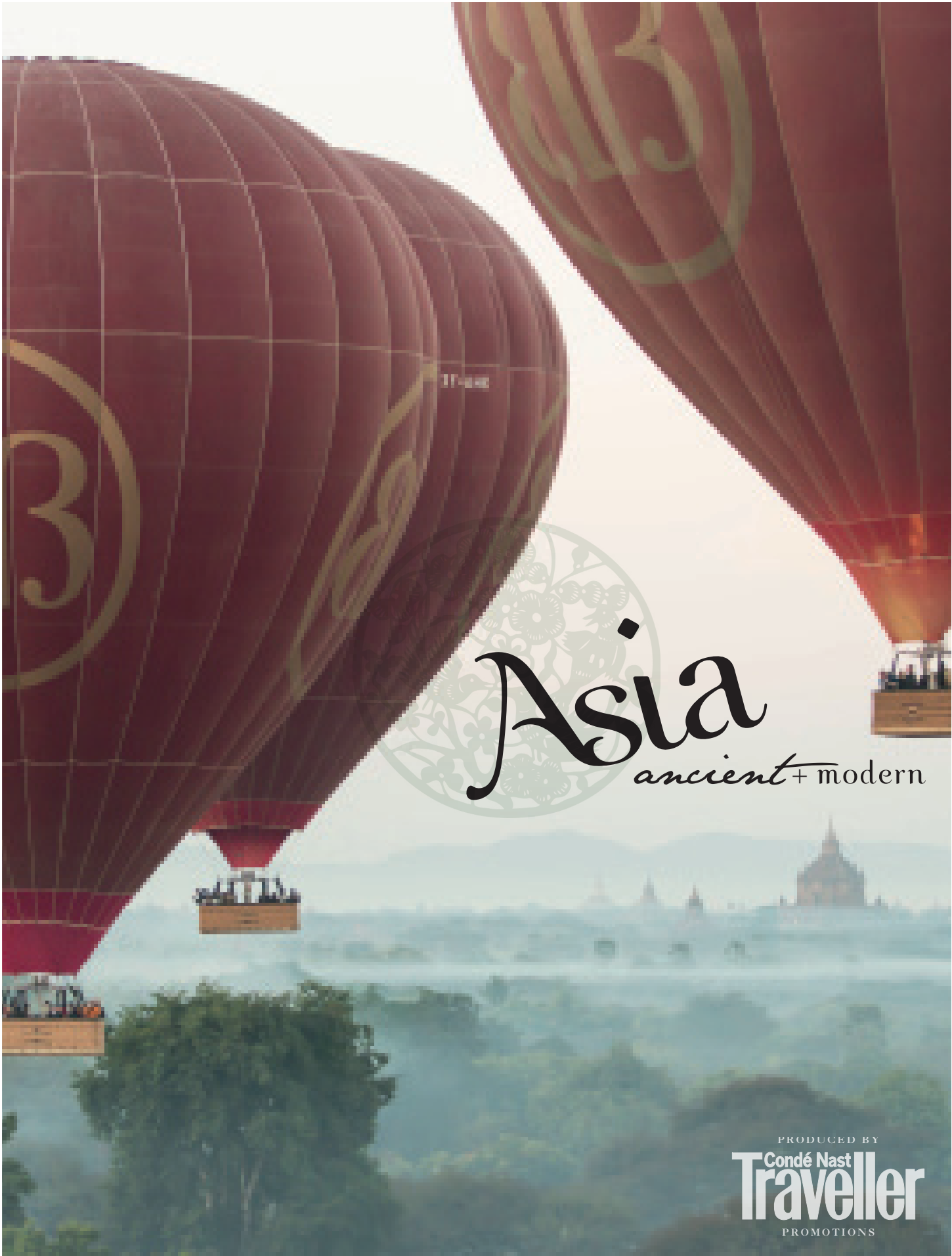


Hot Air Balloons over Bagan, Myanmar. Photograph: Ken Spence



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China

Immerse yourself in the buzzing and vibrant cities of Beijing and Shanghai

Urban China is where the past, present and future intersect as this vast nation hurtles towards global superpower status. The contrasting historical and contemporary narratives of Beijing and Shanghai – China's two primary cities – is where the real fun begins.

Beijing's imperial legacy is underscored by the Forbidden City and Temple of Heaven, while Maoism's imprint hangs over Tiananmen Square. Luxury living is a coveted concept for today's Beijing hipsters, though, and the hotel scene exemplifies this. Kengo Kuma's **The Opposite House** (theoppositehouse.com) fuses minimalism with contemporary Chinese art, and **Aman at Summer Palace** (amanresorts.com) occupies pavilions once reserved for guests of the Empress Dowager.

The capital's labyrinthine hutong alleyways are where timeless



traditions endure in the shadows of modern skyscrapers. Explore the hutongs around the Drum Tower and Houhai Lakes with **Beijing Sideways** (beijingsideways.com) – traverse the backstreets in a 1930s-style motorbike and sidecar, or take a sidecar jaunt to the Great Wall. Fast forward to China's white-hot contemporary arts scene with **Bespoke Beijing** (bespoke-beijing.com). A private tour of 798 Art District is hosted by Tom Pattinson,

founder and CEO of Affordable Art China, who gives expert insights on Chinese art, along with the history of this Bauhaus-style, former munitions factory complex. Private studio visits can also be arranged.

A younger city, whose founding principal was commerce rather than imperial decree, Shanghai has a penchant for showiness, apparent in its angular skytowers and glitzy boutiques. Stylish stays include the slick, state-of-the-art **Banyan Tree Shanghai on the Bund** (banyantree.com) with spectacular views, and the neo-classical **Waldorf Astoria Shanghai on the Bund** (waldorfastoria.com) – which recalls Shanghai's 1930s golden age when

it housed the Shanghai Club, an exclusive retreat for British gentry.

Shanghai's architectural heritage includes a fine portfolio of Art Deco buildings, from the brooding **Park Hotel** (parkhotelshanghai.cn) to the pencil-slim Bank of China. Shanghai will host the 2015 World Congress on Art Deco, and Patrick Cranley, founder of **Historic Shanghai** (facebook.com/historic.shanghai), will be your Art Deco guide. Architect Spencer Dodington of **Luxury Concierge** (luxuryconciergechina.com) offers expert walks, through old Shanghai's neighbourhoods and its futuristic constructs, as well as private shopping trips for design pieces from the 'Pearl of the Orient' heyday.

Clockwise from top: suite at Aman at Summer Palace; Panorama Bund Retreat at Banyan Tree Shanghai on the Bund; atrium water feature at The Opposite House; exterior of Waldorf Astoria Shanghai on the Bund





Hong Kong

Discover the fascinating traditions beyond the glitzy exterior of 'Asia's World City'

Landscaped around the splendid Victoria Harbour and referred to as Asia's World City, Hong Kong lives up to its prize billing. While much of its colonial architecture has been razed and replaced with soaring monuments to constructive hedonism, Hong Kong's cultural traditions remain intact. Look beyond the showy façade and discover a city defined by its formative history, as well as its blazing neon futurism.

Hong Kong's eclectic hotel scene highlights this double-edged personality. Designer minimalism and high-rise harbour views define **The Upper House** (upperhouse.com) in Central. Across the water in Tsim Sha Tsui, **Hullett House** (hulletthouse.com) features 10 individually themed suites in a white-stucco building from 1881 that previously housed the Marine Police headquarters.

Flightseeing is a thrilling way to appreciate – and photograph – the spectacular Hong Kong cityscape. Leave below the spangly malls and boutiques, and ascend by elevator to the helipad lounge atop the landmark hotel **The Peninsula Hong Kong** (peninsula.com). From here, **HeliServices** (heliservices.com.hk) will whisk you through the skies in a twin-engine Eurocopter AS355N Squirrel. The dizzying flight into showcases Victoria Harbour and the waterfront skyline, before heading across the bays and beaches of the outlying islands or over the east coast farmlands of the New Territories – and even to the border with mainland China.

Back on terra firma, fine cuisine – comprising traditional Cantonese flavours and contemporary global dining – is a Hong Kong trademark. Several big-name chefs, including Robuchon, Ducasse and Nobu, have restaurants here, and Hong Kong and Macau were jointly featured in the second *Michelin Restaurant Guide* to be published in Asia (Tokyo was the first). Immerse yourself in the back streets of Central and Sheung Wan with **Hong Kong Foodie Tasting Tours** (hongkongfoodietours.com) to explore its gastronomic culture and local fruit and dried seafood markets. Half-day tours lift the lid



on the time-honoured preparations and cultural importance of Cantonese dishes, such as wanton noodles, dim sum and egg tarts – all washed down with a pot of Chinese cha at a traditional teahouse.

If the urban energy becomes overpowering, take to the waters surrounding Hong Kong for therapeutic respite. **Spoilt Hong Kong** (spoilt.com.hk) takes couples on a leisurely sunset cruise, which will start from Aberdeen pier. Jump aboard a deluxe Beneteau yacht, armed with a chilled bottle of bubbly and some canapés, and revel in the coastal diversity of Deep Water Bay, Repulse Bay and Middle Island as the sun dips over the fragrant harbour.



Clockwise from top: view from the spa at The Peninsula Hong Kong; Casam Suite at Hullett House; Sky Bridge at The Upper House; Helipad at The Peninsula Hong Kong



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Located off the coast of southern China, this island nation's high-tech products are consumed worldwide, but its dramatic scenery awaits further discovery. Street markets in the capital, Taipei, abound with indigenous delicacies, such as steamed dumplings, oyster omelette and soupy beef noodles. Culture buffs should make for the **National Palace Museum** (npm.gov.tw), which houses the world's largest collection of Chinese art treasures. Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek shipped most of the priceless paintings, furnishings, ceramics and jade sculptures from China to Taiwan in 1948, as he fled Mao's Communist revolution.

Stay overnight at the 162-room **amba Taipei Ximending** (ambahotels.com/en/home), a design hotel created by a collective of Taiwanese architects, artists and music stylists. Ximending is a buzzing district with a flourishing design and lifestyle scene, and curbside restaurants,

kiosks and market stalls selling a cornucopia of xiao chi street snacks. For branded luxury, **W Taipei** (wtaipei.com), in the Xinyi fashion and nightlife district, affords commanding views of the 508-metre high **Taipei 101** (taipei-101.com) – the world's third-tallest building – best enjoyed from the 10th-floor heated swimming pool and Tai Chi Garden.

Described by 16th-century Portuguese voyagers as *Ilha Formosa* (beautiful island), Taiwan's outdoor discovery is its greatest asset. Locally based adventure specialists **In Motion Asia** (inmotionasia.com) whisks active travellers in comfort to Yangmingshan National Park, 10km south of Taipei, to hike and cycle among majestic mountains, dormant volcanoes and bamboo forests. Blissed out from the scenic splendor, you'll move on to Wulai, home to the Atayal Aboriginal tribe. Lying in a hot spring valley, Wulai offers a wealth of thrilling adventure sports. Leap off a cliff into churning

whitewater, swim upstream through a high-walled river canyon, or climb the face of a roaring waterfall. Afterwards, indulge tired limbs in the soothing hot spring waters of the **Landis Wulai** (wulai.landishotelsresorts.com) and feast on a banquet of Taiwanese dishes.

As an alternative option, Cam McLean, Director of In Motion Asia, suggests jumping aboard an ultra-modern high-speed train – which travels at up to 300kph – from Taipei, where you should make the scenic 220km journey to Nantou gateway and the sublime Sun Moon Lake. Located in the heart of Taiwan, the island's largest freshwater body boasts calm, emerald-green waters framed by towering mountains. Stay in a highly contemporary courtyard villa at **The Lalu** (thelalu.com.au), with panoramic views of the lake, and visit ancient temples and aboriginal villages dotted among the hills, before savouring dinner and wine on a sunset cruise under a full moon.

Main image:
the rooftop pool
at W Taipei

Taiwan

This 'Ilha Formosa' – beautiful island – is rich in culture and exotic, indigenous food

Asia

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The complexity of Japanese culture and history is hard to define by simply visiting its major tourist attractions.

The mazy pathway to understanding modern Japan is best approached through its intriguingly nuanced art, architecture and world class cuisine.

Boasting a fine modern art collection, The Peninsula Tokyo (peninsula.com/Tokyo) also offers a private Art of Hospitality experience. A chauffeured Rolls Royce ride to Kyu Asakura House in Shibuya is followed by a guided tour of this historic mansion. Built in 1919 in traditional Japanese style, the house and gardens evoke a time rewind to the progressive Taisho era, known as Japan's 'Jazz Age'. Afterwards, a private viewing is offered of the Art Front Gallery's (artfront.co.jp) prized collection of contemporary Japanese art.

Japan's refined cuisine is cherished worldwide, but its deep roots in Japanese island culture are frequently overlooked. So, when in Tokyo. Locally based Michi Travel (michitravel.com) conducts private culinary tours to learn about the ingredients, preparations and cultural influences of favourite dishes. En route, the tour visits Tsukiji Fish Market, one of the world's largest seafood markets, and a local sushi stand for 'fresh-to-plate' sampling. Next stop, via water taxi, is Senso-ji temple and

Clockwise from top: Japanese cuisine at the Ryokan Collection; the pool and Deluxe Suite living room both at The Peninsula Tokyo; Ryokan Collection



Japan

Take a culinary and cultural tour of modern Japan, to understand its complex and extraordinary roots

the nearby delicacy stalls in Asakusa selling unagi (eels) and shabu-shabu (beef hotpot). The tour culminates in upmarket Ginza, for a browse around its gourmet food stores.



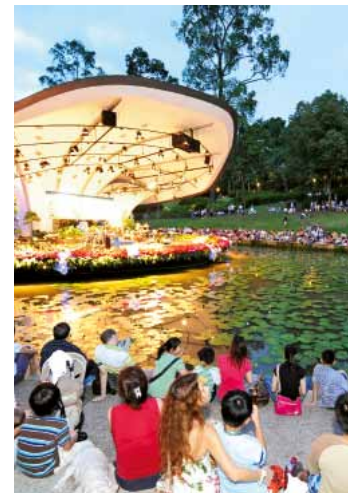
The beautiful gardens and temples of Kyoto merit an extended stay and an exploration of the compelling history and culture. **Luxury Kyoto** (luxurykyoto.jp) connects visitors with exclusive private tours that engage them with traditional arts, crafts and cuisine. Entertainment in Kyoto is synonymous with maiko – young women who undergo a long training period to learn the art of wearing a kimono, distinctive white makeup and floral hair decorations, and delivering omotenashi (Japanese hospitality). A private maiko-hosted ochaya-asobi (teahouse banquet) features Kyoto-style cuisine, cultural dance performances and games, as well as a commemorative photo opportunity.

Japanese hospitality is closely aligned with the inspirations of nature, so staying in a centuries-old ryokan is a bucket list staple of many travellers. Relax and unwind amid divine pastoral landscapes, take a rejuvenating soak in a steaming onsen, and savour kaiseki haute cuisine served by kimono-wearing staff. Choose your ultimate Japanese abode from the **Ryokan Collection** (ryokancollection.com) of 29 traditional inns countrywide. Private cultural tours are also offered, including an exploration of Kyoto's lesser know temples and an opportunity to meet with Buddhist monks to a scenic tour of Kobe and Awajishima, an island rich in Japanese mythology and home to Izanagi, the oldest shrine in Japan.

◆◆ Relax and unwind amid divine pastoral landscapes, take a rejuvenating soak in a steaming onsen, and savour kaiseki haute cuisine

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Often considered a stopover destination for brand shopping, Singapore Sling-sipping at Raffles and high-stake gambling, Singapore's natural assets can be overlooked. Bounteous tropical greenery, which flourishes in the equatorial climate with high rainfall, adds colour and vibrancy to a distinctly 21st-century urban backdrop, where avant garde architecture merges with restored Chinese Malay, Indian and neoclassical colonial buildings.

Opened in 2012 on a coastal promontory extending into Marina



◆◆ Bounteous tropical greenery flourishes in the equatorial climate with high rainfall, and adds vibrancy to a 21st-century urban backdrop

Singapore

Yes, there is high life and hedonism – but there is also magnificent, tropical beauty

Bay, the 121-hectare **Gardens by the Bay** (gardensbythebay.com.sg) is a funky update on the botanical garden format. Take time to experience the cool-dry climate Flower Dome, Cloud Forest Conservatory, and the 18 'supertree' vertical gardens that stand up to 50-metres high, covered with 200 plant and fern species and connected by an aerial walkway.

Pollen (pollen.com.sg), within the grounds, serves modern European cuisine by acclaimed British chef Jason Atherton in the Flower Dome.

More traditional garden aficionados will relish a visit to **Singapore Botanic Gardens** (sbg.org.sg), a delightful green space within walking distance of the brand-saturated malls of Orchard Road. Among the attractions is the sublime **National Orchid Garden**, where more than 1,000 unique species of orchids – including Vanda Miss Joaquim, Singapore's national flower – are displayed. For early risers, **Urbane Nomads** (urbanenomads.com) can arrange a morning tai chi class in the gardens, followed by an organic picnic breakfast.

Cutting-edge artistic expression is not usually associated with Singapore's

Clockwise from top: the rooftop jacuzzi and main lobby of The Fullerton Bay Hotel; concert in the park at Singapore Botanic Gardens; exterior of Pollen restaurant

rather staid image – but **Gillman Barracks** (gillmanbarracks.com), southeast of the city, may change this perception. Originally built in 1936 as a British army barracks, the whitewashed buildings have been converted to house an eclectic cluster of contemporary art galleries from 10 countries. These include New York-based Sundaram Tagore, Berlin's Michael Janssen Gallery, Mizuma Gallery from Tokyo and Shanghai's ShangHart.

Singapore boasts several stylish pillows on which to rest a travel-weary head. The sumptuous **Fullerton Bay Hotel** (fullertonbayhotel.com) at Collyer Quay is the sassy sibling of the Fullerton Hotel, and its 'lounge terrace', by acclaimed designer Andre Fu.



South Korea

Go Gangnam style - Seoul's party hotspot, or head for green Jeju

A pop star named Psy, dancing as if on horseback, has built a planetary buzz for Seoul's upmarket Gangnam district. Its neon-lit boutiques, restaurants and clubs are a partying hotspot, even if Psy was actually mocking their ostentation. Giving context to Seoul's global credibility jump is **The Seoul Museum of History** (museum.seoul.kr), which houses a fascinating collection of ancient artifacts and treasures, plus exhibitions of the capital under Japanese occupation, postwar industrialisation and, of course, Gangnam development.



Standing at the margin of history

is a rare thrill. The Demilitarised Zone, or DMZ, separating North and South Korea, is known as the Great Divide. The two nations are technically still at war, and a captivating day trip from Seoul brings visitors up close and personal with strategic global relations in action. **DMZ Tours** (dmztours.com)



and **Korean Tourism** (visitkorea.or.kr) operate compelling trips to see infiltration tunnels dug beneath the DMZ and the infamous Freedom Bridge, used to trade prisoners. The highlight is squeezing past the armed face-off between South and North Korean soldiers at Panmunjeom to stand on North Korean soil inside the Conference Room – a small hut straddling the borderline where official negotiations take place.



For a more naturalistic Korean perspective, fly south to the untamed beauty of Jeju Island. Comprising more than 350 dormant volcanoes, Jeju is dominated by Mount Halla, considered both a cherished landmark and the island's spiritual heart. Jeju is thought once to have been part of the Korean Peninsula, but a volcanic explosion several thousand years ago blasted it apart. The island's

leading hotel **The Shilla** (shilla.net) provides guided tours to picturesque spots used for filming South Korea's romance-laden soap operas and movies – which are wildly popular across Asia – including Seopjikoji, a rugged rocky cape, Cheonjiyeon Waterfall and the volcanic caves and rustic coastal scenery of Udo Island.



For an offbeat reinterpretation of Jeju nature, take time to visit **The Spirited Garden at Bunjae Artpia** (spiritedgarden.com). Local farmer Bum-young Sung has dedicated most of his life to creating one of the world's largest bonsai gardens, renowned for its beautiful and tranquil landscape. The approachable owner – now a famous local celebrity – can be found most days tending his windswept rockeries and artistic topiary creations, and is happy to share a cup of green tea in the teahouse to discuss the numerous presidents and prime ministers who have visited his 'Garden of Peace' since it opened to the public in 1992.

◆◆ The island's leading hotel provides guided tours to picturesque spots used for filming South Korea's romance-laden soap operas and movies

Clockwise from top: Seoul Floating Island; the lobby of The Shilla Jeju; exterior of The Seoul Museum of History; a suite at The Shilla Jeju



Malaysia

Eat street food in Kuala Lumpur, and stay in a heritage-themed hotel in Georgetown

Kuala Lumpur only gained city status in 1972, but skyscraper construction, overhead highways and glassy malls mark it as an emerging South East Asian ‘Tiger’ city. Sneak between the high-rises and you’ll discover delicious street food infused with Chinese, Malay and Indian flavours. Follow the heritage walking trail from Merdeka Square, taking in the 1897 Moghul-style Sultan Abdul Samad Building and Tudor lines of the 1884 Royal Selangor club, as well as Art Deco shop-houses and Buddhist and Hindu temples.

In the 1930s, the neoclassical Hotel Majestic, opposite the Moorish former railway station,

was among Southeast Asia’s finest hotels. It reopened in late 2012 as **The Majestic Hotel** (ytllhotels.com), with 300 classical rooms, and an impressive Art Deco spa. **Villa Samadhi** (villasamadhi.com.my) in the diplomatic quarter is a Zen-infused urban retreat with thatched-roof suites adorned by imported Thai furnishings.

For a nature-based city escape, Villa Samadhi arranges limousine transfers for the 30-minute drive to **Bukit Lagong Forest Reserve** (frim.gov.my) on the outskirts of the capital. Inside the reserve, a network of trails winds through the verdant rainforest and wetlands that provide a natural habitat to monkeys, lizards and tropical birds. More challenging is



the 150-metre long Canopy Walk on a rope bridge spanning the treetops, and for hard-core adventurers there’s a 30km mountain biking track.

Slower paced than Kuala Lumpur, the UNESCO World Heritage city of Georgetown, on the island of Penang, is renowned for its colourful colonial mansions, tasty street snacks, mosques and Chinese temples. Georgetown also boasts top-notch, heritage-themed hotels, such as **Macalister Mansion**

Clockwise from top: Macalister Mansion main entrance; the pool area at Villa Samadhi; reception at Macalister Mansion; suite at The Majestic Hotel

(macalistermansion.com), a century-old British manor redesigned with contemporary comforts and sculptures by local artists.

Penang was an original Straits Settlement, along with Singapore and Malacca, and its Malay, Chinese and Indian cultures – interwoven by British colonial influence – are engagingly presented at the **Penang Museum** (penangmuseum.gov.my). Fully briefed with local context, embark on a guided tour of the cobalt blue **Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion** (cheongfattzemansion.com). Commissioned in the 1880s by a rags-to-riches Chinese merchant, this beautifully restored mansion was built according to feng shui principles by artisans from China. The beguiling stories surrounding its construction, painted Cantonese lattices, Art Nouveau stained glass and its owner’s business dealings, are pure soap opera.



Thailand

Experience heavenly Buddhist temples and hill-tribe treks off the beaten track

The golden roofed palaces and temples of Bangkok, known locally as the City of Angels, sit side-by-side with some of Asia's sleekest shops and most captivating nightlife. Bangkok's cuisine – all spicy, sour, sweet flavours and fragrances – is legendary, and glamorous hotels such as **The Sukothai, Bangkok** (sukhothai.com) – a central Thai-style boutique hotel with extraordinary ornamental gardens – are the envy of many cities the world over.

Journey back in time aboard the **Anantara Song** or **Anantara Dream**, two converted teak rice barges (bangkok-cruises.anantara.com) for



a romantic journey along the Chao Phraya – known as the 'River of Kings'. The lifeblood of the modern Thai capital, the river trip meanders past the Grand Palace and Temple of Dawn, and continues leisurely towards the ancient Siamese capital Ayuthaya, to archaeological sites and religious monuments from its four centuries as the seat of Thai royalty.

Thailand's spiritually minded second city, Chiang Mai, boasts 300 Buddhist temples, many dating from the 13th century, plus spectacular forested scenery, trekking, rafting, and elephant riding. **137 Pillars House** (137pillarshouse.com) occupies a black Indo-Portuguese style teak house dating back to 1889. It offers private guided visits to scenic temples of the former Lanna Kingdom, as well as Wat Phrathat Doi Suthep, a mountainside temple considered a sacred site by the Thai people. In addition, The Kitchen, housed in a teak pavilion, hosts classes for learning how to cook fragrant northern Thai cuisine.



Clockwise from top: elephants at Four Seasons Tented Camp Golden Triangle; outdoor shower at 137 Pillars House; Chedi pond at The Sukothai

Four hours drive from Chiang Mai, at the convergence of the Thailand, Laos and Myanmar borders, is the remote Golden Triangle wilderness region. Here, **Four Seasons Tented Camp Golden Triangle** (fourseasons.com/goldentriangle) comprises 15 super-glamp tents with hardwood floors and handcrafted furnishings. The resort shares the hillside bamboo jungle with an elephant rehabilitation reserve. Embark on a foraging walk, visit remote temples and, best of all, learn to ride an elephant mahout-style, then swing into the jungle at sunrise.

All Points East (allpointseast.com) implores trippers to bring their camera, tripod and spare memory cards for its all-encompassing Thailand photographic tours, which are led by experienced travel snapper Gary Latham. The shutterbug journeys through one of Southeast Asia's most photogenic countries start in Bangkok, then head to the ruined, ancient city of Sukhothai and Chiang Mai, before going off the beaten track into the mist-shrouded mountains and forests and remote hill-tribe villages of the Golden Triangle.



Where do you begin with 7,107 beautiful islands near the Equator? By its own admission, the Philippines under-promotes itself as a destination, so its wonderful beaches, coral reefs, vibrant festivals and bio-diverse landscapes remain comparatively uncrowded.



Manila is the gateway to the islands. Whether lingering awhile in the capital or staying en route to somewhere else, the 280-room **Fairmont Makati City** (fairmont.com/makati), with its Willow Stream Spa, palm-tree-fringed swimming pool and Long Bar shared with the adjoining Raffles Makati, is a relaxing retreat in the business district. If you have time to spare in the capital, **Jeepney Tours** (jeepneytours.com) are a fun way to explore Intramuros, the Spanish-built old medieval city of Manila with photogenic churches, colonial houses and cobblestones plazas.

Described by UNESCO as “a well-preserved example of a European trading town,” the 16th-century city of Vigan blends colonial-era



Clockwise from top: the main pool at Abaca Resort; Makati City at dusk; bathroom at Fairmont Makati City

Spanish, Chinese and native Filipino influences. Set out in classic Spanish style, the city’s main streets converge on the picturesque central plaza. A day tour of Vigan can be combined with a stay in one of seven salvaged-wood-and-stone villas furnished with vintage Ilocano furniture at **Sitio Remedios** (sitioremedios.ph), a seaside resort in a reconstructed village within the town of Currimao. Then visit the embalmed body, displayed in a glass coffin, of former dictator Ferdinand Marcos and his wife Imelda – at the Marcos’s family home in the small town Batac.

Voted as one of the seven new wonders of nature, **Puerto Princesa National Park** (puerto-undergroundriver.com) in the province of Palawan, is prized for its jagged limestone karsts and 8.2km long subterranean river. The outstanding biodiversity encapsulates an entire ecosystem and is famed for its diverse bird life. After all that exploring, it's time to chill out. **Abaca Resort** (abacaresort.com) is a tropical, boutique hideaway on the oceanfront at Mactan Island, with a sumptuous spa and award-winning California-Mediterranean restaurant.

Philippines

Islands bursting with stunning, serene beaches and bio-diverse landscapes



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local culture with a private Javanese dinner at Pecel Solo, a restaurant housed in a traditional teakwood house, and a stay at d'Omah Hotel (yogyakartaaccommodation.com) in the village of Tembi. The owner, Warwick Purser, is an expert on Yogyakarta's history and arts.



Take a motorbike tour along Yogyakarta's charming back roads and mountain villages. Visit Imogiri village, where traditional batik designs are made with natural dyes, and Mendut, a temple that enshrines the fully intact Buddha statue at Borobudur. At first light, Soma's founder, former TV host Cristy Elmendorp, will accompany you to watch the sun rise over Borobudur from the neighbouring hill of Menoreh, and then proceed to the temple. Finish the trip at Selogiyu, an ancient Hindu temple on the slopes of Sumbing volcano.



Tour mountain villages, party in Jakarta, or immerse yourself in a thriving art scene

talent. If you are staying a night or two, the traditional Indonesian interiors that reinterpret Majapahit culture and palatial guestrooms give **The Dharmawangsa** (thedharmawangsa.com) the appeal of a Sultan's private residence.



A scenic two-hour drive from the capital, Bandung is famed for its cultural and artistic festivals, against an alluring backdrop of Dutch colonial and Art Deco architecture. The city is also home to **NuArt Sculpture Park** (nuarta.com), a majestic hillside villa and garden displaying the eclectic works of Indonesia's most famous sculpture artist, Nyoman Nuarta. The iconic sculptures span his long career, and many of the best pieces are outspoken social commentaries, notably from the era of military dictatorship. The artist often greets visitors and is happy to discuss his two bold public art projects, the 475-foot high Garuda Wisnu Kencana in Bali, and a 196-foot

open-armed statue of Noah atop an ark-shaped hotel overlooking a bay in Sumatra. Hotfoot it to the fine city of Yogyakarta, renowned for its classical Javanese culture and fine art, and the magnificent 9th century Buddhist monument at Borobudur. **Soma Journeys** (somajourneys.com) will ease your immersion into

◆◆ Hotfoot it to Yogyakarta, renowned for its classical Javanese culture and fine art, and the magnificent Buddhist monument at Borobudur

Slated by 2020 to host the world's third-tallest building – standing 638 metres high – Jakarta's frenetic energy and lively nightlife and dining scenes merit exploration. The vast archaeological and ethnography collections of the **National Museum** (museumnasional.or.id) provide a useful introduction to the world's largest archipelago, comprising 17,508 islands. Indonesian contemporary art has been making waves of late, and **Art Seasons Gallery** (artseasonsgallery.com) and **Ark Galerie** (arkgalerie.com) showcase the brightest local

Clockwise from top: the pool area at The Dharmawangsa; Borobudur temple in Yogyakarta; suite at d'Omah Hotel; Majapahit Hall at The Dharmawangsa





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Clockwise from top: Deluxe Suite at Shinta Mani; the pool at Villa Paradiso; Song Saa picnic at neighbouring Koh Rong island

Cambodia's rapidly gentrifying capital Phnom Penh, and Siem Reap in the north – gateway to the temples of Angkor – are luring lots of visitors. Phnom Penh is a popular arrival point for its river walks, fine restaurants and sleek hotels, such as **The Governor's House** (governorshouse.net), with period and mod furnishings in a redesigned colonial mansion, and **The Villa Paradiso** (thevillaparadiso.com), an elegant residence in a Khmer villa.

Despite the crowds, the angular Angkorian temples around Siem Reap are always captivating, especially when viewed from above. **Helicopters Cambodia** (helicopterscambodia.com) provides photo-friendly flyovers of Angkor Wat, The Bayon, Banteay Srei and floating villages on Tonle Sap Lake, plus the less visited hilltop Phnom Krom temple that glows salmon-pink at sunset. Recently refurbished by architect Bill Bensley, **Shinta Mani** (shintamani.com) is Siem Reap's most decadent overnight stay.

Distinctly modern Asian hospitality is offered at **Song Saa Private Island** (songsaa.com) off the southwest coast. Its 27 thatched villas, each with a terrace and private pool, sit on stilts over the sea and a forested hillside. Enjoy splendid isolation – the only neighbours are fishing villages and rainforest creatures – and indulge mind and body, or get active and snorkel or kayak in the clear waters, or take boat trips to nearby islands.



Cambodia

From its capital Phnom Penh, to the exquisite temples of Angkor in Siem Reap

From Siem Reap, head southwest to admire the French-colonial architecture of sleepy Battambang, and enjoy the undulating countryside as you ride the famous **Bamboo Train** (visitbattambang.com/bambootrain), a small, motorised platform used by farmers to transport produce.



Direct flights from the capital Phnom Penh to the coastal town of Sihanoukville provide easy access for exploring southern Cambodia. **ABOUTAsia Travel** (aboutasiatravel.com) will take you to spot dolphins off the beaches of Ream National Park, and zip by speedboat across paddy-fields to the remote island of Phnom Da.

One hour's drive east from Sihanoukville is the charmingly slow-motion town of Kampot, set amid coffee and pepper plantations. Here, the recently renovated **The Columns** (the-columns.com) hotel is housed in a French-colonial building near the riverfront. Daytrips can be arranged to Preah Monivong National Park (aka Bokor National Park) to visit Bokor Hill Station – a mountaintop town of 1920s hotels, casino and churches built as a mountaintop enclave.



this polished venue has spectacular skyline views. Join the convivial local party, high above Vietnam's largest city, set to dine, drink and dance into the early hours.

Ho Chi Minh City's newfound hedonism is a world away from its conflict-ravaged 20th century. The brutal realities of the "American War" in the 1960s and 1970s are graphically retold through photos, articles and captured US military hardware at the War Remnants Museum. Its equally compelling counterpart in Hanoi, the **Vietnam Military History Museum** (btlsgsvn.org.vn), also

If prime positioning is important, **Park Hyatt Saigon** (saigon.park.hyatt.com) overlooks the fine Opera House on central Lam Son Square. After exploring HCMC's retro architecture, markets and museums, the hotel offers an escape from the city to explore the picturesque Mekong Delta Tour. Journey into the surrounding countryside and terraces rice paddies before boarding a motorised sampan (wooden boat) to leisurely cruise along the Delta's narrow waterways. Sample fruits in the shade of a farmer's garden before navigating small, winding channels to lunch, where the speciality dish is 'elephant ear fish'.

Clockwise from top: Halong Bay; Mekong Delta; the lobby of Park Hyatt Saigon

Vietnam's capital, the charming northern city of Hanoi, is also its cultural heartland. More cerebral and less hurried than HCMC, its galleries, heritage courtyards and pavement cafes implore you to linger awhile. **Abercrombie & Kent** (abercrombiekent.com) will guide you around its Parisian boulevards and Chinese temples by cyclo (a three-wheel bicycle), taking in a traditional water puppet show, and exploring the atmospheric One Pillar Pagoda.

Vietnam

High life in Ho Chi Minh City, culture in Hanoi and the beauty of Halong Bay

If a single venue embodies Vietnam's transforming zeitgeist, it has to be the lofty **Chill Skybar** (chillsaigon.com) on the 26th and 27th floors of the AB Tower in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon). Designed by the team behind Bangkok's Sirocco,

details the violent struggle to break free from French colonial rule – whose legacy remains evident in its cuisine (including, of course, delicious coffee and baguettes) and architecture of HCMC and Hanoi.



Then head northeast to sail on the **Emeraude** (emeraude-cruises.com) around Halong Bay's enigmatic karst formations and limestone caves, created over hundreds of millions of years. A replica of an early 19th-century paddle wheel steamer, Emeraude's modern history began in 1999, when French entrepreneur Eric Merlin was rummaging in a Paris flea market and unearthed sepia-tinted postcards of the original steamer. Today, the Emeraude recreates those pioneering overnight cruises through the monumental karsts and islets under the watch of a French captain.

Asia

ancient + modern



Yangon's once-grand colonial architecture is slowly being restored. After a stroll around the historic centre, hail a cab to Shwedagon, a 2,500-year-old complex of golden Buddhist stupas. The 98-metre central stupa glints pure gold at sunset. If you have extra time, The Strand can arrange a private excursion to Kyaukhtyo (Golden) Rock, a 25-foot high granite boulder shaped like a stupa, that is perched on a cliff edge and covered in gold leaves by Buddhist pilgrims.

The beauty of Burma stretches far beyond Yangon, and the 1,000-year-old temple ruins of Bagan are essential viewing. Independent travel options are two-fold, a one-hour flight or a 16-hour jaunt on the

it an endearing experience for rail enthusiasts.

Bagan is integrated into most Myanmar tours, including Abercrombie & Kent's 11-day Burmese Heritage trip, which combines a starlight temple dinner at Bagan with an Ayeyarwady river cruise, the sites of Yangon, pagodas of Mandalay and tranquil Inle Lake. **Balloons Over Bagan** (easternsafaris.com) drift their hot-air balloons daily above the Bagan ruins and Ayeyarwady Delta at sunrise and sunset (From October to March only).

River journeys are a great way to traverse Myanmar. In July, Orient Express will launch Orcaella, a

Myanmar

Not just for the intrepid traveller, Myanmar is fast-becoming a golden destination for all

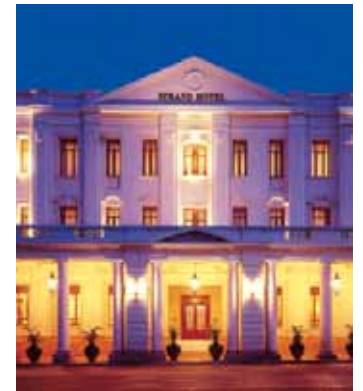
Until recently, the political situation in Myanmar and rudimentary infrastructure meant that only intrepid travellers visited. A reformist agenda is now luring camera-toting folk en masse to this ethereal land of golden pagodas, ancient ruins and mist-laced lakes and mountains. While independent travel is possible, terrains and timetables remain irregular, and several tours take in the highlights.

Built in 1901, **The Strand** (ghmhotels.com) was the well-heeled residence of choice in old Rangoon (now Yangon), hosting literary luminaries such as Kipling, Coward and Orwell, and a timeless glamour pervades the marbled lounges and tiled terraces. Executive Chef Iain Murray, at Yangon's other heritage hotel **The Governor's Residence** (governorsresidence.com), takes guests



ingredient shopping at a local market in a 1970s blue Mazda taxi, then returns to the hotel kitchen to demonstrate how to prepare a local staple: pickled green tea-leaf salad with butterbeans, peanuts, sesame, dried shrimps and chilli.

Bagan Express train from Yangon's central station. It's a slightly bumpy ride – certainly not luxurious – but private cabins can be booked, and the time-warped rural landscapes of the interior and friendly locals bearing snacks at each stop make



deluxe 50-passenger river cruiser that will meander the Ayeyarwady River between Yangon and Bhamo, or along the less-travelled Chindwin River, with onshore experiences including a candlelit street market and a monastery housing the Shwe Sagar Buddha, carved from a single trunk of wood.

Clockwise from top left: Balloons Over Bagan; exterior of The Strand; the pool at The Governor's Residence



Asia
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