Wat, impresses less by its scale than the great artistry of its carvings. Delicately sculpted scenes from Hindu mythology embellish the ornate shrines of the temple, dedicated to the God of Destruction and Preservation, Shiva. The real showstealers here, though, are the voluptuous female deities standing in intricately framed niches around the base of the main sanctuary towers. Swathed in diaphanous silk, the figures are decked from head to toe in exquisite jewellery. Try to visit Banteay Srei in the late afternoon, when the warm light turns the sandstone a molten red colour.

Ta Prohm

The hour after sunrise, while the rest of the world is breakfasting, is the time to be at wonderful Ta Prohm, a stone’s throw east of Angkor Thom. Restoration work has been kept to a minimum in this hauntingly beautiful temple, originally founded in the 12th century by King Jayavarman VII. Like octopus tentacles enveloping their prey, the roots of giant banyans, strangler figs and kapok trees still enfold much of the stonework, creating scenes little changed since those that greeted the French adventurers who first rediscovered Angkor in the 1850s.





Tonle Sap & Prek Toal

The largest freshwater lake in Southeast Asia, Tonle Sap, due south of Siem Reap, supports a population of over a million people, the majority of whom live from rice cultivation and fishing, in stilted or floating villages around its shoreline. During the annual monsoons the lake swells up to six times, as the waters of the Mekong, unable to pass through the relatively narrow channel at Phnom Penh, back up and flood the plains further north. The restoration of flow into the Mekong, at the end of the rainy season, is celebrated by the Water and Moon Festival, when thousands participate in canoe races and religious rituals on the water.

Tonle Sap also attracts huge numbers of wetland birds, among them rare or endangered species such as the spot-billed pelican. The best way to observe the extraordinary conflagration is a visit to the Prek Toal Sanctuary, at the northwestern corner of the lake. Although reachable in a day trip from Siem Reap, it's well worth spending the night in one of the basic stilted cottages at the reserve in order to be there at dawn and dusk, when the vast flocks of painted storks and black-headed ibis are at their liveliest.



Prasat Preah Vihear

This wonderful temple in the far north of the country may see barely a fraction of the visitors its big cousins at Angkor receive each year, but the site occupies a truly astonishing position, scattered over a high plateau in the Dangrek mountains, overlooking a vast chequerboard of rice fields and palm jungle.

The temple was originally founded in the 11th century but substantially enlarged in the 12th during the reign of Suryavarman II (the king responsible for Angkor Wat). Approached by a long flight of stone steps, it's divided into a series of walled enclosures, each one entered via a grand ornamental gateway. The clifftop's easily defensible position ensured it witnessed bouts of fighting during the wars of the 1970s, and one of the most notorious atrocities of the war's fallout took place here, when the Thai military alleged forced 42,000 Cambodian refugees off the escarpment's edge. Those who survived had to cross three miles of minefields before reaching the relative safety of the occupying Vietnamese forces. With the international border running through Prasat Preah Vihear, Thailand and Cambodia still dispute ownership of the site, but it remains one of our favourite off-track destinations in Southeast Asia.



Phnom Kulen National Park

For a total change of atmosphere, we recommend a trip along the bumpy road leading north from Angkor for an hour and a half to the forested Phnom Kulen hills, a tract of steep-sided, table-top mountain where the Khmers founded the ancient city of Mahendrapura, forerunner of Angkor. It was here, in 804 AD, that Jayavarman II famously declared independence from Java, and initiated the cult of 'Devaraja', or the 'God King', ushering in the start of the Angkor era.

Scattered with enigmatic ruins, the sacred plateau is now protected as a national park. Among the many moss-covered archeological treasures lost in its jungles is the River of a Thousand Lingas at Kbal Spean, where the Khmers carved numerous phallic forms representing Shiva into the bedrock of a stream. The site is reached via a steep path through the forest – an invigorating, 30-minute trek. The principal target for Cambodian day trippers, however, is a gilded reclining Buddha, hewn from a giant boulder in the Preah Ang Thom temple. Pilgrims queue to be blessed by the resident monk who lives in a rock cave nearby. For most TransIndus clients, however, the highlight of this foray north from Angkor is often the visit to a spectacular waterfall in the jungle where you can take a refreshing dip – and enjoy piping hot banana fritters afterwards from one of the local vendors!

Battambang

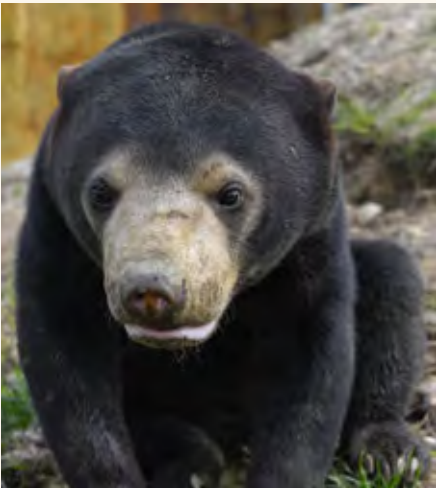
One of the most scenic drives in Cambodia leads from Siem Reap to Battambang, on the banks of the Sangker River. This venerable old city holds a bumper crop of colonial-era architecture, ranging from antique shophouses in the market district to stately French villas lining the broad, leafy boulevards on the south side of town.

Aside from the quirky 'Bamboo train' and a few picturesque temples, the other 'must see' in Battambang is the home of the Phare Ponleu Selpak troupe. Anyone who enjoyed this company's dazzling circus performances in Siem Reap shouldn't miss the chance to watch its trainees being put through their paces. Disadvantaged youngsters from across the region come here to be schooled in dance, acrobatics, juggling and music.



Phnom Penh

The Cambodian capital doesn't feel in quite so much of a rush to embrace the future as its counterparts elsewhere in Southeast Asia. High-rise buildings are beginning to spring up, but they're still outnumbered by colonial-era shophouses and the flaking facades of French-style villas. Begin your sightseeing with a visit to the splendid Royal Palace and adjacent Silver Pagoda, whose central shrine holds a Buddha made from an enormous emerald. Then admire the impressive collection of antiquities at the National Museum before joining our guided tour of Boeung Keng Kang Market, where you'll sample local delicacies such as pungent durian, and dragon fruit. With its ranks of cafés, trinket sellers and strollers, breezy Sisowath Quay is the place to head as the shadows lengthen. At the Foreign Correspondents Club, enjoy a sundowner while savouring the views over the confluence of the Tonle Sap and Mekong Rivers. Such easy living is a far cry from the Pol Pot era of the mid-1970s, when a school in the centre of Phnom Penh housed the notorious S-21 prison. Now maintained as a memorial to the victims of the Khmer Rouge, the buildings today comprise the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum, where exhibitions of clothing, human remains and photographs document the atrocities perpetrated within its walls – a sobering testament to the horrors of Cambodia's recent history.



Wildlife Rescue Centre

A visit highly recommended for animal lovers is the trip to the Phnom Tamao Wildlife Rescue Centre, 24 miles (40km) from the capital. Among the many wild creatures cared for on the site are over a hundred Asiatic black and Sun bears, saved from smugglers, bile farmers and restaurants (where they would have been butchered for bear paw soup). Visitors are invited by NGO 'Free the Bears', who run the facility, to spend a day helping to look after their furry charges, as part of a fantastic behind-the-scenes 'Bear Keeper For A Day' scheme.



NHCC

While discussing their Cambodia itineraries with us, many TransIndus clients express a wish to visit and contribute to a local charity during their holiday. The one we often recommend is a wonderful project called New Hope for Cambodian Children (NHCC), which looks after orphans and abandoned youngsters infected with HIV/AIDS. At present, more than 200 children live at a specially constructed centre on the outskirts of Phnom Penh, whose work has been endorsed by Bill and Hillary Clinton. Visitors are encouraged to drop by for an inspirational tour of the site's gardens, medical centre, farm and schools, and to meet some of the delightful residents. NHCC also runs an excellent child sponsorship scheme – a commendable way to invest in Cambodia's future, should you wish.



Kratie

Once a thriving French cargo port on the Mekong river, Kratie is now a rather somnolent, backwater market town, fronted by a pot-holed promenade and ranks of buttress-rooted dipterocarp trees. Travellers tend to pause here en route to Laos, and for the chance to spot critically endangered Irrawaddy Dolphins – a pale-skinned, slow-moving, beakless cetacean with a bulbous forehead whose numbers have been decimated by gill-net fishing in recent decades. Known as 'psot' in Cambodian, they live in nine deep-water pools dotted along a 120-mile (200km) stretch of the Mekong. One such pool lies just north of Kratie, where local fishermen run psot-spotting trips in low-slung canoes and longtail boats.



Sen Monorom

The wild, sparsely populated and mountainous province of Mondulkiri in the far northeast of the country is famous primarily for its diminishing population of wild elephant, who roam in the region's extensive forests. Although perennially under threat from logging and mining companies, large tracts of jungle endure, along with the Bunong (Phnong) minority people who traditionally inhabit them. In addition to some magnificent rivers and waterfalls, the main incentive to make the long journey from Phnom Penh is to spend time at a marvellous elephant rescue centre. The ELIE project (see box) is located at Sen Monorom, the compact capital of Mondulkiri, which serves as a market hub for the Bunong, dispersed in remote villages around the town.



Kep

Now that Cambodia's foremost resort, Sihanoukville, is overrun with hard-partying backpackers, by far the loveliest coastal retreat in the country is Kep, a town originally founded by the French in 1906, and which has since became popular among wealthy city dwellers, who travel here on weekends in search of the famous local peppered crab. There's not much of a beach to speak of, but visitors may catch an excursion boat out to nearby Rabbit Island, whose palm-fringed shoreline is scalloped by coves of white sand and turquoise water. Guided trips to hidden cave shrines and rock formations in the dramatic karst hills nearby are options should you wish to extend your stay.



Koh Kong

The little town of Koh Kong, a 3-hour drive from Phnom Penh on Cambodia's southeast coast, serves as a gateway to the beautiful Cardamom Mountains, one of the last remaining areas of true wilderness in the country. Cloaked in pristine rainforest, the range is rich in flora and fauna, and ripe for exploration. With guidance from an American NGO, locals from the village of Chi Pat have opened up a network of trails that allow visitors to experience the area's majestic landscape and forest. Treks of varying lengths string together remote villages, bat caves and enigmatic jar burial sites dating from the Khmer era. You can also embark on kayaking trips, join early morning birdwatching parties on misty rivers and swim in pools below thundering waterfalls on the Tatai River.



Rattanakiri & Banlung

In the far north-east of the country, on the 'Dragon's Tail' dividing Laos and Vietnam, Rattanakiri is Cambodia's most remote province – a tract of rolling hills, forests and river valleys whose jungles provided refuge for the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s. Over the past 15 years, illegal logging has decimated most the tree cover to make room for cashew and rubber plantations, but a few pockets survive, as do scattered communities of Chhmer, the indigenous minority people of these uplands. Jungle treks and river trips to their settlements and the superbly picturesque crater lake of Yaek Lom provide the main incentives to make the journey to this far-flung enclave, with the area's best accommodation located in Banlung.



Elephant Valley Project

Glimpses of elephant roaming wild in the forests of Southeast Asia are exceedingly rare. But a wonderful eco-tourism project near Sen Monorom offers the next best thing. In partnership with local Bunong (Phnong) mahouts and their families, the NGO 'Elephants Livelihood Initiative Environment' ('ELIE' for short) provides rehabilitation for injured, sick and retired pachyderms. Visitors are invited to spend a day or more with the animals, shadowing a small group as they graze in the forest. You can also help feed and bathe the elephants. A share of the profits are then ploughed back into health and welfare schemes for the local community. This is a model project of its kind and an experience that consistently receives glowing reviews from TransIndus clients.

Some of our favourite hotels, Cambodia

Amanjaya, Phnom Penh | An elegant and stylish boutique hotel on lively Sisowath Quay, the Amanjaya stands in the thick of the riverside action, making the most of its plum location and sweeping views over the Mekong and Tonle Sap confluence. Its 21 rooms, spread over 3 floors, offer great value for money. They’re large and beautifully styled, with polished rosewood floors, splashes of Cambodian silk and the odd Art Deco flourish – achieving a perfect harmony between period charm and modern designer chic. For meals and drinks, there’s a brasserie and panoramic rooftop bar, and the capital’s buzziest strip on your doorstep.



Song Saa, Koh Rong Islands | Set on a hidden archipelago, this is the ultimate island hideaway – exquisitely beautiful, tantalizingly remote and more than a little decadent. Transfer is by speedboat: after half an hour bumping over the big blue, you arrive at a pair of sand-fringed islets whose achingly gorgeous villas are built into the forest or suspended on stilts over the water. All have their own plunge pools, decks and sublime sea views. Stroll over sun-bleached walkways to the infinity pool or spa for a massage; snorkel around the reef in search of seahorses; or kayak around the nearby mangroves. Exclusive luxury like this doesn’t come cheap, but the experience is unique.



Amansara, Siem Reap | Veterans of Aman properties will know the name is a byword for fine contemporary design, often in a historic package, which sums up this breathtakingly cool boutique hotel near Angkor Wat. It occupies a former royal guest house, built by King Sihanouk in the 1960s, and the discrete, minimalist, oriental décor perfectly fits the period feel of the building. The same retro-chic is carried through to the cream-walled rooms, and there’s a suave slate pool in the garden, as well as a second lap pool for fitness swims, and a world-class spa. For a little more privacy, choose a pool suite, though be warned: you won’t want to leave it.



Anantara Angkor Resort, Siem Reap | This luxury all-suite boutique hotel on the outskirts of Siem Reap is an excellent choice for anyone looking for peace and tranquillity and a little pampering. With interconnecting suites available, it is also well suited to families. The hotel has been designed with exquisite attention to detail; all suites feature fine Khmer silks, teakwood floors and modern luxuries such as rain showers, in-room Nespresso machines and complimentary smartphone use for the duration of your stay.



Shinta Mani, Angkor, Siem Reap | Often, brilliant hotels can seem a bit po-faced, but not this fresh, boutique place, which offers a refreshingly cool haven after forays to nearby Angkor. The uber-stylish décor by US designer Bill Bensley incorporates many contemporary Cambodian art objects and colours to create a relaxed, tropical feel. Views flow through sliding doors to cosy, private pebble gardens or over the gorgeous, black-tiled lap pool in the central courtyard, where you can bliss out to the sound of the water feature and tropical birds flitting through the surrounding palms. A few classes of room are offered, the showers get more decadent as you move up the grades!

Knai Bang Chatt Resort, Kep | Most of the French holiday villas in Kep-Sur-Mer were vandalized by the Khmer Rouge in the 1960s, but this chic, mid-century pile on the seafront outside town has recently been renovated. Conceived in minimalist, Le Corbusier style, with natural stone and boxy, pastel-washed concrete, it’s ever so chic and makes the most of the sublime light and secluded, waterfront location. Hammocks are strung between the almond trees behind a pebble-strewn beach, and day beds rest in the shade of frangipani blooms. Indoors, all is luxury, calm and indulgence: breakfast on driftwood tables and crisp white linen. Watersports enthusiasts are also well catered for.

La Villa, Battambang | On the quieter east bank of the Sangker River, this elegant old house, dating from the heyday of French Indochina, has a turbulent history which mirrors that of modern Cambodia – though it’s now in fine fettle. Painted pretty lemon yellow on the outside, the building holds just 7 spacious bedrooms, whose Art Deco furniture and fixtures are scrupulously in period – down to the light switches, four-posters, quarry-tiled floors and oval doors. The only concession to modern taste is the air-con and large pool in the garden. After sundowners in the bar, meals with an Indochinese accent are served in a gracious dining room.

Raffles Hotel Le Royal, Phnom Penh | Le Royal has been the grande dame of Phnom Penh’s hotels since it first opened its doors back in 1929. Having sheltered journalists and foreign dignitaries during the war, it received a major refurbishment in the 1990s and is now a picture of old-world elegance again, from the sweeping driveway up front, to the high ceilings and polished marble of its interiors. The rooms are classically furnished, with louvred windows opening on immaculately kept gardens. Two invitingly large pools grace the grounds, which you can survey from the comfort of the clubby Elephant Bar, as frequented by A listers, from Jackie Onassis to Angelina Jolie.

Travel information & Itineraries, Cambodia

When to travel to Cambodia

Peak season in Cambodia is between November and March, when the weather is hot and sunny, and dependably dry. From April onwards, humidity levels rise and showers become more frequent, erupting into the full-blown southwest monsoon in May, when heavy downpours may cause flooding and disrupt travel.

How to travel to Cambodia

For the most part, travel around Cambodia is done by car with a driver. To enrich your sightseeing, TransIndus guides, chosen for their expertise in specific region, will accompany you on excursions. The only internal flights you are likely to take are between Phnom Penh and Siem Reap (Angkor Wat), if you wish to avoid a road trip, and the one from Siem Reap to Sihanoukville on the south coast. A delightful way to reach the capital from Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) is by luxury cruiser, full details of which appear on p26. A selection of suggested itineraries is featured here, showcasing the country’s varied attractions, but we would be happy to design a bespoke tour to suit your particular needs, interests and budget.



Classic Cambodia | 10Days

This 10-day route focuses on the historic highlights of the Angkor temples before delving into the French-colonial legacy of Battambang and Phnom Penh further south – the perfect introduction to this compelling country.

- Day 1** Fly overnight from the UK to Siem Reap.
- Day 2** Arrive Siem Reap; stay four nights.
- Day 3** Sightseeing of Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom.
- Day 4** Further sightseeing around Angkor and the less visited region to the north of the main sight, with the possibility of a Temple Safari.
- Day 5** At leisure, with an option to visit Tonle Sap lake and Prek Toal Bird Sanctuary.
- Day 6** Travel by road to the atmospheric, colonial-era town Battambang on the Sangker River; stay two nights. Experience a ride on the Bamboo Train.
- Day 7** Explore the old shophouses and French-era boulevards of Battambang.
- Day 8** Travel by road to the Cambodian capital, Phnom Penh; stay one night.
- Day 9** Visit the magnificent Royal Palace and Silver Pagoda, followed by a trip to the museum and stroll along the Mekong promenade of Sisowath Quay. Take a flight back to UK.
- Day 10** Arrive UK.



Discover Cambodia | 16Days

This highly varied 16-day tour covers the must-sees of the central region before veering south to experience the pristine rainforests of the Cardamom mountains and Cambodia’s tropical coastline.

- Day 1** Fly overnight from UK to Siem Reap.
- Day 2** Arrive Siem Reap; stay four nights.
- Day 3** Sightseeing of Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom.
- Day 4** Explore other Khmer monuments on the site, such as Ta Prohm and Banteay Srei, with the option of an overnight temple safari.
- Day 5** At leisure. Possible excursions include the trip by boat across Tonle Sap lake to the Prek Toal Bird Sanctuary.
- Day 6** Travel by road to the former French trading town of Battambang; stay two nights. Learn about the Phare Ponleu Selpak Circus in the evening.
- Day 7** Sightseeing in and around Battambang and take a ride on the Bamboo Train.
- Day 8** Travel by road to Phnom Penh, visiting Kampong Chhnang en route; stay two nights.
- Day 9** City sightseeing of the Royal Palace, Silver Pagoda and Toul Sleng Genocide Museum. Take a stroll along the Sisowath Quay promenade.
- Day 10** Travel by road to the town of Koh Kong, in the southeast; stay two nights.
- Day 11** At leisure to explore this beautiful region on your own. Laze in a floating river lodge or trek in the nearby Cardamom Mountains.
- Day 12** Travel by road to the resort and coastal port of Kep; stay three nights.
- Day 13** Visit the charming riverside town of Kampot, with its charismatic colonial architecture.
- Day 14** At leisure to explore the beaches, islands and karst caves along the coast.
- Day 15** Return to Phnom Penh for a connecting flight to the UK.
- Day 16** Arrive UK.



Explore Cambodia | 21Days

Experience some of the lesser frequented corners of this compelling country on our wide-ranging, 3-week itinerary, which can be combined with an extension into neighbouring Vietnam.

- Day 1** Fly overnight from UK to Siem Reap.
- Day 2** Arrive Siem Reap; stay four nights.
- Day 3** Visit the world-famous temples of Angkor Thom and Angkor Wat.
- Day 4** Sightseeing of other Angkorian monuments, such as Ta Prohm and Banteay Srei.
- Day 5** At leisure. Possible excursions include a trip by boat to the Prek Toal bird sanctuary.
- Day 6** Travel by road to Kampong Cham, a provincial town on the Mekong; stay one night.
- Day 7** Travel to Sen Monorom; stay three nights.
- Day 8** Spend a day watching, feeding and bathing elephants at the ELIE Project.
- Day 9** Visit plantations, waterfalls and minority villages in the area.
- Day 10** Travel by road to the former French port of Kratie, on the Mekong River; stay two nights.
- Day 11** Sightseeing in and around the town, with a sunset dolphin spotting trip on the river.
- Day 13** Travel to Phnom Penh; stay two nights.
- Day 14** Visit the Royal Palace and Silver Pagoda, followed by a visit to the Genocide Museum.
- Day 15** Travel by road to Koh Kong, in southeast Cambodia; stay two nights.
- Day 16** On foot in the beautiful tropical forests and minority villages of Cardamom Mountains.
- Day 17** Travel by road to the pretty coastal resort and port town of Kep; stay three nights.
- Day 18** Visit the riverside town of Kampot.
- Day 19** At leisure for trips to the nearby islands.
- Day 20** Travel back to Phnom Penh for a connecting flight to UK.
- Day 21** Arrive UK.



Water Festivals of Southeast Asia

Symbolizing purity, renewal and the changing of seasons, water is the focus of some of Southeast Asia's most exuberant and joyous festivals – as you'd expect from a largely agricultural region where millions depend for their livelihoods on the vagaries of the annual monsoon.

Perhaps the most striking of all is the celebration that takes place on the banks of the Mekong in the Cambodian capital, Phnom Penh, each October–November, to mark the restoration in the direction of flow of the Tonle Sap river, allowing for a bumper catch of fish. During the monsoons, the amount of water pouring down the Mekong is too great for the width of the waterway, which as a consequence causes the Tonle Sap river to reverse its flow and flood a vast plain around Tonle Sap Lake, enriching the rice paddy and providing prime breeding ground for fish.

Vast crowds descend from across the country for the three-day festival, known as Bon Om Tuk, which revolves around a series of boat races. Rowing lavishly painted and decorated vessels, over 300 teams of 65 oarsmen (dressed in matching strips and ballcaps!) compete for the coveted top prize, egged on by noisy supporters from the riverbanks. The culmination of the festival is the cutting of a large vine stretched across the Mekong, after which illuminated boats process on the water.

In Myanmar, beautiful Inle Lake is the venue for an equally splendid rowing festival, when four enormous boats in the form of golden birds are paddled around local villages by handsomely dressed crews of Intha leg rowers. Each contains a deity from the revered U Phaung Daw Pagoda, whose passage through the lake's floating gardens and stilted settlements is believed by the Intha to confer blessings and good luck.

Precisely the same spirit imbues Thailand's pretty Loi Krathong lantern festival, held in November each year, in which clouds of glowing paper balloons are released into the night sky – one of the most visually enchanting spectacles Asia has to offer. At the end of the festivities, thousands of miniature leaf boats carrying flickering candles are also placed on rivers as offerings.

While the ending of monsoons is a cause for jubilation and religious ritual at the end of the year, anticipation of the rainy season's arrival after months of soaring temperatures fuels the region's most raucous festival at the start of the Buddhist calendar in April. Known as 'Thingyan' in Myanmar, 'Songkran' in Thailand and Laos, and 'Chaul Chnam Thmey' in Cambodia, the week-long holiday involves various forms of public splashing, often full-on dousing of strangers and vehicles – an aspect particularly enjoyed by teenagers. The mayhem, often fuelled by prodigious quantities of alcohol, brings whole cities to a standstill.





Laos

Locked for decades in a Communist-imposed time warp, Laos is Southeast Asia's least developed nation – the place to come if you wish to experience Indochina as it would have been before the onset of globalization. In the north, soaring, jungle-covered mountain slopes shelter an array of ethnic minority people – identifiable by their resplendent traditional dresses – while on the sun-scorched plains of the south, an old-fashioned rice farming economy still holds sway. The cities are small scale and uncongested, their leafy avenues lined by ancient Buddhist temples and French-style villas, and the Lao people themselves unfailingly warm and hospitable. A memorable way to travel through the country is on a cruise along the Mekong, which flows from the Golden Triangle region along the Thai-Lao border to Cambodia, passing the former royal city of Luang Prabang, a breathtakingly exotic town of golden spires and pagoda rooftops framed by spectacular limestone peaks.



Highlights of Laos

Si Phan Don | The '4000 Islands' region of the far south comprises a uniquely beautiful landscape of sandy islets, where massive waterfalls herald the Mekong's departure for neighbouring Cambodia.

Luang Prabang | The temples, palaces and elegant Lao-French villas of this leafy town crowd a peninsula in the Mekong – one of Southeast Asia's undisputed gems.

Nong Khiaw | This remote town on the Mekong River is set amid a spellbinding landscape of mountains and forest – perfect terrain for a range of outdoor activities, or merely gazing at the views.

River Cruising in Laos | Enjoy the otherworldly landscapes, monuments and ethnic minority villages of Laos from the comfort of teak-lined luxury cruisers.

Plain of Jars | The town of Phonsavan is the springboard for visits to this area of rolling grassland, scattered with mysterious stone jars carved in the Iron Age by a forgotten civilization.

Vat Phou | A major pilgrimage site since pre-Angkorian Khmer times, this mighty temple spills down the flank of a sacred hill in the south of Laos, near the Mekong.

Vientiane | Plenty of French influence lingers in the diminutive capital of Laos, whose historic hub on the river holds a wealth of gleaming Buddhist shrines and world-class museums.

Muang La | Set on the floor of a valley beside a slow-flowing tributary of the Nam Phak, this sleepy village makes the ideal springboard for explorations of the surviving forest areas of northern Laos.

Travel Information

Time zone: UTC+7 hours

Flying time: 16.5 hours

Currency: Kip

Capital: Vientiane

When to go

Month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Temperature °C	20	23	25	27	28	28	28	28	28	26	23	20
Rainfall mm	15	19	30	108	147	258	228	289	173	126	40	10
Best to travel	●●	●●	●●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●●	●●

●● The best time to travel

● A good time to travel

● Low season

Be inspired

Speak with one of our Laos specialists who will be delighted to help you plan your ideal holiday.

Tel: **020 8566 3739**

Web: **www.transindus.com**



Luang Prabang

Enfolded by low, wooded hills, Luang Prabang languishes amid a gauzy tranquillity on a peninsula in the Mekong. Long regarded as the country's pre-eminent cultural and religious capital, the town served for 15 centuries as the abode of Lao royalty and retains a delightfully traditional feel. Stucco French villas and wooden colonnaded houses, festooned with scarlet bougainvillea and the foliage of overhanging mango and jackfruit trees, line its quiet streets, along with a wealth of delicately gilded temples and monasteries.

Luang Prabang's elegant religious and colonial-era buildings provide a wonderfully picturesque backdrop for the many stylish cafés, restaurants and boutiques that flank its avenues. Grandest of all the old piles is the former Royal Palace – a graceful fusion of Lao and European styles housing a glittering throne room and exhibitions of heirlooms. Recitals by the Royal Ballet of Laos are also staged here thrice a week. Dressed in vibrant brocaded silk, elaborate headdresses and masks, the troupe dances to an accompaniment of live music by a traditional orchestra – a magical experience.

For a matchless sunset view over Luang Prabang's exotic roofscape, ascend the long flight of frangipani-lined steps leading from opposite the palace to the hilltop pagoda of Wat Chom Si, from where the 360-degree panorama extends to the surrounding mountains. After dark, the main street below is closed to traffic as dozens of market stalls pop up, selling handloom silks and wood carvings fashioned by local Hmong artisans, as well as mulberry paper lanterns, basketware and antiques.



The Gibbon Experience Bokeo Nature Reserve

Huay Xai, a long, bumpy day's drive west of Luang Prabang, lining the Thai border, is home to the Bokeo Nature Reserve and its legendary 'Gibbon Experience'. In a tract of dense, humid rainforest, a network of observation platforms high in the trees have been interconnected by zip wires, enabling visitors to 'fly' through the forest canopy with their guides in search of troupes of the elusive Black Crested Gibbons. Nights are spent suspended above the ground in specially constructed treehouses. As well as a head for heights, you'll need a sturdy pair of boots and plenty of stamina as the safaris involve trekking over steep, uneven terrain – an authentic jungle adventure.

Activities in Luang Prabang

Rural Tours | Ever popular with families, trips into the lush countryside around Luang Prabang offer an absorbing way to experience the life of traditional Lao rice farming families, amid a spellbinding setting of mountains and paddy fields. Try your hand at planting, harvesting or threshing – depending on the time of year – and visit local handicraft workshops to see bamboo weavers, blacksmiths, and sugar cane processors in action. Another fascinating tour takes you to a local organic garden where Lao medicinal herbs are grown.



Cookery Class | Discover the secrets of Lao cuisine at a full day cookery class hosted by local chef, Mrs Vandara. After shopping for ingredients at the local market, you'll be driven to beautiful Tat Kuang Si waterfall, a fairy-tale setting. Enjoy the exotic flavours you've created on location before a leisurely tour of the falls and surrounding forest on foot.



Meet the Monks | You'll have to get up in the predawn darkness to catch one of Luang Prabang's defining spectacles: the Tak Bat ritual. Each morning at sunrise, the bells, gongs and drums of local temples crescendo, as around a thousand barefoot monks and novices, dressed in luminescent saffron robes, make a circuit of the peninsula to collect alms from the town's householders. If you'd like to join in and make your own donation, our local guides can arrange for a bowl of rice to be prepared for you, and will lead you through this atmospheric ceremony – a great way to connect with Lao Buddhist tradition.

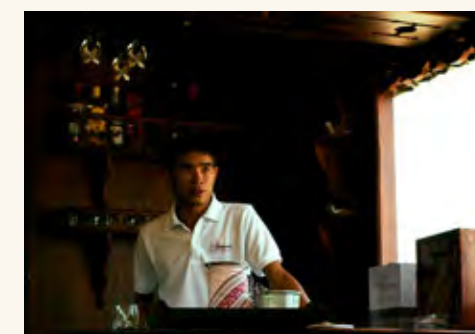


Shampoo Cruise

The limestone scenery to the west of Luang Prabang along the Mekong Valley is among the most striking in Southeast Asia, with the most beautiful countryside and remote ethnic minority villages. Undoubtedly, the most comfortable way to experience this region is on a gentle cruise on a traditional slow boat operated by Shampoo Cruises, using traditional slow boats.

Once the only way to navigate the Mekong between Houay Xay, the town border of

Thailand close to Chiang Rai and Luang Prabang, today the 2-day, one-night journey makes regular stops at ethnic minority villages along the route, spending a night midway through the cruise at its dedicated eco-lodge near Pakbeng. Meals are served in an open-sided restaurant on the waterfront. The beauty of sleeping in this remote spot is that you experience dawn over a pristine section of Mekong as the sun rises over shreds of mist clinging to the forest canopy.





Luang Namtha

In the far north of Laos near the Chinese border, Luang Namtha is a small provincial capital and market town that's fast emerging as one of the country's foremost eco-tourism and adventure centres, thanks to its proximity to the Nam Ha National Protected Area. Treks of 1-3 days duration lead through the surrounding jungle and stream valleys to ethnic minority villages, yielding numerous opportunities to interact with local Akha people. In the dry season, cycling trips around the terraced rice fields are another possibility.



Muang La

For a taste of life in the slow lane of northern Laos, Muang La, in the Nong Khiaw Valley, is hard to beat. Situated in one of the most scenic corners of the region, this sleepy riverside village is surrounded by forested hills inhabited mostly by ethnic minority people: the Hmong, Ikhos and Khamus.It's well off the beaten track, with only one noteworthy place to stay - a beautifully set up eco-resort (see p52), that serves as a perfect base for treks into the surrounding countryside, and mountain bike and 4WD trips to nearby hill tribe villages. The hotel also has its own boats and offers leisurely but adventurous excursions along rivers in the area, including a 3-hour journey between Muang Khua and Nong Khiaw via the Nam Phak, which flows through a succession of deep, wooded valleys flanked by striking karst mountainsides - without doubt one of the prettiest stretches of water in all of Southeast Asia.



Nong Khiaw

Sleepy Nong Khiaw, 78 miles (126km) north-east of Luang Prabang, straddles the languid Nam Ou River at the bottom of a deep, forested valley. Wonderful views of the surrounding peaks are to be had from the Chinese-built bridge that connects the two sides of the village, but you'll get a more vivid feel of the landscape by taking a guided trek along the river. Taking you up a series of low cascades via bamboo ladders and fixed ropes, the '100 Waterfalls' route is a memorable soft adventure. Kayaking trips are also on offer.



Ethnic Minorities of Northern Laos

The far north of Laos retains the highest proportion of ethnic minority people in the country – a fact attributable to its convoluted geography of deep, isolated valleys and forested mountains. Collectively referred to as ‘Lao Sung’ (‘Highland Lao’), the groups are defined by their distinct languages and – most visibly – traditional forms of architecture, dress and jewellery. For generations, opium cultivation provided a principal source of income for many minority villages, but in recent decades the Lao government has tried to discourage the practise, and now very little of the region is given over to poppy cultivation. Markets days in provincial hubs such as Muang Sing and Luang Namtha, yield the best opportunities to see minority women in their ornate and colourful attire. Most vibrant of all are the Hmong, with their elaborately embroidered, indigo-dyed clothing. Equally distinctive, due to their heavy silver headdresses, are the women of the Akha tribe, who you'll encounter at Luang Namtha, where they hawk handwoven textiles. The other main groups are the Mien (or ‘Yao’), a Taoist minority distinguished by their bulky black turbans, and the Lanten, a subgroup of the Mien, known for their paper making skills.The best way to experience the disappearing lifestyles of the Lao Sung is to join a guided trek to their remote villages, some of which have small homestays where you can spend a night in a family home, sharing meals and helping with agricultural work. Our consultants can advise you on the best ones to choose.



Vientiane

Southeast Asia's smallest capital, Vientiane, started life as a Khmer trading post on the Mekong and later expanded during the reign of the Lao Kings. Gallic influence, dating from the French Indochina era of the 19th and 20th centuries, is still very much to the fore in the grid of orderly, tree-lined boulevards and backstreets hugging the river, where the peeling stucco facades and weathered shutters of old colonial villas are draped in bougainvillea. More than a hint of the Arc de Triomphe may be detected in the Patuxai – a monumental archway reminiscent of the one in Paris, but with some splendid Southeast Asian embellishments. Compact enough to explore on foot or by bicycle, the historic heart of the city holds a crop of vibrant Buddhist wats, including the resplendent Haw Pha Kaew, a former royal temple turned museum that now holds a world-class collection of bronze Buddhas and Khmer stone stelae. Further out of town, the gilded Pha That Luang is the pre-eminent national monument of Laos and symbol of Buddhist devotion.



The Plain of Jars

The country's most famous archeological site, the so-called 'Plain of Jars', comprises around 100 different locations, dispersed over the Xieng Khouang Plateau, a wide area of grassy uplands and low hills, to the east of Phonsavan. Literally thousands of the famous carved stone jars have been discovered,

grouped into clusters of up to 400 pieces, ranging in size from 18" to 9 ft (50cm to 3m). These enigmatic objects are thought to have served as funerary urns. Viewed in the hour before sunset, when the surrounding grasslands glow orange, the jars form a mesmerizing spectacle.



Vang Vieng

Nestled on the banks of the Nam Song River, against an awesome backdrop of lofty limestone ridges and peaks, this small town 90 miles (150km) north of Vientiane, is the adventure capital of Laos. The wooded slopes, karst caves and broad, green river provide spectacular terrain for a range of different outdoor activities, from trekking and kayaking to climbing,

mountain biking and – most famously – 'tubing' (drifting downstream on inflated tractor inner tubes). Visits to the many, deep and convoluted show caves in the area provide more sedate excursions from Vang Vieng, whose superb scenery and quality accommodation makes it the obvious stopover on the journey between Vientiane and Luang Prabang.



Si Phan Don

One of the most formidable impediments to full navigation of the Mekong is the mighty Khone Phapeng Falls near the Cambodian border – the largest in Southeast Asia, and a jaw-dropping spectacle, especially during the rainy season. Beyond the cataracts, the river divides into a tangle of different

channels, flowing for roughly 30 miles (50km), around a constellation of islets and islands. The so-called Si Phan Don, or 'Four-Thousand Islands' region supports a population of rice subsistence farmers, whose paddy fields form splashes of brilliant green against the dun-coloured river banks.

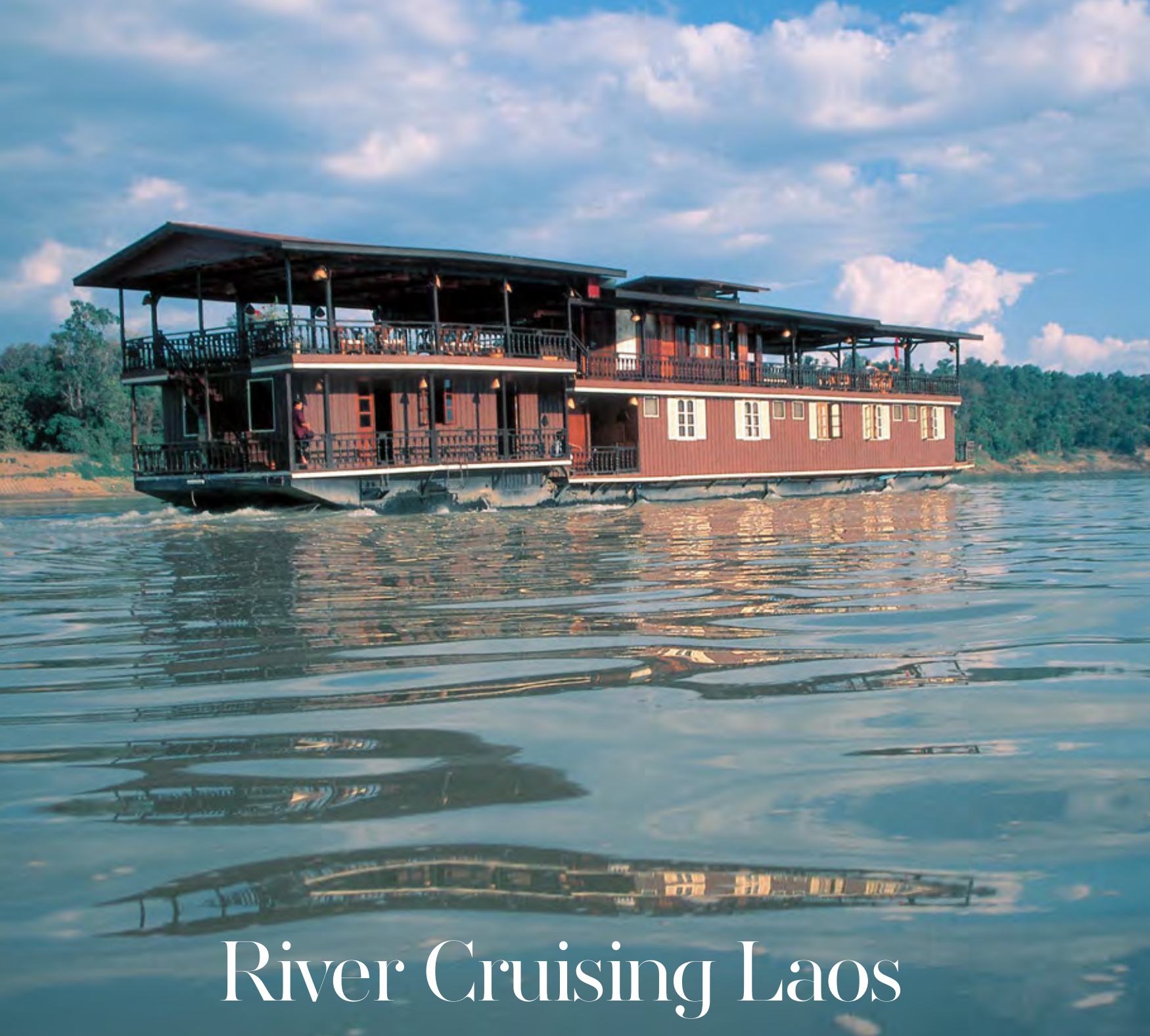


Bolaven Plateau

Lying between the Annamite Mountains and Mekong River in the far south of Laos, the Bolaven Plateau ranks among the most remote and beautiful corners of Indochina. A lush, fertile upland filled with waterfalls, spice plantations, cardamom and coffee groves, it was originally developed in the 1900s by the French, who appreciated the region's temperate climate. Ethnic minority people make up the majority of its scattered population today. Dominant among these are the Laven (whence the plateau's name), whose villages, along with a couple of spectacular waterfalls, provide the focus for day visits to the region.

Pakse & Vat Phou

Dominated by the Mekong, the flat, riverine terrain of Laos' southernmost region is prodigiously fertile, though seen by comparatively few foreigners until recently, when a cluster of ecolodges, boutique hotels and – crucially – a luxury river cruiser made travel in this unspoiled enclave more comfortable. The majority of TransIndus clients who pause here, do so on the popular Vat Phou River Cruise (see p51), in order to visit the amazing ruins of Vat Phou, a sprawling, stepped Khmer-Hindu temple at the foot of Mount Phou Kao. The UNESCO World Heritage site retains some exquisite stone carvings of Lord Shiva and apsaras and, a shrine room in which the Shiva Linga is bathed by the waters of a natural spring. A flight of time-worn steps lead to the top of the adjacent sacred hill for a mesmerizing view over the temple and ancient reservoirs nearby. The easiest route into the region is to fly to the town of Pakse, a colonial trade hub at the confluence of the Mekong and Se Dong Rivers, founded in 1905 by the French. The town itself holds few sights of note but boasts a particularly lively market area, and pleasant waterfront promenade.



River Cruising Laos

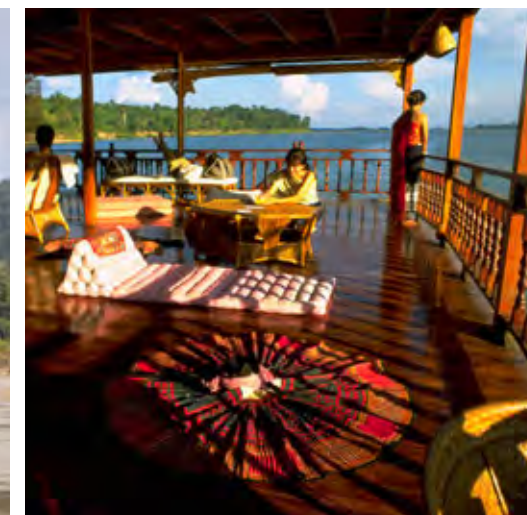
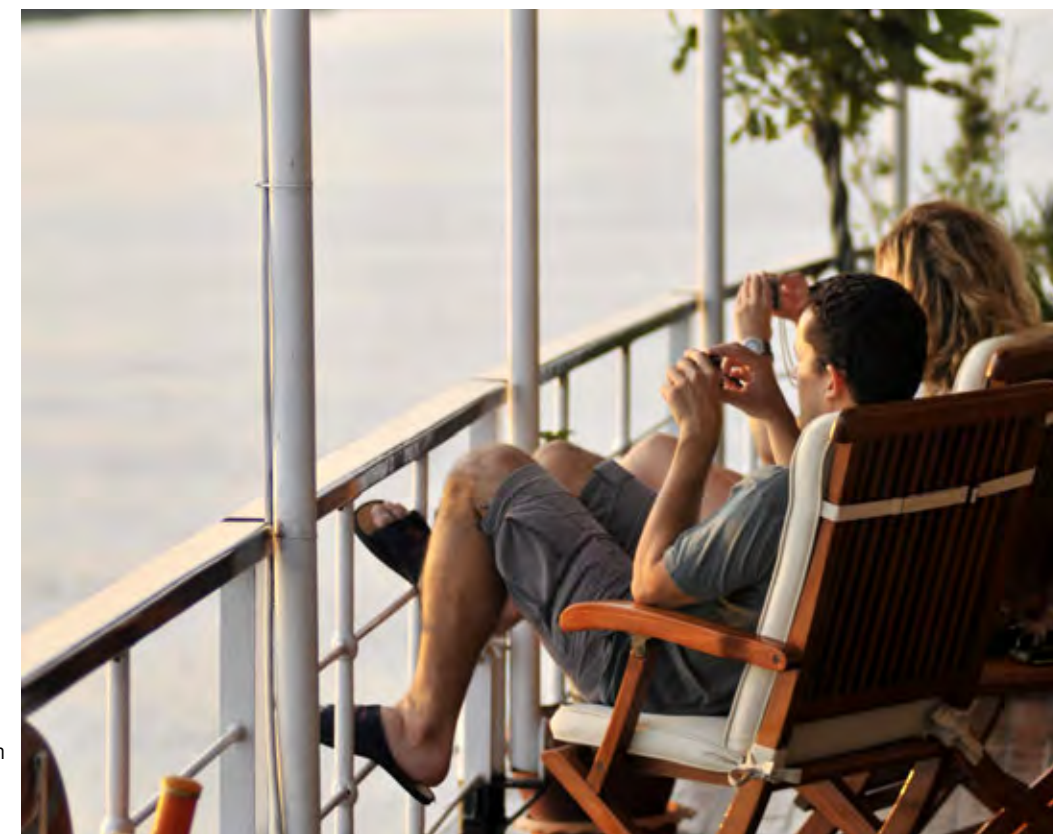
The Mekong flows through the heart of Laos, connecting the mountainous, forested north with the more arid south. Along the way, its silt-laden waters pass a succession of astonishing rock formations, cave complexes, waterfalls and scenery of exceptional grandeur, as well as numerous ethnic minority villages and some of the country's signature sights, including Luang Prabang and the Si Phan Don ('4000 Islands') region.

A handful of companies run luxury cruises on the river, enabling you to experience its monuments, breathtaking scenery and great cultural diversity in world-class comfort. Broadly speaking, travellers have three options: short, 2-day cruises in the north (see p45); 3-day cruises in the south; or longer, 10-day expeditions along the full extent of the Lao Mekong. Departure dates tend to be fixed a year or more in advance, but wider-ranging tours of various lengths, incorporating extensions in Laos itself, or into neighbouring countries, may be devised around them. Contact our Laos and Indochina specialists for more details.



The Full Mekong: Pandaw | The famous Pandaw company operate a fleet of beautiful replica river steamers on the Mekong, and their trips evoke the grand age of colonial travel in Indochina. Always keen to break new ground (or should that be 'water'?), they're the only outfit that currently cover the entire length of the river, from the Cambodian border in the far south to the Golden Triangle region in the north. They even have plans afoot for three-week trips travelling all the way from the Delta to China. Pandaw's Mekong all-inclusive boutique tour in Laos, however, lasts for 10 days, starting in the capital, Vientiane, and ending at Chiang Khong in Thailand. Conditions on board are luxurious. Both the staterooms and common areas are fitted with trademark teak and brass décor, with panoramic French windows for unimpeded views, and there's plenty of space to lounge in comfy chairs on the promenade and observation decks. A series of interesting cultural shows, lectures, cooking classes and ship tours fill the down times between excursions, while an international team of chefs cook up a storm at meal times.

The South: Vat Phou | Named after the majestic Khmer temple featured prominently on its itinerary, the Vat Phou is a diesel-powered, 34-metre former teak transporter that's been converted into an elegant, floating boutique hotel. Staffed by 15 crew members, the cruiser has two decks holding a dozen fully air-conditioned, luxury en-suite cabins, as well as a shaded observation lounge on the upper level where drinks and meals are served. The 3-day cruises start and finish in the town of Pakse, in southern Laos, and proceed downriver to the wonderful UNESCO-listed Vat Phou ruins, and thence to the Si Phan Don ('4000 Islands') region, where you might be lucky enough to sight a rare Irrawaddy Dolphin. After a pause to visit the Phapheng Falls, the Vat Phou then turns around and heads north, back to Pakse.



Some of our favourite hotels, Laos

Maison Souvannaphoum, Luang Prabang |

Housed in a former royal residence, this charming boutique hotel in central Luang Prabang provides a suave, serene haven within easy walking distance of the temples and night market. Rooms are offered in the original portion of the building (‘La Résidence’) or more modern, but no less luxurious ‘Garden’ wing. Varnished wood, stone-floored bathrooms and limewashed walls create a soothing feel, enhanced by French windows opening on to small balustraded balconies. Shady loungers line the pretty outdoor pool, and there’s a quality restaurant specializing in Indochinese cuisine, where traditional music and dance performances are staged in the evenings.



Kamu Lodge, Luang Prabang |

Experience life in a subsistence farming village, deep in the jungles bordering the Mekong. Access is by boat – a 2-hour trip – followed by a short uphill trek to a superbly sited ecolodge comprising all-weather, mosquito-proof safari tents and thatched pavilions dotted around a clearing in the forest. Join locals from a nearby village for rice planting, archery or gold panning sessions, set against a magnificent backdrop of densely wooded mountains. After dark, children perform charming traditional song and dance routines around the bonfire. A share of the profits from every visit helps fund a local school and other development projects.



Victoria Xiang Thong Palace, Luang Prabang |

Surrounded by the golden finials of Luang Prabang’s Buddhist temples, this beautiful boutique hotel was the last palace in town occupied by Lao royalty. Richly restored a decade ago, it’s now one of Southeast Asia’s most genteel heritage properties, combining the feel of a late-colonial era mansion with modern amenities such as iPod docks and in-room wifi. If your budget can stretch to it, opt for one of the double-storey villas, which have private plunge pools and river views from their raised verandas. A stroll across the garden, the Ayu Spa offers a range of oriental massages and other rejuvenating therapies.



Riverside Boutique Hotel, Vang Vieng |

A staggeringly beautiful panorama of forested mountains faces this hotel on the banks of the Nam Song. Ranged around a large pool, its rooms gaze across the river to a vast, undulating wall of peaks and ridges, draped in lush foliage. Wherever you are, whether lounging on your spacious private balcony or on the poolside terrace, the same jaw-dropping panorama remains the principal focus. And the smiling, helpful attitude of the staff does ample justice to the setting, both of which garner rave reviews from TransIndus clients.



Belmond La Résidence Phou Vao, Luang Prabang

The Belmond group prides itself on providing high, colonial-inspired luxury, in exquisite locations and La Résidence at Luang Prabang is no exception. This gracious five-star hotel, on a hilltop outside town, enjoys fabulous views over the tree canopy and exotic roofscape of the old quarter, to the jungle-covered mountains beyond. Terracotta tiles, cream-washed walls and rattan easy chairs recall the heyday of French Indochina – a look carried through to the large rooms, which have spacious sitting areas and big windows opening on to lush, flower-filled gardens. Enjoy the panoramas from a dreamy infinity pool, before a session in the Mekong Spa – one of the finest in Laos.

Settha Palace, Vientiane | ‘Like a small, understated Raffles’ is how one TransIndus guest recently described this gracious boutique hotel in the Lao capital. Opened in the 1930s, it fell into government hands after the regime change of the 1970s, before being reacquired 20 years later by its original French owners, who have since lavished a fortune on restoring its ivory-coloured and rosewood interiors to their former glory. Everything, from the sweeping staircases to the paddle fans, and rooms filled with Lao art and antique pieces, exudes a warm, colonial-style elegance. For post-sightseeing swims, there’s a huge curviform pool in the garden. And the smart Belle Epoque restaurant serves gourmet French and local cuisine.

Nong Khiaw Riverside Lodge | The giant karst cliffs looming above Nong Khiaw village, on the banks of the Nam Ou river, lend a vivid edge to this remote corner of northern Laos, and the Riverside Lodge is ideally placed to make the most of the staggering views. Each of its bamboo-screen, stilted bungalows look across the river and have spacious, water-facing balconies from which to savour the panoramas. With their wooden plank floors, mosquito nets and handwoven bedspreads, the interiors have a pleasantly rustic feel. The accommodation here may not be as luxurious as other places reviewed on these pages, but offer great levels of comfort considering the far-flung location.

Muang La Resort | This small but postcard-pretty boutique ecolodge in the far north provides the perfect base for explorations of one of the country’s most ethnically diverse regions. Comprising only 10 rooms in stilted bungalows, the property is set amid well tended gardens overlooking the banks of the river, where locals come to bathe and water their buffalo each morning. Enjoy an indulgent massage in the spa, followed by a champagne sundowner in the resort’s signature, spring-fed hot tub. Served on a stylish candlelit terrace, the meals are Lao-French fusion dishes prepared from fresh local ingredients - a real highlight.

Travel information & Itineraries, Laos

When to travel to Laos

The most congenial period to travel in Laos is between November and March, when the weather is dependably warm and sunny (albeit chilly at nights in mountain areas in December and January). Temperatures begin to mount in April, ahead of the onset of the annual monsoons in late-May/early-June. The rainy season continues through September, bringing frequent disruption to transport.

How to travel to Laos

Most international flights to Laos are routed through Bangkok, where you change to a regional airline for the onward leg to Luang Prabang, Vientiane or Pakse.

TransIndus tailor-made holidays are conducted by comfortable air-conditioned car with a driver. Specialist guides, chosen for their expertise on particular areas, will join you for excursions. To experience life in more remote corners of the country, we also recommend a short cruise on the Mekong River, either from the Thai border west to Luang Prabang, or around Champasak in the far south.

The routes outlined below are merely suggested itineraries that can be adapted, extended or shortened depending on your requirements. Many TransIndus clients also combine a tour of Laos with neighbouring Cambodia and Vietnam, as shown in the third itinerary.



Discover Laos | 11Days

Experience the scenic and cultural highlights of Laos on this focused 11-day tour, which includes a short Mekong cruise and stay in the beautiful town of Luang Prabang.

- Day 1** Overnight flight from UK to Laos.
- Day 2** Arrive Vientiane; stay two nights.
- Day 3** Visit the temples, markets and museums of the capital by foot, tuk tuk or bicycle.
- Day 4** Fly to Pakse; stay one night. In the afternoon, excursion to the beautiful Bolaven Plateau.
- Day 5** Join the Vat Phou Cruise for two nights, to explore the ‘4000 Islands’ region.
- Day 6** Continue with the cruise: dolphin spotting at Don Khone island, and visit the spectacular Phapheng Falls.
- Day 7** Disembark from the cruiser and return to Pakse in the afternoon; stay one night.
- Day 8** Fly to Luang Prabang; stay three nights.
- Day 9** Visit Luang Prabang’s gilded temples and royal palace.
- Day 10** Excursion to Pak Ou Caves by boat. Afternoon at leisure.
- Day 11** Return to UK via Bangkok.



Explore Laos | 21Days

Three weeks allow for further explorations of the mountains and forest regions of north-central Laos, as well as the unique Mekong landscapes of the far south.

- Day 1** Overnight flight from UK to Laos.
- Day 2** Arrive Luang Prabang; stay three nights.
- Day 3** Sightseeing in Luang Prabang.
- Day 4** Excursion to Pak Ou Caves. Afternoon at leisure.
- Day 5** Travel by road to Muang La. Stay three nights in this delightful riverside lodge.
- Day 6** Excursions to local minority villages and gentle backcountry cycle rides.
- Day 7** Further explorations of the unspoiled countryside around the lodge: visits to Buddhist temples and tribal settlements in the forest.
- Day 8** Travel by road and boat to Nong Khiaw; stay two nights.
- Day 9** Trek to nearby villages or tackle the famous ‘100 Waterfalls’ river route.
- Day 10** Return by road to Luang Prabang; stay one night.
- Day 11** A long transfer by car to Phonsavan; stay two nights.
- Day 12** Visit the Plain of Jars.
- Day 13** Travel by road to Vang Vieng; stay two nights.
- Day 14** Experience the superb karst landscape around Vang Vieng.
- Day 15** Travel by road to the national capital, Vientiane; stay two nights.
- Day 16** Half day city sightseeing. Afternoon at leisure.
- Day 17** Fly to Pakse and travel by car and boat to Champasak. Stay three nights.
- Day 18** Explore the ‘4,000 Islands’ region by boat.
- Day 19** Visit Vat Phou Temple and Bolaven Plateau.
- Day 20** Travel by road to Ubon Ratchathani; fly to Bangkok for onward connection to the UK.
- Day 21** Arrive UK.



Grand Tour of Indochina | 21Days

Sample the cream of Indochina’s world-renowned sights on this 3-week odyssey around Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia – the trip of a lifetime.

- Day 1** Overnight flight from UK to Laos.
- Day 2** Arrive Luang Prabang; stay three nights.
- Day 3** Sightseeing in Luang Prabang.
- Day 4** Excursion to Pak Ou Caves. Afternoon at leisure for market shopping.
- Day 5** Early start to see the monks’ procession at dawn. Fly to Hanoi in the afternoon. Stay two nights.
- Day 6** Sightseeing in and around Hanoi.
- Day 7** Travel by road to Halong Bay and board a traditional junk boat for a one-night cruise.
- Day 8** Disembark from the boat in the morning and return to Hanoi. Fly to Hue; stay two nights.
- Day 9** Visit the Imperial City and Nguyen tombs.
- Day 10** Travel by road to Hoi An, visiting the coastal city of Danang en route; stay two nights.
- Day 11** Walking tour of the old town in the morning. Afternoon at leisure.
- Day 12** Fly to Ho Chi Minh City; stay two nights.
- Day 13** Sightseeing of Cu Chi Tunnels and Ho Chi Minh City.
- Day 14** Travel by road to the Mekong Delta and board a small boat to explore the region. Continue to Can Tho in the afternoon; stay one night.
- Day 15** Visit Cai Rang floating market in the morning. Travel by road to Chau Doc; stay one night.
- Day 16** Travel down the Mekong River by a speedboat to Phnom Penh; stay two nights.
- Day 17** Sightseeing of the Cambodian capital and a visit to the Killing Fields.
- Day 18** Fly to Siem Reap; stay two nights. Explore the old market in the afternoon.
- Day 19** Sightseeing of Angkor Thom and Angkor Wat.
- Day 20** At leisure with an option to visit other Angkorian temples. Fly to Bangkok for onward connection to the UK.
- Day 21** Arrive UK.





Myanmar

Home to one of Southeast Asia's oldest and most culturally sophisticated civilizations, Myanmar is full of wondrous historic monuments – from gigantic gilded stupas to vast temple complexes sprawling over thousands of acres. It also holds a wealth of enthralling landscapes: forested mountains in the north, huge river deltas in the middle, serene lakes cradled by the hills of the Shan Plateau in the east and pristine tropical islands in the far south. Moreover, despite having only recently emerged from decades of enforced isolation from the Asian mainstream, Myanmar's predominantly Buddhist population is evidently delighted to be able to share their culture with foreign visitors again. A perfect blend of old-world charm and rapidly evolving modernity, this is one country where travel still feels like discovery.



Highlights of Myanmar

Yangon (Rangoon) | With its wide colonial streets lined by parks and Victorian-Edwardian buildings, the city of Yangon still retains a faded British feel – while the shimmering Shwedagon Pagoda recalls its ancient Buddhist roots.

Inle Lake | Encircled by rugged hills, magical Inle Lake sustains a constellation of small stilt villages inhabited by the resourceful Intha people, best known for their one-legged rowing style.

Golden Rock Pagoda, Kyaiktiyo | Join the crowds of pilgrims who stream south from Yangon between October and March to marvel at this massive, gravity-defying golden boulder, seemingly about to plunge from a cliff edge.

Mandalay | Myanmar's second city, on the banks of the Ayeyarwady River, was the country's capital before the British took over and retains a bumper crop of famous pagodas, monasteries and vestiges of splendid royal palaces.

Bagan | Occupying a site the size of downtown Manhattan, around 4,400 Buddhist temples and stupas rise from the plain lining a bend in the Ayeyarwady River at Bagan – one of Asia's most magical vistas.

Ngapali Beach | Easily reached by air from Yangon and Heho (Inle Lake), exquisite Ngapali beach, on Myanmar's northern coast, is a glorious expanse of white sand and crystalline water.

Mount Popa | This important religious site soars high above the dry alluvial plain beyond Bagan, a surreal natural spectacle considered the abode of powerful nature spirits.

Mrauk U (Myohaung) | This archeological site of decaying temples is gloriously remote and atmospheric. Boat trips to the villages of the tattooed Chin minority people offer fascinating side trips.

Travel Information

Time zone: UTC+6.5 hours
Flying time: 14.5 hours
Currency: Kyat
Capital: Naypyidaw

When to go

Month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Temperature °C	25	26	29	30	29	27	27	27	28	27	25	
Rainfall mm	5	2	7	15	303	547	559	602	368	206	60	7
Best to travel	●●	●●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●●	●●	●●

●● The best time to travel ● A good time to travel ● Low season

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Yangon

Despite having been deposed as capital in 2005, Yangon (formerly 'Rangoon') is most travellers' gateway to Myanmar. Its resplendent centrepiece, rising from a hilltop in the centre of the city, is the gold-brick, diamond- and ruby-encrusted Shwedagon Pagoda, one of the world's most enthralling religious structures. Throughout the day and evening, visitors make offerings of flowers and incense at the complex of ornately decorated, pagoda-roofed shrines below the great stupa, while red-robed monks practice their English with foreign visitors.

It's also worth setting aside a day or two to take in the city's other huge gilded stupas – Botataung and Sule – as well as the National Museum, home to King Mindon's legendary 'Lion Throne' and a host of other traditional treasures. Lining the riverfront, the old British quarter holds a wealth of colonial era buildings dating from Rangoon's heyday. The flaking, weed-choked facades of churches, former banks, teak traders and department stores today rise above a charismatically chaotic swirl of street markets, tea shops, beer stations and traffic.

At the far west end of the district lies Bogyoke Aung San Market, Myanmar's single richest source of souvenirs, with different sections given over to lacquerware, jade jewellery, puppets, woven silk and other typically Burmese merchandise.



Bagan

For many, the opportunity to gaze at the ruins of ancient Bagan, silhouetted against their distinctive backdrop of dusty acacia scrub and distant hills, is reason enough to travel to Myanmar. Over 2,000 brick, gold and stucco stupas and temples are scattered across this wondrous archeological site – the remains of a once glittering city that thrived on the banks of the Ayeyarwady River between the 11th and 13th centuries. Spanning the period when Theravada Buddhism gradually eclipsed Hinduism and indigenous Nat worship in Myanmar, the monuments come in a variety of shapes and sizes, from modest cave shrines to soaring, hollow structures sprouting giant spires.



Kyaiktiyo

The vision of Kyaiktiyo's gilded boulder glowing molten yellow in the dying rays of daylight is simply one of the most ravishing Myanmar – or indeed the whole of Southeast Asia – has to offer. To Buddhists, the opportunity to pray before the jewelled pagoda seated on top of the rock is incentive enough to make the bumpy journey to the mountaintop. But it is the otherworldly atmosphere – the hundreds of candles, the clouds of incense smoke, ringing of bells and, above all, wondrous vision of the rock itself, miraculously balanced on the rim of the valley – which makes this such a memorable destination for travellers. Sunset and sunrise, when the hilltop complex fills with pilgrims and the rituals reach their peak, is the best time to be at the temple.



Mandalay

Mandalay, Myanmar's second city on the left bank of the Ayeyarwady River, was founded in the 1850s by King Mindon of the Konbaung Dynasty, whose palace complex at the foot of Mandalay Hill was the most resplendent in Asia before it was destroyed by Allied bombs in World War II. Only a few fragments of the original royal enclave still stand, but enough vestiges of Konbaung glory survive to make a stopover here obligatory, while the region around the city holds spectacular remnants of older Burmese capitals dating back 700 years or more. After marvelling at the Shwenandaw Kyaung, climb the covered walkways winding up nearby Mandalay Hill for a matchless view of the city.



Inle Lake

Magical Inle Lake lies a short, 40-minute flight southeast of Mandalay, amid the outlying hills of the Shan Plateau. Nowhere else in Myanmar exemplifies the country's geographical and cultural diversity as vividly as this vast body of water, whose levels rise and fall dramatically with the monsoons. The Intha people who live in ramshackle stilt villages around its fringes have evolved a unique way of life based on fishing and vegetable gardens that literally float on the surface of the lake. Visit ancient stupas, monasteries, temples, cheroot rolling factories, weaving workshops and fresh produce markets to which Pa-O and other minority people travel from the surrounding mountains.

Myanmar Beaches, Ngapali

Few travellers to Myanmar resist the allure of a beach break at the end of their tour – and with good reason. Bona fide resorts may be thin on the ground, but the powder soft sand, transparent water, backdrop of coconut palms and luxury hotels provide the perfect antidote to the heat and dust inland. Moreover, compared with better known seaside locations elsewhere in the region, they're refreshingly low-key and un-sophisticated. And the seafood is simply sublime.

The country's premier coastal retreat is Ngapali, in the far northwestern state of Rakhine, whose prominence derives from its string of idyllic, turquoise bays, gleaming white shell sand, backed by a wall of gently rustling palm trees.



Some of our favourite hotels, Myanmar

Belmond Governor’s Residence, Yangon |

Tucked away in the leafy diplomatic enclave, the Governor’s Residence isn’t the only colonial-style hotel in Yangon, but it’s the one with the most panache and old-world charm. You enter via impeccably manicured lawns flanked by a pool and lotus pond. With its red-tiled, white-fringed roofs, teak walls and deep verandas, the main building, which dates from the 1920s, is a picture of tropical refinement. The rooms, in low-rise blocks to the rear, have sleek hardwood floors and white walls; most open on to the garden.



Rupar Mandalar, Mandalay |

Wake up in your own private villa made from lustrous Burmese teak, under a ruby-coloured silk bedspread with freshly cut orchids on the bedside table. The Rupar Mandalar is effortlessly stylish from top to toe – an enclave of peace and luxury on the eastern fringes of Mandalay city. It has only 20 rooms, dotted around 5 acres of beautifully maintained gardens, but they are spacious and relaxing, as is the sun terrace surrounding the generous-sized pool and adjacent fitness centre and spa. In short, great comfort on a homely scale with high standards of service and attention to detail.



Inle Princess Resort, Inle Lake |

This beautiful complex of thatched, stilted huts nestles on the bucolic eastern shore of Inle Lake. It can only be reached by water – teams of local leg rowers paddle guests up the channel leading to the the teak-floored villas, ranged around a lush tropical garden dotted with lotus ponds. Some face the water; others look inland across the fields to the Shan mountains. All, however, have wonderfully decadent bathrooms featuring tubs in the shape of boats. There’s also a restaurant, bar and luxury spa – in short, a superbly exotic launch pad for explorations of the lake and its environs.



Thiripyitsaya Sanctuary Resort, Bagan |

At a grand setting beside the river, the Thiripyitsaya creates an imposing spectacle, its pretty bungalows and villas spilling across landscaped grounds to the waterfront as the tips of ancient stupas nose above the trees in the background. The rooms are large and airy, with elegant décor and their own water-facing decks or verandas, while the riverside pool is huge. Settle on to the sun terrace with a heat-beating cocktail between trips around the nearby ruins of Old Bagan, enjoy an Ayurvedic massage in the spa or simply soak up the ambiance of the Ayeryarwady River on your doorstep.



Savoy, Yangon |

Centered on an elegant colonial-era residence, this charming boutique hotel makes the perfect pied-à-terre in bustling Yangon. Tall trees provide a welcome screen of greenery between it and nearby Dhammazedi Rd, ensuring the wood-floored rooms are cool havens. There’s a delightful courtyard pool to lounge beside. Wicker chairs, paddle fans and a generous scattering of antiques enhance the period feel of the place, although the delights of the modern shopping district are close at hand. After dark, settle into the Kipling’s Terrace restaurant for a wonderful view of the floodlit Shwedagon Pagoda.

Red Canal, Mandalay |

‘The Hotel By The Red Canal’, to give it its full title, is one of the few bona fide boutique properties in Mandalay. Fusing contemporary Burmese chic with high Konbaung style, it’s delightfully pretty, with traditional gabled roofs overlooking a palm-filled garden – a serene oasis in dusty Mandalay. The suites come in four categories, offering varying amounts of space inside and out, but all are chic, cool and comfortable. The curvi-form pool’s a boon, and the Indian restaurant one of the best in the city. Located in a quiet neighbourhood close to the Royal Palace, the hotel is also perfectly placed for sightseeing.

Villa Inle, Inle Lake |

This boutique property, hidden from view behind a tract of floating gardens, enjoys a tranquil location on the eastern shores of Inle Lake. Most of its 16 villas face west, ensuring romantic sunset views over the water to the mountains from their spacious wooden decks. Lined with dark, polished teak and enlivened with splashes of exotic local silk, the interiors are simple but very stylish, with mosquito nets suspended from high pitched ceilings and enormous picture windows. The bathrooms are equally luxurious and have stand-alone tubs. A top-notch restaurant, bar and spa complete the picture.

Bagan Lodge, Bagan |

The ruins of ancient Bagan are mesmerizing, but exploring them in the heat of the central plains can be hard work, which is why a cool, tranquil, restorative base is essential. Opened only in 2013, the Bagan Lodge – the site’s newest and most stylish boutique property – is just that. Its French designers set out to create the feel of the ‘Golden Age of Travel’, and the result is a triumph. Tropical woods, rattan screens and cream-coloured cotton in the rooms complement a luxurious outdoor pool and the highest standards of service – all within easy range of Bagan’s most famous monuments.

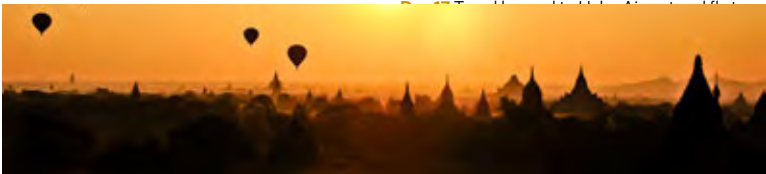
Travel information & Itineraries, Myanmar

When to travel to Myanmar

The driest, coolest months in Myanmar are December, January and February, when average maximum temperatures at sea level and in the central plains rarely exceed 30°C and nights may require a blanket. From March onwards, the temperature gauge starts to climb into the high 30s and beyond, in the run up to the water festival of Thingyan in April. After a period of building humidity, mid-May sees the arrival of the tempestuous southwest monsoon, during which heavy rainfall can seriously disrupt travel. The rains peter out in late September–early October, leaving clear, dust-free skies in the central plains through November – the best month to come for serious photographers.

How to travel to Myanmar

As there are no direct flights from the UK to Myanmar, your outward journey will involve a transfer – most often in Bangkok or Singapore, or possibly one of the Gulf hubs. These do not require overnights stays unless desired. On arrival in Yangon, you’ll be met by one of our representatives and introduced to your driver for the transfer by air-conditioned car to your hotel. Due to the variable condition of trunk roads, travel around the country is conducted by a mixture of short domestic flights and longer journeys by car, accompanied by a driver and guide. Different guides are assigned to different regions to ensure consistent levels of regional expertise throughout. The routes outlined are merely suggested itineraries that can be adapted, shortened or extended depending on your requirements. Call one of our Myanmar specialists for further discussion and advice.



Myanmar Explorer | 18Days

This varied 18-day itinerary covers Myanmar’s classic sights, and includes a few side trips to lesser known, rural destinations.

- Day 1** Fly from UK to Yangon via Bangkok or another regional hub.
- Day 2** Arrive Yangon; stay two nights.
- Day 3** Full day tour of Yangon, followed by the Shwedagon Pagoda for sunset.
- Day 4** Fly to Mandalay, and continue by road to Pyin Oo Lwin; stay one night. Explore the hill station by a horse cart in the afternoon.
- Day 5** Travel by train and road to Hsipaw, crossing the Goteik Viaduct en route; stay two nights.
- Day 6** Visit Hsipaw town and surrounds.
- Day 7** Return to Mandalay; stay three nights.
- Day 8** Tour the remains of former Burmese capitals at Amarapura and Sagaing. At sunset, take a boat ride around U-Bein’s bridge.
- Day 9** Morning trip along the Ayeyarwady to see the giant stupa at Mingun; in the afternoon, visit Mandalay’s Royal Palace and Mahamuni temple.
- Day 10** Travel by road to Monywa; stay one night. Visit Pho Win Taung caves and Bodhi Tataung.
- Day 11** Drive to Pakkoku and explore its temples, monasteries and markets. Continue by local boat to Bagan; stay three nights.
- Day 12** Visit the ruins of ancient Bagan by car, horse cart or bicycle.
- Day 13** Day trip to Salay, site of splendid colonial-era buildings and medieval monasteries, and Mount Popa – an important local pilgrimage site and Nat worship centre.
- Day 14** Fly to Heho in the morning and continue by road to Inle Lake; stay three nights.
- Day 15** Visits to Intha villages, pagodas, monasteries and markets by boat.
- Day 16** Full day at leisure. Alternatively, you can trek to a nearby village.



Myanmar Discovery | 22Days

As well as the country’s main sights, this trip features visits to some very off-track locations, seldom visited by foreigners.

- Day 1** Fly from UK to Yangon via Bangkok or another regional hub.
- Day 2** Arrive Yangon; stay two nights.
- Day 3** Full day tour of Yangon, followed by the Shwedagon Pagoda for sunset.
- Day 4** Fly to Mandalay; stay two nights. Visit the sights in the afternoon.
- Day 5** Visit Amarapura, and Sagaing. At sunset, boat ride around U-Bein’s bridge.
- Day 6** Travel by road to the former British hill station of Pyin Oo Lwin; stay one night.
- Day 7** Travel by train and road to Hsipaw, crossing the Goteik Viaduct en route; stay two nights.
- Day 8** Explore Hsipaw town and surrounds.
- Day 9** Drive to Mogok, Myanmar’s ruby-mining capital, via Kyaukme; stay one night.
- Day 10** Travel by road to Shwebo; stay one night. Explore the town in the afternoon.
- Day 11** By car to Monywa; stay one night.
- Day 12** Visit Pho Win Taung caves and the colossal hilltop Buddhas at Bodhi Tataung.
- Day 13** Travel to Bagan by road visiting Pakkoku’s market and monasteries en route; stay two nights.
- Day 14** Visit the ruins of ancient Bagan by horse cart or bicycle.
- Day 15** Fly to Heho and continue by road to Pindaya caves; stay one night. Visit a local market.
- Day 16** Drive to Inle Lake; stay two nights.
- Day 17** Visit local minority villages, pagodas and monasteries by boat.
- Day 18** Travel by road to Heho Airport and fly to Kyaingtong; stay three nights. Visit the town’s pagodas in the afternoon.
- Day 19** Day trip to Enn, Palaung, Loi and Wa villages around Kyaingtong.



Active Myanmar | 20Days

Cycling and walking trips to remote monuments, minority villages and wild mountain summits feature on this adventure-filled, 20-day tour.

- Day 1** Fly from UK to Yangon via Bangkok or another regional hub.
- Day 2** Arrive Yangon; stay two nights.
- Day 3** Take a ride on the local circular train. Explore Yangon in the afternoon, and Shwedagon pagoda at sunset.
- Day 4** Travel by road to Mawlamyine (Moulmein) via Bago; stay three nights.
- Day 5** Cycling excursion to a local market and nearby villages; visit ‘Shampoo Island’ by boat.
- Day 6** Excursion to Bilu Kyun (‘Ogre Island’).
- Day 7** Travel by road to Hpa-An and visit various villages and caves by bicycle; stay one night.
- Day 8** Travel by road to Kyauktiyo; stay one night. Visit the famous Golden Rock in the afternoon.
- Day 9** You can revisit the Golden Rock at sunrise before travelling back to Yangon; stay one night.
- Day 10** Fly to Bagan in the morning; stay two nights. Visit Salay village in the afternoon.
- Day 11** Explore the famous temples and pagodas of Bagan by car, bicycle or horse cart.
- Day 12** Nat Ma Taung (Mount Victoria) trekking trip. Travel from Bagan to Kampelet; stay one night in basic local accommodation.
- Day 13** Ascend Nat Ma Taung; return and stay at Aye village in basic local accommodation.
- Day 14** Continue trekking to Mindat; local accommodation.
- Day 15** Return to Bagan; stay one night.
- Day 16** Fly to Heho in the morning and travel by road to Inle Lake; stay three nights.
- Day 17** Full day trekking excursion to Kyar Tun village and U Daung Hill.
- Day 18** Day trip by boat to explore a local market, villages and monasteries.

Southeast Asian Cuisine

Reflecting its position at a cultural crossroads between China, India and Melanesia, as well as centuries of trade with the Arab world and African coast, Southeast Asia has blended the recipes and produce of its immigrants and traders with indigenous produce – notably spices – to create a wealth of unique dishes.

Balance | Regardless of what it may contain, any successful Southeast Asian dish sets out to achieve an equilibrium; balancing salty, sour, sweet, hot and cool flavours. A good example is the Vietnamese favourite, pho – a light broth containing flat rice noodles. Added to this are a squeeze of lime juice, dollop of pungent fermented fish paste, a twist of basil, chilli flakes, and a pinch of cilantro. The effect of all these complimentary tastes is phenomenal.

Melting Pots | Thanks to its spicy hybrid dishes, which blend Indian and Chinese influences to superb effect, Malaysia has become one of the world's great food destinations. Its best known regional cuisine is that of the Peranakan community of Penang and Melaka, whose classic dish is bak chang, Chinese-style sticky rice dumplings made with minced pork, candied melon and roasted peanuts wrapped in banana leaf.

Complex flavours are the defining feature of Indonesian cuisine, which is as sophisticated and cosmopolitan as its arts and crafts. Nasi goreng, gado gado and beef rendang are the country's famous exports, but the official national dish is tumpeng – a spectacular rice cone surrounded by mounds of fried chicken, sweet and spicy beef, anchovies with peanuts, grilled prawns, corn or potato fritters and fragrant vegetable preparations.

Ancient Tradition | Southeast Asian cooking tends, in foreign eyes, to be dominated by Thai cuisine, whose variety, ingenuity and extraordinary flavours are nowadays familiar the world over. Few, however, have sampled the joys of Khmer cooking, refined over many centuries in the courts of Angkor's mighty God-Kings. Cambodia's signature dish is amok, a preparation of meat simmered in coconut milk and a distinctive blend of condiments, among them the 'secret weapon' of Indochinese cuisine, 'kroeung' – a pungent paste made from fermented fish or shrimp.

Healthy Salads | Southeast Asian cuisine is not entirely dominated by spicy curries. Salads are another highlight of travelling in the region. While in Laos or Thailand, try som tam – shredded green papaya served with a refreshing mix of crunchy nuts, aubergine, sour lime and chilli. In Myanmar, another favourite that's perfect as a cooling lunch is the local tomato salad, seasoned with chickpea flower, sesame seeds, garlic and fresh leaf coriander – and utterly scrumptious.





Thailand

Thailand's necklace of idyllic, white-sand beaches and translucent sea water offer the perfect setting for a blissful sun-and-sand holiday. The country's phenomenal cuisine, abundant seafood and high-quality accommodation are other reasons for the enduring popularity of its islands and coast. Away from the shoreline, however, numerous world-class cultural attractions await exploration, from evocative ruined cities of the Central Plains to the deserted Khmer temples in Isaan and jungle-covered mountain valleys in the far north, where ethnic minority people (the so-called "hill tribes") maintain their traditional ways of life in the face of Thailand's increasing modernity.



Highlights of Thailand

Grand Palace, Bangkok | One of only a handful of pre-colonial royal palaces surviving in Southeast Asia, Bangkok's principal visitor attraction has as its focal point Thailand's holiest shrine.

Kanchanaburi | This town on the south central plains is infamous as the site of the PoW-built bridge over the River Kwai – immortalized in David Lean's eponymous movie.

Ayutthaya | Capital of one of Asia's mightiest dynasties in the 15th and 16th centuries, the city of Ayutthaya is simply one of the world's most spectacular archeological sites.

Sukhothai | The vestiges of the ancient Sukhothai kingdom in central Thailand, a UNESCO-listed complex holding 40 ruined temples, are the region's most popular visitor attractions.

Old City, Chiang Mai | A major religious centre in the 13th to 16th centuries, the old walled core of Thailand's atmospheric second city holds dozens of superb wats, as well as delightful boutique hotels, markets and restaurants.

Golden Triangle region | The forested mountains along the Myanmar and Laos borders are nowadays an important visitor destination thanks to their traditional hill tribes and pretty, historic towns.

Prasat Phnom Rung, Isaan | Reminiscent of the temples of Angkor in Cambodia, this evocative 10th-century Khmer complex crowns the summit of an extinct volcano and hosts an exuberant, yearly festival in April.

Beaches & Islands | Whether you're seeking the tranquility of a super-sleek resort, a safe, tropical haven for the family or a remote, romantic cove, Thailand has a beach that's perfect for you.

Travel Information

Time zone: UTC+7 hours

Flying time: 11.5 hours

Currency: Baht

Capital: Bangkok

When to go

Month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Temperature °C	26	28	29	30	30	29	29	28	28	28	27	26
Rainfall mm	10	30	28	66	221	150	195	198	343	241	48	10
Best to travel	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●

●● The best time to travel

● A good time to travel

● Low season

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Bangkok

Founded only in 1782, Bangkok is one of Asia's youngest, and fastest growing, capitals.

Phalanxes of skyscrapers tower over the Chao Phraya River where Rama I originally erected his splendid palace, dwarfing the gilded finials of Buddhist wats, boat-jammed klongs and wood-fronted bazaars of the old quarter. Gleaming air-conditioned malls stand cheek by jowl with polychrome temples, while on the sidewalks saffron-clad monks jostle for space with besuited businessmen and street food stalls belching clouds of spicy aromas.

However long you plan to spend in the capital, it's always worth setting aside time for its great showpieces: the Grand Palace and Wat Phra Kaew, seat of Thailand's most revered Buddha image, and nearby Wat Pho, one of the city's oldest religious complexes. In the National Museum, a superb collection Asian antiquities provides the perfect introduction to Thai history and culture. With another day to spare, you could visit Jim Thompson's House, an exquisite traditional Thai mansion holding another world-class museum. In the evenings, indulge in a spot of souvenir shopping at one of Bangkok's atmospheric night markets before donning your glad rags for a cocktail and gastronomic dinner at one of the glamorous rooftop restaurants and bars like the Avani Riverside and the Skybar on the 63rd floor of the Lebua.



Kanchanaburi

Nowhere is more emblematic of the sufferings endured by the Allied PoWs and other Asian labour slaves co-opted by the Japanese into constructing the Siam-Burma Railroad than the bridge over the Kwai Yai River, just north of Kanchanaburi town. Built of timber and bamboo, the original structure (the subject of David Lean's 1957 epic, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*) was destroyed and replaced with a steel and concrete one after the war. But the ordeal of those who erected it is vividly preserved in the nearby Thailand-Burma Railway Centre. We also recommend TransIndus travellers catch a train across the bridge to visit the poignant Hell Fire Pass Museum, on the site of an infamous cutting in the jungle where 69 men were beaten to death and hundreds more died of disease and starvation.



Ayutthaya

Scattered amid lawned grounds on an island encircled by the Lopburi, Pasak and Chao Phraya rivers, the crumbling chedis (stupas) and Buddha images at the Ayutthaya Historical Park, 49 miles (80km) north of Bangkok, are all that remains of the former capital of Siam, which at its height between 1350 and 1767, ranked among the wealthiest and most glittering cities in all of Asia. A handful of attractive boutique hotels have opened on plots adjacent to the site to enable visitors to see the park at its most evocative, with soft, early morning light burnishing its red-brick pagodas and gently smiling Buddhas, many of which are lovingly wrapped in bands of yellow silk.



Biking in Bang Krachao

Enfolded in an ox bow on the Chao Phraya River, Brang Krachao is a green haven of winding lanes, coconut plantations, canals and bamboo groves, interconnected by a network of stilted concrete and wooden paths that make a wonderful cycle circuit. The area features on our popular off-track cycle tour, which takes in a series of authentic city sights – such as an open-air Muay Thai (kickboxing) school and local sweatshop making shoes for export – before crossing the river by longtail boat to reach the park.



Market Tours

Bangkok's backstreets and ragged fringes are packed with markets of all shapes and sizes, and these are among the most fascinating corners of the city to explore. One that's particularly popular with TransIndus clients is the Maeklong Railway Market, which takes place on the suburban rail tracks themselves. A siren sounds ahead of the arriving trains and all the stallholders hurriedly pack away their goods, replacing them after the locomotive has trundled through.

Trips to Maeklong are often combined with a visit to the Amphawa floating market, where shoppers and vendors paddle around a gird of narrow, covered waterways. After dark, night markets spring up at various locations in the city – our favourite is the Talad Rot Fai, which specializes in retro and antique items, and features funky food stalls based in vintage VW camper vans.



Sukhothai & Si Satchanalai

The Sukhothai Historical Park, 264 miles (427km) north of Bangkok, preserves the spectacular vestiges of a royal capital that emerged on the central plains of Thailand in the 13th century, after the fall of the Khmer Empire. Surrounded by rivers, paddy fields and wooded hills, the site encompasses 40 temples complexes, the remnants of a walled palace and nearly 200 chedis (stupas) of various sizes, separated by neatly cropped lawns and tree-studded grounds. Serene Buddhas gaze from ceiling-less shrines, stucco elephants line the sides of ancient, crumbling brick pyramids and Sri Lankan-style stupas are reflected to magical effect in shimmering green lily ponds.

Just over an hour's drive further north, Si Satchanalai holds the remnants of another moated 13th century city, centered on a huge bell-shaped chedi, Wat Cham Lom. Visits to both these extraordinary UNESCO-listed sites can be made en route to or from Chiang Mai, or by direct flight to Sukhothai airport from Bangkok.

Elephant Camps

Elephants were central to traditional Lan Na culture and the countryside around Chiang Mai holds several camps where you can get close to herds of domestic pachyderms. Not all of the centres, however, work to the same high standards of animal welfare as the one TransIndus uses, an hour's drive north, where the elephants are cared for in optimal conditions by a dedicated team. During your visit you can watch the herd graze in the forest, help prepare their food and bathe them in the river.



Mae Hong Son

Mae Hong Son province in the far northwest is a region of remote towns and villages huddled at the foot of soaring limestone escarpments. This is about as off-the-beaten-track as Thailand gets, offering a glimpse how, much of the country must have looked three or more decades ago.

Its main hub, Mae Hong Son town, serves as a convenient and comfortable base for trips into the surrounding hills to visit various ethnic minority villages: represented here are the Lisu, Lahu and so-called 'long-necked Karen', the Padaung, whose women elongate their necks by wearing stacks of brass rings. Trips up mangrove-lined rivers by petrol-powered dinghy or self-paddled canoes are another possibility.



Pai

Set in a delightfully pretty valley carpeted with lush forest and luminous rice paddy, Pai is a popular stop on the loop through this picturesque frontier province. Waterfalls, elephant camps, hot springs in the forest and a handful of hilltop wats provide targets for leisurely day trips, along with the fascinating Chinese village of Mae Aw, whose wood-fronted teahouses and tiny shops sporting Mandarin script are spread around the shores of a tranquil lake – like a scene from a Ming dynasty watercolour.



Chiang Mai

Despite its expanding, modern suburbs, the old, moated, low-rise core of Thailand's second city retains the ambiance of a traditional market town. Numerous antique houses survive in the winding back lanes of its old quarter, along with a bumper crop of elegant wats dating from the era

when this was the capital of the Lan Na kingdom. One legacy of the old trade with China is Chiang Mai's bustling night market – among the most atmospheric of its kind anywhere in Asia, and a great source of textiles, jewellery and other handicrafts from across the north.



Chiang Rai and the Golden Triangle

In the far north of Thailand, Chiang Rai served briefly as the capital of the medieval Lan Na kingdom before the rise of Chiang Mai. Today, it's known primarily as the gateway to the Golden Triangle region – "golden" because of the wealth that poured through on the back of the opium trade. A crackdown initiated by the Thai royal family, however, has reduced production of the drug to virtually zero in Thailand, opening up this fascinating corner of upland Asia to visitors once again.

Chief among the Golden Triangle's attractions are the ethnic minority villages scattered across its hillsides and valleys, where you can experience the traditional lifestyles of the Akhu, Lisu and Karen, among others. Day trips may be undertaken by car from Chiang Rai, but to visit less commercialized settlements it's necessary to trek for a day or two. Visitors are also permitted to stay overnight in local houses, where you're encouraged to share meals with local families and help with work in the fields.

Isaan

Most of northeastern Thailand, known as 'Isaan', is made up of the vast Khorat Plateau – a dry, red-dirt scrubland undulating between 200m and 300m (650–1,000ft) as far as the Mekong Valley and Laos border. Though it's the poorest corner of the country today, a scattering of impressive ruins are vestiges of a time when the region formed part of the mighty Khmer empire. Dating from the 13th–16th centuries, the largest of these exotic ruins have been painstakingly restored, and are now in a more complete state than most of their cousins across the border in Cambodia.

Despite the presence of the Khmer shrines, tourism is far less developed in Isaan than elsewhere in Thailand and luxury hotels are thin on the ground. The few that do exist, however, are oases of great comfort and style, making travel in this backwater tract a real joy. A major silk production centre with a strong handicrafts scene, Isaan also provides a culturally fascinating stepping stone to the Si Phan Don ('4000 Islands') region in southern Laos, site of the Khmer's spectacular Vat Phou temple (see p49).



Surin

The recommended base for exploring the archeological sites of southern Isaan is Surin, a town on the Khorat Plateau famous for two things: silk and elephants. The former is produced in many of the surrounding villages. Visitors are welcome to visit workshops and to watch artisans reeling thread from cocoons, dyeing the yarn and weaving it into beautiful scarves, sarongs and ties.



The Surin Elephant Roundup

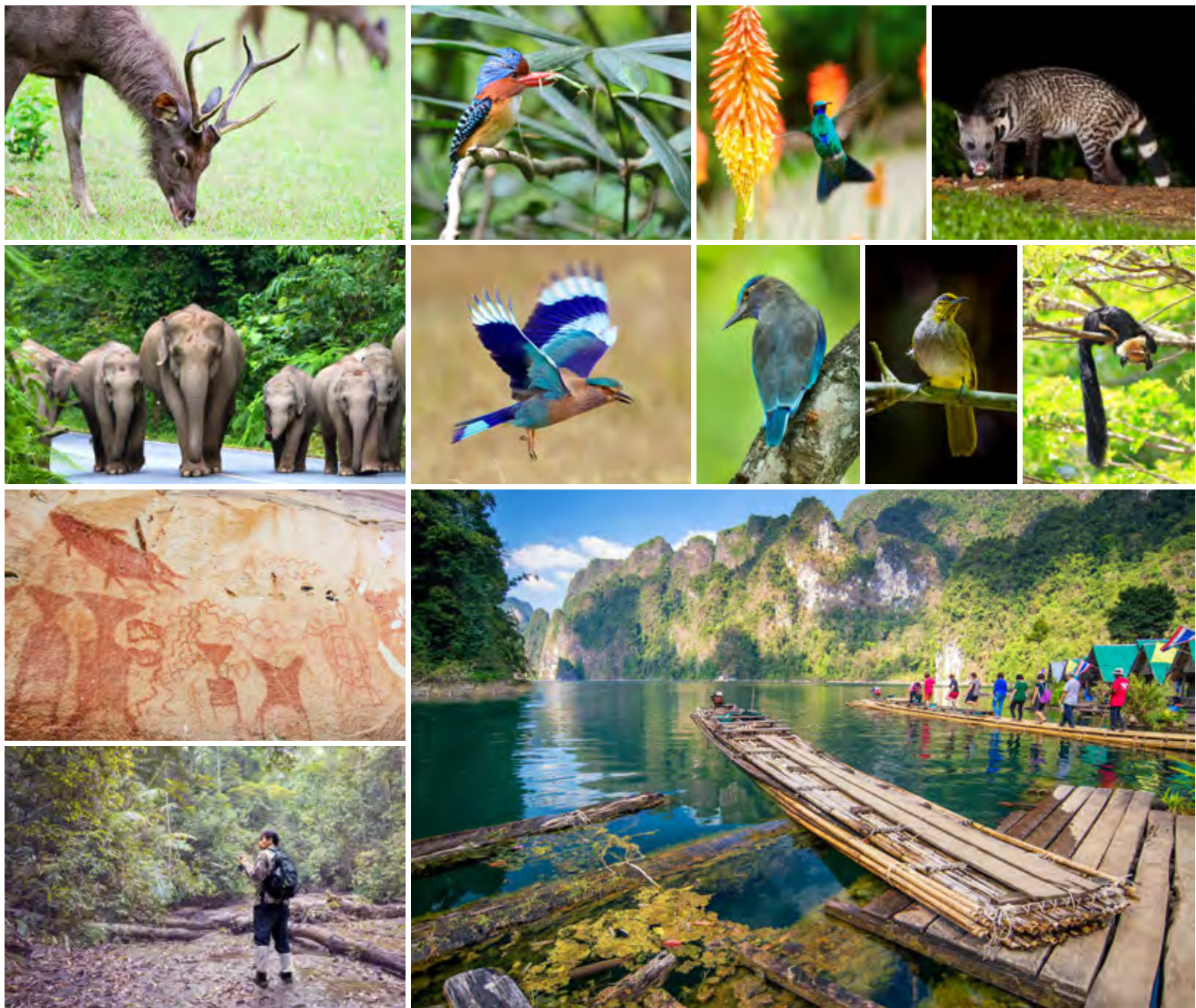
Elephant capture used to be a speciality of the Surin region, and although the practise has all but disappeared, elephants today form the focus of a lively festival on the 3rd weekend of November each year, when 250–300 pachyderms and their mahouts descend on the town for the annual 'Roundup'. The event begins with a mass parade along one of Surin's main streets, followed on Friday morning by a banquet in which the elephants gorge themselves on tables of fruit donated by local householders. Saturday and Sunday see a series of processions, tug-of-wars, football matches and other competitive events staged in the town's stadium, culminating in re-enactments of battle scenes from Siamese history. Around 2000 participants, dressed in authentic period costume, assemble for the grand finale: a rerun of the Burmese attack on Ayutthaya – an extraordinary spectacle.



Phanom Rung and Phimai

Erected on the rim of an extinct volcano, with sweeping views south to the Dangrek Mountains on the Cambodian border, Phanom Rung is the most spectacularly sited of Thailand's Khmer temples. The shrine, originally dedicated to Shiva, is surmounted by a magnificent tower, which during the full moon phase of April each year becomes the focus

of an exuberant festival, when the stonework is adorned with vibrant silk streamers and banners. A 139-mile (225km) ancient highway, paved in laterite, once ran all the way from Angkor to Phanom Rung, and then north to Isaan's other great Hindu shrine, Prasat Hin Phimai, which can be visited on the same day.



National Parks of Thailand

Khao Yai | A three-hour drive north-east of Bangkok takes you to Thailand's oldest-established and largest national park, Khao Yai. Spread over 770 sq miles (2,000 sq km) of forested mountains, the sanctuary is laced with a network of tarred roads and well defined trails that enable you to explore the area's pristine jungle and, with luck, encounter some of its wildlife. Species you can be confident of sighting on a day visit include hornbills, gibbons and macaques, along with an assortment of giant spiders, squirrels, gaur (bison) and superb butterflies.

Pha Taem | A short drive upriver from Khong Jiam, the Mekong swings around a giant meander, carving a great slice from the sandstone bedrock. Protected as the Pha Taem National Park, the resulting escarpments, capped with stands of flowering trees and weird mushroom-shaped rock formations, harbour some of the finest prehistoric rock art in Southeast Asia – a lively assortment of geometric human figures, hand prints, animals, farming and fishing scenes rendered in red ochre. The paintings are believed to be 3,000–4,000 years old.

Khong Jiam | At the eastern extremity of Issan, on the Laos-Thai border, the small town of Khong Jiam clusters on the tip of a peninsula overlooking the confluence of the Mekong and Mun Rivers. The mingling of the different coloured waters (the Mekong is sandy brown and the Mun blue-green) forms an arresting natural spectacle known in Thai as 'maenam song si' ('two-colour river'), best admired by boat or kayak.

Khao Sok | Located close to several of the main resorts on Thailand's southwestern seaboard, the Khao Sok National Park encompasses a wondrously scenic tract of karst islets and pinnacles that rise in dramatic style from a tangle of turquoise bays. Inland, grey and purple-tinged mountain crags tower above the country's largest rainforest – home to a wide array of animals, from elephant and tiger to bear, boar, bison, spectacled langur monkeys and endangered Lar gibbons. In January and February, you might also catch a glimpse the world's largest flower – the giant, five-petaled Rafflesia. Bamboo rafting safaris down the Sok River and guided jungle treks are also on offer.



A Disappearing World: Asian Oasis

The difficulties faced by the minority communities of Thailand's northern hill tract are well chronicled. For decades, ethnic groups such as the Akha, Karen, Lisu, H'ti, Yao and H'mong, who migrated to the region centuries ago from neighbouring countries and have since subsisted principally from rice and opium cultivation, have endured forced relocation and threats to their livelihoods. Then, in the 1980s, many minority villages became the

focus of an intensive "Hill Tribe Trekking" circuit which has proved a mixed blessing, bringing income to many impoverished settlements, but also disrupting the traditional way of life visitors came to experience. For this reason, many travellers today avoid the far north, not wishing to exacerbate the hill tribes' predicament. Such misgivings, however, are misplaced at properties created by the award-winning company, Asian Oasis.



Thailand Beaches & Islands

World-class though Thailand's cultural attractions undoubtedly are, it's hard to resist the allure of its extraordinarily beautiful beaches. Nowhere else in Asia holds so many of them, nor with such squeaky white sand and stupefyingly transparent water. The only problem is deciding which one to choose. Featured on the following pages is a rundown of our favourite Thai beaches, islands and seaside boltholes. The selection is by no means comprehensive, but it will give you an idea of the kind of places and experiences you can expect. Our Southeast Asia specialists know dozens more and will be happy to discuss your requirements in order to devise your perfect beach holiday.

Koh Yao Noi | If you want to see what the rest of coastal Thailand might have been like 30 years ago, this is the island for you. Rugged, authentically Thai and heart-stoppingly beautiful, it boasts only 18km of roads and has by some miracle escaped the attentions of the cement mixers. Boats leave Phuket for the 45-minute transfer, but Yao Noi's another world completely from the bright lights across the bay.

Six Senses Yao Noi | The "barefoot luxury" ethos of the Six Senses chain perfectly chimes with this earthy, unspoiled location on a hillside overlooking the emerald waters and myriad limestone pinnacles of Phang Nga Bay. Lined with mango wood, the resort's hideaway villas and palm-thatched treehouses are open to the sea breezes, birdsong and stupendous views.

Hua Hin

Popular ever since the 1920s with Thai royalty, Hua Hin is enjoying a new lease of life these days as an upscale resort thanks to its long, broad beach of power-soft sand, and clutch of chic hotels. Attracting a cosmopolitan clientele, it lies within easy reach of the capital.

Anantasila Villa by the Sea | This smart, beachfront property enjoys a plum position on a quiet stretch of sand, to the south of town. A long-standing TransIndus favourite, it boasts a good-sized pool and splendid bay views from its upper floors. Rooms are decorated in Lan Na (Northern Thai) style, with ivory colour schemes enlivened by splashes of coral and green silk.



Krabi

Nestled at the mouth of the Krabi River on Thailand's Andaman Coast, Krabi is an important ferry hub for islands and resorts around Phang Nga Bay, and so retains a more authentic feel than most towns of comparable size in the area. Its defining feature, however, are the massive outcrops of limestone that tower above the surrounding mangroves. Some of the finest beaches on the Andaman Coast – including Ao Nang and Railay Bay – also lie within easy reach.

Tub Kaak | This romantic, boutique property west of Krabi town opens on a secluded beach of pristine white sand and azure water, with 12 islands out in the bay creating a dreamy view. Wrapped in tropical greenery, its stylish, wood-lined villas, suites and rooms are dotted around a central curvi-form pool. Two separate restaurants offer a choice of Asian or European cuisine.

Khanom

Khanom is a provincial town in Southeast Thailand, reliant on small-scale fishing and farming. Although easily reached from nearby Surat Thani airport, its long sandy beach is gloriously unspoilt. The few travellers that frequent it may be treated to a glimpse of the rare pink dolphins that breed in the jade-green waters.

Aava Resort & Spa | An air of minimalist, northern European chic pervades Aava, a resort on Thailand's peaceful southeast coast, whose Finnish owners set out to fuse the clean-lined simplicity of Scandinavian design with the warmth of Thai hospitality. Ranged around a central courtyard pool are 28 designer cabins, each with their own private terraces; the larger Poolside Villas also enjoy uninterrupted beach views.



Koh Samui

Koh Samui was one of the first islands to be discovered by foreign backpackers in the 1970s and today is among the most developed in Thailand, with a high quality infrastructure. Direct flights from Bangkok, Singapore and Hong Kong serve its recently upgraded airport, and sophisticated hotels now outnumber the palm-leaf hut camps of previous eras. The real poster piece here, though, is Chaweng on the east coast – a 3-mile (5km) arc of heavenly white sand and crystalline water backed by coconut trees.

Tongsai Bay | This gem of a five-star resort boasts the distinction of occupying its own exclusive cove, which ensures it's never too crowded or plagued by motorized watersports. Ranged around a leafy slope overlooking two large pools, accommodation is offered in 9 categories of rooms and suites, some with their own free-standing bathtubs, teak decks and plunge pools with views of the sea through the palm trees.



Koh Kood

This large, rugged island near the Cambodian border is one of Thailand’s few remaining undeveloped Edens. An hour’s flight south-east of Bangkok, it’s a place of sleepy fishing villages, untrammelled rainforest, rubber plantations and deserted wooden jetties projecting over bays of transparent turquoise water.

Soneva kiri | Take the concept of an all-inclusive, five-star resort in an impossibly beautiful, remote location but remodel it with upcycled materials, and you’ll have something close to Soneva Kiri. Transfer is by light aircraft or speedboat. You’re met at the jetty by your own private butler, carrying a bag for your footwear with “No News, No Shoes” written on it. The pool villas are vast, with uber-luxurious, rustic-chic interiors and their own private plunge pools.

Koh Phi Phi

Koh Phi Phi’s famous limestone cliffs surge sheer from beaches of brilliant turquoise water, gleaming white sand and lush carpets of tropical vegetation – the quintessential Thai paradise. There are actually two islands, located 25 miles (40km) south of Krabi: the larger one, Phi Phi Don, to the north, with its symmetrical double bays of Ao Ton Sai and Ao Loh Dalum; and uninhabited Phi Phi Ley to the south, renowned as the location for Danny Boyle’s 1999 film, The Beach.

Zeavola | On a tranquil, white sand beach at the northern tip of Phi Phi Don, this secluded boutique property recreates the feel of traditional island homes, with extensive use of handcrafted teak and murals in earthy colours. Floor-to-ceiling windows allow the breezes to blow through the suites from gardens and beach.



Khao Lak

Khao Lak is spread over four large, beautiful sandy bays on the northern part of Thailand’s Andaman Coast. Backed coconut groves and ridges of densely rainforested hills, it’s less busy than nearby Phuket, whose airport lies within easy reach. The resort is also well placed for explorations of the Khao Lak (Lam Ru) National Park, as well as the Similan Islands to the west.

Sarojin | This extravagant, award-winning boutique resort occupies 10 acres of tropical gardens at the south end of a huge, sweeping bay of soft sand and cobalt-blue water. Ranged around its infinity pool are a selection of breezy, ultra-luxurious suites in modern-minimalist style, some with sunken onyx pools on their terraces. Roots of a giant ficus tree dangle evocatively over the al fresco dining area, where you can enjoy fine local seafood barbeques.



Koh Samet

Because of its diminutive size and national park status, tiny Koh Samet, on the east side of the Gulf of Thailand, off Rayong, has avoided large-scale development. Although only a couple of hours from Bangkok, it feels a world away from the mayhem of the capital. A string of graceful beaches with talcum-powder sand and vivid blue water line up along its east coast.

Paradee | This low-key, five-star resort has annexed the sweet spot at the far southern end of Koh Samet, beside breezy, beautiful Ao Kiew beach. It’s a popular choice for those seeking somewhere peaceful at the end of a tour, but which doesn’t require a full day of travel to reach. Go for a garden villa rather than one on the beach as they’re more private and secluded.

Phuket

Phuket is Thailand’s wealthiest and most sophisticated province, as well as its largest island. Some of the country’s signature seascapes indent its spectacular west coast, where surreal limestone pillars tower above bays of transparent water. Mass tourism has certainly made its mark here, but the trend is definitely upmarket: new, ever more chic boutique hotels with fine dining restaurants and spas pop up each year.

Mom Tri’s Villa Royale | A former royal bolthole overlooking the sugary sands of Kati Noi beach, Mom Tri’s Villa Royale is a uniquely suave fusion of modern designer style and traditional Thai grace. Antique lacquerware, silk and carved wood compliment its cool, airy interiors and contemporary furniture.



Koh Lanta

An hour’s boat ride south of Krabi, Koh Lanta Yai is a predominantly Muslim fishing island – the largest in an archipelago of 52, protected by the Koh Lanta Marine National Park. Low, forested hills sweep from its shoreline, scalloped by pristine beaches, the finest of them dotted along the west coast.

Pimalai | A seductive mix of nature and luxury defines the exquisite Pimalai – a luxury five-star resort spread over wooded slopes above an idyllic white-sand bay. Superb views extend over the sea from its infinity pool and serene villas. There’s plenty to keep you occupied between spells on the beach: from jungle treks in search of treetop gibbons to explorations by boat of the deserted islands in the area.

Some of our favourite hotels, Thailand

Mandarin Oriental, Bangkok | Regarded by many as the world’s finest hotel, the ‘MOBK’ is an institution of superlatives. It boasts the highest staff-to-guest ratios of any five star hotel (3:1), and was the first grand hotel ever opened in Asia. The list of former guests reads like an international Who’s Who: Somerset Maugham, Noel Coward, Audrey Hepburn, the British Royals, several American presidents and the Beckhams have all admired the views over the Chao Phraya from its sumptuously decorated suites. The original, double-storey 19th-century ‘Authors Wing’ was recently upgraded, but wears its historic patina lightly. The décor is sumptuous without being gaudy, and service flawless.



Praya Palazzo, Bangkok | An early 20th-century Italianate mansion on the banks of the river, the Praya Palazzo perfectly evokes the faded gentility of Rama-V-era Bangkok, when most of the traffic was water-borne and the city’s inhabitants awoke to the sound of birdsong. Access is via a pretty wooden barge, which enhances the feeling of entering a time warp. Exposed brickwork, patches of peeling plaster, striped-wood floorboards and antique furniture evoke the period feel perfectly, though you’re not compromised on comforts: there’s a generous pool and spa; and the service is as gracious as the architecture.



Amari Watergate, Bangkok | This is a popular option if you’re just transiting through Bangkok for a night and don’t aim to do much sightseeing. A large, modern skyscraper hotel, it stands within easy walking distance of some of the city’s biggest shopping malls and markets, and offers the space, comfort and convenience of a luxury hotel at a fraction of the price, which explains why it’s favoured as much by budget-conscious business people as leisure travellers. On site are 6 dining venues, lounges and bars, as well as a spa and gym, but no pool.



U Inchantree, Kanchanaburi | Slap on the banks of the River Kwai Yai, this waterfront lodge charms both for its tranquil location and the suave but unpretentious style of its rooms. Quality linens and Thai silk cushions set the tone, while slatted wood blinds and floaty muslin drapes over the floor-to-ceiling windows diffuse the light. Out in the garden rests a pleasant pool, as well as an al fresco restaurant whose Thai fusion cooking gains consistently strong reviews from TransIndus guests. Complimentary bicycles are also available for rides to the famous Bridge, only a couple of minutes’ peddle away.



Lebua State Tower, Bangkok | Capped with its trademark golden dome, the Lebua occupies one of Asia’s tallest skyscrapers, the 68-floor State Tower – a soaring pinnacle of concrete and glass famous above all for its rooftop Sky Bar, where you can wine and dine with the entire city spread below you. The panoramas are no less enthralling from the suites downstairs, which all come with their own separate living rooms, bedrooms and kitchenettes. Go for one facing the Chao Phraya, and you’ll be able to savour the river vistas from the luxury of your own private balcony. World-class, five-star facilities include an open-air pool with terrace café, state-of-the-art fitness centre and spa.

Ariyasom Villa, Bangkok | This small, luxury boutique property offers a haven of old-world elegance amid the clamour of modern Bangkok. Built by the grandparents of its present owners, the villa is around 70 years old and has been lovingly restored using recycled teak, repro antique furniture and vibrant silk drapes to create an authentic period Thai feel. Both staff and management are genuinely friendly and caring. The food served in the restaurant, Na Aroon, is excellent, and the spa and pool perfect for relaxation after some city sightseeing. Stops for both the BTS Sky train and municipal ferries are nearby.

Tharaburi, Sukhothai | This small, 20-roomed boutique hotel, backing on to the moat of ancient Sukhothai, is the one we think offers best value for money near the UNESCO World Heritage site. Within walking distance of the Historical Park, it offers a cool, calm, relaxing space to recover from sightseeing in the heat. Its rooms are decorated in traditional Thai style, with beds on raised plinths, framed calligraphy on the walls and long, raw-silk drapes. There’s a well kept pool in the garden – a boon for those hot hours after lunch – and the overall atmosphere is welcoming, peaceful and attentive.

Kirimaya, Khao Yai | This is ‘glamping’ as you’ve never experienced it, with the emphasis firmly on the ‘glamorous’ rather than the ‘camping’. Close to the Khao Yai National Park, the resort offers a luxurious launchpad for visits to the world-renowned wildlife reserve. But plenty of well-heeled Bangkokians come here just to relax in their tented villa, gazing at the idyllic views while sprawled on cushioned daybeds, or lolling about in the fabulous infinity pool. Set amid manicured lawns, the hotel is approached via a sweeping, tree-lined driveway that promises something special – and the hotel certainly delivers. Golfing fanatics will particularly love this property, which has its own Championship course.

137 Pillars House, Chiang Mai | Chiang Mai’s most exclusive hotel address, the 137 Pillars, nestles among the cafes, galleries and period homes of the fashionable Wat Gate art district of Chiang Mai with a vibrant community feel. A nostalgic blend of historic 19th-century Thai architecture and sleek modern design, its 30 opulent, colonial-inspired suites recreate a period residence that was once a family home. The immaculate grounds, vine-walled lap pool, two restaurants, a spa, and exquisite gardens provide a haven for residents. The hotel provides a perfect base for forays into the nearby natural parks, sightseeing, temple-hoping and market-shopping.



Ratchamankha, Chiang Mai | Experience the timeless allure of traditional Lan Na style architecture in this beautiful boutique hotel at the heart of Chiang Mai’s Old Quarter. A series of interlocking, colonnaded courtyards, overhung with mango trees and red-tiled temple roofs, enclose a complex of intimate spaces exquisitely decorated with framed lithographs, Chinese porcelain, scroll boxes and antique Buddhist artefacts. Featuring huge old wooden doors and four-poster beds, the rooms are heavenly and the pool one of the prettiest in Thailand. With Wat Phra Sing a stone’s throw away, the Ratchanamankha is a must for lovers of Southeast Asian heritage chic.



Anantara Golden Triangle Elephant Camp, Chiang Rai | There aren’t many five-stars resorts in the world where you can expect to be greeted by a baby elephant while relaxing on your veranda. But then, this is no ordinary resort. Set on a hillside above the Mekong Valley, with 30 resident elephants; it has wide-ranging views over the jungle-draped hills of the Lao-Myanmar border. The rooms are vast and beautifully styled in cream and earthy reds, with lots of fragrant rattan and polished hardwoods. You stay will include all meals, spa treatments and elephant-related activities.



Tohsang Khongjiam Resort, Ubon Ratchathani | There are relatively few spots on the banks of the 2,700-mile-long Mekong where you can relax in great comfort to enjoy the mesmerizing spectacle of the river, and this is one of them. Situated close to Thailand’s easternmost point, the resort consists of rooms in a modern, 3-storey block and pricier private villas, all smothered in tropical foliage. The furnishings and décor are generic Asian-fusion, but the views from the balconies are simply wonderful: watch fishermen chugging upstream in their pirogues, as egrets flap past the Lao village on the far bank.



Four Seasons, Chiang Mai | Set on the leafy outskirts of the city, the Four Seasons surveys a bucolic vision of swirling rice terraces, orchards and tropical forest, against a backdrop of mist-shrouded mountains. Inside, the style of the 98 suites and villas, whose covered verandas open on to lotus ponds, is best described as ‘royal Thai’ (lacquered wardrobes, embroidered silk wall-hangings and decadent bathrooms). The pool villas are as indulgent as you’d imagine, but the main pool is equally irresistible, especially at night when the staff place flickering oil lamps around it. Lovers of floating flower arrangements will also be in seventh heaven here.

Amata Lanna, Chiang Mai | This cosy, 12-roomed boutique hotel is a great budget option for Chiang Mai. Only 10 mins’ walk from the Night Market and Old Quarter, it’s well placed for sightseeing and offers a relaxing, cool haven from the busy streets outside. The ground-floor rooms open on to a plant-filled, central courtyard featuring a pool surrounded by wooden decking. They’re all attractively decorated and furnished in traditional Thai style, with rich cotton hangings and ornately carved wood panels on the walls. TransIndus guests particularly appreciate the four-posters and Jacuzzi tubs in the large bathrooms, and the warm, friendly welcome of the staff.

Phu Chaisai Mountain Resort & Spa, Chiang Rai | Immerse yourself in the serene countryside of the Golden Triangle region at this far-flung resort on a leafy mountainside, an hour’s drive out of Chiang Rai. Resting on stepped terraces, the cottages are made of bamboo and thatch. All have private balconies overlooking the valley – perfect for enjoying the magnificent sunsets – and are attractively furnished with four posters and cushioned daybeds. While afternoon temperatures are warm enough for lazing in the saltwater pool, evenings can be very chilly in the winters, so come prepared.

Wishing Tree Resort, Khon Kaen | Located in the dead centre of Isaan, Thailand’s little visited northeastern province, this luxury resort on the banks of the Chi River offers the most stylish accommodation for miles. It’s also conveniently placed as a stepping stone between the Khmer sites in the south of the region and the Mekong Valley and Lao border to the north. The rooms are spacious, handsomely furnished and light, with high ceilings and a décor that complements the superb natural setting. Stay a couple of nights and you can explore the surrounding rice farming villages by bicycle and lounge for hours in the hotel’s inviting pool.



Eastern and Oriental Express

A Fabled and luxurious rail journey through Southeast Asia

Combining classic glamour with uncompromising service and adventure, Belmond’s Eastern and Oriental Express takes you through the heart of Southeast Asia in style, exploring ancient wonders and cosmopolitan cities enroute.

The Pullman carriages offer the best of the old world and new. Onboard, the interiors are nothing short of magnificent, evoking an atmosphere of fine living with elegant wood-panelled carriages, oriental Thai silks and intricate Malaysian embroidery. As for modern innovation, the train is beautifully air-conditioned throughout, while the open-air observation car provides a perfect spot for quiet reflection as you watch the world gently roll by.



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Your luxurious accommodation comes fully equipped with ensuite bathrooms and state of the art cabins, staterooms and suites provide a private sanctuary by day transform into cosy comfortable sleeping quarters with the help of your private butler.

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Three exquisite dining cars and a team of internationally renowned chefs set the stage for divine gastronomy on board. Take a seat in the restaurant car for elegant and delicious lunches and dinners, while a signature cocktail in the Piano Bar will set just the right note. Breakfast is served in the comfort of your cabins.



Your journey

Choose from one of E&O’s iconic two or three night journeys combining the three most dynamic cities of Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok. Begin with a Singapore Sling in the Long Bar at Raffles before boarding and head up Malaysia’s west coast for inspiring excursions along the way. Delve into the pages of history at Kanchanaburi, with a boat trip and tour of the iconic River Kwai Bridge. Revel in rural Malaysia with a tour through lush rice paddies. Trek to a local hilltop for panoramic views and well deserved refreshments. The highlights of Thailand and Malaysia come alive on the Eastern & Oriental Express.

Speak to us about availability.

Travel information & Itineraries, Thailand

When to travel to Thailand

Thailand may be visited at any time of year, but the recommended period is the dry season between November and March, when all of the islands and coasts remain dependably dry and sunny. Temperatures at night in the mountain regions of the north, however, can drop to around 0°C in December and January, which can come as a shock after the humidity and heat at sea level.

Thailand’s heaviest monsoon begins in May and affects the Andaman Coast most strongly, lasting until October, which rules out rain-free holidays in Krabi, Phuket or Khao Lak at that time. Over on the east coast, however, the weather is frequently clear, making it high season for travel, – convenient for families tied to school holidays in July and August.

How to travel to Thailand

Bangkok airport ranks among the world’s busiest hubs and is served by daily flights from London on a range of carriers, including Thai Airways, British Airways and Eva Air, who all fly direct.

Travel around the country is mostly conducted by luxury air-conditioned saloon car with a driver, and a guide if required. For longer transfers between regions and islands, internal flights operated by domestic carriers are the way to go, although some itineraries can incorporate an overnight train journey.



Cultural Thailand | 15Days

This two-week trip explores Bangkok in depth before venturing north to the ruined Thai capitals of the central plains, then on to Chiang Mai and the mountains of the Golden Triangle region on the borders of Myanmar and Laos.

- Day 1** Fly overnight from UK to Bangkok.
- Day 2** Arrive at Bangkok airport and spend the day acclimatizing. Stay four nights.
- Day 3** In the morning, visit Wat Arun, the magnificent Grand Palace and temple of the Emerald Buddha, before continuing to Wat Pho to see the reclining Buddha. Afternoon at leisure.
- Day 4** Visit a floating market that few tourists get to see. Afterwards, take a longtail boat on the klongs – the backwaters of Bangkok.
- Day 5** Travel by car to Kanchanaburi to visit the famous bridge over the Kwai river, a war museum, war cemetery, and take a ride on the ‘death railway’.
- Day 6** Continue by train and car to Sukhothai, Thailand’s ancient capital. Stay two nights.
- Day 7** Spend the day exploring the temples of old Sukhothai, and nearby Si Satchanalai.
- Day 8** Travel by road north to Chiang Mai, the former Lan Na capital. Stay three nights.
- Day 9** In the morning, explore Chiang Mai old town, before continuing onto Doi Suthep to visit a mountain temple.
- Day 10** Have a day to explore this atmospheric city at leisure.
- Day 11** Travel through the mountains to Chiang Rai, gateway to the Golden Triangle. Stay three nights.
- Day 12** Spend the day exploring the Golden Triangle region, where Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar meet.
- Day 13** Travel further into the mountains, visiting ethnic minority villages.
- Day 14** Spend the day at leisure before boarding an evening flight to Bangkok, and onward flight to UK.
- Day 15** Arrive UK in the morning.



Unexplored Thailand | 13Days

Travel to the little visited northeastern province of Isaan to experience its superbly sited Khmer temples, national parks and atmospheric Mekong Valley, pausing at the ruined former capital of Ayutthaya en route.

- Day 1** Overnight flight from UK to Bangkok.
- Day 2** Arrive Bangkok and spend the day acclimatizing; stay three nights.
- Day 3** With your guide, explore the city by public transport. Visit Wat Arun, the magnificent Grand Palace and temple of the Emerald Buddha, before continuing to Wat Pho to see the reclining Buddha. Explore the vibrant Chinatown district.
- Day 4** In the morning travel to Samut Songkram province to see the Railway Market. Later visit a floating market.
- Day 5** Travel by road to the Khao Yai National Park – gateway to the Isaan region. Stop en route for a visit of the old capital Ayutthaya. Stay three nights.
- Day 6** Spend the day exploring the lush jungles and plains of Thailand’s oldest national park.
- Day 7** Visit the remote ancient temples of Phanom Rung and Phimai, once outposts of the Khmer empire.
- Day 8** Continue east further into remote Isaan. Stay in Surin for two nights. Enjoy an introduction to Isaan cuisine.
- Day 9** Visit the Elephant Study Centre, and a fascinating silk-weaving village.
- Day 10** Continue by road towards the Lao border and spend two nights in Khong Jiam overlooking the Mekong River.
- Day 11** Rise early and take a sunrise boat trip on the Mekong. Later visit the Pha Taem National Park to see prehistoric cave paintings on cliffs above the Mekong.
- Day 12** Day at leisure for cycle rides and riverside walks. In the evening, fly to Bangkok to pick up a connecting flight to UK.
- Day 13** Arrive UK in the morning.



Wild Thailand | 15Days

In addition to some of Thailand’s key cultural attractions, this varied two-week trip includes explorations of four superb national parks dotted along the Gulf Coast and its jungle-covered hinterland.

- Day 1** Fly from UK to Bangkok.
- Day 2** Arrive Bangkok and spend the day acclimatizing. Stay three nights.
- Day 3** In the morning, visit Wat Arun, the magnificent Grand Palace and temple of the Emerald Buddha, before continuing to Wat Pho to see the reclining Buddha. Afternoon to explore the city at leisure.
- Day 4** Take a cycling tour out to Bang Krachao, a rural enclave on the edge of the city, where you can gain an insight into a more traditional Bangkok.
- Day 5** Travel by road to the Khao Yai National Park – gateway to the Isaan region. Stop en route for a visit of the old capital Ayutthaya. Stay three nights.
- Day 6** Spend the day experiencing the lush jungles, plains and wildlife of the park.
- Day 7** Trek deeper into the reserve where birds and animals are more abundant, and the landscape even more impressive.
- Day 8** Travel back to Bangkok and take a flight north to Chiang Mai. Spend a night in the city.
- Day 9** In the morning, visit Doi Suthep to see a mountaintop temple. Then travel out to the Doi Inthanon National Park, site of Thailand’s highest peak. Stay two nights.
- Day 10** Rise early for some bird-watching. Spend the day exploring the national park.
- Day 11** Travel back to Chiang Mai and fly south to Bangkok. Continue by road to Hua Hin, a resort town on the Gulf Coast. Stay three nights.
- Day 12** Visit Kaeng Krachan National Park, a bird-watching hotspot.
- Day 13** Visit Khao Sam Roi Yot National Park, a coastal reserve encompassing dramatic limestone scenery and bird-rich marshlands.
- Day 14** Travel back to Bangkok by road, and catch an evening flight to UK.
- Day 15:** Arrive UK in the morning.



Family Travel in Southeast Asia

Life throughout Southeast Asia is very family focussed. Wherever you travel, you'll find people pay a lot more attention to children than they tend to back home, particularly foreign ones, which is heartening as a parent. Kids really help break the ice, facilitating interaction with locals, whether in remote farmsteads or city restaurants.

With a wealth of adventurous activities on offer, you'll have no trouble occupying your offspring, either. National parks throughout the region offer amazing wildlife spotting opportunities, ranging from orangutan safaris by boat in Borneo to dizzying canopy walks in the rainforests of Malaysia, where massive butterflies and hornbills flit between the branches. Pygmy elephant, crocodiles and proboscis monkeys are commonly sighted species guaranteed to fascinate youngsters, and of course, elephant camps, where families may help wash and feed rescued pachyderms, are found in many countries.

For older children, hiking, biking and canoeing trips are a great way to explore off-track jungle areas, such as the wildlife reserves of Sarawak and Borneo, or rural hinterlands like the Mekong Delta and interior Bali. Kids also love the elemental pleasures of staying close to remote beaches, where they can snorkel in transparent water and collect exotic shells. Most of the resorts we use in Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam and Thailand, where the beaches are out of this world, also offer professional childcare facilities, so you and a loved one can enjoy some well earned downtime while you're on holiday.

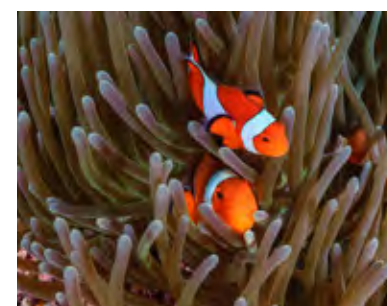
More than formal, planned activities, however, we've always found it's everyday life on the streets, in the villages and markets of rural Southeast Asia that have left the most lasting impression on our children: the sight of water buffalo lounging in muddy ponds; travelling to a floating market on the Mekong early in the morning on a motorized canoe; being offered a sugar cane snack from a kindly Vietnamese H'mong vendor dressed in outlandish, handwoven clothes; or being shown a Jurassic-sized crab by a smiling fisherman in Thailand.

Novelty and interest lies around every corner in the region – perfect for enquiring young minds!



Ten Top Family Experiences Southeast Asia

- Elephant Camps, Thailand and Cambodia - p37, p66.
- Song Xanh cruise on the Mekong Delta- p27.
- Bali's famous 'Monkey Dance' - p115.
- Tracking Komodo dragons, Indonesia- p118.
- Spend the night in an Iban longhouse, Sarawak- p90.
- Spotting Orangutans, and klotok cruising, Tanjung Puting National Park, Kalimantan- p109.
- Rice planting and harvesting, Luang Prabang- p45.
- Kayaking in Koh Kong, Cambodia- p37.
- Temple safari, Angkor- p32.
- Volunteering at 'Free the Bears', Phnom Penh- p36.





Malaysia & Borneo

Created in 1963 from a patchwork of former colonial kingdoms, Malaysia is divided into two distinct regions separated by the South China Sea: the Malay Peninsula in the west; and the states of Sabah and Sarawak on the island of Borneo to the east. From the early 15th century onwards, the Portuguese, Dutch and British jostled for control over the lucrative trade in spices, silk and other luxury goods that passed through the region, adding their influence to the rich mix of Malay, Chinese and Indian which had already taken root. The result is one of the world's most ethnically diverse nations – a fascinating cultural melting pot whose cities retain a wealth of exotic architecture, crafts and cooking traditions. Malaysia also boasts some of Asia's most unspoiled tropical beaches and beautiful islands, while Borneo's mountain landscapes and extensive rainforests remain strongholds for numerous indigenous tribes and rare wildlife, including the critically endangered orangutan ape.

Highlights of Malaysia & Borneo

Melaka (Malacca) | Melaka's pivotal role in the trade networks connecting China, the spice islands and Europe is vividly manifest in its diverse, culturally hybrid architecture, cuisine and festivals.

Mulu National Park, Sarawak | Named after the mountain at its centre, Sarawak's most famous park is renowned above all for its tract of 50-metre-tall, razor-sharp limestone pinnacles, reached via a multi-stage wilderness trek.

Taman Negara | Encompassing the oldest and most extensive tract of wildlife-rich jungle in the Malaysian peninsula, the country's premier national park is home to a thousand-strong community of hunter-gatherers, the Orang Asli.

Danum Valley, Sabah | Orangutans, clouded leopards, proboscis monkeys and bearded pigs are the standout species of this world-famous conservation area in central Sabah, which preserves a pristine valley of primary dipterocarp forest.

Bako National Park, Sarawak | Lush jungle cover and scraggy coastal cliffs herald your arrival by boat at this superb reserve in Borneo, whose dense forests harbour colonies of proboscis monkeys.

Kinabalu National Park | Watch the first rays of dawn illuminate the summit of Southeast Asia's highest peak, Mount Kinabalu – centrepiece of a national park that's one of the planet's greatest biodiversity hotspots.

Beaches and diving | Malaysia's numerous islands and beaches offer turquoise water, powder-soft sand and teeming coral reefs comparable to those of neighbouring Thailand – but without the crowds.

Sepilok Orangutan Sanctuary | The rainforests of Borneo are among the last bastions of the orangutan, but only at a few locations – such as the wonderful Sepilok Sanctuary, in northeastern Sabah – are you guaranteed to encounter one.

Travel Information

Time zone: UTC+8 hours
Flying time: 12.5 hours
Currency: Ringgit
Capital: Kuala Lumpur

When to go

Month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Temperature °C	27	27	28	29	28	28	28	28	27	27	27	27
Rainfall mm	193	198	257	290	197	131	148	162	214	265	321	252
Best to travel	●	●●	●●●	●●●	●●●	●●●	●●●	●●●	●●●	●	●	●

●● The best time to travel ● A good time to travel ● Low season

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Kuala Lumpur

Dubbed affectionately as ‘KL’, Kuala Lumpur started out life in the 1850s as a Chinese mining shanty town, but over the ensuing century-and-a-half has expanded into a metropolis of 1.4 million. One of Asia’s principal financial centres, it’s a stridently modern, cosmopolitan, upbeat place whose high-rise core – a glittering spectacle at night – epitomizes the modern, forward-looking face of Malaysia.

A perfect place to get your bearings is the Observation Deck on the 86th floor of the Petronas Towers, the capital’s most iconic buildings. Nearby, a matchless view of the Towers themselves is to be had from the revolving restaurant of the Menara KL Tower, whose panorama extends to the blue-green peaks of the Titiwangsa range, beyond the city limits.

More historic character is to be found in the old colonial quarter across town, where the intricate, Moorish-style Jamek Mosque is the standout building. To its south, Chinatown’s shophouses, traditional cafés and colourful Buddhist temples give a sense of what KL might have been like half a century ago. The superb Islamic Arts Museum, whose ultra-modern premises are crowned by a turquoise-tiled Persian dome, is another of the city’s key sights.

Foremost among the attractions on the fringes of the capital is the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia – ‘FRIM’ for short – where a wonderful tree canopy walk reveals more fine views over the metropolis. Nearby, the Batu Caves complex holds the country’s most revered Hindu shrine, approached via a flight of 272 steps and colossal gilded statue of Lord Murugan.



Fraser’s Hill

At an altitude of roughly 1,500m (5,000ft) in the Titiwangsa Mountains, Fraser’s Hill lies only a couple of hours’ drive north-east of KL, but the contrast in climate and atmosphere is total. Refreshingly cool air envelops the dense, moist, moss-covered forests and peaks where, in the 1890s, the Scottish tin prospector, Louis James Fraser, established a mining camp. A network of paths and scattering of bungalows followed in later years, along with a Country Club and golf course to which British officials would retreat when the heat got too much for them at sea level. Today, the hill station is of particular interest to birdwatchers as its beautiful woodland hosts around 270 species, including hornbills. The annual Bird Race, in which participants compete to sight and identify as many species as possible from the official list, attracts ornithologists from all over the world.

Taman Negara National Park

High in the hills of Malaysia’s sparsely populated interior, Taman Negara, due to its easy reach from Kuala Lumpur, takes the top spot of the country’s most visited national park – a 4,323 sq km reserve of primary rainforest, rivers and cloud-fringed mountains. Its few remaining large mammals, which include elephants, leopards and rhinos, are rarely sighted these days, but it’s still worth the trip to experience the jungle in the raw: the cacophony of insect and bird noise is a revelation if you’ve not been in moist tropical forests before. A superb canopy walk suspended 30m above the forest floor makes for an adrenalin-fuelled introduction, while rides on wooden longboats take visitors deeper into the park to waterfalls, caves and the start of longer trails, including overnight treks up Gunung Tahan (2,187m/7,175ft), Peninsular Malaysia’s highest peak. Orang Asli villages where visitors are invited to try their hand at blowpipe hunting and fire making are other attractions.



Melaka (Malacca)

Wander around Melaka’s old quarter, Bandar Hilir, for a glimpse of a ruined Portuguese fort, salmon-coloured Dutch Square and Chinese clan houses and temples – just part of the rich heritage of a town whose role in the early maritime spice trade with Europe kick-started the formation of the Malaysian state. Before the arrival of an invading Portuguese fleet in 1511, this was the capital of the powerful Malacca Sultanate, and it remains a thriving regional capital. Since being awarded UNESCO World Heritage status in 2008, Melaka’s historic core has seen much renovation, with dilapidated old buildings gaining a new lease of life as heritage hotels and trendy cafés. On weekend evenings, Jonker St, the main thoroughfare of Chinatown, hosts an atmospheric Night Market specializing in antiques and handicrafts. Several lavishly decorated Chinese-Palladian townhouses belonging to the Baba-Nonya community have also been opened to visitors.



Cameron Highlands

Connected to the coast by road only in the 1930s, Cameron Highlands, 46 miles (75km) north-east of KL, was one of very last hill stations to be established by the British, and the area still evokes the twilight of the empire. Miles of lush tea plantations carpet the rolling hills of this hidden tableland, which at a mean elevation of around 1,500m (5,000ft) is considerably cooler than the coastal strip, offering the perfect spot to break the long journey between the capital and Penang.

Tea production continues to dominate the local economy and plantation visits are popular among visitors, along with trips to honey, strawberry and butterfly farms. British travellers hankering for a taste of home should also drop into the Smokehouse in Tanah Rata, the hill station’s main town, for a Devonshire cream tea, served in a quintessentially English, half-timbered, wood-panelled dining room with horse brasses on the walls. A network of walking trails to viewpoints and Orang Asli villages provides gentle post-prandial workouts.



Georgetown, Penang

Georgetown, capital of Penang state on the north-western side of the Malay Peninsula, was the East India Company’s first outpost in the region, and preserves behind its high-rise blocks and modern intersections, a wealth of colonial vestiges, from the mildewed ramparts of Fort Cornwallis to vintage shophouses and resplendently ornate Chinese guildhalls and temples, whose incense-filled interiors writhe with coiled dragons and Confucian sages.

Chinese merchants grew wealthy on regional trade in the 19th century and lavished huge sums on their mansions, of which numerous fine examples survive in Georgetown’s time-worn streets. This is also Malaysia’s culinary capital, renowned particularly for its spicy Peranakan (Chinese-Malay) cuisine, which can be sampled in fine-dining restaurants or out on the street at rough-and-ready food stalls.



Ipoh

Malaysia’s third city, Ipoh, rose to prominence in the 1880s, following the discovery in its mountainous hinterland of major tin reserves. This, coupled with the later introduction of rubber by the British, spawned the boom from which its grand Edwardian-Baroque railway station and other colonial buildings date. With lanes of little pastel-painted Chinese shophouses, Ipoh’s central market district retains the feel of this prosperous era, when tens of thousands of immigrants poured in to seek their fortune. On the outskirts, a massive cave temple, Perak Tong, bears witness to the fact that many succeeded. Decorated with vibrant dragon murals and delicate calligraphy, the interior holds a huge golden Buddha donated by wealthy Chinese benefactors.

Another monument to Ipoh’s great boom stands on a hilltop 20 minutes’ drive out of town. Erected by a wealthy Scottish rubber baron named William Kellie Smith, ‘Kellie’s Castle’ is an enormous mansion in Scots-Baronial, Indian and Moorish style. Although work on the building was never completed (because Smith died prematurely), it became a much loved local landmark.

The Jungle Train

Connecting the west coast with the east via the sparsely populated interior of Peninsular Malaysia, the Jungle Train offers one of Asia’s great railway journeys. While the views may not be as expansive as those to be had from the Himalaya narrow-gauge lines, you get to encounter rural Malay life at close quarters and traverse areas of pristine rainforest, riverine plains of rice paddy, towering karst cliffs, rubber and palm oil plantations and numerous rattling river bridges.

Most people begin the trip in the north at Kota Bharu and proceed south as far as Gemas in 9-10 hours. Alternatively, break the journey to make side trips to the Taman Negara National Park, explore the Gua Musang Caves complex, or take a jungle river cruise at Dabong.

As much as the varied tropical landscapes, however, it’s your fellow passengers that really make this trip so memorable. Pausing frequently at backcountry villages and obscure forest halts, the trains provide vital transport for inhabitants of remote areas. You could find yourself sitting next to a family of Orang Asli hunter gatherers, a cheroot-smoking durian grower, or small holder with a basket of chickens bound for market.



Kota Bharu

In the far northeast of Malaysia near the Thai border, Kota Bharu is the capital of Kelantan State – the most traditional region of the country. Visitors frequently pass through en route to the Perhentian Islands, or to pick up the Jungle Railway (see box), but the town holds plenty of interest in its own right. As well as several (functioning) royal palaces and a crop of ornate Buddhist wats on the outskirts, KB’s outlying districts retain a few workshops dedicated to batik making, as well as silver filigree and wood carving. Foodies can also savour the range of local produce on sale at the central market, Pasar Besar Siti Khadijah, while the famous Medan Selera night bazaar specializes in cooked Kelatanese delicacies such as murtabaks (stuffed pancakes) and nasi kerabu (rice stained a vibrant blue colour by flower petals).

Another highlight here is the Gelanggang Seni Cultural Centre, where demonstrations of shadow puppetry, Silat (a uniquely Malay martial art) and traditional top spinning are staged most days.



Malaysian Borneo



A 90-minute flight east of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia's share of Borneo comprises the two states of Sabah and Sarawak. Smothered in primary rainforest, and with a hinterland of high mountains, the interior of the island remains astonishingly rich in flora and fauna. In addition to the flagship species, Borneo's national parks and reserves preserve some of the most spectacular scenery in Asia, from the cloud-swept summit of Mt Kinabalu to the mangroves and sublime coastline of Bako near the capital of Sarawak, Kuching. Trek through primeval jungle to the shard-like pinnacles of Gunung Mulu. Spend the night in an Iban longhouse. Or head into the floodplain of Lower Kinabatangan in search of some of the world's rarest primates.

Borneo boasts some of the richest biodiversity on the planet, and Malaysia's well managed national park system provides an efficient infrastructure for viewing some of its varied wildlife, while an ever increasing crop of quality hotels and lodges ensures comfort – even in extremely remote places.

Orangutan | Around 40,000 orangutans live in Borneo's jungles. Their decline, caused by habitat loss, has been slowed by the creation of two wonderful rescue centres at Sepilok (in Sabah) and Semenggoh (in Sarawak). Sightings in the wild are less frequent than in past decades, but at a handful of rainforest reserves you stand an excellent chance of seeing an orangutan in its natural habitat – a truly magical experience.

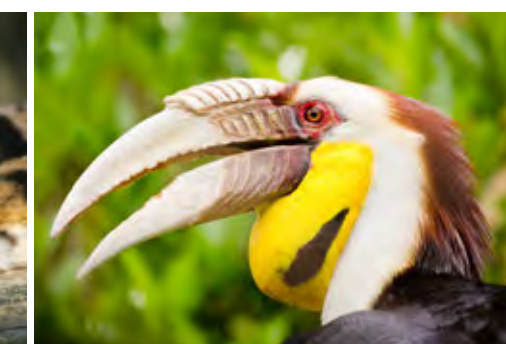
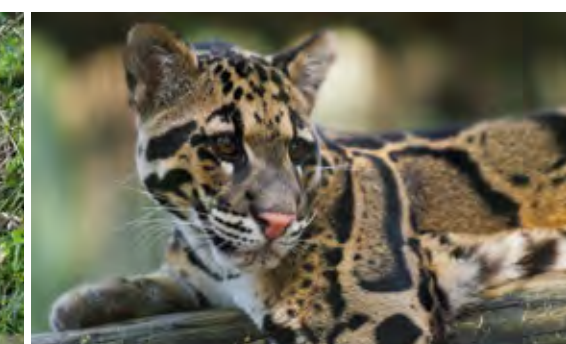
Grey gibbon | The undisputed Acrobat King of the Bornean rainforest is the Grey gibbon, a primate which you're more likely to hear than see due to its loud whooping call. Gibbons can move at astonishing speeds, swinging through the tree canopy on their long arms faster than a bird can fly.

Sunda clouded leopard | The most elusive of all Borneo's mammals, this exquisite cat takes its name from the fact it spends most of its life high in the canopy of the rainforest, where it sleeps during the day and hunts for hornbills and monkeys at night. Unfortunately, the creature's nocturnal habits and preferred habitat high off the ground mean it is almost never seen.

Proboscis monkey | Sightings of this curious looking creature, by contrast, are common in Borneo's reserves. Only the male has the eponymous, elongated nose, which grows to around 4"/10cm in length.

Pygmy elephant | Although it is customary to refer to Borneo's elephants as a 'Pygmy' variety, in fact the subspecies is only marginally smaller than the one prevalent on the mainland. Like its cousin across the water, however, the wild elephants roaming the rainforest of central Sabah have been decimated in recent decades.

Hornbills | Eight species of this striking bird are present in Borneo. Often, the first sign that you're about to see one is the 'whoosh whoosh' of its wings flapping high overhead as it flies between patches of forest.





Kuching

The largest and best looking city in Malaysian Borneo is Kuching, on the banks of the Sarawak River, at the southwestern edge of the territory. Relaxed and atmospheric, it has managed to preserve much of its historic core of narrow streets and colonial-era municipal buildings, all within a stone's throw of a breezy waterfront promenade. The mix of Malay, Chinese and Indian, as well as indigenous Dayak, makes for a fascinating cultural jigsaw, while a particularly strong crop of museums provides an inspirational introduction to the island and its traditional societies. Moreover, Kuching's sophisticated hotels and restaurants lie within easy range of day trips to ten or more first-rate wildlife reserves.



The Iban and Lemanak Longhouse

The Iban are Borneo's largest indigenous minority, comprising around one-third of Sarawak's total population. Although the majority these days live in towns, their traditional dwelling is the longhouse – essentially an indoor village in which an entire community resides under a single roof. Corrugated iron and TVs feature in most longhouses these days, but the traditional Iban way of life has proved amazingly resilient. A great way to experience it at close quarters is to spend a night in a longhouse as a paying guest. A few around Kuching welcome visitors: our favourite is the Lemanak Longhouse on the Ai River, a 90-minute drive east of town.

Don't expect any luxury here. You'll sleep on a mattress with a mosquito net on the floor of a communal dormitory; and sanitation is basic. But a vivid, authentically Iban atmosphere is guaranteed and you'll have numerous opportunities to interact with your hosts. Various day trips will be included for those who spend a couple of nights at Lemanak, including excursions along the river in traditional Iban longboats.



Gunung Mulu National Park

Encompassing a spectacular tract of pristine rainforest and high mountains in Sarawak's northern interior, this is the state's top national park, and one of the few in the country designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The accolade derives in no small part from the presence here of the Pinnacles. But the famous, grey-blue limestone shards soaring above the forest canopy share the limelight with a cave network astonishing both for the size and depth of its caverns.

Access to Mulu is easiest by plane. Visitors fly direct to the well organized Park HQ, site of the five-star Mulu Marriott, whose longhouse-like buildings stand on stilts amid the jungle. Popular guided treks in the park include circuits of the main show caves, the largest of which boast passages up to 2km long and 170m tall, and the route through the forest to the great Pinnacles themselves (see box). You'll also have numerous opportunities to swim in idyllic river pools, discover waterfalls deep in the forest, and watch clouds of bats streaming from the mouths of the world's deepest caves.



The Pinnacles Trek

The 3-day round walk through Mulu's rainforest to the world-famous Pinnacles is the park's signature experience, and reason enough to make the journey. Culminating with a panoramic view of the 50-metre-tall needles, the route can be arduous and is only recommended for the physically fit.

Day 1 starts with a visit to Wind and Clearwater show caves (the longest in Southeast Asia), followed by a short boat ride to the trailhead at Long Litut, where the walk proper begins. A gently undulating 9-km trail brings you to Camp 5, where trekkers bed down in dormitory tents run by the Park. Hot meals are served in a communal dining area. The first part of Day 2 is mostly uphill, involving 3-4 hours of strenuous climbing, till you reach a natural balcony on Mt Api at 1200m, from where a magnificent view of the Pinnacles is revealed. You then return back down the mountain to Camp 5, following the route in reverse to arrive at the Park HQ around mid-afternoon on Day 3.

Brunei Excursion

The Sultanate of Brunei, on Borneo's northwest coast, makes an interesting stopover if you're travelling between Sarawak and Sabah. Resembling a tiny Gulf emirate hemmed in by miles of undisturbed tropical forest, the country owes its high standard of living and generally relaxed feel to the prodigious offshore reserves of oil and gas, which have made the ruling monarch one of the world's wealthiest men. The Sultan of Brunei's lavish palace is the largest building in the capital Bandar Seri Begawan ('BSB' for short), though it attracts considerably less admirers than the rather more down-at-heel water village on the river. Comprising thousands of brightly painted wooden houses on stilts, the settlement of Kampung Ayer is the largest of its kind in Asia; 10% of the entire population is said to live in its maze-like, watery streets, made of boardwalks and ramshackle clapper bridges.

Boat trips along the river to the water settlement may be extended to take in a small area of forest on the outskirts of town inhabited by a colony of proboscis monkeys – offering the best chance of spotting these rare primates in all of Borneo. Other worthwhile side trips in the Sultanate include the excursion out to the edge of town to see the astonishingly opulent Empire Hotel and Country Club, built in the 1990s for an estimated \$1-billion, and the Ulu Temburong National Park, featuring a particularly well designed canopy walkway.





Kota Kinabalu

Mount Kinabalu

Sabah's capital – normally referred to as 'KK' – is a lively and friendly place. Although its high-rise tower blocks and 4-lane freeways are the antithesis of what most visitors come to Borneo to see, the city's top-class hotels, restaurants and transport connections offer a welcome change after the relative discomforts of travel in the remote interior, dominated by the grey-pinnacled Mt Kinabalu.

A decent ethnographic museum and brace of colourful markets provide worthwhile distractions. With more time, you can also venture offshore by boat to the five beautiful islands comprising the Tunku Abdul Rahman Marine National Park, whose coral gardens and white-sand beaches offer some fabulous snorkelling. Train enthusiasts will also enjoy a ride on the British-built North Borneo Railway, half an hour's drive out of town, which retains a wonderful old, wood-burning Vulcan steam engine.



Sepilok

Since it opened in 1964, the world-famous Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre at Sepilok in northern Sabah has cared for apes orphaned or injured by forest clearance. In 43 sq km of tropical forest they are able to roam wild, re-learning essential survival skills such as climbing and foraging which may have been lost through the trauma of displacement. The hope is that in time the animals will be ready to be sufficiently skilled to be released back into the wild.

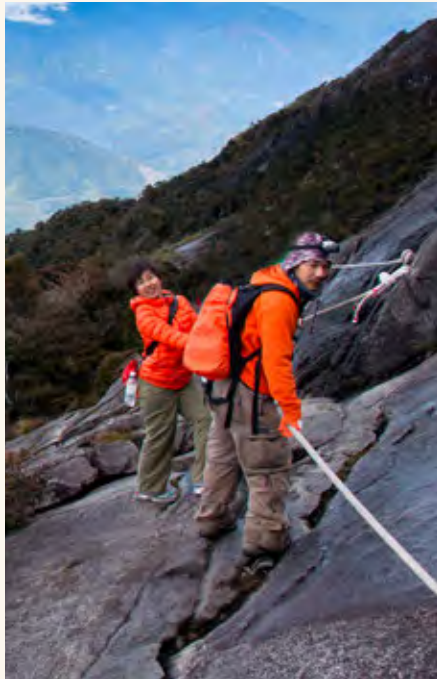
At any given time, between 60 and 80 adults are present here, along with 25 or more babies and youngsters in the site's nurseries. Visitors

are welcome to attend the twice-daily feeding sessions, when the centre's charges gather to be fed milk and bananas – a diet that's intentionally bland in order to encourage the orangutans to gather their own more nutritious forest food.

Alongside the primate reserve is a smaller centre for rescued sun bears, making Sepilok an unmissable destination for wildlife enthusiasts. For those wishing to extend their visit, allowing time to explore the surrounding reserve forest and observing the apes without the crowds of onlookers, we recommend a two-night stay in the area.

Turtle Islands National Park

A cluster of three tiny, sand-fringed islands off the northeast coast of Sabah serve as nesting sites for endangered green and hawksbill marine turtles. Each night of the year, a handful of females crawl out of the surf to dig a hole and deposit a clutch of eggs above the high-tide mark – a spectacle that may be observed at close quarters on Selingan Island, where the park authorities offer simple chalet-style accommodation. It is also possible to watch park wardens releasing hatchlings back into the sea – one of the most heart-warming spectacles wild Borneo has to offer.



Mount Kinabalu Trek

Mt Kinabalu is not merely Borneo's loftiest summit, but – at an imposing 4,095m/13,435ft – is also the highest ground between the Himalayas and Papua New Guinea. Thousands of trekkers travel to the island each year to complete the ascent – a trek which, although requiring no technical expertise, demands a good degree of physical fitness and stamina. Normally covered in the predawn darkness amid near-freezing conditions and at elevations that can cause altitude sickness in some, the final part of the climb can be particularly demanding. The reward is an unrivalled view of the sunrise over Borneo that will linger in the memory a lot longer than any aches and pains incurred on the way down.

Two days, with a night in a mountain hut en route, are required to make the ascent, which starts just beyond the Kinabalu Park HQ. The first stage, taking 5-7 hours, winds uphill via a well made path through dense dipterocarp jungle and cloud forest filled with orchids and rhododendrons to the Laban Rata Hut, where you spend a short night at altitude, getting up at 2:30am for the final pull to the summit in time for daybreak. A very steep climb in total darkness using a head torch takes you to the summit – a surreal plateau of inclined slabs and horn-like peaks. From there, it takes 5-7 hours to descend by the same route to reach your waiting onward transport.

If you decide to include the Kinabalu trek as part of your tailor-made itinerary, we'll ensure all the necessary paperwork, accommodation bookings and peak fees are arranged in advance, along with expert guides and, if required, porters to carry your gear. You will, however, need to prepare physically for the challenge!



Kinabatangan

Olive green or chocolate brown depending on the season, the Kinabatangan is Sabah's longest river, rising in the mountains of the interior and flowing into the Sulawesi Sea on Borneo's northeast coast. The mangroves, grassy swamplands, oxbow lakes, dipterocarp and ficus forests carpeting its floodplain host a prodigious quantity of wildlife, including elephants, orangutans, proboscis monkeys, gibbons, monitor lizards and all eight species of hornbill present on the island. The main reason for this great gathering is the clearance of forests around the area for palm oil plantation, which has forced the animals and birds ever closer to the riverbanks. Since 2005, this precious land along the water's edge has been protected as a nature reserve.

Safaris are generally conducted in electric-powered longboats. The guides we use in the area are highly skilled and will take you to lesser visited zones along tributaries of the Lower Kinabatangan, such as the Menanggul, where you can expect to have a quieter wildlife experience.



Danum Valley

The most pristine, protected lowland rainforest in Borneo extends over 169 sq miles (438 sq km) of the Danum Valley in eastern Sabah. Comprising primarily dipterocarp jungle, the area provides sanctuary for an exceptionally rich array of species, from the rarely sighted clouded leopard and Sumatran rhinoceros to more common pygmy elephants, gibbons and proboscis monkeys. Orangutans are also present here in healthy numbers. Among the best places to see them is the forest in the immediate vicinity of the Borneo Rainforest Lodge, a wonderful eco retreat that offers an impressive level of comfort for such a far-flung location. Reaching Danum involves a short flight from Kota Kinabalu to Lahad Datu, on the east coast, followed by a 2-3 hours' drive inland (though it is also accessible by a 4-hour road journey from Kinabatangan River). Once installed in your comfortable rainforest chalet, you'll be in the capable hands of the lodge's highly trained naturalists. First foray into the conservation area is usually a guided tour of the majestic, 107-metre-long canopy walkway, from which vantage point you'll be able to begin ticking off many of the 320 species of birds resident in the valley. Around 30 miles (50km) of marked trails thread through the reserve to observation posts and other places of interest, such as a Kadazan-Dusun cliff-coffin burial site and Sungai Purut waterfalls. Tubing, night hikes to spot nocturnal animals, and pre-dawn treks to panoramic viewpoints where you can watch the sun rise over the mist-drenched rainforest canopy are also offered.

Tabin Wildlife Reserve

Trips to the Danum Valley can be combined or alternated with visits to the Tabin Wildlife Reserve, an hour-and-a-quarter's drive down a bumpy gravel track from the airport at Lahad Datu. As with Kinabatangan, the rapid spread of palm oil production in the area has seen this patch of mostly secondary forest fill up with refugee wildlife, including Sumatran rhinos, pygmy elephant, gibbons and proboscis monkeys, as well as orangutans. The signature experience here, however, is the trek to the Lipad mud volcano, a mineral-rich water hole used by animals as a salt lick. Nocturnal walks also yield frequent sightings of western tarsier, flying squirrels and civet cats.

Although not as exclusive as the lodge at Danum, the Tabin Wildlife Resort provides a comfortable base in the heart of the forest, and is run by exceptionally knowledgeable and genuinely enthusiastic staff.



Beaches of Malaysia

Fringed by sparkling turquoise water and blissfully soft, white-sand beaches, Malaysia’s islands are textbook tropical paradises. The finest beaches on the west coast are to be found at Pulau Langkawi, 30km off the shore of Kedah. The islands of the Peninsula’s eastern flank are harder to reach, though worth the trouble for their breathtaking scenery. Among 64 volcanic islets comprising the Seribuat Archipelago, Pulau Tioman was one of the first resorts to be developed in Malaysia, thanks to its starring role in the movie *South Pacific*. It tends, however, to be eclipsed by the picture-postcard

beaches of the nearby Perhentian Islands, twin jewels of the Terengganu coast. Across the sea in Borneo, the shoreline of Sabah is generally much wilder. Within easy range of the airport, Gaya Island’s exquisite beach and rainforest hideaway resort makes a perfect first footfall. But for those with the time and resources to venture to the far northeastern tip of the island, the rewards are access to some of the world’s richest tropical marine reserves – Sipadan, Matakang and Mabul Islands – where you can dive four or five times daily on amazing reefs with huge shoals of barracuda and turtles.



Beach Resort of Malaysia

Datai, Langkawi | Recently voted among the world’s ‘Top Ten Beaches’ by National Geographic magazine, dreamy Datai, on the far northwestern tip of Langkawi, is the loveliest bay on the island, with a single, exquisite ecolodge nestled amid the carpet of primary rainforest behind the sand. Framed by a tangle of strangler figs and ancient trees full of wildlife, with the marble crags of Gunung Machinchang towering behind, the location is out-of-this-world. So too is the architecture, which fuses traditional Malaysian and contemporary luxury to wonderful effect. Five-star facilities include a spa, two pools and an 18-hole, championship golf course.



Pangkor Laut Resort, Pulau Pangkor | The jewel in Pangkor’s crown is a tiny island off its southwest tip, occupied by a very special place to stay. Offering exclusive access to a bay of shimmering, transparent water and golden sand, the Pangkor Laut Resort comprises uber-luxurious, Malay-style villas scattered across a hillside smothered in rainforest; others rise directly from the water on stilts. Everything, from the overflow pools to the designer spa village, blends seamlessly with the landscape, allowing you to experience the rainforest and tropical shoreline in matchless comfort.



Japamala, Pulau Tioman | Long since upstaged by the likes of Phuket and Langkawi, Tioman is today all about tranquility – and there’s plenty of it at this secluded luxury hideaway on the southwest side of the island. Access is via private, twin-propped plane from KL or Singapore, and then speedboat, which deposits you at a wooden jetty enfolded by a cove backed by soaring, jungle-covered mountains. Clinging to the forested slopes above the beach, Japamala’s 13 wood chalets are blissful havens – some have their own alfresco hot tubs and daybeds cantilevered over the sea. Spend your days kayaking, crab spotting on the beach or snorkeling around the vibrant inshore reef.



Bubu Long Beach Resort, Kecil Perhentian | Of the twin Perhentian islands of Besar (‘Big’) and Kecil (‘Small’), the latter is marginally less developed, appealing in the main to independent-minded travelers looking for a beach that’s lively in the evenings, but not a rolling party zone. Bubu, on Long Beach, is its best hotel – a well run, midscale place offering great value accommodation. Providing a comfortable base in which to recover from a day’s swimming and snorkeling in the crystalline waters of the bay, the rooms are bright and cool and all have their own private veranda or balcony. There’s a choice of dive shops on the doorstep, and a string of excellent budget restaurants only a stroll away.

Reef Dive Resort, Matakang Island | On the edge of a continental shelf surrounded by reefs of hard and soft coral, Matakang ranks among the world’s finest diving resorts. Legendary Sipadan Island lies within range of a daytrip, and 30 other superb sites teeming with undersea life are nearby. And if that weren’t incentive enough, the property’s beach villas and chalets are some of the most luxurious and indulgent in Malaysia, offering sunrise and sunset views, depending on their orientation, from glass-walled, marble-floored bedrooms, private decks with direct access to the beach and raised wooden balconies. Prices are all-inclusive, covering transfers, dives and meals.

Bunga Raya Island Resort, Gaya Island | On a coral reef island off the northern coast of Borneo, a short ferry ride from Kota Kinabalu, the award-winning Bunga Raya Resort occupies a tranquil bay of aquamarine water enfolded by rainforest and mangroves. Its 48 timber villas, terraced into the hillside, make the most of the uplifting views. Handcrafted from local hardwoods, they range from simple cottages, three steps from the sand, to palatial, multi-floored units with wrap-around decks and their own private plunge pools, from where you can watch hornbills and giant butterflies flit through the surrounding canopy. A hilltop spa, drawing on the power of indigenous plants and oils, completes the picture.

Diving in Malaysia



With their abundant marine life and average visibilities ranging from 12–40m, Malaysian waters offer superlative diving, whatever your ability level. For serious enthusiasts, the eastern state of Sabah, on Borneo, is the destination of choice. Sipadan, a tiny islet off its northeast shore, is world famous for its spiraling shoals of barracuda, congregations of turtles and lumphead parrotfish, but nearby Mabul and Matakang are no less enthralling thanks to their spectacular wall dives, colourful coral gardens and labyrinthine cave systems. Underwater life off the coast of Peninsular Malaysia is only marginally less rich. Boasting a wealth of caves, reefs, twisting channels and sponge-encrusted pinnacles, Tioman and Redang both hold sites to suit a wide span of experience, while the Perhentians are ideal for learners, thanks to their shallow reefs.

Some of our favourite hotels, Malaysia

Villa Samadhi, Kuala Lumpur | Set discretely in the diplomatic quarter, this delightful boutique hideaway offers 20 beautifully designed rooms ranged around a lagoon pool and tropical garden, only 10-mins’ walk from the Petronas Towers. Its thatched roofs and low-hanging lanterns create a soothing contrast to the tower-block modernity on all sides. Darkwood floors and elemental textured walls infuse the room décor with a tranquil feel, with antique urns and bamboo screens adding old-world Asian notes. There’s a gourmet residents-only restaurant and relaxing rooftop bar, and the service is warm and smiling, making you feel more like a house guest than a paying customer.



Blue Mansion, Penang | Thanks to its coat of traditional indigo limewash, Cheong Fatt Tse’s Blue Mansion in Penang has been one of the city’s most desirable and distinctive residences since it was built in the 1880s. Aside from a few modern conveniences, nothing much was added during the conversion to stylish heritage hotel: the original granite-paved courtyard, Art-Nouveau stained-glass windows, clay tiled floors (from Stoke-on-Trent), French louvred windows and handsome Chinese porcelain gable panels are still gloriously intact. Picturesque old trishaws beside banana and bamboo plants in massive glazed pots provide perfect still-life photo opportunities. And the rooms ooze period charm.



Hotel Puri, Melaka | Formerly owned by a family of wealthy rubber planters, this lovingly restored Pemakan shophouse on Heeren St (aka ‘Millionaires’ Row’) has been converted into a quaint heritage boutique hotel. Behind the elaborately decorated Neo-classical façade, many of the original furnishings and fixtures survive in the 100-metre-long property, from the English quarry-tile mosaic floors to the framed Chinese calligraphy hanging on the walls, elegant spiralled staircase and richly carved furniture in the little museum room. The guest rooms are much more clean lined and modern – impeccably comfortable and superb value for money. You’re also guaranteed a warm welcome from genuinely hospitable staff.



Mandarin Oriental, Kuala Lumpur | This lavish, landmark 5-star occupies a plum position between the city centre park and iconic Petronas Towers, in the heart of KL. It has plenty of presence and glamour, without ever becoming brash, and is run with a great sense of pride and efficiency, as befits one of the world’s top hotels. Classically furnished rooms, suites and apartments come in no less than 14 different categories; all enjoy sweeping skyline views, as does the heavenly alfresco pool. Also on site are a dozen or more restaurants, coffee shops and bars, serving an impressive range of cuisines in high style.



Majestic, Kuala Lumpur | Back in Malaysia’s pre-war boom years, the Majestic was the hotel in KL, often mentioned in the same breath as Raffles of Singapore, Bombay’s Taj Mahal and the Strand, Rangoon. After a lavish refit, it once again occupies pride of place in the city, offering a luxurious, cool and nostalgic haven amid the humid heat of the capital. If you can stretch to it, go for a suite in the original Majestic Wing, which has preserved a wonderfully vintage feel – thought in truth, the Art-Deco-inspired black-marble-and-chrome look of the modern Tower Wing is no less elegant. Relax in the stylish courtyard pool, Cigar Room (smoking jacket by request), or British-themed spa.

Majestic, Melaka | Occupying an evocative 1920s mansion, this stylish heritage hotel recalls the colonial heyday of Melaka. Floor-to-ceiling windows, framed by opulent silk drapes, make the most of the fabulous views, which extend across the river and nearby Malay village to the distant sea, and can be enjoyed from the comfort of your own indulgent chaise longue. Little touches such as the clawfoot tubs in the bathrooms, and handcrafted Nonya sweets left in your room at turndown time, increase the overall sense of delight and luxury. Should you really feel like splashing out, book one of the suites on the top floor – they’re huge and have the finest panoramas.

Cameron Highlands Resort | If you’re travelling to the hills for echoes of the romance and gracious living of the colonial era, you’ll find plenty of inspiration here. Conceived in high plantation style, with shuttered windows, tall French doors and extensive use of teak and silk, the property looks as it might have before the war, when the hill station and its surrounding tea groves served as the restorative of choice for heat-weary British burrasahibs and their families. The ivory coloured walls and matching upholstery in the rooms are alluringly offset by polished hardwood floors and four-posters fitted with floaty mosquito nets.

Eastern & Oriental, Penang | Along with Raffles in Singapore and the Majestic in KL, the E&O served from the late-19th century as an outpost of refined British living in the former Straits Settlements. Rudyard Kipling, Noel Coward, Somerset Maugham and numerous celebrated artists, writers and heads of state have passed through its doors, which are still staffed by khaki-clad doormen and bellhops wearing pith helmets. Pass through the soaring echo-dome lobby to reach the original Heritage Wing, with its iconic Moorish domes, and savour the views through the palms to the seafront from your own clay-tiled veranda.

Shangri-La Rasa Ria, Kota Kinabalu | For those wishing to combine the grandeur and comfort of a fully fledged, luxury five-star resort with a truly wild setting, Shangri La’s Rasa Ria, outside Kota Kinabalu, is the perfect choice. Beautifully laid out around landscaped grounds, behind a beach of velvet-soft sand, the property is surrounded by 400 acres of primary rainforest and even boasts its own orangutan reserve and canopy walk. Everything you could possibly want or need for a perfect holiday is on-site, and delivered with unfailing good humour by the resort’s enthusiastic staff. Optional activities range from jungle walks to fishing trips, and being royally pampered in the top-notch spa.



Sepilok Nature Resort, Sepilok | Nestled on the banks of a small lake in the heart of the Bornean rainforest, this resort is the best base for visits to the nearby orangutan sanctuary, sun bear centre and Kabili-Sepilok Forest Reserve, and serves as a comfortable and welcoming stepping stone if you’re heading further east towards Kinabatangan. The wood-lined chalets are pretty, spacious and cool, and the waterside gardens full of birds and butterflies which you can watch from the comfort of your dark-wood veranda – particularly atmospheric at night when the staff line the walkways with lanterns and candles. The meals and smiling service also garner consistently positive feedback from TI guests.



Lone Pine, Penang | Having seen its heyday in the 1950s and 1960s, the Lone Pine recently had a major refurbishment and is now by far the most stylish and characterful place to stay in Penang’s famous beach area, Batu Ferringhi. All of the rooms and suites open on to sea-facing terraces, balconies or private courtyards. The interior décor is fresh and modern, with a few subtle nods to the building’s heritage, such as polished parquet floors. For relaxation, you can lounge by a generous sized pool or in one of the hammocks strung between the casuarina trees in the garden. And the beach is on the doorstep.



Lakehouse, Cameron Highlands | Originally created as a B&B by a retired British army colonel, the Lakehouse retains lashings of old-world English charm. Half a century later, the mock-Tudor residence, which surveys a grand sweep of rolling uplands and tea plantations from its hilltop site, looks much as it did back in the 1960s, albeit a little more polished. Liveried staff light fires in the rooms before bedtime, while you relax with a glass of fine wine in their well-stocked bar. Guided walks in the surrounding tea groves and rainforest provide additional incentive to linger a while in these refreshingly cool climes.



Mulu Marriott, Gunung Mulu National Park, Sarawak | Offering opulent, five-star luxury in the depths of Sarawak’s interior, the Mulu Marriott achieves astonishing standards, both in its levels of comfort and service, considering the remote location. The sleek, cutting-edge designer style was the result of a lavish makeover in 2014. Rich leathers, shimmering silk and carved hardwoods now dominate the serene interiors, whose style is said to have been inspired by indigenous longhouses. Suspended walkways looking onto virgin rainforest interconnect the various wings with the communal areas, pool and spa. Although forming a rather surreal counterpoint to the jungle, the beauty, tranquillity and elegance of this property are truly irresistible.

Permai Rainforest Resort, Kuching | Optimally placed for trips into the fabulous Bako National Park, Permai rests amid dense jungle at the foot of Mt Santubong, on Borneo’s rugged north coast. You’re only half an hour’s drive away from Kuching, but the location has a vivid, middle-of-nowhere edge, particularly at night, when the sounds of the forest are intense. Accommodation is provided in beautiful stilted villas, 20ft off the ground with their balconies literally in the tropical tree canopy. We particularly love the terrace of the breezy, open-sided café-restaurant (‘The Feeding Tree’) which has breathtaking sea views. Numerous activities are also offered, from sea kayaking to mangrove cruises.

Ranee, Kuching | Located on the promenade at the heart of Kuching’s historic quarter, within easy walking distance of Kuching’s main sights, this suave, 24-roomed boutique hotel was converted from a pair of 19th-century shophouses. Its owners cleverly managed to upcycle fragments of the antique building into the interiors of the individually styled rooms and suites which, along with pieces of rustic furniture, add great character to the opulent retro décor. Public space is limited to a small library on the first floor, but you can relax on your own balcony overlooking the adjacent palace or terracotta rooftops of the bazaar.

Mutiara Taman Negara Resort | This large, spread out eco-resort is the only place of note to stay inside the national park. Be prepared for glimpses of wild tapir, monkeys, boar and hornbills from your chalet porch, and invest in a pair of earplugs from the resort shop because the nocturnal din from the jungle can be intense! Buffet meals are served in a spacious dining hall where there’s a serviceable wi-fi connection. The hotel really comes into its own as a springboard for jungle treks, night hikes in the rainforest and wildlife spotting trips on the nearby river.

Travel information & Itineraries, Malaysia

When to travel to Malaysia | Malaysia is a year-round destination, although April to October is the driest period. Peak season falls in the summer school holidays, in July and August. During the monsoons, from October to March, travel may be disrupted on occasions and diving is suspended in most of the resorts.

How to travel to Malaysia | Overland journeys in Malaysia are mostly conducted by chauffeur-driven, air-conditioned car. Road conditions rank among the best in Asia, although for remote parts of the Peninsular and jungle reserves and lodges in Borneo, four-wheel drive vehicles may be needed. The country's excellent network of domestic flights make it straightforward to reach even far-flung coastal resorts in Sabah, Sarawak and the east coast, making it possible to cover widely contrasting landscapes in even a relatively short trip. Expert, English-speaking guides will accompany you on sightseeing excursions where required.



Colonial Malaysia | 14Days

This two-week tour focusses on Malaysia's colonial legacy, starting in the capital and progressing to cooler climes of the Cameron Highlands, before exploring the decaying mansions and colonial architecture of Ipoh. You'll finish in Penang, an island with a fusion of cultures.

- Day 1** Overnight flight from UK to the Malaysian capital, Kuala Lumpur.
- Day 2** Arrive KL; transfer by car to the historic city of Melaka (Malacca); stay two nights.
- Day 3** Explore the cultural and architectural legacy of Melaka's colonial spice trade on a full-day tour of the atmospheric old quarter.
- Day 4** Morning, return to Kuala Lumpur; stay three nights. Evening tour with dinner and a local cultural performance included.
- Day 5** Take an orientation tour of the capital, and visit a local tea house.
- Day 6** Day at leisure for shopping or trip to the Forest Research Institute's renowned canopy walk, on the city's outskirts.
- Day 7** Drive to the Cameron Highlands, stopping at the Batu cave temple and Iskandar falls en route; stay two nights.
- Day 8** Half-day tour of the area, with visit to a tea plantation.
- Day 9** Depart for Ipoh, pausing on the way at the Kek Lok Tong Cave Temple and Kuala Kangsar. In the afternoon, explore the city's colonial mansions. Stay overnight.
- Day 10** By car to Penang; stay three nights. Dinner is included on an evening tour of Georgetown.
- Day 11** Visit restored Pernakan shophouses and street markets on a tour of Georgetown, followed by an excursion up Penang Hill on the funicular train.
- Day 12** Day at leisure.
- Day 13** Evening flight back to UK, via Kuala Lumpur.
- Day 14** Arrive UK early morning.



Wild Malaysia | 17Days

The national parks and reserves of Peninsular Malaysia and its islands form the backbone of this varied 17-day trip, which covers the full gamut of the region's landscapes and climate zones, from coastal rainforests to stunning tea gardens.

- Day 1** Overnight flight from UK to Kuala Lumpur.
- Day 2** Spend the day relaxing in your hotel. Evening tour with dinner and a local cultural performance included. Stay three nights.
- Day 3** Morning visit KL's butterfly and bird parks before heading to the Selangor Wetland Reserve.
- Day 4** Day at leisure for shopping or a trip to the famous canopy walk at the Forest Research Institute on the city's outskirts.
- Day 5** Transfer north to Batu caves, Malaysia's largest Hindu shrine, and onwards to Fraser Hill; stay for two nights.
- Day 6** Half day bird watching tour. The rest of the day is at leisure for walks and swimming.
- Day 7** Transfer to Taman Negara National Park; stay two nights. Night walk to spot nocturnal wildlife in the forest with a guide. Dinner included.
- Day 8** Spend the day in the national park, exploring the area on foot with an expert naturalist.
- Day 9** Depart the national park and onwards to the Cameron Highlands; stay two nights.
- Day 10** Half day tour of the area.
- Day 11** Leave the cooler climes of the Cameron Highlands and head north to the lesser visited Belum Rainforest Reserve, your home for two nights.
- Day 12** Spend the day exploring the national park with your guide, on foot and by boat.
- Day 13** Transfer to Kuala Perlis Jetty to catch a ferry to beautiful Langkawi Island, home to some of Malaysia's loveliest beaches. Stay three nights.
- Day 14** Full day tour of the island, including a trip on its famous cable car to the acclaimed Sky Bridge for a matchless panorama over the coast.
- Day 15** Day at leisure for swimming and snorkelling in the island's dazzling turquoise bays.
- Day 16** Evening transfer to the airport for overnight flight to UK via Kuala Lumpur.
- Day 17** Arrive early morning in UK.



East Coast Explorer | 14Days

This fortnight-long tour takes you from the futuristic capital, Kuala Lumpur, to the national park in Malaysia's interior. Continue across the Peninsula to the East Coast, staying in laid-back coastal towns, finishing on the exquisite white-sand beaches of the Perhentian Islands.

- Day 1** Overnight flight from UK to the Malaysian capital, Kuala Lumpur.
- Day 2** You'll be greeted at the airport and transferred to your hotel; stay two nights.
- Day 3** Orientation tour of the city and visit to a local tea house.
- Day 4** Transfer to Taman Negara National Park; stay two nights. Night walk with guide.
- Day 5** Spend the day in the national park with your guide, exploring the area on foot.
- Day 6** Transfer to Kuantan; stay two nights.
- Day 7** Full day tour of laid-back Kuantan and its surrounding area, dotted with Malay fishing villages and secluded beaches.
- Day 8** Transfer to Terengganu, take a tour to the Firefly Sanctuary to witness the amazing synchronized flashing patterns. Picnic supper by the beach. Stay two nights.
- Day 9** A half day tour covering the highlights of the city.
- Day 10** From Kuala Besut jetty you'll catch a boat to the glorious Perhentian Islands. Stay three nights (on Kecil).
- Day 11** Day at leisure
- Day 12** Day at leisure.
- Day 13** Catch the ferry back to Kuala Besut, transferred to Kota Bharu to take a flight via Kuala Lumpur back to UK.
- Day 14** Arrive early morning in UK.



Bornean Honeymoon | 15Days

Tropical islands with secluded coral-sand beaches, wildlife-rich jungles and remote ecolodges in the untouched rainforests – Sabah, in the far north of Borneo, has all the right ingredients for the most exotic and romantic of honeymoons.

- Day 1** Overnight flight from UK to the Malaysian capital, Kuala Lumpur.
- Day 2** Catch a connecting flight to Sandakan, on remote Sabah's northeast coast; stay one night. Rest of the day at leisure.
- Day 3** Boat transfer to Lankayan Island; stay three nights.
- Day 4** Day at leisure for swimming, snorkeling and diving.
- Day 5** Day at leisure.
- Day 6** Travel to Sukau via Sepilok Orangutan Sanctuary. Take an evening wildlife cruise along a Kinabatangan tributary; stay two nights.
- Day 7** Boat safari on the Ox Bow Lake and Kinabatangan River to spot proboscis monkeys, pygmy elephant, orangutans and gibbons.
- Day 8** Transfer into the depths of wild Danum Valley; stay two nights.
- Day 9** Full day of jungle activities in this pristine wildlife haven.
- Day 10** After morning activities, catch a flight to Kota Kinabalu and onwards to a luxury property on Gaya Island; stay four nights.
- Day 11** At leisure.
- Day 12** At leisure.
- Day 13** At leisure.
- Day 14** Late afternoon transfer to the airport to catch a flight back to UK via Kuala Lumpur.
- Day 15** Arrive in UK early morning.



Borneo Family Adventure 15Days

Share unforgettable wildlife encounters, sleepovers in a tribal longhouse and a blissful stay at an idyllic tropical beach on this family-oriented tour. The optimum time for visiting Sabah is between April and September – perfect for the school holidays.

- Day 1** Overnight flight from UK to Kota Kinabalu.
- Day 2** Arrive in Kota Kinabalu; stay two nights.
- Day 3** Drive to the Mari Mari cultural village to learn about the tribes of Borneo.
- Day 4** Drive to Kudat area via a tea plantation; stay overnight in a traditional Iban longhouse.
- Day 5** Spend the morning experiencing village life, then transfer back to Kota Kinabalu to catch a flight to Sandakan. Transfer to Sepilok, where you stay for two nights.
- Day 6** Visit Rainforest Discovery Centre and Sun Bear Conservation Centre.
- Day 7** Boat transfer to Selingan Island. Stay for a night to watch turtles laying eggs on a remote tropical beach.
- Day 8** Boat transfer to Abai, via Sepilok Orangutan Sanctuary. Late-afternoon wildlife river cruise; stay two nights.
- Day 9** Full day of wildlife safaris in and around the Kinabatangan River.
- Day 10** Transfer back to Sandakan and take the afternoon flight to Kota Kinabalu, transfer to a first-class beach resort for four nights.
- Day 11** Day at leisure.
- Day 12** Day at leisure.
- Day 13** Day at leisure.
- Day 14** Transfer to the airport and fly back to UK via Kuala Lumpur.
- Day 15** Arrive in UK early morning.



Discover Borneo | 17Days

Explore Sarawak and Sabah's world-renowned wildlife parks, staying at a series of comfortable ecolodges in the heart of the rainforests. Spot Borneo's varied species of tropical animals and birds, winding down at a beach resort in Kota Kinabalu.

- Day 1** Overnight flight from UK to Kuala Lumpur, then on to Kuching in Sarawak.
- Day 2** Arrive Kuching, transfer to Permai Rainforest Lodge; stay two nights.
- Day 3** Full day excursion to Bako National Park.
- Day 4** Morning cruise in search of dolphins, followed by a visit to Satang turtle island for some snorkeling; stay in Kuching for a night.
- Day 5** Fly to Sandakan; stay two nights. Visit Sepilok Orangutan Sanctuary.
- Day 6** Visit Rainforest Discovery Centre and Sun Bear Conservation Centre.
- Day 7** Travel by boat to Kinabatangan Riverside Lodge; stay two nights.
- Day 8** Enjoy boat safaris on the Ox Bow lake and Kinabatangan river to spot wildlife.
- Day 9** Transfer to the Tabin Wildlife Reserve; stay two nights. Enjoy afternoon jungle activities.
- Day 10** Trek through lush rainforest to Lipad waterfall and enjoy bird watching at dusk.
- Day 11** Drive to Danum Valley; stay two nights.
- Day 12** Full day of jungle activities today.
- Day 13** After morning activities, catch a flight to Kota Kinabalu; stay three nights.
- Day 14** Day at leisure
- Day 15** Day at leisure
- Day 16** Evening flight back to Kuala Lumpur and on to UK.
- Day 17** Arrive UK early morning.



Indonesia

Forming a vast flight of stepping stones between mainland Asia and Australia, Indonesia comprises around 15,000 islands that encompass a truly astounding array of landscapes and cultures. While some feel like large countries in themselves, others are little more than tiny specs of coral-fringed rainforest in the midst of the deep-blue Indian Ocean. Ancient Buddhist and Hindu sites testify to the deep roots of Indonesian civilization, while evocative Dutch and Portuguese trading posts, and their indigenous royal counterparts inland, preserve fascinating vestiges of the more recent past. Extensive tracts of tropical forest also survive, where you can see exotic creatures such as the orangutan and proboscis monkey in their native habitats. Frame this richness with an exotic backdrop of cloud-swept volcanoes and dazzling white-sand beaches, and you'll understand why the country inspires such passion among those who have spent time here.



Highlights of Indonesia

Yogyakarta and Surakarta, Java |

Dubbed 'Jogja' and 'Solo' by Indonesians, these old Javanese towns remain vibrant repositories of local courtly arts and crafts, ranging from traditional costumed dance to fabulous handwoven batik.

Ubud, Bali | With its vibrant craft workshops, tropical boutique hotels and trend-setting yoga schools, Ubud is a compelling fusion of traditional Balinese Hinduism and contemporary tropical chic, set in an irresistible landscape of rice terraces and palm forest.

Borobudur and Prambanan, Java |

Savour the spectacle of sunrise over these awe-inspiring, UNESCO-listed archeological sites, whose ancient carved figures and elaborately symmetrical terraces lay forgotten under a mantle of jungle until the 19th century.

Lovina, Bali | Soak up the soothing sea breezes of Bali's less developed north coast, whose hinterland holds a mix of traditional settlements, ancient temples and beautiful forest, framed by a mesmerizing backdrop of volcanoes and mountains.

Tanjung Puting National Park, Kalimantan (Borneo) |

The large patches of primary rainforest surviving in Indonesia's portion of Borneo offer the chance to see orangutans in the wild – from the comfort of a wooden klotok river boat.

Komodo Dragons | The world's largest lizard – the mighty Komodo Dragon – survives on only 5 remote islands in eastern Indonesia. See this forbidding creature on a walking safari around Komodo and Rinca Islands.

Lake Toba, Sumatra |

Trek through the jungle to hidden beaches and wonderful wild-swimming spots, or simply relax and enjoy the sublime scenery and unique local architecture of this turquoise lake, cradled by the volcanic hills of deepest Sumatra.

Raja Ampat Islands | The waters of this isolated archipelago are regarded as the most pristine and biodiverse on the planet – the spellbinding scenery, both above and below the waterline making it a paradise for divers and snorkellers.

Travel Information

Time zone: UTC+7-9 hours

Flying time: 13 hours

Currency: Indonesian Rupiah

Capital: Jakarta

When to go

Month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Temperature °C	25	25	28	28	28	28	26	27	30	28	28	26
Rainfall mm	300	300	205	162	121	100	73	44	81	120	166	202
Best to travel	●	●	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●	●	●	●

●● The best time to travel

● A good time to travel

● Low season

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Mount Bromo, Java

Java

Thanks to its fertile volcanic soil and plentiful rainfall, Java is the most populous island in the Indonesian archipelago. The nation’s sprawling capital, Jakarta, lies on its north coast, but the undisputed cultural hub is Yogyakarta, where visitors come to experience traditional Javanese music, dance, arts and crafts, as well as to visit the great archeological sites of Borobudur and Prambanan nearby. Smouldering in the background, a phalanx of active volcanoes form an other-worldly horizon, where you can climb in the predawn gloom to gaze over the rim of giant craters for the sunrise view of a lifetime.



Jakarta

Home to around 10.2 million people, the nation’s capital is a vast, modern megacity sprawling from the feet of the Bogor Hills to the Java Sea. Its airport is the point of arrival for many visitors to Indonesia. Among the highlights are the atmospheric old Dutch quarter at Kota, and the fascinating port of Sunda Kelapa, with its jetties of traditional, two-masted pinisi boats being loaded and unloaded by hand. The harbour is best visited around sunset time, after a leisurely lunch at the famous Café Batavia, and tour of Jakarta’s excellent museums.



Yogyakarta, Java

The conservative rule of Yogyakarta’s traditional Sultans has ensured the tidal wave of westernization sweeping across the rest of the country has made a more measured impact in this pleasant provincial capital. Visitors flock here to experience traditional gamelan, shadow puppetry, classical and contemporary Javanese dance and ritual theatre. Between performances, jump in an old-style becak (rickshaw) for a tour of the city’s sights: the Sultan’s Palace, Water Palace and Sonobudoyo Museum, where the highlight is a collection of 1,200 wavey-bladed kris daggers.



Prambanan, Java

Dedicated to the Hindu god Shiva, Prambanan, 11 miles (18km) east of Yogyakarta, was constructed in the mid-850s AD, but deserted only a couple of generations later – probably because of volcanic activity in the area, which covered the site under a pall of ash, sand and later, jungle. Only in the early-19th century was the complex rediscovered by British colonial officials. Substantially reconstructed, its crowning glory and jaw-dropping centrepiece remains the elaborately carved, 47m tall sanctuary tower, surmounting the site’s central shrine. The spectacle of this extraordinary behemoth soaring above the palm canopy, swathed in smoke from village fires, ranks among the most memorable Southeast Asia has to offer.

Borobudur, Java

Borobudur encapsulates everything that’s most exotic about Java. Come before dawn and you can watch the first rays of daylight illuminate the faces of 1200-year-old stone Buddhas gazing west over a plateau of lush rice fields and palm groves to the plume of smoke rising from the summit of Gunung Merapi. Ash from the volcanoes on the western horizon buried the mighty stupa until the early 19th century, when British and Dutch officials rediscovered the site. It’s now Java’s most visited attraction, and an active place of worship; a pilgrimage hub of UNESCO World Heritage status.





Dieng Plateau

A winding 3-hour drive from Yogyakarta, the Dieng Plateau is a lush, cloud-swept caldera at an altitude of 2,000m (6,600ft). Encircled by dramatic volcanic peaks (including some that remain active), the steep sides of the crater are sculpted with twisting terraces of potato and cabbages. Over one-thousand years ago, the floor of the plateau was carpeted with tiny Hindu temples, of which a scattering survive. Whether gilded by the early morning sunlight or wreathed in mist, they're a beautiful sight, as is the nearby jade-green mineral lake. Accommodation options around Dieng itself are limited to basic homestays, but you can base yourself in one of the comfortable hotels down the mountain Wonosobo, half an hour away, and travel up before dawn for the sunrise.



Malang

Surrounded by four magnificent volcanoes, Malang in eastern Java ranks among the world's most dramatically sited cities. Visitors pass through en route to the mountains further inland, but it's worth exploring the faded old town, established by the Dutch in the late-18th century on the back of the coffee trade. Malang's cooler climate (the city sits at 443m/1,453ft above sea level) appealed to the European traders and planters, and still entices people to linger in the area longer than they intended: trips to the many beautiful beaches, islands, waterfalls and ruined medieval temples in the area offer plenty of incentive to do so.



Krakatau

In 1883, one of the most violent volcanic eruptions ever known occurred in the Sunda Straits, off the west coast of Java, ripping apart the island of Krakatau and causing an immense cloud of scorching dust and a tsunami that left tens of thousands dead. Waves the height of 7-storey buildings sped at over 400mph across the ocean, eventually reaching South Africa and New Zealand. Today, the island lies deserted and barren, but makes a compelling side trip from Jakarta. More interesting than the remnants of the defunct volcano is its more active offspring, Anak Krakatau, which rose from the depths in the 1930s and still periodically spews rivulets of molten lava. Volcanic activity permitting, you can climb to the rim of the caldera for a superb panoramic view of the surrounding archipelago.



The Baduy

While modern Indonesia develops at a dizzying pace, a minority community in the west of the country, near Banten on Java, cling to their age-old way of life, living from farming and weaving in bamboo and rattan villages miles away from the nearest roads. Refusing to adopt the conveniences and technologies of the 21st century, the Baduy (or 'Badu') wear only handwoven robes of dark blue and white, and practise a mixture of animism and Hinduism. At the root of their lifestyle are a raft of taboos forbidding the use of money, the cutting of hair, travel in motorized vehicles, the wearing of flowers or perfume, or use of modern tools – all of which makes their villages fascinating to outsiders. Visits may be arranged from Jakarta, 3 hours' drive away.



The Ijen Plateau

Although often overlooked by travellers, the far east of Java holds some of the island's most spectacular landscapes, notably those of the Baluran National Park, whose principal highlight is the beautiful Ijen Plateau, a rolling upland of dry savannah studded with soaring volcanoes. Three of these – Gunung Raung, Gunung Sulket and Gunung Merapi – approach or exceed the 3,000m mark. The one that's most fascinating to ascend on foot is Gunung Ijen (1,994m/), thanks to the secret it cradles in its summit crater: a steaming blue-green lake, surrounded by slopes of yellow-ochre. Passing through coffee plantations, vegetable gardens and forest, the road to the start of the trek at the national park headquarters in Pal Tuding makes a delightful drive.

From the trailhead, you strike out on foot along a path trodden at dawn each day by teams of sulphur miners from the local villages. Having hacked lumps of mineral rich rock from the crater floor, the men return carrying 50–70kg loads on their backs – an extraordinary feat of courage and endurance which you can observe from the safety of the crater rim. An expert guide will accompany you on this unforgettable 3km climb, which takes around 90 minutes.



Bandung

Java's second city, Bandung, lies 118 miles (190km) southeast of Jakarta. Although a convenient staging post on the long journey to Yogyakarta, the centre itself holds little to detain visitors. Tours instead revolve around the outskirts, dominated by the profile of Tangkuban Perahu, a dormant volcano whose summit may be reached via an enjoyable hike, or by road. Visitors bathe in the hot springs of Sari Ater, enjoying recitals of Angklung music in the evening, played on traditional bamboo flutes.

Gunung (Mount) Bromo, Java

Peaking at 2,392m (7,848ft), Gunung Bromo in eastern Java may not be Indonesia's highest volcano, but it's one of the most conveniently accessible, with a road running all the way up to the lip of the caldera's encircling cliff, from where the views are magnificent. Bromo is actually one of three volcanoes cradled in a massive 10km crater that's carpeted in a covering of grey-brown sand and ash. Rising in the background, a plume of smoke and steam billows from the perfectly symmetrical snout of Gunung Semeru, Java's loftiest peak (3,676m/12,000ft) – a mesmerizing spectacle at dawn, when the first rays of sunlight burnish its eroded slopes.



Surakarta (Solo)

The perennial rival to Yogyakarta, Surakarta – aka ‘Solo’ – is Java’s second royal capital. It was established in the mid-18th century by King Pakubuwono II, one of the main descendants of the Mataram Sultans, and continues to be an important hub of Javanese culture, despite having been largely eclipsed by its better known counterpart. Music (particularly gamelan) and traditional courtly dance is still widely studied and performed here. The great local speciality, however, is batik. Some of the finest textiles in all Indonesia originate in the city, and you can admire superb antique pieces in the famous Danar Hadi museum.

As at Yogyakarta, two royal kraton palaces survive, dating from the years after 1745 when European power was in the ascendancy and the local rulers became de facto puppets of the Dutch East India Company. Other vestiges of past splendor lie in the hills outside Solo, where a number of ancient temple sites nestle amid the terraced greenery, volcanoes smoking on the horizon.



Semarang

Encapsulating the twin facets of modern urban life in Indonesia, the north coast city of Semarang is divided between its antique, Dutch-built colonial quarter, and the 8-lane highways, skyscrapers and malls of the modern Simpang Lima district. Dilapidated old warehouses and administrative buildings line the streets of the former colonial enclave, known as ‘Outstadt’, while the city’s most iconic European landmark, the twin-towered Lawang Sewu, has recently been renovated and now welcomes visitors. On the outskirts, the huge Gedung Batu Chinese temple, with its tall pagoda roofs and red paper lanterns, also warrants a tour if you’re passing through en route to or from the east.



Eastern Kalimantan

Daily flights from Yogyakarta, Bali and Singapore connect Java with the regional capital of Eastern Kalimantan, the oil-rich boom town of Balikpapan. Yet despite its convenient transport links, comparatively few travelers venture to this far-flung corner of the country. The principal incentive to do so is the chance to travel inland via the broad, sinuous Mahakam River, which gives access to a wonderful orangutan reserve and some traditional Dayak villages, complete with huge wooden longhouses and guardian figures.

On arrival at Balikpapan, you’ll be transferred to a luxurious cruise boat for the trip upriver. A combination of jeeps and motorized canoes will, over the coming few days, enable you to venture deep into the island’s jungly interior, where the Samboja Lestari ecolodge provides a luxurious base from which to visit the groundbreaking orangutan rehabilitation centre and surrounding villages.



Kalimantan

The Indonesian state of Kalimantan covers three-quarters of Borneo – one of the very wildest, and least visited, parts of Asia. Infamous for their former practice of headhunting, the indigenous Dayaks who inhabit the region’s primordial jungle have retained many aspects of their traditional way of life in the face of rapacious deforestation, wild fires and intensive missionary activity since the 1970s. For visitors, however, Kalimantan’s abundant wildlife is the prime incentive to cross the Java Sea. Providing a compelling side trip on journeys between Borobudur and Bali, the state’s national parks offer the best chance in the world of sighting orangutans in their native habitat, along with proboscis monkeys, sun bears, gibbons and rare jungle birds such as hornbills.



Tanjung Puting National Park

Covering 4,000 sq km of tropical heath and swamp forest on a low-lying peninsula jutting into the Java Sea, Tanjung Puting is Kalimantan’s premier nature reserve. The reason for its great popularity is its 1000-strong population of orangutans, who live semi-wild around three feeding stations deep inside the park – part of the famous Camp Leakey rehabilitation programme, which helps the animals adapt to life in the wild if they have been orphaned or captured. Safaris are generally conducted on klotok cruises (see over/below) along the Sekonyer River – a wonderful way to experience the jungle of Borneo. Alternatively, visitors may stay on dry land in a number of purpose-built eco-resorts, among which the Rimba Lodge (see p136) is a particular favourite of ours.

As well as the ginger-haired ‘Man of the Forest’, Tanjung Puting supports viable populations of crocodiles and red leaf monkeys. If you’re extremely fortunate, you may even spot a Sunda clouded leopard – a creature so rare and elusive it was only identified as a separate species in 2006.



Cruising the Sungai Sekonyer

As Tanjung Puting is a roadless park, the only way to travel around it is on the Sekonyer River. A fleet of small klotok boats chug daily from the jetty at Kumai, a port connected by road to the airport at Pangkalan Bun, mooring at night in secluded spots deep in the jungle, where guests sleep on deck atop simple mattresses.

While they offer good value for money, klotoks aren’t all that comfortable, for which reason we often recommend safaris on the more luxurious Rahai’i Pangun – a beautiful, 20m wooden riverboat fitted with 6 cabins and a spacious observation deck. As the journey

unfolds, the river narrows, and banks fill with spiky pandanus bushes, with vivid yellow gardenia and ranks of stately dipterocarp trees lining up behind. Orangutans nesting in the trees, gibbons swinging through the branches, crocs drifting through the still, green water or hornbills flitting through the tropical canopy could appear at any moment as you glide deeper into the jungle, arriving eventually at the Camp Leakey feeding stations, where you’ll be able to watch the apes at close quarters.

Nighttimes on board the Rahai’i Pangun, with the nocturnal sounds of the forest filling the air, are equally memorable.

Art & Textiles of Indonesia

The traditional arts and crafts of Indonesia have for many centuries played an integral part in local religious and cultural life. Woven cloth and painting, in particular, were regarded as a means of revealing the divine nature of the universe, playing important roles in rites of passage and temple ceremonies.



Batik | The finest pieces of this quintessentially Indonesian textile have for centuries been produced in the workshops of Java's two royal cities, Yogyakarta and Surakarta (Solo). Earthy russet browns, indigos and deep reds set against backgrounds of yellow ochre or cream are the hallmarks of the school, which uses distinctive motifs for different social groups. Visit any of the old-family batik factories in the backstreets of Jogja or Solo and you'll see artisans using a nibbed stylus called a djanting to apply the resist, traditionally made of beeswax. The cloth may be dyed and re-dyed dozens of times to achieve the spectacular multi-hued layering effect .

Ikat | Following the demise of the Majapahit Kingdom in the late 1400s, many Javanese aristocrats fled eastwards, taking their most highly prized artisans with them, which is why the art form is nowadays most closely associated with Bali.

'Endek', or 'weft ikat' is the speciality of Tenganan village, on the east side of the island - one of only three places in the world where intricate 'double ikat', known as 'gringsing' is also produced. Lengths of this exquisite, luxurious cloth takes months (or even years) to produce and sell for huge sums.

Balinese Painting | Formerly rendered on bark cloth, Bali's traditional Kamesan style of painting had its roots in the Majapahit courts of Java, and was used primarily to recite Hindu epics. Royal houses and temples were its principal patrons until the 1920s, when European and Australian artists resident on the island began to influence local painters. The introduction of perspective and principles of anatomy gave rise to a completely new form, which took as its subject matter secular scenes from everyday village life rather than stories from the Mahabharata or Ramayana, and which featured, for the first time, the artist's own signatures.

Not to be outdone, the nearby village of Batuan also boasts its own distinctive style - with less romanticized and more frenetic scenes than those favoured by the Ubud school.





Bali

Bali, to the east of Java, has always been considered the pearl in the necklace of Indonesia’s Sunda Islands. Its mix of spellbinding volcanic scenery, glorious beaches, pounding surf, lush tropical hinterland and a vibrant local culture rooted in an archaic form of Hinduism have long made it the most popular destination in the archipelago. Although the resorts of the south coast, in particular, can get very busy, further north and east, a handful of relatively peaceful fishing villages offer greater tranquillity, serving as ideal bases for explorations of Bali’s scenic and cultural riches.

Tenganan

The Bali Agas – the original, indigenous Balinese – resisted the Javanization of the island in the 13th century onwards by retreating to remote villages where they could preserve their traditional way of life. This endures most strongly at Tenganan, a village encircled by a high wall. Stepping inside is like entering another world. Economically and culturally isolated from the rest of Bali, the villagers are largely self-sufficient and have a proud, refined, distinguished air about them, underlined by their elegant traditional dress and their resplendently intricate, double-ikat gringsing cloth, which takes literally years to dye and weave. Fine examples are on sale at local houses, along with specimens of basket work, palm-leaf etching and calligraphy.



Tanah Lot

Well before you even set foot on the island, you’ll be familiar with the distinctive, multi-tiered form of Tanah Lot, whose shrines rise seamlessly from the rocky coast, 16 miles (26km) west of the Balinese capital Denpasar. The temple has become the unofficial symbol of Bali, and as such appears in tourist literature the world over, ensuring it sees more than its share of foreign visitors from nearby resorts. It’s easy enough to sidestep the crowds; however, get to the site early in the morning, or follow the cliff path north-west for a superb panoramic view of the shrine set against the Bukil plateau of Bali’s southwestern tip.

Besakih

The Mother Temple for Balinese Hindus, Besakih, at the foot of Gunung Agung, is a popular day trip inland for foreign visitors staying on the coast. Come in clear weather (most common at the height of the dry summer season in July–August when the mountain’s dramatic form is revealed in all its unearthly splendour), and the experience is guaranteed to be a magical one. Crowds of worshippers laden with floral offerings file around the site’s 20 different temples and innumerable subsidiary shrines, spread over a 3km area and interconnected by ascending terraces, colonnaded walkways, long, steep flights of steps and ceremonial gateways.

Ubud

Ubud is the place to stay if you’ve come to Bali hoping to experience traditional dance and ritual arts – or if you’re seriously into shopping! The town is jam-packed with absorbing little stalls, boutiques and crafts workshops where you can watch artisans at work and browse an astonishing range of quality local handicrafts, from painting to wood and stone carving, masks, and textiles made using ikat and batik techniques. The thatched villages around it offer windows on Bali’s more traditional way of life, as well as plenty of scope for forest walks, white-water rafting, bird spotting and encounters with long-tailed macaques at the famous Monkey Forest Sanctuary. And if all that weren’t incentive enough, the town has also become a favourite among yoga aficionados, thanks to its world-renowned schools and holistic therapy practitioners.



Candi Dasa

At the eastern extremity of majestic Amuk Bay, Candi Dasa represents the relaxed face of Bali’s main resort strip. As well as boasting superb snorkelling and diving in its crystalline waters, it is also one of the most superbly situated of the island’s holiday centres, enfolded by a hinterland of dramatic hills, idyllic villages and terraced rice fields, with the majestic, sacred volcano, Gunung Agung, dominating the horizon.

Lovina

A perfect base from which to explore Bali’s refreshingly uncongested north coast is the resort of Lovina, a popular centre for dolphin spotting as well as diving and snorkelling at nearby Pemuteran and Menjangan Island. Trekking in highland villages and visiting fruit and vegetable farms are other attractions in the area. Within easy reach of a day trip lie Bali’s largest Buddhist monastery, the Brahmavihara Arama, and hot springs of Banjar Tega, where you can wallow in healing sulphurous water.



Amed

Development has been slower to gather pace on Bali’s quieter northeastern coast, where a string of low-key resorts and pretty villages are dotted along a spectacular shoreline known as Amed. Colourful catamarans idle on grey-pebble and black-sand beaches, against a backdrop of hills sweeping straight from the shoreline. This dramatic hinterland lends a vivid edge to swims in the translucent waters offshore, whose coral reefs swirl with colourful marine life.



Trekking in Bali

Bali is an especially rewarding destination for keen walkers, with wonderful hiking trails threading through the villages, rice terraces and palm forests of the interior to dormant volcanoes with summits trailing plumes of mist and cloud.

Rising from the shores of a beautiful, crescent-shaped lake, Gunung Batur (1,717m/5,633ft) is the most easily accessible of the big peaks. It's reachable in a hike of between 2 and 3 hours, via hillsides covered in forest and, higher up, slopes of dark-grey and black volcanic sand. In order to reach the top early enough to catch the sun rising over the surrounding mantle of cloud, the trek is best covered before dawn. From the rim of the caldera you can peer into the volcano's smoking core, and out across the ocean to the summit of Gunung Rinjani in neighbouring Lombok.

A longer and tougher option is the ascent of Gunung Agung (3,142m), Bali's highest mountain and a pivotal point in local religious tradition: Balinese Hindus believe it to be the abode of ancestral spirits. Routes range from 4 to 7 hours, and once again, to be on the summit at sunrise you'll need to camp overnight halfway up. Consult one of our Southeast Asia specialists for advice on specific trails. Whichever trek you choose, rest assured it will be in the company of experienced and knowledgeable guides.



Yoga and Meditation

Over the past decade or so, Bali has become a popular destination for yoga practitioners of all levels of ability, with schools such as the popular Yoga Barn in Ubud and the Gili school on the neighbouring Gili Islands (in Lombok) offering daily drop-in classes, or longer retreats, in beautiful mud-walled, thatched-roofed shalas. We can help arrange your stay, advising on the best yoga school and accommodation for your budget.

Gunung Rinjani Trek

The highest peak on either Bali or Lombok is Gunung Rinjani (3,726m/12,224ft), a smouldering cone of volcanic rock and sand with a huge, blue-green lake in its summit caldera. You can trek to the rim in 6–7 hours for a peek inside the vast, lunar-like crater, or camp just below in order to catch the sunrise. Confirmed trekkers may also wish to tackle the full, 3-day ascent of the summit itself, which involves two nights under canvas and is regarded as among the finest mountain ascents in Southeast Asia. We can arrange experienced guides, tents, supplies and porters for the expedition. Just bring suitable all-terrain footwear, mountain clothing, and a camera to capture the stupendous panoramas, which extend across the steaming, younger volcano inside the caldera and out across the Straits to Gunung Agung in Bali.



Lombok

Although often mentioned in the same breath as Bali, neighbouring Lombok – a couple of hours by boat across the Straits – is geographically and culturally distinct, with a predominantly Muslim population and a more open, wind-blown landscape. Tourism has, with the exception of a handful of resorts clustered along the coast north of the capital, Mataram, made considerably less impact here, leaving the island's traditional Sasak culture to flourish. Often dubbed “a rough diamond” because of its undiscovered feel, Lombok will particularly suit anyone who enjoys off-track exploration.



Gili Islands

Some of the most striking stretches of powder-soft sand and turquoise water in the region fringe a cluster of three tiny islands off Lombok's northwest coast, collectively known as ‘the Gilis’. Because it boasts the broadest choice of quality hotels, restaurants and dive shops, we tend to recommend Gili Trawangan, the member of the trio furthest from the mainland. For greater tranquillity, however, you could opt for quieter Gili Air. Alternatively, visit the Gilis on day trips from the gorgeous boutique hotel, Tugu Lombok, just inland, whose magnificent traditional wood and thatch buildings, crammed with antiques and beautiful artworks, set out to recreate the splendour of Lombok's ancient Hindu kingdoms.

Balinese music and dance

The most easily identifiable form of Balinese music is gamelan, in which orchestras of 25 or more men, sitting cross-legged on the ground, play a bewildering combination of bronze percussion instruments: bells, gongs, cymbals and chiming bars. The swirling, overlapping chords and syncopated rhythms are intensely mesmeric, and the perfect accompaniment to the island's other-worldly temple dance forms, in which performers wear sumptuous costumes featuring headdresses, brocaded silk and elaborate jewellery. By contrast, the Kecak, or Monkey Dance, is performed by men wearing no more than a chequered black-and-white cloth over baggy cotton trousers – and a single hibiscus flower behind their ear. Seated in concentric circles, waving arms and chanting ‘chak chak chak’ in unison to dramatic effect, they also accompany dance dramas at temple festivals – one of Asia's most compelling rituals.





Sumatra

Sumatra, known to Arab geographers and mariners of the medieval world as ‘Lamri’, is the largest island entirely within Indonesia. Stretching for over a thousand miles from north to south, its backbone is a chain of jungle-shrouded volcano-mountains called the Bukit Barisan, whose rainforests shelter vestigial populations of tiger, elephant, rhinos and orangutans. It is for a glimpse of these critically endangered creatures, along with the vivid turquoise waters of a vast freshwater crater lake, Danau Toba, that most visitors travel to Sumatra. Despite having borne the brunt of the Boxing Day Tsunami of 2004, the island’s dazzling coastline also holds considerable allure, with some of the best snorkeling and diving in the region.



Danau Toba and Pulau Samosir

Around 80,000 years ago, a cataclysmic eruption ripped through the mountains of northern Sumatra, transforming the world’s climate and almost completely wiping out homo sapiens. Its source was a volcano whose steep-walled caldera today holds a serene, green-blue lake known as Danau Toba – the largest body of freshwater in Indonesia.

Connected to the shore via a narrow isthmus of land, Samosir, the presque-isle in the lake’s centre, is the homeland of the Toba Batak – a community of Christianized indigenous people, infamous in colonial times for their custom of ritual cannibalism. Nowadays, however, visitors can expect a rather warmer welcome at Batak villages! Dotted along the island’s tropical shoreline are a string of delightful little resorts that make ideal bases from which to make leisurely cycle rides and treks through the forested interior. Hike to hidden white-sand beaches and wonderful wild-swimming spots, or simply relax and enjoy the sublime scenery and exotic local architecture. While the Christian missionaries that converted the Toba Batak a century ago erased many local traditions, lots of houses retain antique-style upswept eaves and handsomely carved gables. Wood carving remains a local speciality – staffs sculpted with the faces of ancestral spirits are a staple of village handicraft shops – as does music, dance and weaving.



Gunung Leuser National Park

The largest wilderness area in all of Southeast Asia lies in the north of Sumatra, a region whose ancient forest and extraordinary biodiversity is being eroded at an unnerving speed by the spread of palm oil production and logging. Of particular importance is the primary jungle covering the mountains of the Gunung Leuser National Park (GLNP), stronghold of the Sumatran tiger, Sumatran rhinoceros, Asian elephant and orangutan.

While sightings of the first two species are extremely rare these days, you’re guaranteed a glimpse of an orangutan at the famous Bohorok Orangutan Centre at Bukit Lawang. Set up by a pair of Swiss naturalists in the 1970s to care for and train rescued animals for release into the wild, it is now run as an ecotourism site and centre for conservation, learning and education. Accommodation is in simple, but clean and spacious ecolodges set in lush forest, where the accent is very much on experiencing nature rather than high luxury.



Tana Toraja

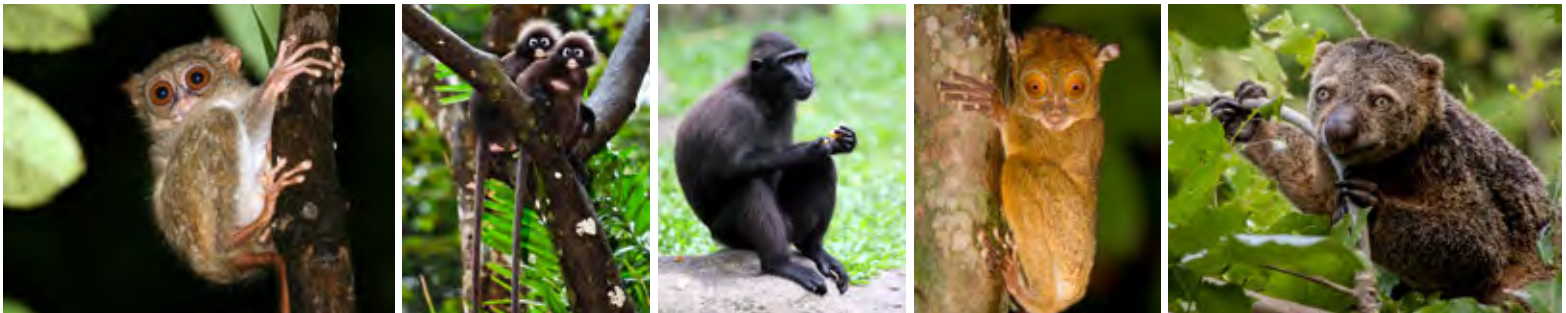
The most self-confident and best known minority group in Sulawesi are the Toraja – an ostensibly Christian society who retain many animist beliefs and practises. Settlements scattered around their traditional territory in the hills of the southern interior – known as Tana Toraja – feature strikingly decorated rice barns and boat-shaped ancestral houses with upcurved roofs and richly painted gables. The Toraja are equally famous for their extravagant funerals, in which dozens of pigs and water buffalo are ritually slaughtered. Afterwards, the embalmed bodies of the deceased are placed in cavities hewn from limestone cliffs, where they remain on display for many years – among southeast Asia’s most other-worldly spectacles.

Sulawesi

Sulawesi is one of Indonesia’s four biggest islands, and its most curiously shaped. Four long peninsulas, divided by yawning blue gulfs, form a sprawling, 1,000km-wide ‘K’ shape, converge on its mountainous core, where a myriad small villages nestle amid glistening rice terraces against horizons of active volcanoes. Based in trading ports on the coast, the colonial powers struggled to exert control over this remote heartland, whose feuding kingdoms managed to maintain their traditional cultures well into the 20th century, when Christian missionaries evangelized the region.

Few visitors linger in either of Sulawesi’s hot, congested cities – Makassar, the capital, in the southwest, and Manado in the far northeast. Instead, nature and minority cultures provide the incentive to venture to the island’s unspoiled peripheries. Boasting vast swaths of primary forest, countless undeveloped beaches, vibrant reefs and some unique wildlife viewing opportunities, Sulawesi is ripe for off-beat exploration.

Its principal national park, Tangkoko, ranks among the best places in the world for seeing elusive tarsiers – tiny, nocturnal primates distinguished by their oversized ears and bug eyes. Rare possums called kuskus and the peculiar looking babirusa pig-deer are other species seldom seen elsewhere. The diving and snorkelling are superlative too, particularly in Wakatobi in the southeast, up north in the Gulf of Tomini, and at Lembeh Strait and the Bunaken Marine National Park, near Manado on Sulawesi’s northeastern tip, whose waters lie within the fabled ‘Coral Triangle’ – one of the planet’s purest marine ecosystems.





Komodo and Rinca Islands

The world's largest lizard, the legendary Komodo dragon, survives on 5 islands in eastern Indonesia – the most accessible of them, Komodo itself and nearby Rinca. Both are starkly beautiful, with parched, undulating hills of bleached grass and spindly lontar palms falling to turquoise bays and pale, pink-sand beaches. Against this serene backdrop, the leathery reptiles, which weigh up to 100kg and grow to 3 metres in length, stalk their prey, which they kill by inflicting wounds that become infected by bacteria contained in their saliva.

In order to ensure your safety while observing the dragons, expert guides and rangers will accompany you throughout your safari. While most day trips to Komodo and Rinca leave from the small harbour town of Labuan Bajo, on the neighbouring island of Flores, it is also possible to spend a night on a private boat, rather than returning to shore. Either way, expect stops at one or two of the uninhabited islands that fleck the ocean around Komodo to snorkel and trek. The finest panorama in the region is to be had from the summit of Komodo's highest hill, Gunung Ara; on the way, your guide will point out cockatoos and megapodes, a rare bird resembling a turkey.

Flores

This long, rugged island straggles across Nussa Tenggara Province, its mountainous volcanic spine soaring to an impressive 2,500m (8,200ft). Portuguese traders were responsible for the name – a homage to its verdant flanks, which tumble from the rocky peaks inland through pine forests and terraces of coffee, cocoa, rice, bananas and spices to a coastline indented with beautiful powder-sand beaches. Labuan Bajo, the ramshackle capital on the western side of Flores, serves as a springboard for boat trips to Komodo and Rinca, home of the eponymous 'dragon'.

Linger a few days and you'll be able to follow the sinuous trans-island highway into the hills, passing a string of tiny Catholic churches and tin-roofed villages belonging to the island's Christian indigenous communities. Reached by a 3-4 hour hike from Denge, through fragrant rainforest, the village of Wae Rebo is much photographed thanks to its 7 conical, palm-thatched mbaru niang houses, made in traditional style by the Manggarai minority and set amid a spellbinding amphitheatre of peaks.

The most popular day trip on Flores, however, is to Kelimutu, a dormant volcano whose three summit lakes, cradled inside lunar-like craters, constantly change colour. A 4am start is required to reach the summit in time for sunrise, which you can enjoy over a hot cup of coffee or a bowl of steaming noodles from one of the vendors who also make the trek each morning.

Sumbawa

Larger than both Bali and Lombok combined, Sumbawa is a sprawling, parched, rugged and sparsely populated island often used by travellers as a stepping stone en route to or from Komodo. Its population is culturally mixed, with the Sumbawan of the west more influenced by Balinese Hinduism than the staunchly Muslim Bimans of the east coast. Spectacular coral reefs and wildlife-rich islands, such as Pulau Mayo to the north, offer ample incentive to linger a day or two, as does the ascent of spectacular Gunung Tambora, an imposing cone with a vivid turquoise crater lake at its summit. In 1815, the volcano erupted with an explosion several times greater than that of Krakatau.



Raja Ampat Marine National Park

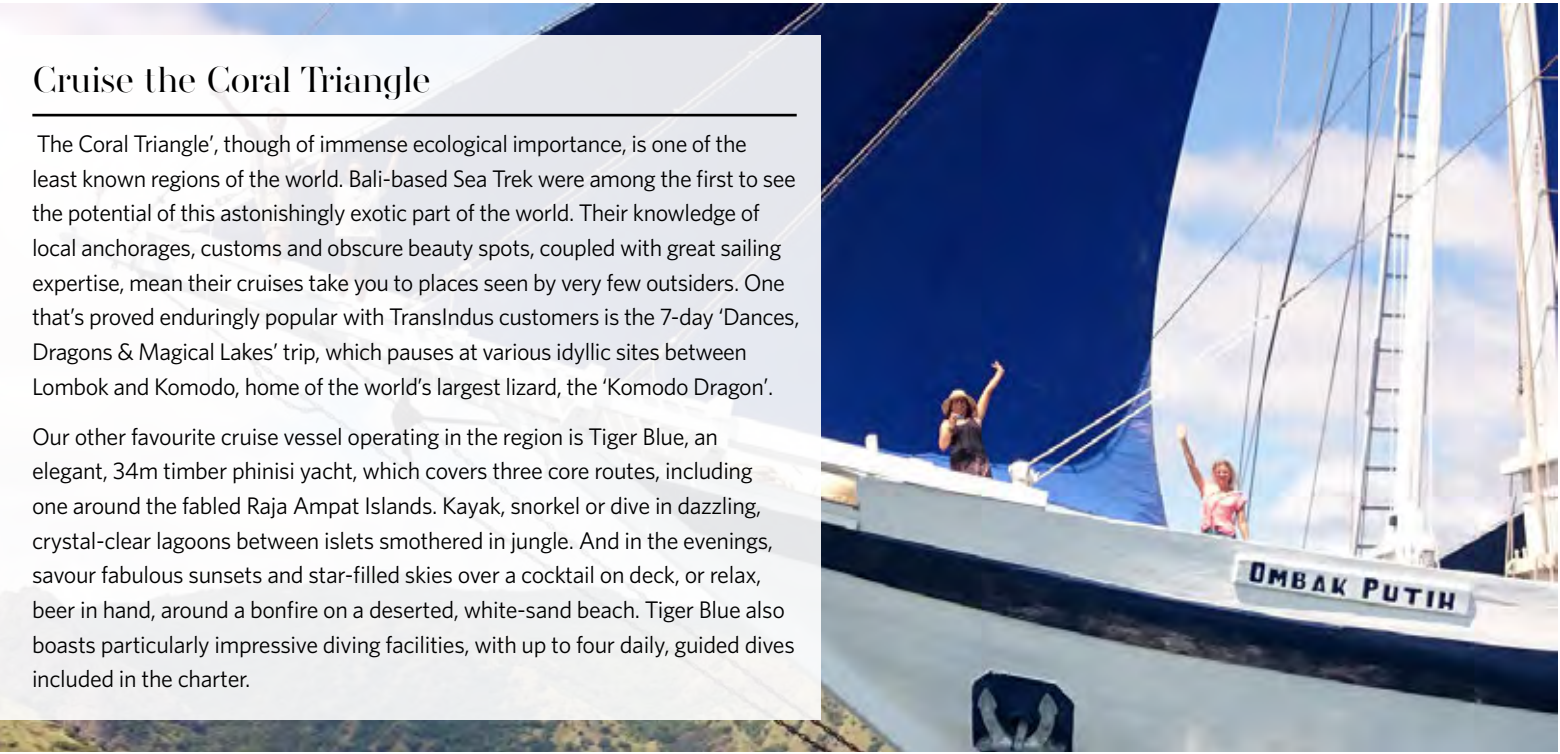
The Raja Ampat archipelago is a group of widely dispersed, largely deserted islands and islets off the coast of West Papua, Indonesia's most easterly province. Incredibly remote and unspoilt, it requires considerable effort to reach, but those prepared to commit to the journey are rewarded with an experience of a pristine natural environment of a kind that's now exceedingly rare in this region. Divers, in particular, rave about the Raja Ampats, whose numerous world-

class dive sites are protected as a Marine National Park – regarded as one of the world's most biodiverse sub-aqua zones, on par with the Great Barrier Reef and Galapagos, with a staggering 374 species of fish and coral recorded so far, including many found nowhere else on earth. You can reach the islands either by plane, staying at the beautiful Sorido Bay Resort (see p137), or on a long-distance live-aboard cruise out of Bali. Whatever you choose, a glimpse of paradise is guaranteed.

Cruise the Coral Triangle

The Coral Triangle', though of immense ecological importance, is one of the least known regions of the world. Bali-based Sea Trek were among the first to see the potential of this astonishingly exotic part of the world. Their knowledge of local anchorages, customs and obscure beauty spots, coupled with great sailing expertise, mean their cruises take you to places seen by very few outsiders. One that's proved enduringly popular with TransIndus customers is the 7-day 'Dances, Dragons & Magical Lakes' trip, which pauses at various idyllic sites between Lombok and Komodo, home of the world's largest lizard, the 'Komodo Dragon'.

Our other favourite cruise vessel operating in the region is Tiger Blue, an elegant, 34m timber phinisi yacht, which covers three core routes, including one around the fabled Raja Ampat Islands. Kayak, snorkel or dive in dazzling, crystal-clear lagoons between islets smothered in jungle. And in the evenings, savour fabulous sunsets and star-filled skies over a cocktail on deck, or relax, beer in hand, around a bonfire on a deserted, white-sand beach. Tiger Blue also boasts particularly impressive diving facilities, with up to four daily, guided dives included in the charter.



Some of our favourite hotels, Indonesia

Amanjiwo, Borobudur, Java | Enfolded by the spectacular natural amphitheatre of the Menoreh Hills in central Java, Amanjiwo overlooks the ancient Buddhist site of Borobudur, offering a serene, luxurious base for visits to the ruins at sunrise and sunset time. Its focal point is a bell-shaped rotunda sculpted from local limestone. A central corridor and staircase aligns this with the temple complex below, framed by a backdrop of volcanoes – a view you can savour from a gorgeous jade-coloured pool flanked by mango trees and forested hills. Ultra-stylish yet exuding a timeless feel, this fabulous boutique property provides the perfect compliment to one of the world’s most sublime archeological sites.



Tugu Hotels | If you’d like to spend your holiday somewhere resembling a scene that could be spirited off the pages of a Javanese-Hindu epic, then the Tugu chain of heritage boutique hotels is for you. Housed in period properties with great old-world character, each of the four ‘museum hotels’ in Blitar, Malang, Bali and Lombok are unique, and beautifully sited, with exquisite collections of antiques, artworks and furniture assembled by Tugu’s owner, Anhar Setjadibrata. Rich, vibrant colours, exuberantly carved wood panels and shimmering local textiles combine to create romantic settings with echoes of Indonesia’s lost kingdoms.



Plantaran Borobudur Resort, Java | Only 5 mins from the Borobodur temples, the Plantaran occupies an elevated position in the Menoreh Hills, surrounded by lush forest and paddy fields on the edge of a typical Javanese village. If your budget can stretch to it, go for one of the pool villas and you’ll be able to soak up the exotic vistas from the comfort of your own private pool and sun terrace – though in truth, the ‘garden villas’ and rustic-minimalist ‘paddy cabanas’ are only marginally less alluring. Enjoy an indulgent Javanese massage and fragrant flower bath in the spa, followed by a yoga session in a beautiful open-sided pavilion.



Wapa Di Ume Resort, Ubud | This stylish boutique resort and spa is our favourite pied-a-terre in Ubud, Bali’s culture capital. It nestles unobtrusively on the outskirts of town, surrounded by rice fields and coconut trees, along the banks of a winding river. The pool villas, with their sunken tubs and teak decks, pull off the difficult trick of offering wide-ranging views at the same time as great privacy, while the new infinity pool also enjoys wonderful panoramas over the paddy terraces and palm canopy. An indulgent spa adds to the allure of the property.



MesaStila, Losari, Java | Set on a working coffee plantation in the hills outside Yogyakarta, this heavenly heritage hotel recaptures the romance of the colonial era, with authentic Dutch-Indonesian villas dotted around 25 acres of manicured grounds. Eight volcanoes punctuate the horizon – a spellbinding backdrop for leisurely afternoons on your own private veranda or relaxing in the stone-lined infinity pool, from where the views extend over miles of unbroken tree canopy to distant forested mountains. The Javanese-inspired interiors, featuring antique, carved wood screens, four posters and fine local textiles, are no less entrancing. Borobudur can be visited en route to or from the airport, or as an easy day trip.

Roemahkoe, Surakarta, Java | Built in 1938 as the residence of a wealthy batik merchant, this is a wonderfully atmospheric haven on the edge of the former royal capital. Lovers of Art Deco style will adore its beautifully preserved interiors, which have been painstakingly restored and refurbished. The antique beds, vibrant stained-glass windows and liberal use of dark, polished wood all underline the heritage pedigree, as do meals in the open-sided dining area, which has the feel of a bygone era. The cuisine is refined and service gracious. Visits to a nearby batik village are a must, and for the musically inclined there are lessons from an in-house gamelan teacher!

Rimba Lodge, Kalimantan | On the banks of the slow-moving Sekonyer River in Kalimantan, the Rimba is a superbly sited ecolodge, offering a unique springboard from which to explore the wonders of the nearby Tanjung Puting National Park. It’s only reachable by boat: you arrive at a wooden jetty deep in the heart of the rainforest, leading directly to your spacious, en-suite chalet-room. Although not luxury, facilities are impressive for such a remote location. The beds are large, and you get a private stilted deck to sit on in the evenings, when the exotic sounds of the Borneo jungle fill the tropical air.

Kayumanis, Ubud | Another one of our favourites in Bali’s traditional cultural enclave, Kayumanis nestles amid groves of cinnamon trees, and offers luxurious accommodation in suave private villas, each with its own pool, sundeck, tropical garden and private butler. The décor is Balinese-inspired, but draws on different local cultures to magical effect. Ask for one with a valley view and you won’t be disappointed. The hotel’s heavenly spa is central to the whole Kayumanis experience and shouldn’t be missed: enjoy a relaxing Indonesian massage before a candlelit dinner in the privacy of your own villa.

Alila Manggis, Candi Dasa, Bali | Soak up the balmy tropical breezes of Bali’s east coast at this boho-boutique hotel in Candi Dasa. Set amid lawned grounds dotted with coconut palms, with sacred Gunung Agung volcano in the background, the property faces the ocean, with direct access to its own beach. Every room has a patio and sea view, but we particularly like the Seaside Corner Suites, which boast spacious wrap-around balconies with huge day beds. The garden pool is perfect for prolonged lounging under the palms, with the crashing surf only a stone’s throw away. But for more active guests, there’s an award-winning cookery school and some world-class snorkeling on the doorstep.



Amankila, Bali | Mount Agung provides the spellbinding backdrop for this graceful resort overlooking the Lombok Straits in eastern Bali. Swathed in frangipani and bougainvillea, its free-standing along-along villas rise in thatched ranks up the hillside, affording sublime views of the cobalt-blue ocean; some have their own infinity pools and walled courtyards. The same vistas may be enjoyed from the hotel’s three-tiered pool, and there’s a serene black-sand beach below which you can swim from. As ever with Aman properties, location is key: miles of pristine, forested countryside dotted with traditional craft villages and temples stretches alluringly inland, while the resorts of Manggis and Candi Dasa are close by.



Oberoi, Seminyak, Bali | The venerable Oberoi on Seminyak Beach was one of the first five-star resorts to be built in Bali, and its grand style, standards of service and impressive attention to detail still set the benchmark in this buzzing resort on the island’s southwest coast. Making extensive use of natural wood, stone and textiles, its rooms have a pleasantly earthy feel, while retaining the glamorous sheen you’d expect from one of the world’s premier luxury chains. With everything you require for a relaxing holiday on the premises, there’s little need to venture beyond the adjacent beach, though the bright lights of Seminyak’s centre are only a stroll away.



Nihiwatu, Sumba | Situated due south across the Savu Sea from Komodo, Sumba is among Indonesia’s least developed islands. The coast is wild, wave-lashed and great for surfing, particularly around this isolated resort, which sits next to its own spectacular beach, flanked by limestone headlands rising to a rampart of rugged savannah and mountains. Villages are widely scattered and very traditional, with distinctive thatched roofs and clan houses. Facilities in the hotel itself are five-star – astonishing given the remote location – and include a delightful spa.



Kura Kura Resort, Karimunjawa Islands | Not many Indonesians, let alone foreigners, could tell you where the Karimunjawa Archipelago is, and that’s just how the Kura Kura Resort would like to keep it. Occupying a pristine stretch of ocean between Java and Borneo, the scattering of tiny, palm-fringed islands are blissfully remote and idyllic. The resort itself is surrounded by a large shallow lagoon of an astonishing turquoise colour. Nestled under lush coconut trees, Indonesian-style pool villas and cottages provide cool sanctuaries from the equatorial glare. Transfer is by plane, or public ferry if preferred. Expect a Robinson-Crusoe-esque experience in a truly special location; particularly recommended for honeymooners.

Sorido Bay Resort, Raja Ampat | If you’re one of the few people who have heard of the Raja Ampat islands you’ll know they’re among Asia’s best kept secrets – a pristine tropical paradise on the far-flung eastern fringe of Indonesia, where there are no roads, but miles of vibrant coral reefs and marine life as diverse and abundant as anywhere on the planet. The Sorido Bay is the one of the most alluring among a select handful of resorts on the archipelago. It’s beautifully designed and, best of all, surrounded by wildlife-rich forest: orchids, monitor lizards, furry marsupial cuscus, lorikeets, vibrant parrots, kingfishers and cockatoos are everyday sights here. And the dive school is world class.

Amanwana, Moyo Island | This luxury tented camp is the only place to stay on Moyo Island, a nature reserve off the east coast of Bali. Sandwiched between dense jungle and warm, turquoise water on a bay overlooking the Flores Sea, it offers a deliciously secluded, romantic and peaceful experience of real tropical wilderness. Guided treks and trips in an old World War II Jeep take guests to waterfalls for wild swims in the forest, where you might spot rare rusa deer and boar. And the scuba diving and snorkelling are sublime – these rank among the richest seas in the region. Access is by boat or seaplane, or Aman’s own beautiful Phinisi cruiser.

Desa Dunia Beda, Gili Trawangan | ‘Blissful’ is the word best used to describe this tiny hideaway on the remote Gili Island of Trawangan, off the northwest coast of Lombok. From Bali, direct boat transfers run to the hotel, which backs a secluded stretch of beach outside the main resort area. Once installed, you’re unlikely to want to venture much further than the veranda of your traditional Indonesian chalet. Each has a sea view and direct access to the sand. There’s a saltwater pool, with under lights for nocturnal dips, and sunset suppers on the beach – an experience not to be missed.

Travel information & Itineraries, Indonesia

When to travel to Indonesia | The driest period in Indonesia falls between April and October, with July and August the peak season for beach resorts in Bali, Lombok and elsewhere. At other times of year, you can expect more rain, although even in the dry season, the jungle regions of Sumatra and Kalimantan receive frequent downpours, which, however, quickly pass. Humidity levels vary greatly. While islands such as Komodo and Rinca are surprisingly arid, rainforest areas remain sticky year round. The only properly cold places in Indonesia are the very tops of the high peaks, where temperatures may plunge to near freezing before sunrise.

How to travel to Indonesia | International flights connect the UK, indirectly via various hubs, with the Indonesian capital, Jakarta, as well as Yogyakarta in Central Java and Bali further east, besides a few other towns in Sumatra and Sulawesi. The vast distances separating the extremities of the country mean travellers wishing to see more than one of the major islands in a typical fortnight’s holiday will need to make frequent use of the far-reaching domestic air network. Once on the ground, we recommend travelling by air-conditioned car with a driver. Our local guides will greet you on arrival at your destination and show you around the sights.



Discover Indonesia | 17Days

Cover the highlights of Indonesia’s three most popular islands, from ancient Buddhist Borobudur to the orangutans of Sumatra, on this varied 17-day trip, which culminates with a relaxing spell on a Balinese beach.

- Day 1** Fly from the UK to Medan via Kuala Lumpur/Singapore.
- Day 2** Arrive Medan, on the island of Sumatra. Stay one night.
- Day 3** Travel into the Gunung Leuser National Park and spend the day exploring with your guide; stay overnight in a basic lodge.
- Day 4** Continue to Bukit Lawang for an orangutan sighting. Stay one night.
- Day 5** Drive to Lake Toba, the world’s largest volcanic lake. Stay on the isthmus of Pulau Samosir for two nights.
- Day 6** Spend the day exploring the lake area, visiting villages, and having a wild swim in the tranquil jade-green waters.
- Day 7** Travel back to Medan, and take a flight to Yogyakarta on the island of Java; stay three nights.
- Day 8** Visit the bustling city, including the royal ‘kraton’ palace, and later in the day proceed to Borobudur to see the magnificent ancient Buddhist temple at sunset.
- Day 9** In the morning, visit the ancient Hindu temple of Prambanan. Have the afternoon at leisure to relax and explore the cosmopolitan heritage city of Yogyakarta.
- Day 10** Travel by train to Surabaya for city sightseeing. Stay one night.
- Day 11** Travel by road to Gunung Bromo and climb the crater. Stay one night in Wonotoro.
- Day 12** Transfer to Probolinggo to take a scenic train journey to Banyuwangi. Transfer to the Ijen Plateau, stay one night.
- Day 13** Early morning tour to Ijen crater. Later transfer to Ketapang for a ferry to Bali. Transfer to South Bali for a three-night stay.
- Days 14 & 15** At leisure on the coast.
- Day 16** Fly from Bali to Kuala Lumpur and on to the UK.
- Day 17** Arrive UK



Wild Indonesia | 15Days

Take a walk on Indonesia’s wild side to see endangered orangutans, Komodo dragons, proboscis monkeys, elephants and other amazing jungle creatures across four exotic Indonesian islands. Also explore colonial Dutch ports and ancient ruins of Java.

- Day 1** Fly from UK to Yogyakarta via Singapore.
- Day 2** Arrive Yogyakarta; stay three nights.
- Day 3** Visit the bustling city and its royal ‘kraton’ palace. In the afternoon, drive to the magnificent ancient Buddhist temple of Borobudur.
- Day 4** In the morning, visit Prambanan. Afternoon at leisure to further explore the city.
- Day 5** Travel to Semarang and take a short flight to Pangkalan Bun in Kalimantan on the island of Borneo. Spend the afternoon travelling up the Sekonyer River on a private klotok boat and into the jungles of the Tanjung Puting National Park. Stay in a stilted lodge in the jungle for two nights.
- Day 6** Spend the day visiting orangutan sanctuaries, including the famous Camp Leakey. See other wild primates such as the proboscis monkey from the river as you cruise through the jungle.
- Day 7** Travel by boat back to Pangkalan Bun and onwards to Semarang, where you can tour the Dutch colonial buildings of the atmospheric old town. Stay one night.
- Day 8** Fly to Bali for an overnight stay.
- Day 9** Take a flight east to Labuan Bajo on the island of Flores. Explore the fishing village with your guide, and sample some freshly grilled seafood at the market; stay two nights.
- Day 10** Travel across the sea to the Komodo National Park, where you will encounter the awesome Komodo dragon on Komodo and Rinca islands. Between safari treks, enjoy snorkelling in the clear turquoise waters around the archipelago.
- Day 11** Fly back to Denpasar and spend three nights in Ubud, the cultural centre of Bali.
- Day 12** Spend the day exploring the temples and cultural villages of Ubud.
- Day 13** Day at leisure in Ubud for shopping and cultural performances. Alternatively, relax at your resort, and explore the lush countryside of central Bali.
- Day 14** Fly from Denpasar to Singapore and on to the UK.
- Day 15:** Arrive UK.



Sulawesi Explorer | 19Days

Indonesia’s least visited island holds a beguiling mix of former colonial ports, superb volcanic scenery, wildlife-rich national parks and fascinating indigenous cultures. This in-depth tour takes in the highlights, ending with a 3-night stay in Ubud.

- Day 1** Fly from UK to Manado on an indirect service.
- Day 2** Arrive Manado; transfer to Tangkoko Nature Reserve for one night.
- Day 3** Explore the reserve with a naturalist this morning. Afternoon transfer to Tomohon; stay two nights.
- Day 4** Explore Tomohon village, Minhasa highlands and Lake Tondano today.
- Day 5** Drive to Kotamobagu city. Stay one night.
- Day 6** Take the scenic trans-Sulawesi highway to Gorontalo, stopping at the ruins of Otanaha Fort en route. Stay one night.
- Day 7** Drive to Moutong today, passing the equatorial line at Siney; stay one night.
- Day 8** Transfer to Parigi, a small coastal town. Stay one night.
- Day 9** Drive to Tentena village, located on Lake Poso, one of Indonesia’s most beautiful and clearest lakes. Stay one night.
- Day 10** Enjoy a boat ride on Lake Poso. Continue to Pendolo town today, on the south shore of the Lake. Stay one night.
- Day 11** Drive to Tana Toraja, stopping at waterfalls en route; stay three nights.
- Day 12** Full day exploring Tana Toraja and learning about the fascinating culture of the Toraja indigenous people.
- Day 13** Excursion to Batutumonga, Pallawa and Sa’dan.
- Day 14:** Transfer to Makassar today. Stay one night.
- Day 15** Fly to Bali today. Stay in Ubud for three nights.
- Days 16 & 17** At leisure.
- Day 18** Evening, return flight to UK.
- Day 19** Arrive UK.



Indonesian Honeymoon | 20Days

This multi-faceted journey of a lifetime splices together the best of old and new Southeast Asia, combining cultural and wildlife highlights with relaxing stays in Singapore and the fabulously romantic beaches of Bali and Lombok.

- Day 1** Fly from UK to Singapore.
- Day 2** Arrive Singapore; stay two nights.
- Day 3** At leisure to explore vibrant China Town, visit the Hokkien-clan temple in Telok Ayer St and down a Singapore Sling in Raffles before a gourmet dinner for two with a view of Singapore’s futuristic skyline.
- Day 4** Fly to Yogyakarta; stay three nights.
- Day 5** Visit to the UNESCO-listed Buddhist site of Borobudur.
- Day 6** Day at leisure, with optional cultural activities.
- Day 7** Transfer to Semarang and fly to Pangkala Bun. Take a klotok boat to Rimba Lodge; stay three nights.
- Day 8** Visit Camp Leaky feeding stations today to see wild and semi-wild orangutans.
- Day 9** Explore the Pesalat rainforest area during a short wildlife trek.
- Day 10** Return to Pangkalan Bun and fly to Semarang. Visit Ambarawa and Semarang towns before transferring to Surakarta for a night.
- Day 11** Explore Surakarta in the morning and transfer to Yogyakarta for a flight to Lombok; stay five nights.
- Day 12, 13, 14 & 15** At leisure to enjoy Lombok’s incredible beaches and volcanic landscapes.
- Day 16** Fly to Bali; stay three nights.
- Day 17 & 18** At leisure in Bali.
- Day 19** Take a return flight to Singapore and on to UK.
- Day 20** Arrive UK



Bali Adventure | 18Days

Sample Bali’s many and varied charms in this active 18-day trip, which features some light trekking, cycling, dolphin watching, canoeing, white-water rafting and experiences of authentic Balinese culture, as well as plenty of surf and sand.

- Day 1** Fly from UK to Bali on an indirect service
- Day 2** Arrive Bali; stay two nights in Sanur.
- Day 3** Day at leisure, evening enjoy Kecak dance performance.
- Day 4** Drive to Lovina, visiting Taman Ayun royal temple and monkey forest en route. Stay two nights.
- Day 5** Soft trek around Sekar Mukti highland village.
- Day 6** Take a morning cruise to spot dolphins. Later visit Gitgit waterfall and Puri Beji temple. Continue to Kintamani for a two night stay.
- Day 7** Early morning excursion for a sunrise climb to Gunung Batur peak.
- Day 8** Enjoy cycling and canoeing today. Spend time in the hotspots before driving to Amed; stay two nights.
- Day 9** Day at leisure.
- Day 10** Drive to Ubud, visiting Besakih temple en route; stay four nights.
- Day 11** Afternoon white-water rafting in Ayung River.
- Day 12** This morning enjoy Barong and Kris dance performances and visit craft workshops.
- Day 13** Day at leisure
- Day 14** Transfer to Seminyak area for a 3-night stay.
- Days 15 & 16** Days at leisure
- Day 17** Evening take the indirect return flight to UK.
- Day 18** Arrive UK



Java and Bali Overland | 15Days

This 2 week-trip covers a wide cross-section of Java’s extraordinary sights, from botanical gardens to coffee plantations; from archeological sites to volcanic peaks. Explore the less visited eastern side of Java before heading to Bali for a wind down on the beach.

- Day 1** Fly from UK to Jakarta.
- Day 2** Arrive Jakarta; stay one night.
- Day 3** Transfer by road to Bogor for an excursion to the renowned Botanical Gardens. Visit Gunung Mas tea plantation and continue to Bandung; stay two nights.
- Day 4** Scenic drive through the Lembang Hills to the crater of Gunung Tangkuban Perahu and to Sari Ater hot springs.
- Day 5** Depart for Cangkuang Lake and temple. Continue to Naga village and on to Baturaden; stay one night.
- Day 6** Drive to Wonosobo for an excursion to the mystical Dieng Plateau. Continue to Yogyakarta for two nights.
- Day 7** Explore the UNESCO World Heritage sites of Borobudur and Prambanan.
- Day 8** Drive to Kediri today, visiting the town of Surakarta (Solo) en route. Stay one night.
- Day 9** Visit a luwak (civet) coffee farm and Penataran temple at Blitar. Continue to Malang for a one night stay.
- Day 10** Excursion to the stunning Gunung Bromo volcano and smoking crater. Later drive to Kaliburi and visit coffee and cocoa plantations. Stay overnight.
- Day 11** Transfer to Ketapang Harbour to take the ferry to Bali; stay three nights.
- Day 12** At leisure, with optional sightseeing tours of Bali and Ubud.
- Day 13** At leisure.
- Day 14** Evening, take the indirect return flight to UK.
- Day 15** Arrive UK.

Singapore

When he visited the city in 1885, the zoologist William Hornaday likened Singapore to “a big desk, full of drawers and pigeon holes, where everything has its place and can always be found” – a remark that rings no less true today. The city remains supremely well organized. Critics argue this orderliness has come at the cost of Singapore's soul, but the payoffs are plain for all to see. An ultra-modern skyline bristling with glass-sided towers bears witness to the record breaking economic growth and prosperity of the past four decades – though huddled beneath them are remnants of the colony's 19th century beginnings, including some sumptuous Chinese temples and clan halls. The shopping too is every bit as glittering as they say, whether you're after a designer item or quirky souvenir from a local street stall. Efficient and modern, but with a fascinating multi-ethnic make up and plenty of sights to keep you busy, Singapore is the obvious choice for extended layovers on longer tours, or for a quick side trip if you're exploring other countries in the region.



Chinatown | The antique shophouses have been garishly modernized, and the main streets colonized by bistros and souvenir shops, but the atmosphere of old-China lingers in many of the side streets of this district, where numerous temples, clan halls, Chinese bakers and medicine outlets survive.



Bintan Island | For a fast-track out of the city's bustle, jump on a ferry to Bintan Island in Indonesia, a former Dutch colony whose beautiful tropical beaches are nowadays backed by ranks of stylish international resorts. The snorkelling is terrific and sands quiet outside weekends.



Sentosa Island | Cable cars from Mount Faber, on the mainland, shuttle visitors across and back to the harbourfront of this easily accessible island, whose attractions include a fabulous aquarium and Fort Siloso, a museum dedicated to the events of World War II.



Shopping | For decades, Asia's jet setters have come to Singapore to shop, and although the city is no longer the bargain basement it once was for electronic goods, shopping remains something of an obsession. With its signature wavy walls, VivoCity is the undisputed poster piece of the downtown malls.

Some of our favourite hotels, Singapore



Villa Samadhi | One of the latest additions to Singapore's hotel scene, Villa Samadhi is sure to rank as one of its best boutique properties. A bubble of tranquility and quietude, the hotel is set amidst the verdant greenery of Labrador Nature Park. The converted colonial garrison hotel exudes a nostalgic Malayan charm, having been lovingly restored with recycled timber and adorned with vintage centerpieces from across Southeast Asia. Its 20 rooms seamlessly fuse modern amenities with an unmistakable rustic-luxe vibe, while the Tamarind Hill restaurant offers exquisite, heirloom Thai cuisine.



Fullerton | Looming large over Marine Bay at the mouth of the Singapore River, the massive Doric columns and lofty portico of the Fullerton epitomize the strident self-confidence of the British Empire at its zenith in the 1920s. Fashioned from Aberdeen granite, the building originally housed the GPO and Singapore Club, and later accommodated Japan's top military brass in World War II. Its 400 rooms and suites were lavishly refitted in 2000 and now comprise a grand 5-star in classical style, featuring a 25-metre infinity pool, award-winning spa and glamorous restaurants. Most rooms enjoy sweeping panoramic views over the city skyline and riverside promenade.



Goodwood Park | Set in 15 acres of landscaped grounds, the Goodwood Park started life in the early 1900s as the German-only 'Teutonic Club', which was converted into a luxury hotel after World War I – the only one in the colony with a pool and air-con wine cellar! There are now two pools: the original, and a more modern, Balinese-inspired one in the garden that was part of a major refurbishment in 2013. Most of the hotel's 233 rooms and suites have a soothing coffee-and-cream colour scheme. Those in the newly built 'Mayfair Wing' feature floor-to-ceiling headboards with black and white photographs of traditional Singaporean shophouses – a stylish contemporary touch amid the heritage chic.

Naumi | Voted the 'Best Boutique Hotel in Singapore' four years in succession, the Naumi offers a supremely stylish hideaway in the heart of the business district. Soft, earthy tones dominate the colour scheme of its rooms, which blend designer furniture and floor-to-ceiling silk curtains with the latest mod cons (including Apple TV and 'magic-glass' panels in the bathrooms). One of the city's most atmospheric rooftop bars sits up on the top floor, along with a dreamy infinity pool.



How to book your holiday

Having chosen your suitable holiday, in discussion with our travel consultant, you can book your trip by paying a deposit of 20% of your holiday cost. This can be higher in some instances, such as when river cruises are booked. A booking form will need to be sent along with the deposit. The final payment is due 8 weeks before departure. We suggest you familiarize yourself with our booking conditions, which you can find along with the booking form. More details can be obtained from your travel consultant.



TransIndus - Events, blogs and Social media

At TransIndus, we believe a visit to a new country and seeing its people and culture is more than just a memorable experience. It enriches one's life long after the holiday is over. Many of our clients choose to return to the same destinations again and again, learning and experiencing more that the countries have to offer. To help our clients stay in touch, we regularly run events. These events are conducted by our own staff, writers, journalists, experts and even a few celebrities! Our staff also regularly visit the countries and post blogs on what excites them about the destinations.

Visit us at the Old Fire Station

We welcome our clients visiting us to discuss and plan their holiday with one of our specialist travel consultants over a glass of wine, tea or coffee. We are open from 9 am to 5:30 pm on weekdays and on Saturday from 9 am to 4 pm. We are a 5 min walk from South Ealing station, in West London. If driving, there is a paid car park behind our offices, and free parking around Lammas Park. It is best to make an appointment by calling us on 020 8566 3739, to ensure the right people are available to meet with you.



Responsible Tourism

TransIndus makes every effort to ensure our holidays have a positive environmental, social and economic impact on the local communities we visit. We support schools, wildlife conservation initiatives and village development projects across Asia, and favour the use of responsible local hotels, lodges and guest houses. Here are some details on specific charities in Southeast Asia we sponsor:



New Hope for Cambodian Children (NHCC), Phnom Penh | This wonderful organization on the outskirts of the Cambodian capital cares for around 200 orphans and abandoned youngsters infected with HIV/AIDS. Supported by Bill and Hilary Clinton, the centre includes school rooms, a special medical centre and vegetable gardens, which we encourage any of our clients who are interested in the project's invaluable work to visit as part of their tour. Workers at the centre are always happy to show visitors around and introduce them to the delightful residents. They also run a well-managed child sponsorship scheme for those considering a longer, lasting commitment to the centre's programme. Newhopeforcambodianchildren.com



The AIP Foundation | Vietnam's spiralling economic growth over the past few decades has had numerous unforeseen consequences, among them a rapid increase in the number of deaths and injuries from road traffic accidents: an estimated 60 people die everyday on the country's chaotic roads, often from entirely preventable causes. To reverse this trend, the Asia Injury Prevention (AIP) Foundation provides life-saving traffic safety knowledge and skills, and runs an excellent helmet donation programme in schools, backed by national poster and TV advertising campaigns. AIP hope to reduce child road deaths by a further 80 percent in the coming years. Onevietnam.org/aipf



The Orangutan Appeal UK | Founded in 2000, this British charity, based in Surrey, is dedicated to the rehabilitation and preservation of orangutans, and the conservation of their habitat. The Appeal strives to protect remaining wild populations by providing support and funding for projects across Malaysian and Indonesian Borneo, and by raising awareness of the plight of this great ape across the globe. The OA is also authorised to work on behalf of the famous Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre. TransIndus are proud to support its ongoing work by being an official Business Partner. You can find out more about the scheme on the charity's website: orangutan-appeal.org.uk

Photo Competition

With many TransIndus clients being keen amateur photographers, we have thoroughly enjoyed the wonderful entries we have received since our first competition nearly ten years ago. As you can tell from our brochures and website, we really appreciate the power of a striking image. So if you've travelled to any one of our destinations in the last year (or so), then send us your best travel photographs. The competition is open to everyone, even if you have not yet travelled with us. More information on this can be found on our website: transindus.co.uk/news-events



Richard Horwell - impressions of Hoi An, Vietnam

Vietnam offered enormous variety and was another memorable trip. Burma exceeded every expectation. Each country presented countless photographic opportunities and the only risk to be managed was ensuring sufficient space on CF memory cards. The trips were seamlessly arranged by TransIndus with whom we have travelled many times and with whom we will travel again.



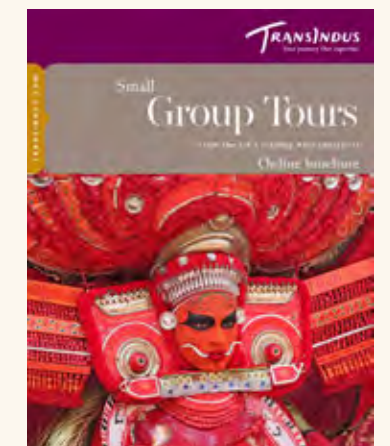
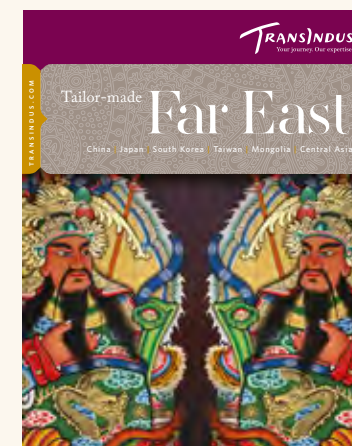
Sally & Rob Wellman - impressions of Banteay Srei, Cambodia

We photographed these children having fun near Banteay Srei Temple in Cambodia. Fascinating culture and history, delightful people and of course, wonderful cuisine. TransIndus put together an excellent trip with extremely knowledgeable guides and professional drivers. It was certainly a trip to remember.

Other TransIndus destinations

If you have enjoyed reading this brochure, why not check out our other offerings, covering tailor-made holidays to the Indian subcontinent, Far East. We also have publish a Central Asia and Group Tours online brochure, accessed via:

www.transindus.com



TRANSINDUS

Your journey. Our expertise.

Vietnam | Cambodia | Laos | Myanmar
Thailand | Malaysia | Indonesia | Singapore



'My husband and I have travelled extensively, visiting over 120 countries between us! I can honestly say every single piece of advice offered, all the guides provided, all the tours organized, hotels booked and restaurants suggested were absolutely spot on. We have never experienced such consistency of good advice, with so many friendly staff.'

Mr & Mrs Greenside - Vietnam



'We are accustomed to excellent planning help from Transindus employees, but this time it was quite exceptional, & way above the call of duty. The considerable first-hand knowledge of the countries was extremely helpful in planning the itinerary.'

Neil Findlay - Myanmar



'Yogyakarta to Surabaya: an incredible week in Java, from the moment of our arrival till our departure we were enthralled by Indonesia. Smoking Mount Bromo, spa treatments, wonderful scenery, a knowledgeable guide, a careful driver, interesting and comfortable hotels, delicious food. It was a memorable and most enjoyable trip. Thank you Amrit and the team at TransIndus: be sure you will see us again!'

Nick & Penny Horsburgh - Indonesia



'I wanted to thank you for all your excellent help in arranging our successful trip to Thailand. All went well and the hotel in Bangkok was truly good as were other venues. The guide, Chai, who you provided was also excellent.'

Dr. Glees & Party - Thailand



'Everything was excellent, our guide Rosli was beyond excellent - his knowledge of the animals, how to spot them and the history of Sarawak was amazing and very interesting. We felt he went beyond his remit to make our trip very special. Thank you.'

Katie Peterson & Carlo Aragno - Borneo



'It was a pleasure working with you to come up with our ideal trip. You listened to our requirements and came up with an ideal itinerary. The trip itself worked like clockwork.'

Don Spiller - Cambodia

To book and for more information

Call: 020 8566 3739

Email: enquiries@transindus.com

www.transindus.com

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