

ASIA



YOU'LL FIND A
LAND OF TRULY
ANCIENT HISTORY
AND COMPLEX
CONTRASTS.



CHINA

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**Silk and jade. Dim sum and fried rice.
Tai Chi and acupuncture. All these and more
have filtered through into Western culture ...
becoming, to some, an intrinsic part of their life.**

But there is more to the vast land we call China. A whole lot more.

From the Army of Terracotta Warriors to the Great Wall that snakes its way across the country, you'll find a land of truly ancient history and complex contrasts. Vast soaring peaks that haven't changed much over the centuries ... to cities that have been modernized so rapidly it's hard to imagine they were sleepy fishing villages less than a decade before.

Yet, despite this rapid adoption of industry and commerce, much of China has still managed to maintain its fascination and beauty. Take Beijing, the center of China is moving into the millennium, it still manages to captivate the senses.



Here's where you'll find the country's largest and best-preserved cluster of ancient buildings – the Forbidden City. Two dynasties of Emperors rarely left its sumptuous surrounds ... except to escape the oppressive heat at the airy Summer Palace. Stroll around its immense array of temples, pavilions and sparkling lakes set into jewel-like gardens and you'll understand why they loved to play here.

If you ever get tired of watching the stately grace of tai chi, you can go to fly a kite in Tiananmen Square; browse for curios in Liulichang Street; or bicycle through winding, narrow hutongs past rows of Qing dynasty courtyards.

Already been to the Temple of Heaven Park and Lama Temple? Beijing is the perfect stepping off point for a trip to the Great Wall and the Yungang Caves, which hold over 50000 Buddhist statues and other incredible ancient artwork.

Tai Shan, the most revered Taoist peak, is easier to get to from the lovely seaside city of Yantai in the Shandong Province. Considered one of the birthplaces of Chinese civilization, the platform where the Ming Dynasty fought pirates still stands today.

Monsoon winds keep it warm and humid in the summer and, between the long coastline and multiple islands, the seafood connoisseur will be in heaven. So will the wine buff, as Yantai is China's prime wine area, with Zhangyu Red holding pride of place.

Considered one of the most inhabitable places in the world, the beaches, islands, rivers and undulating hills form a picture postcard backdrop. Along with a host of photographs, make sure you leave with some Zibo porcelain, shells carved in Qingdao, and a kite from Weifang.

Just as beautiful is Qiandao Lake near Hangzhou. Warm and subtropical, this year-round destination is part of one of the largest national parks in the world. Its clear waters, lush vegetation and soaring mountains continue to captivate vacationers.

Plum Peak Islet, Five Dragons and Longshan Island. Thousand Island Lake, Mt Wuyishan and Tai Lake. Mt Huangshan, Heaven Pool and West Lake. They'll all delight and refresh you.

For those who like a little retail therapy, go to Qing He Fang Street in Hangzhou for silks, Longjing tea, fans, parasols and brocades.



FOR A TROPICAL IDYLL IN CHINA, GO TO HAIKOU ON HAINEN ISLAND. THERE IS A PLETHORA OF BRILLIANT BEACHES, THE MOST POPULAR OF WHICH IS HOLIDAY BEACH.



Shanghai, considered the place to shop, is a little further away, but still within reach if you're keen. Old Street, part of Fangbang Road, is lined with specialist tourist shops.

Then there's Hong Kong. From shop-till-you-drop megacenters to quirky markets, there's very little you can't buy here. Clothing, jewelry and electronics are the 'best buys' and can usually be made to order.

The Temple Street Night Market is worth visiting. It is cheap and interesting to shop in the Apliu Street Market. Look out for second-hand electronic goods while you're there. You never know what you'll find.

But it's not all about shopping. There are excellent hikes in the New Territories. Victoria Peak offers fantastic views, while Victoria Harbour has to be crossed on the Star Ferry. And the beaches, especially on the Outlying Islands, are great.

The dim sum banquets (try Hoi Yat Heen) have to be sampled, as does the huge variety of noodle dishes. The seafood is sublime. And the alleys of Lan Kwai Fong hold good late night bars and eateries.

On the opposite end of the scale is Lijiang, near the Nepalese border. Remote and surrounded by stunning scenery, it's famous for the

wooden houses and canals in the old city. Even bicycles aren't allowed on its ancient cobblestone streets.

Lijiang was once an important stop on the ancient Tea Horse Road and the Naxi people still maintain much of the original Dongba culture. The matriarchal society of the Mosuo at Lugu Lake also retains many of their cultural traditions.

Lijiang is also a good stepping off point for skiing The Jade Dragon Snow Mountains. And, if you prefer to use your own two feet, you'll be entranced by the surrounds. The 13 peaks provide sanctuary for a wonderful array of flora and fauna, as well as provide a stunning backdrop to the Moon-Embracing Pavilion at Black Dragon Pond.

For a tropical idyll in China, go to Haikou on Hainan Island. There is a plethora of brilliant beaches, the most popular of which is Holiday Beach. The diving in Yalong Bay is also excellent and there is no shortage of places to snorkel.

The central highlands are thickly forested and great to hike in. For those who prefer to walk on flatter surfaces, there's always golf. And Sanya's Number One Market offers everything under the sun! ▶



Hainan Island also offers an abundance of good food, exotic tropical fruits like coconut, mango, carambola and longan are plentiful. Some of them even feature in the local fare of Wenchang Chicken, Dongshan Mutton, Jaiji Duck and Hele Crab. Sample the local spirit, baijiu, while you're about it.

Follow the Silk Road, walk the Great Wall, sail the Yangzi River ... wherever you go in China, you will be stepping into a tiny part of a long and dramatic history that has helped shape this world we live in. And there's every chance you'll love it.



INDIA

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From the mountainous north to the wet, monsoonal south, India is diverse. Its religions, its cultures, even its buildings are a conglomeration of many influences.

Take the Taj Mahal. Persian, Turkish, Indian and Islamic influences result in one of the most striking monuments on earth ... especially when the sun touches the marble at sunrise and sunset.

Nearby Jaipur, with its striking salmon-colored buildings, is the place for semiprecious gems and also houses the Palace of Winds, where the sultans kept their women. The mysteriously deserted town of Bhangarh, near Alwar, is India's answer to Machu Picchu. Check out camels at Pushkar, or go wild Bengal tiger spotting at the Ranthambhore National Park.

Go from these desert plains to the snowy Himalayas in Uttaranchal, source of the sacred Ganga River. Trek past glaciers, flower-filled valleys and dense forests to four of the most sacred Hindu temples.

Ski the slopes of Auli, Dayara Bugyal, Mundali and Munsiriari during winter. In summer, there are multiple rivers offering the ride of your life. If you prefer serenity, try sailing at Nainital.

Travel further south for another spectacular natural phenomenon; the Ajanta Caves. Buddhist monks went there to shelter and meditate from 200BC and their paintings are remarkable.

In Hyderabad, you'll find a plethora of exotic goods ... including hand-embroidered, sequin-encrusted slippers and Aladdin's lamps. Furthermore, this hi-tech city is so renowned for its technology it's earned the nickname 'Cyberabad'.

Another place that is a fascinating mix of cultural influences is Goa. A tiny tropical paradise on the warm Arabian Sea, the old Portuguese flavor still permeates everything from the festivals to the food - try a fish rice curry, or Idli (steamed rice cake) and Chai from a street-side hole-in-the-wall.

Tear yourself away from the beach to ride inland on a hired motorcycle. Meander through rice fields, whizz past Portuguese churches sharing walls with Hindu temples, pause under the shade of a banyan tree, putter across rivers on a ferry, or stop at ruined forts overlooking the ocean to watch the sun set.

Lazing or castle building, people love Calangute Beach. Enjoy cold beer, fresh seafood feasts or banana honey pancakes from one of the shacks in the shade of the swaying palm trees. The coppery sands of Baga are everything a tropical beach should be, complete with grove of palms and a river flowing down one side.

For another breathtaking vista, go to the Kerala Backwaters - a vast network of emerald lagoons, lakes, rivers and canals that finger their way inland from the coastline. Tiny settlements cling to slivers of land only a few meters wide; Chinese fishing nets cantilever into shallow, palm-fringed lakes; locals load coir, copra and cashews onto boats moored on the banks of shady canals.



TAKE THE TAJ MAHAL. PERSIAN, TURKISH, INDIAN AND ISLAMIC INFLUENCES RESULT IN ONE OF THE MOST STRIKING MONUMENTS ON EARTH . . . ESPECIALLY WHEN THE SUN TOUCHES THE MARBLE AT SUNRISE AND SUNSET.

The ever-present Western Ghats, one of the planet's bio-diversity hotspots, tower over it all. These glorious mountains are filled with lush hill stations, cascading waterfalls (two of which are ranked among the Top 50 in the world), exotic wildlife and national parks.

Bandipur, in the shadow of the mountains in Karnataka, is the perfect place to spot the Asiatic elephant in its natural habitat. If wildly beautiful isn't enough for you, Karnataka also has 200 miles (320km) of pristine coastline with magnificent diving, scores of historical monuments and two world heritage sites.

Even Bangalore is known as a garden city. The 18th century Lalbagh Botanical Gardens is filled with red roses, ancient trees and one of India's largest collections of rare plants. It's so peaceful, stepping out of it into the chaos of the streets may shock.

But that's India. A land of beautifully striking contrasts that will either overload you . . . or delight you to the very bone. Certainly, it holds so much appeal for some that they simply don't leave. However, the only way you'll know what India will be for you is to go there . . . and find out for yourself. ►

TEAR YOURSELF AWAY FROM THE BEACH TO RIDE INLAND ON A HIRED MOTORCYCLE. MEANDER THROUGH RICE FIELDS, WHIZZ PAST PORTUGUESE CHURCHES SHARING WALLS WITH HINDU TEMPLES, PAUSE UNDER THE SHADE OF A BANYAN TREE, PUTTER ACROSS RIVERS ON A FERRY, OR STOP AT RUINED FORTS OVERLOOKING THE OCEAN TO WATCH THE SUN SET.





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INDONESIA

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Tens of thousands of islands, many tiny, make up this incredible archipelago that stretches from Asia to Australia. Only about 6000 of them are inhabited, with Java forming the verdant heartland.

Mountainous and enchanting, West Java is filled with lofty peaks and lush green valleys.

Its people were the first to meet Indian, Dutch and British traders and explorers all of whom have subtly added to the overall culture. Known for their love of bright colors, mournful 'kecapi' music and beautiful women, the Sudanese culture is uniquely appealing.

The cool, fresh air, magnificent mountain views and gracious tea plantations of the Puncak Pass have long been a favorite with those looking to escape the hustle and bustle of Jakarta. But it's not all relaxing in the peaceful surrounds or admiring the spectacular sunsets from the top of the pass.



Hiking in the Gede or Pangrango national parks is a popular pastime. As is the Taman Safari Park, Flower Park, Taman Bunga Nusantara and the Botanical Gardens. And, when you get peckish, there are plenty of warungs (food stalls) with roasted corn or toast, as well as traditional warming drinks like bajigur and bandrek.

Anyer, on the other hand, is between the magnificent coastline of the Sunda Straits and the lush rolling countryside of Puncak. Perfectly situated for visits to Sanghiang Island, Baudi Village, Krakatua Volcano and Ujung Kulon Natural Reserve, you'll never run out of things to do.

Batam Island in Riau is much further north and just 20 minutes in an air-conditioned ferry from Singapore. Its proximity makes it popular with Singaporeans, who come for its duty-free shopping and excellent seafood.

Nongsa is where you'll find the beaches and golf courses. Just south is Batu Besar, a cluster of seafood restaurants built on stilts over the water. Wash your meal down with an ice-cold Singaporean beer ... or the juice from a cooled green coconut.

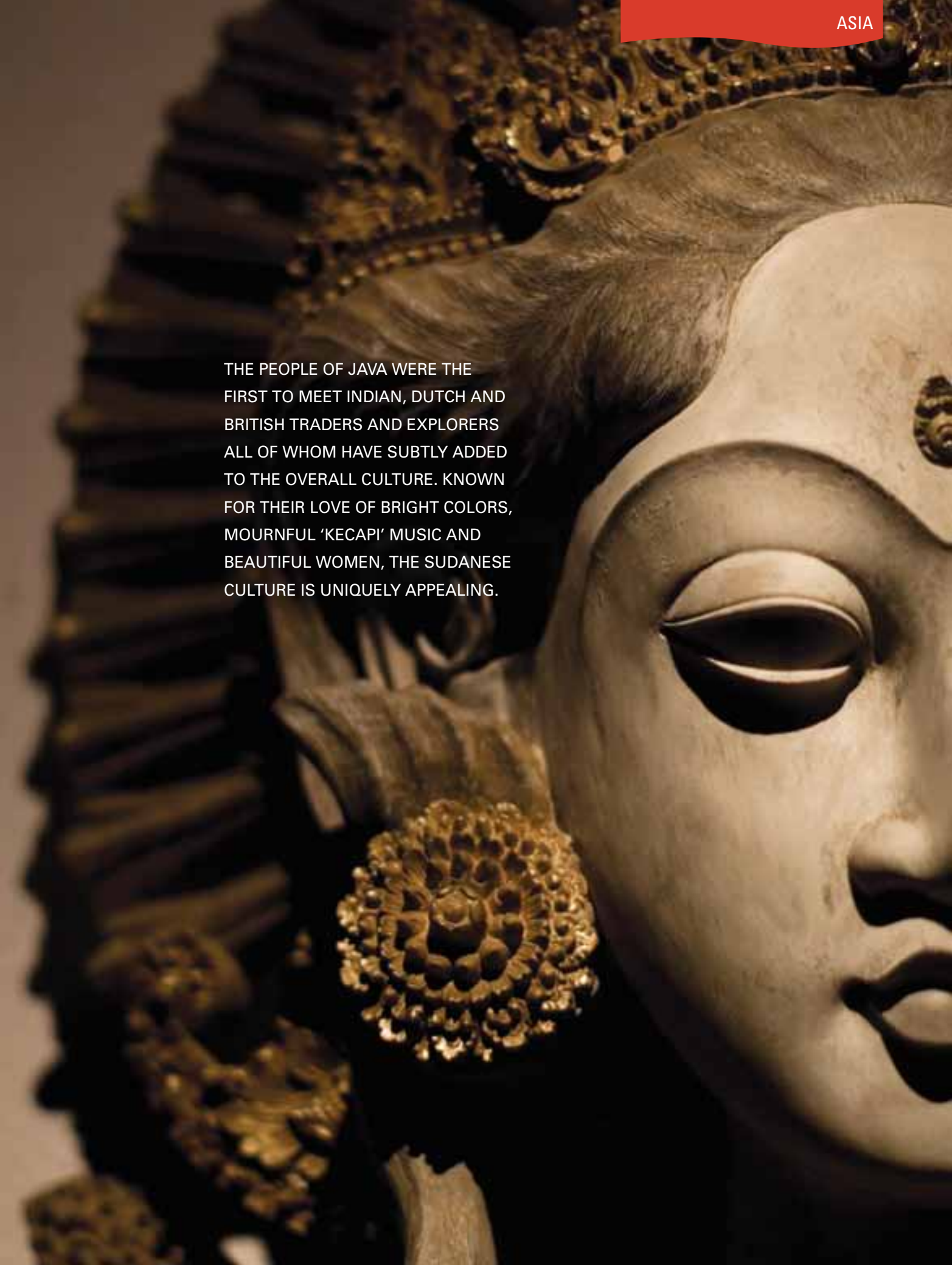
Nagoya is where you'll find the liveliest nightspots. It's also the place for bargains and Indonesian souvenirs. On the other side of the coin is the old Batam, just near Kabil. Here's where you'll find the quaint, old fishing village. Watch the sampans and other fishing craft float by while you enjoy yet another delicious seafood meal.

On the opposite side of Java, you'll find Lombok, close by Indonesia's premier tourist site of Bali. A wildly picturesque island, it has the third largest volcano in Indonesia. Mount Rinjani and its crater lake, Segara Anak, are well worth a look.

If you're after white sands, azure seas and first-class diving, hop over to the Gili Islands just off Lombok. Gili Meno, the middle one, houses a menagerie containing over 300 local and exotic birds and animals and is perfect for honeymooners or those looking to get away from it all.

The reefs that surround are now managed to maintain the magnificent coral and rich sea life. There's a lovely blue coral garden that can be reached by snorkelling off the beach. Turtle Point and Meno Wall, however, can only be accessed by boat.

There are many more islands in Indonesia that offer dream tropical vacations. No matter which one you choose to visit, you can be sure that you'll leave saying, 'I want to come back here again'. And there's every chance you will. ▶



THE PEOPLE OF JAVA WERE THE FIRST TO MEET INDIAN, DUTCH AND BRITISH TRADERS AND EXPLORERS ALL OF WHOM HAVE SUBTLY ADDED TO THE OVERALL CULTURE. KNOWN FOR THEIR LOVE OF BRIGHT COLORS, MOURNFUL 'KECAPI' MUSIC AND BEAUTIFUL WOMEN, THE SUDANESE CULTURE IS UNIQUELY APPEALING.

BALI

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It's only a small island, floating to the east of Java, but it's such a huge drawcard that it deserves a mention all on its own. Visitors come here in their millions. And return again ... and again.

Quite apart from the fact that you can have a magnificent vacation for not that many dollars, it really is a paradise on earth. Mile upon mile of the sort of beaches you see in brochures; glorious weather; fantastic diving; picturesque rice terraces teetering down steep slopes; towering active volcanoes, with crater lakes and sacred caves; lush tropical forests dropping into deep ravines; and truly friendly people.

Most of the action happens in the southern tip of Bali. In fact, don't be surprised if you only travel for a short while through the beeping chaos of the streets before you get to your destination. Some of the most popular beaches are minutes away from the airport.

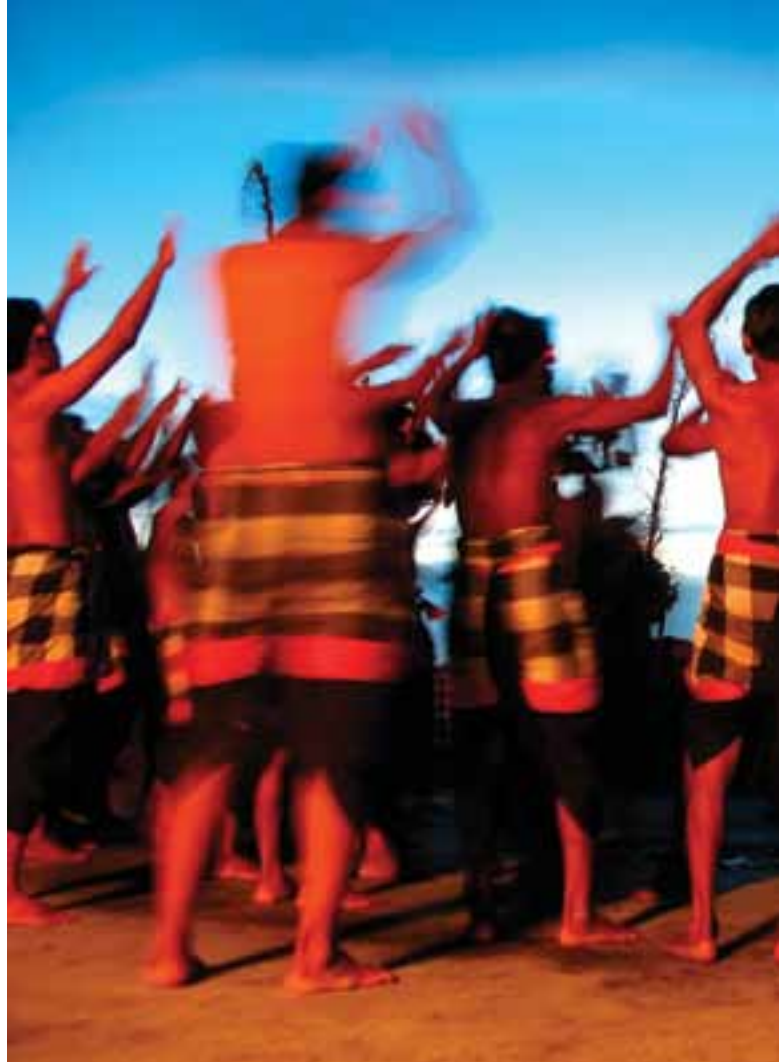
There's Legian, loved by surfers and sunbathers alike. Tuban, a popular family destination. Kuta, the place for nightlife and with the biggest market (remember to bargain).

Jimbaran Bay, with its fishing boats and grilled seafood restaurants strung out along the beach. A top spot for water sports and to watch the sunset. Don't be surprised if you see a landing plane silhouetted against the cinnabar sky.



Ungasan, on the soaring cliffs of the southernmost peninsula, nearby the amazing three-court Uluwatu Temple. Nusa Dua, with its elegant resorts and great surfing waves. The quiet port of Tanjung Benoa, where you can snorkel to the reef off the palm-fringed beach. Bali really is a paradise on earth.

When you watch the sunrise kiss the sands of Sanur beach, you'll understand why there are ancient temples right there. Medewi, has the longest point break in Bali and the beach is so rocky only anglers and surfers go there, while Candidasa's beachfront lagoon is covered with fragrant waterlilies. With its proximity to Pura Besakih 'Mother Temple' on Mount Agung, the most revered peak in Bali, Candidasa is the ideal spot to explore the more remote cultural treasures of this beautiful island.



GO TO THE MONKEY FOREST – BUT HOLD ON TO YOUR CAMERA AND SUNGLASSES, THE FURRY RESIDENTS ARE CHEEKY!





If you can tear yourself away from the beach and spas (you simply have to get a Bali massage), there is no shortage of culture and fantastic craft. Head inland past the rice paddies to the Gianyar district. And remember to take your camera and wallet, as there's no shortage of items for either. Batubulan and its stone sculptures lining the main road (watch the Barong dance while you're there); Celuk and Singapadu for excellent gold and silver jewelry; or Sukawati, with its two-storied art market, pasar seni and wind chimes. You'll get a good selection of Indonesian food at night, too.

Mas, is famous for woodcarving while Ubud, is the cultural center of Bali and home to the best art museums. Here's where you'll see the other Balinese dances - Legong, Ramayana, Baris, Kecak and the Fire Dance – and find markets with great handicrafts.

While you're there, take a stroll through lush forest to breathtaking gorges and deserted swimming holes. Alternatively, go to the Monkey Forest – but hold on to your camera and sunglasses, the furry residents are cheeky!

If you're into ancient monuments, there are scores. The Moon of Pejeng, a huge kettledrum from the Bronze Age; Goa Cave, where you enter through the mouth of a demon; Gunung Kawi at the bottom of a lush valley; or magnificent Pura Ulun Danu Bratan, with its Hindu and Buddhist temples beautifully silhouetted against the surrounding lake - arrange to paddle across at sunrise, it's like being in a dream.

MAS, IS FAMOUS FOR WOODCARVING WHILE UBUD, IS THE CULTURAL CENTER OF BALI AND HOME TO THE BEST ART MUSEUMS. HERE'S WHERE YOU'LL SEE THE OTHER BALINESE DANCES - LEGONG, RAMAYANA, BARIS, KECAK AND THE FIRE DANCE – AND FIND MARKETS WITH GREAT HANDICRAFTS.



For spectacular views, go to Kintamani, with its deep crater lake and bubbling hot springs. Git Git waterfall is worth the climb and you can buy great silver or gold threaded cloth from the stalls at the top. And for the best offshore diving visit Amed, Nusa Lembongan and Menjangan Islands.


As you can see, Bali is another of those places for which you should pack light - so you have space for the marvellous craftwork you'll bring home. But that'll be okay, because a swimsuit, sarong, light clothes and warm jumper don't take up that much space at all!

JAPAN

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Another iconic Oriental country, Japan's small size belies an impressive and ancient culture. It would be fair to say that most of us would have at least one electrical appliance that hailed from these shores. However, despite its huge industrial output, Japan is still a great place to vacation.

Way up north is Hokkaido. Home to Japan's aboriginal Ainu, it's a vast, untamed wilderness of national parks. Marvel at the lofty Daisetsu-san Park and secluded Shiretoko-hanto Peninsula or the volcanic, lake- ►



SHIZUOKA, AT THE FOOT OF MT FUJI, HAS IT ALL – LAKES, MOUNTAINS AND BEACHES. WHILE YOU'RE THERE, GO TO THE KANZAN-JI HOT SPRING IN NEARBY HAMAMATSU TO VIEW THE MOON. COASTAL CITY, MIE, IS SURROUNDED BY ATTRACTIONS LIKE THE TOBA AQUARIUM, PEARL ISLAND, THE GRAND SHRINE OF ISE AND SUZUKA RACE CIRCUIT.

filled Shikotsu-Toya Park and Kushiro Marsh, where you'll spot the Japanese crane and a host of other wildlife.

When you're not tramping the parks, you can relax in one of the hot springs that abound; gaze into Shakotan's clear blue waters from one of the glass-bottomed boats; pretend you're a space shuttle pilot in the simulator at Yoichi Space Memorial Museum; or drink the pristine water gushing from Mt Yotei-zan.

You'll find Tokyo and the other major cities on Honshu. Heavily populated, there are still areas of great natural beauty. And every city has so many attractions you'll never run out of things to do. Ginza, Tokyo's shopping district, is big enough to satisfy the most seasoned shopper!

The striking mountain country north of Tokyo is much loved. Gunma's lakes and mountains are spectacular. Tochigi is nearby the greatest amusement park at Nasu highland.

Into skiing? Go to Nagano, Niigata, Fukushima, Gifu and Toyama, the entrance to the stunning Tateyama-Kurobe Alpine Route. If you're there in summer, the countryside is dazzling, fish are plentiful and so are golf courses.

Lake Kawaguchi near Yamanashi, is actually renowned for its bass fishing. And Kanagawa in Fuji-Hakone-Izu National Park is one of Japan's best-loved vacation spots.

Shizuoka, at the foot of Mt Fuji, has it all – lakes, mountains and beaches. While you're there, go to the Kanzan-ji hot spring in nearby Hamamatsu to view the moon. Coastal city, Mie, is surrounded by attractions like the Toba Aquarium, Pearl Island, the Grand Shrine of Ise and Suzuka Race Circuit.

Talking of speed, catch the Kobe bullet train – it's the best way to see Mt Fuji in all its glory. Hyogo has many scenic places on its doorstep ... Seto Inland Sea and San-in Kaigan Coast National Parks, Rokko Mountains and Awaji-shima Island.

The largest island on Japan's Inland Sea, Awaji is all about fresh seafood, sun and sand. While you're there, make sure you go to Goshiki Hama, where the beach is made up of five different colored stones. Great place for swimming, too!

Back on the mainland ... in Wakayama, go to the World Safari Park; in Nagoya, go to the Castle, Tokugawa art museum or, at night, the neon-filled Sakae district.

Nagoya, is also a great springboard for day trips into central Honshu. Atsuta Jingu, one of the most sacred shrines, is hidden amongst ancient Cyprus trees. Good food to try is Udon noodles in Miso broth, Kochin Chicken and Miso-katsu. Wash it down with a Japanese beer like Asahi.

Another neon-filled city is Osaka, though it has a softer side of cherry blossoms in spring and beautiful autumn leaves in fall. The Palace has an excellent museum and beautiful park-like gardens.

To shop, go to the huge Umeda mall on the way to Kobe, complete with giant red ferris wheel; Kita, with its department stores and huge underground malls; and Minami, which spreads out around the Namba Station. Shinsaibashi Street is wall to wall stores, some of which have been in one family for generations, and Dotonbori Street is particularly known for its food, theater and fans. ►



ANOTHER NEON-FILLED CITY IS OSAKA, THOUGH IT HAS A SOFTER SIDE OF CHERRY BLOSSOMS IN SPRING AND BEAUTIFUL AUTUMN LEAVES IN FALL.



Try Udon noodles, Fried Octopus Balls, Kushi-katsu and Okonomiyaki. Don't be surprised if you end up drinking lots of beer as well!

Shiga and Kyoto, on the other hand, offer a chance to experience rural Japan. Close to Amano-Hashidate, the Bridge of Heaven, Kyoto is also home to more than 200 shrines, 1600 temples, three palaces, nine museums and countless gardens. It's a great place for pottery, lacquerware, bamboo, porcelain and embroidery.

Tokushima, perched on Shikoku's coast, is also blessed with great scenic attractions - towering mountains, the deep blue sea and unexplored ravines. Walk the vine suspension bridge over the Lyagawa River. View the raging whirlpools of Naruto from a glass-floored walkway. And look out for Aizome (indigo dyeing) and handmade paper.

Kyushu is another scenic wonderland. Smoking volcanoes near Kagoshima; Hot springs in Beppu; and Beaches everywhere. Make sure you try the Ramen noodles in Pork Broth and Gyoza. Feast on grilled fish, Yakitori and beer at Fukuoka's riverside yatai. Visit rustic Saga for its pottery and pre-historic village ruins.

The seas around Okinawa in the south have spectacular coral and fish. Once an independent kingdom leading the South-Asian sea trade, it contains nine world heritage sites. And the banyan trees bloom one after the other all year round.

Moon Beach is famous for its snow-white sand and water in impossible shades of blue. Kokusai Dori, or International Avenue, is lined with restaurants, department stores and souvenir shops. There's also no shortage of old world markets, where you can pick up beautiful ceramics, textiles and glasswork.

Overall, it's hard to tie Japan down to any one thing. And, whether it was your love of Sushi that initially attracted you ... or a fascination with the ancient traditions ... or, simply business ... Japan will leave an indelible impression upon you that'll be hard to beat.



MALAYSIA

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From the beautiful glass skyscrapers in Kuala Lumpur to the wild heights of Taman Negara you'll be enchanted by this easygoing country. The people are happy, the land is fertile and the temperature rarely drops below 68°F (20°C).

If the humidity gets to you, take a dip in the ocean or visit the cool hill stations. Alternatively, take the lift up to the viewing deck on one of the world's tallest buildings.

Actually, despite the plethora of gleaming towers, Kuala Lumpur (KL) still retains much of its original character. When you're around the lovely colonial buildings in the center, the vibrant night markets of Chinatown or active Little India, you would be excused for forgetting you were in a wealthy and modern city.

The best store shopping is in the megaplexes of Jln Bukit Bintang. Otherwise there are plenty of markets, including the Central Market in its Art Deco building. Remember to bargain!

Thean Hou Temple and Masjid Jamek are beautiful. The Lake Gardens offer verdant relief from the buildings and crowds. Families love the giant waterparks just out of town. And you can always take a walk along wooden bridges strung high in the tree canopy at the jungle park.

Just north of the city is the eminent limestone outcrop that house Batu Caves. You have to climb 272 steps to get there, but many believe it's



THE BEAUTIFUL BUDDHIST KEK LOK SI TEMPLE, AND COOLING BREEZES AND SPECTACULAR VIEWS OF PENANG HILL ARE MUST-DOS.



worth it – even if only to see the monkeys scaling the vertical cliff faces. Also go to Templer Park’s caves if you like exploring. If not, there is no shortage of golf courses.

Ipoh, a quiet town surrounded by hills, is famed for its tasty hawker food. It’s said that people drive here just to savor its delectable taste! It’s certainly a place made quaint by old colonial bungalows and Straits Chinese architecture like the white stucco Hong Kong Bank.

There are also a number of little islands that bear mentioning. Pangkor, opposite Lumut, has charming fishing villages, excellent diving and great beaches. The best ones are Pasir Bogak and Teluk Nipah. If you go at the right time of year, you can see turtles laying eggs in Teluk Ketapang.

Penang is much more developed, though it still has a lot of dense jungle. Georgetown, which manages to retain some of its appealing colonial atmosphere, is the place for shopping and great food (a mix of Chinese, Indian and classic Malay). The beautiful Buddhist Kek Lok Si Temple, and cooling breezes and spectacular views of Penang Hill are must-dos.

Batu Ferringgi is the most popular beach and the open-air bazaar that happens around sunset buzzes with life. It’s a good place for craftwork and souvenirs. You can even watch some of them being made.

Much smaller is Langkawi Island further north, which is famed for its beaches, including secluded Pantai Kok and Pantai Cenang, which is framed by coconut palms and casuarinas. Burau Bay, with its vistas across to Thailand, is home to some of the most exclusive resorts and a top golf course edged by rainforest.

Winner of countless tourism awards, Redang Island lies on the eastern side of Malaysia. Go to it for brilliant beaches and, thanks to a marine reserve, even better diving. Its waters are so crystal clear they have to be seen to be believed.

Considerably bigger and more developed is Tioman Island. With soaring peaks and verdant jungle, like Redang, its flora and fauna have often featured in National Geographic documentaries. The beaches are brilliant expanses of white sand, its water sparkles and the snorkeling and diving is superb. ►



PHILIPPINES

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The Philippines is another destination that offers balmy weather, beautiful beaches, azure oceans and excellent diving in many of its regions. Manila, its capital, is a teeming metropolis. Few colonial buildings survived the WWII bombing and are overwhelmed by modern megaliths.

However, don't be fooled. This is more than just a stepping off point for Filipino tropical paradises. It has a charm all of its own. You can still find parts of the medieval walled city of Intramuros it used to be, in parks and performing venues, and as homes for art galleries and other shops.

The Baroque San Agustin Church managed to survive all the bombings intact. And not much of Chinatown's lifestyle has changed either. Affluent Makati has been absorbed into Manila and is where the fashionable boutiques, restaurants and people can be found.

If surfing is more your thing, go to laid-back Cherating Beach on the east coast of the mainland. Of course, it's still a paradise for others, great food and rustic rural villages nearby.

The fishing village of Beserah, just nearby, has a unique practise. Locals use water buffalo to carry their daily catch from the boat to where they dry and salt the fish. It's also a good place for handicrafts like batik, seashell curios and so on.

With the formidable Main Range dividing the area, there are some excellent eco-adventures you can enjoy from this region. The rainforest in the Endau-Rompin State Park is 130 million years old. Visit the Orang Asli village on your way there. Or wash an elephant at the orphanage at Kuala Gandah – after you've ridden it, of course.

Whether you go to Malaysia for a jungle adventure or a tropical idyll, this is a country that will deliver a dream vacation.

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NATURALLY BEAUTIFUL, IT STILL
RETAINS AN OLD TIME CHARM
AND IS WELL KNOWN FOR ITS
SANDY BEACHES, DEEP BLUE SEA
AND CORAL REEFS.



Not too much further north is Zambales on Subic Bay. Naturally beautiful, it still retains an old time charm and is well known for its sandy beaches, deep blue sea and coral reefs. Watersports are the major reason to come here. And, while you're at it, go to the Marine Exploratorium.

La Union on the coast and Benguet, in the beautifully chiselled Cordillera Mountains, are good places from which to explore the Banaue rice terraces built by the headhunting Ifugao, and the Spanish Village in Vigan. While there, look out for clay pottery, woven blankets and Basi, the native sugar cane wine.

Those who don't go to Bolinao for its beaches and sport fishing, come for the archeological site. And Ilocos Norte, way up on the northern tip of the island, holds numerous other attractions, including the late President Marcos.

Heading south from Manila, you'll find Tagaytay perched high on a ridge overlooking the world's smallest active volcano. It's so small because it has risen anew from the lake formed in the crater from the original volcano. If you're feeling truly adventurous, try trekking to it or exploring one of the many caves.

The less adventurous can visit the interesting Basilica of Saint Martin, island hop on Taal Lake, or shop for local craft like pina cloth and balisong. A little further south and you can dive the rich marine parks of the Batangas or bask on the beaches.

Otherwise, go straight to Anilao and head off to another island adventure. How about palm-fringed Boracay? Tranquil, sweet and slow - you won't want to leave.

The beautiful powdery sand of White Beach is superb. Mind you, so are Ilig-Iligan, Pukashell and Balihai. Coral reefs surround the island, which makes for spectacular snorkeling and diving. If you're feeling energetic, you can always island hop, visit a bat cave, or play a round of golf. At night, the sands come alive with revellers and many don't go to sleep till dawn.

In Cebu you can go to San Remigio, a dive and golf resort, or Lapu-Lapu on Mactan Island. When you're not working on your tan or diving, go dolphin and whale spotting, shopping in Cebu City or try your luck at the casino. Wherever you end up going, you'll be in paradise. ►



LUCKILY, THE OTHER THING SINGAPORE IS FAMOUS FOR IS ITS FOOD. A BLEND OF CHINESE, INDIAN, MALAY AND TAMIL IT'S USUALLY DELICIOUS. SOME SAY THE SIGNATURE DISH IS HAINANESE CHICKEN RICE; OTHERS SAY THE SATAY. SEAFOOD IS USUALLY A UNIVERSAL FAVORITE.



SINGAPORE

WWW.VISITSINGAPORE.COM

If you're looking for an authentic 'Asian experience', this is not the place to go. If, however, you want to shop, then you've found just the place to do it.

You'll find Gucci, Armani and Valentino at the ritzy Hilton on Orchard Road. Or you can get one of the numerous tailors to make it to measure. There's Wedgewood china at Delpi. Jade and other jewelry at the Far East Shopping Center. With over 200 malls jammed into a few blocks, you'll get tired long before you run out of stores to visit.

For the market lover, go to the merchants and shops in Chinatown, where you can feast your eyes on the temples and terraces as you go; the wall-to-wall shops of Little India, filled with the odor of spices, incense and who knows what else – the southern end of Serangoon Rd is the place for chapattis and other great food; and Arab St, a good place for fabric, traditional crafts and jewelry, and good quality clothing at bargain prices. If you get peckish, there are many little restaurants, where you can end your meal with a shisa (like a hookah).

FOR THE MARKET LOVER, GO TO THE MERCHANTS AND SHOPS IN CHINATOWN, WHERE YOU CAN FEAST YOUR EYES ON THE TEMPLES AND TERRACES AS YOU GO.





Sim Lim Square offers six floors of electronic equipment. DVDs, computers, components, software, mobile phones. It's not all new, but it's cheap – especially if you shop around and know how to bargain.

Cho Lon has an eclectic collection of homeware and souvenirs. Dempsey Road is where you can find older collectables. It's a jumble of shops, but you'll have fun making a 'find'. And you can always stop and fortify yourself at one of the wine bars.

If you're into Oriental medicine, go to Eu Yan San. Bugis Street has brand name jeans and trendy clothing. And, if you're still willing to shop after all that, there are a heap of complexes along the waterfront.

Luckily, the other thing Singapore is famous for is its food. A blend of Chinese, Indian, Malay and Tamil it's usually delicious. Some say the signature dish is Hainanese Chicken Rice; others say the Satay. Seafood is usually a universal favorite.

Also try Tahu Telor at Bambu and Beef Rendang or Udang Ketak Nana Lemak at Blue Ginger. Hawker stalls sell halal Tamil food. Chinese stalls often introduce Malay.

Must-sees are the Asian Civilizations Museum, Singapore Zoo and Night Safari, National Orchid Garden with over 60000 plants, a ride on the high-altitude cable car over Keppel Harbour to Sentosa Island, looping back to the station via Mt Faber.

Amongst the rather attractive skyscrapers, you will find the odd relic from the past - a Singapore Sling under a Raffles Hotel ceiling fan is a must – but the rest of squeaky-clean Singapore is post-modern to the core.

TAIWAN

WWW.TAIWAN.NET.TW

Sultry and sub-tropical on the scant western plains, visitors will welcome the coolness on the high, vegetation-covered mountains that fill most of Taiwan. The plain is covered with modern metropolises heaving with people. But, even though Taiwan is highly industrialized there are still pockets of peace and beautiful ancient monuments to be found.

The most visited area is the northeast. Taipei has the world's tallest building to date – 101 stories, complete with elegant shops and an incredible Asian food court. If you want to get amongst the locals to eat, try one of the night markets you'll find in every city. The Dihua Market is a great place for cloth. ►

IT'S THE VIEW OF THE AZURE PACIFIC WHEN YOU WALK OUT OF THE GORGE THAT INSPIRED THE NAME, TAROKO, WHICH MEANS 'MAGNIFICENT AND BEAUTIFUL'.



When you're not eating or shopping, visit the Lin Family Mansion, Longshan Temple, Mao Kon or Qingxin Tea Gardens and the National Palace Museum, with its extensive collection of oriental art treasures.

The most popular beach is Fulung, and Yenliao with its wooden pavilions and walkways, comes a close second. The Tsaoling Historic Trail is said to be enchanting and the Yangmingshan National Park is filled with excellent walks leading to delightful waterfalls, volcanic craters, lakes and hot springs.

Marble-walled Taroko Gorge, in the mountainous east, is much more rugged. The view from the bottom is awe-inspiring – cliffs so high they block out the sky, incredible rock formations and luxuriant greenery. But it's the view of the azure Pacific when you walk out of the gorge that inspired the name, Taroko, which means 'magnificent and beautiful'.

Whether you come to Taiwan on business or vacation, you'll find plenty to satisfy. And more than enough to take away with you.



THAILAND

WWW.TOURISMTHAILAND.ORG

Its stunning beaches, incredible diving, verdant interior, cultural marvels, delectable cuisine and infamous nightlife draw more visitors than any other country in southeast Asia.

Even if you're coming here for the sand and sea of the south, you simply have to begin (or end) with Bangkok. Khoa San Road at night, especially late-nite, is a sight to behold and there is no shortage of bars, discos and other entertainment.

Daytime treats are also worthwhile. A cruise down the river is the best way to see the city, Siam centre has good shopping and the Chatuchak weekend market seethes with stallholders and their customers.

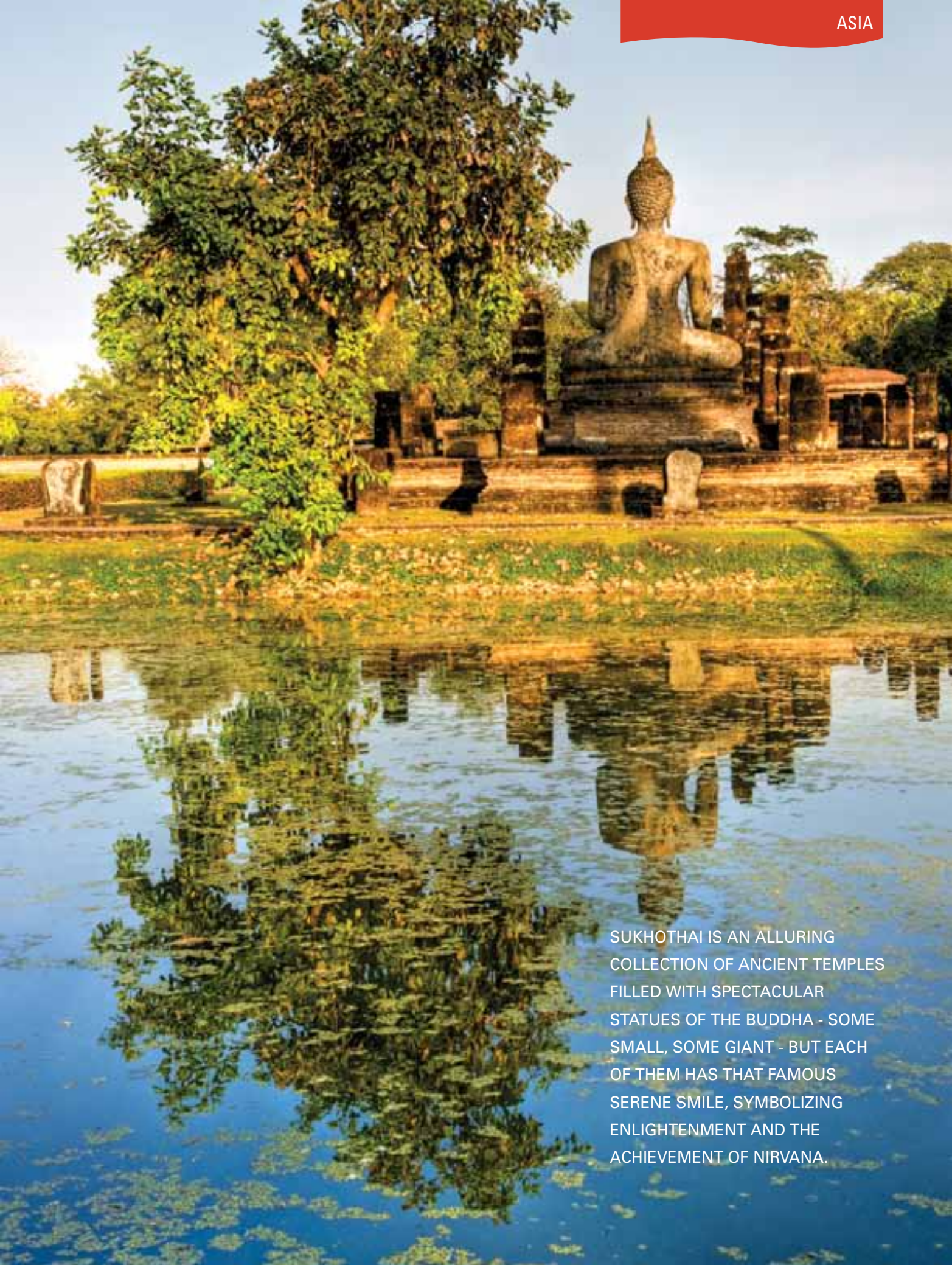
There are countless souvenir markets, hundreds of handcraft outlets in the clamorous streets, and plenty of luxury malls. Other places worth going to are MBK if you wear glasses or lenses; Phahurat Market in Little India for cloth and clothing; and Amulet Market for just that ... amulets.

Wat Traimit holds the world's largest golden Buddha, weighing in at 5.5 tons; dinner cruises are touristy, but do the job well; Sala Rim Nam is the best place for classical dance performances; and the Wat Phra Kaew and Grand Palace are simply wonderful. For a bird's eye view of Thailand and its great monuments, go to the Ancient City – it's an excellent educational theme park.


For parks of a different sort, go to the Ao Phang Nga Marine Park just northeast of Phuket. Towering limestone formations covered in greenery thrust up out of the Andaman Sea, submerged karst caves beg to be explored and quaint fishing villages dot the shores.

Phuket itself is not a park but a playground. The golden beaches of the west coast are filled with sunbathers, amenities and entertainment. Patong is the premier tourist beach, whereas Kamala, Hat Karon and Hat Kata are a little less frenetic. And the Fantasea theme park show will captivate kids. Bigger kids will enjoy the handicrafts, fire juggling and elephant rides.

Koh Samui, off the western coast, is famous with scuba divers. Though there are plenty of beautiful palm-fringed beaches, they mostly come for the incredible diving. The names Anghthong Marine Park, Koh Tao, Koh Phangan and Koh Samui all conjure up visions for those in the know. ►



SUKHOTHAI IS AN ALLURING COLLECTION OF ANCIENT TEMPLES FILLED WITH SPECTACULAR STATUES OF THE BUDDHA - SOME SMALL, SOME GIANT - BUT EACH OF THEM HAS THAT FAMOUS SERENE SMILE, SYMBOLIZING ENLIGHTENMENT AND THE ACHIEVEMENT OF NIRVANA.



THERE ARE ALSO MAGNIFICENT NATIONAL PARKS AND THUNDERING WATERFALLS AROUND HERE. MOST NOTABLE ARE ERAWAN PARK, THUNG NANG KHUAN WATERFALL AND WAT PA LUANGTA BUA YANASAMPANNO, WHERE TIGERS AND OTHER WILDLIFE ROAM FREE.

When they manage to drag themselves out of the water, there is plenty to do. The Big Buddha, that's enormous enough to be seen from the air; the Snake Farm; the rocks of Hin Ta and Hin Yai, purported to be an elderly couple that were washed to shore; the Namuang Waterfalls; scoffing freshly-caught seafood, tropical fruit and coconut; and a whole lot more.

Pattaya, on the other side of the South China Sea and the center of around 250 miles (400kms) of magnificent coastline, is only two hours from Bangkok. Because it's been established for so long, it's perfectly set up for families and it's said to have nightlife comparable to Bangkok (go to Tiffany's to see for yourself).

There are heaps of great beaches. Jomtien has everything you could wish for; Pattaya is the place to catch boats to islands like Koh Larn, Phai Group, Krok and Sak. All have good beaches, clear water and coral.

If you prefer to stay dry for a while, go to Underwater World, Million Years Stone Park and Crocodile Farm, Elephant Village, Mini Siam or Alangkarn, a huge Vegas-style extravaganza.

Kanchanaburi, northwest of Bangkok, is the place to go for those into war history. Retrace the steps of the WWII prisoners who were forced to build the notorious Death Railway and Bridge on the River Kwai. Or visit the war cemetery, memorial to nearly 7000 prisoners of war who died constructing them.

There are also magnificent national parks and thundering waterfalls around here. Most notable are Erawan Park, Thung Nang Khruan Waterfall and Wat Pa Luangta Bua Yanasampanno, where tigers and other wildlife roam free.

Good things to get are glass noodles, preserved mango, coconut jells and jewels from the Bo Phloi district.

Chiang Mai in the north is the birthplace of the Thai civilization and many of the ethnic hill people still live much as they used to. This is the place to come for excellent – and cheap – handicrafts. Beautiful silks and other natural weaves, hand painted fans, silver jewelry, lacquerware etc.

You can go to the 'factory' itself or you can wander around the extensive Night Market, whose origins can be traced back to the ancient Yunnanese trading caravans, and Sunday Walking Street on the eastern edge of The Ratchadamnoen.

The Wat Chedi Luang, with its wonderful stupa, and Wat Phan Tao, made from intricately carved wooden panels from a Thai palace, are must-sees. Take a wander along the Doi Suthep, the moat that encircled the original city, while you're about it.

When you're peckish, try sausages with green chilli dip if you like it hot, or noodles from a vendor if you don't. Either way, you can wash it down with an icy Singha. For the best sit-down meals, eat at one of the restaurants frequented by the locals.

North or south, beach or inland hills and mountains, Thailand is an incredible country. Some come for a week and stay for a year. Others never leave. Chances are you will have to, even though you don't want to. But rest assured, it will all be here waiting for you to come back. ■



THIS IS THE PLACE TO COME FOR EXCELLENT – AND CHEAP – HANDICRAFTS. BEAUTIFUL SILKS AND OTHER NATURAL WEAVES, HAND PAINTED FANS, SILVER JEWELRY, LACQUERWARE ETC.

