

# Destination Southeast Asia

The life-giving force of water has sculpted many of Southeast Asia's stunning landscapes, engaging cultures and collective psyches. It falls from the heavens during the monsoons to impregnate the fields and forests with a bounty found only in the tropics. The air takes its share becoming thick with moisture. The busy concrete cities and the sleepy wooden villages are always built near a water source: be it the sparkling sea where sinewy fisherman cast their nets at sunset or the muddy rivers criss-crossed by old dugouts. Even the staple crop of rice needs to be submerged in water for a portion of its life cycle.

The fluid qualities of water infuse the social landscape too. Road traffic flows like a river swollen with debris, as the big machines push aside the tatty motorcycles that cough up black smoke. The market crowds move through the aisles with the force of an invisible current, and the social interactions with humble noodle vendors or earnest students can be as refreshing as a tall, cold glass of beer.

Water and what it has wrought are the primary tourist attractions as well. The beaches are legendary amongst the sun-deprived, and encompass every idyll from the shallow coral-protected bays of the Malay peninsula to the powerful writhing seas of Indonesia and the Philippines and the languorous Vietnamese coastline. Inland there are scenic karst mountains, evidence of long-vanished seas that are now hollowed out by water's ceaseless sculpting powers.

The spirituality that washes over the land also requires this ingredient in its religious rituals. Muslims cleanse themselves five times a day before pressing their foreheads to the earth and presenting their supplications to God. The Buddhists celebrate the rains and the rivers with water-throwing festivals and candlelit offerings. The great Khmer empire grew and prospered in what was then a fecund corner of the world and built, as thanks to its god-kings, the magnificent Angkor temples embossed with the myths of oceans and sea serpents.

You may wonder what you'll do in this strange region, where water has shaped the landscape and identity. The answer is to swim in the warm seas, sweat in the hot sun, slurp down noodles floating in a salty broth and sip beer kept cool with ice cubes. The recipe for happiness is a simple and elemental one.



Traditional longtail boats dock in the waters off Ko Phi Phi (p817), Thailand

# HIGHLIGHTS

---

## MOST AMAZING MONUMENTS

**Temples of Angkor (Cambodia)** – these incredible Hindu-Buddhist temples, built by the great Khmer empire, are among the world's greatest architectural feats (p95)

**Bagan (Myanmar)** – a deserted city of ancient temples rippling into the distance (p581)

**Borobudur (Indonesia)** – a stunning stupa ringed by mist and mountains (p210)

**Hanoi (Vietnam)** – an embalmed Ho Chi Minh gives this French-influenced city monumental status (p842)

**Bangkok (Thailand)** – a human-made mountain range of skyscrapers and dazzling coloured royal temples (p710)

## BEST BEACHES & DIVE SPOTS

**Bali (Indonesia)** – synonymous with beach paradise thanks to the amazing dive spots of Pulau Menjangan and the white-sand coves near Ulu Watu (p222)

**Ko Phi Phi (Thailand)** – the prettiest little island you've ever seen, with dramatic limestone mountains jutting out of a sapphire sea (p817)

**Boracay (Philippines)** – long and leggy beaches, good-time bars and enough of a breeze to propel a windsurfer (p637)

**Semporna Archipelago (Malaysia)** – deep sea walls where turtles, sharks and rays hang out (p505)

**Nha Trang (Vietnam)** – party like a GI on Vietnam's good-times beach (p886)





Akha women in Muang Sing (p401), Laos

## BEST PLACES TO GET HIGH (ALTITUDE-WISE)

**Mt Kinabalu (Malaysia)** – make the blood-pumping scramble to the top of this looming granite spire for a spiritual sunrise (p497)

**Cordillera Mountains (Philippines)** – a vast range of jagged mountains with ancient rice terraces and superb trekking (p625)

**Muang Sing (Laos)** – a somnolent Thai Lu village surrounded by forested treks through the Nam Ha National Protected Area (p401)

**Inle Lake (Myanmar)** – an alpine lake of floating gardens, stilted villages and true tranquillity (p565)

**Gunung Bromo (Indonesia)** – an active volcano that is usually hiked at night for a sunrise view of its moonscape summit (p220)

## BEST CULTURAL CONNECTIONS

**Sapa (Vietnam)** – a misty mountain market town for hill-tribe treks and country sojourns (p868)

**Luang Prabang (Laos)** – a romantic city of gleaming temples, crumbling French villas and the serpentine Mekong River (p383)

**Kampot (Cambodia)** – riverside charmer filled with ageing French architecture, a nearby hill station and pepper plantations (p121)

**Chiang Mai (Thailand)** – a culture-nerd's best friend known for kitchen demos and hill-tribe treks (p749)

**Ubud (Indonesia)** – a town amongst the rice paddies where Balinese culture occupies museums, classrooms and artists' studios (p237)

## BEST OFF THE BEATEN PATH

**Dili (East Timor)** – a rapidly modernising city with reef dives in easy reach (p150)

**Bukit Timah (Singapore)** – a rainforest in the middle of a metropolis (p685)

**Bario & Kelabit Highlands (Malaysia)** – a Borneo hang-out with wobbly longhouses and jungle wonders (p523)

**Myitkyina (Myanmar)** – life in the slow lane along the fabled Ayeyarwady (p588)

**Coron (Philippines)** – a beach paradise with a pulse for wreck divers, kayakers and cove hunters (p660)

## FOODIE CITIES

**Pulau Penang (Malaysia)** – eat from dawn till dusk from a buffet of Malaysia's culinary cultures: Chinese noodles, Indian curries and Malay desserts (p461)

**Singapore** – become a hawker centre expert in this city that knows how to nosh (p669)

**Vientiane (Laos)** – dine on a dime with the Mekong River as your backdrop and a collection of fiery Lao dishes by your side (p366)

**Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam)** – graze through the markets, the *banh mi* (Vietnamese-style sandwiches) shops and the noodle hole-in-the-walls to savour Vietnam's zesty flavours (p901)

**Chiang Rai (Thailand)** – tailor your taste buds to northern Thai fare and home-grown coffee (p764)



Singapore's cuisine (p687) is varied, cheap and delicious

# Getting Started

It's easier than you think to amass enough know-how to tackle Southeast Asia. For an overview of regional practicalities, see the Southeast Asia Directory (p932) and then dive into the nitty-gritty details in each destination chapter. Give the Health chapter (p955) a scan for tips on vaccines, and pick up a few stock phrases in the Language chapter (p966).

## WHEN TO GO

Southeast Asia is always hot and humid but there are degrees in temperature and wetness. The mainland countries (Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam) tend to share similar weather patterns, enjoying a 'cool' season from roughly December to February (peak months for tourism) and a 'hot' season from March to May. The monsoons last from June to October, bringing sudden torrential downpours for an hour or two every day, which are followed just as suddenly by sunshine. The last or penultimate month in the monsoon season is usually the rainiest with all-day downpours. In Cambodia and Laos, travel in remote areas can be disrupted by flooded roads during the monsoon season, and ferries to some Thai islands go on abbreviated or suspended schedules during rough seas and low tourist demand.

Along the Malay peninsula, two monsoons strike: from November to February, the east coast gets all the action; from May to October, the west coast gets soaked. The duration of monsoon season varies from year to year.

Indonesia also gets two monsoons; the best time to visit is from May to September. The rains start in September in Sumatra and head east, arriving in East Timor around November or December. April to June is the best time to visit East Timor.

The wet and dry seasons vary within the Philippines but, by and large, January and February are dry months. Typhoons can hit both the Philippines and Vietnam between June and November.

There are, of course, regional variations within each country; these are detailed in the respective country chapters' Directory sections.

Large festivals are also factors in plotting an arrival date. Businesses in certain countries tend to close during Muslim Ramadan and Chinese New Year, and everyone goes water-gun crazy during the Thai, Lao and Cambodian New Year in April. Check the Festivals & Events sections in specific country chapters for forthcoming events that might attract or impede a visit.

## COSTS & MONEY

Western currencies enjoy a favourable exchange rate with many of the Southeast Asian currencies. If you travel and eat like a local, your daily budget could be a positively emaciated US\$15 to US\$35 a day.

This will vary on the country and the popularity of the destination. As a rule, beaches and big cities are expensive, while small towns tend to be cheaper. Food, especially street-stall meals, is rarely over US\$1 a dish.

Travel within mainland Southeast Asia is generally affordable, but Indonesia tends to have wildly fluctuating petrol prices and, though cheaper than in year's past, air flights are more expensive than buses or ferries and sometimes a necessity when jumping between Indonesian islands. Local transport won't stretch the budget but hiring taxis or chartered transport in most areas will require haggling and invariably the newly arrived tourist will pay more than a street-smart local.

See p936 for more climate information.

## HOW MUCH?

Bottle of beer US\$1-3

Bus ticket US\$4-15

Food-stall meal  
US\$0.50-3

Guest-house bed US\$4-15

Internet access per hour  
US\$1-6

**COMMON MONEY PIT**

When you can't speak the language you have to rely on a middleman (or woman), usually a travel or booking agent, to make travel arrangements for you. That middle path comes at a cost. The trustworthy ones have obvious and nominal fees that pay for their efforts filling out forms and stamping various scraps of paper. But others will turn a cheap bus ride into a luxury-priced trip (and pocket the difference). When making travel arrangements, shop around to find the lowest commission rate and ultimately the best price.

What might be more bothersome than the price of goods is the 'walking ATM' syndrome where you feel like everyone wants a withdrawal. It isn't personal, but just simple economics. Remember that compared to the average worker in Southeast Asia, your pathetic bank account is the equivalent of a robber baron's. Many of the locals have never left their home towns, much less travelled to a foreign country.

For more information on money matters, see p941 or Money in individual country Directories.

**LIFE ON THE ROAD**

The shoestringer's life is an adventure in asceticism. By being cheap you see more of the local culture, learn how to live with the bare essentials and evolve into a grateful person, appreciative of the privileges and conveniences your nationality and economic class affords you.

The primary area of abstinence is in lodging, which is almost comical in its deprivation. Privacy, you'll soon discover, is a luxury. The walls are paper thin (letting in all of Southeast Asia's amplified noise), the mattresses are rock-hard and the bathroom is shared.

Your day might begin at a low-slung table parked roadside, where you order a cup of coffee from a woman who spends all day filtering coffee grounds and watching traffic. She thinks that you're hilarious with your knees poking above the table and your awkward attempts at language. The coffee is spiked with sweetened condensed milk and soon you're buzzing with caffeine and sugar. The empty seat beside you is filled by a curious local who wants to practise his English. He puts you through an informal interrogation: Where do you come from? How old are you? Are you married? With this out of the way, this stranger and you are now the dearest of friends according to local convention, and you might pose for a picture with him before parting ways, or join him for a tour of the town.

The next day you move to the next town because you've got a lot to see. Arriving at the destination station, the bus is flanked by touts all thirsty for your business. You haggle the price, which is almost always inflated due to an informal 'you're new in town' tax. The first guest house you visit has a shady yard with chickens scratching around in the dirt but the room is dank and noisy, so you thank the desk clerk and set off down the road. You use your budget senses to sniff out the best score in town, and in a few hours you're camped out in the shade with a steamy bowl of noodles and a sweaty bottle of beer. And you'll likely repeat the delightful process all over again.

**CONDUCT**

In general most Southeast Asians are glad to meet you, especially in small towns where foreigners are a rarity. Through our years of travel, we've met dozens of locals whose hobby is meeting and temporarily adopting travellers. In return all you have to do is charm the flip-flops off the locals, and that's

**WHOOPS!**

*Greg Bloom*

Public transport can be a contact sport in the Philippines. In Boracay I fell off a tricycle when the driver took a sudden swerve. Luckily only my pride was wounded. In Puerto Princesa I went flying out the back of the jeepney when the driver took off as I was disembarking, resulting in a badly scratched back and a broken laptop.

relatively easy with a few pointers. For more guidance on how to avoid being a sore-thumb tourist, see p4 and the Culture sections in specific country chapters throughout this guidebook.

Here are some other helpful tips:

- Take a gift when visiting someone's home.
- Share your snacks or cigarettes with your neighbour on long bus rides.
- Tip here and there as daily wages are pitifully small.
- Smile while bargaining; your beauty will distract them from wanting to make a profit.
- Keep a thick skin and a sense of humour.

## Dress

Except in the major urban cities, like Bangkok and Singapore, most locals dress modestly, especially in Muslim countries. To blend in a little better, cover to the shoulders and to the knees. And if you're hot, do as the locals do and walk in the shade instead of bearing your belly. Women who dare to wear more will help promote a healthier image of all Western women abroad.

## Language

Try to learn a few stock phrases, like 'thank you', 'hello' and 'delicious' in every country you visit. Remember to smile – it expresses genuine appreciation and kindness when you lack sophisticated vocabulary.

### **SOUTH EAST ASIA ON THE CHEAP (IN FLARED PANTS)** *Brian Thacker*

I recently travelled through Southeast Asia using the original 1975 Lonely Planet guidebook, to see how it holds up 35 years later. I stayed in the same hotels, ate at the same restaurants and followed the authors' advice on what to see and do. I was bit worried that hotels would now be highway overpasses or restaurants would now be KFCs, but I was happy to see that many places were still around (even if they haven't been in a Lonely Planet guide for years!).

I followed Tony and Maureen's original route from East Timor (which, back then, was Portuguese Timor) and finished up in the Palace Hotel in Singapore (now the Hotel Madras Eminence), in the same room that Tony and Maureen stayed in for a couple of months putting the entire guidebook together. It was wonderful to see that some things never change at all. In Ubud, Bali, the book recommended Canderi's restaurant where, 30 years ago 'the whole travelling population gathered to see Canderi perform miracles in her tiny kitchen'. Canderi is still cooking in that tiny kitchen today, but the whole travelling population isn't there anymore. Back then, Canderi was one of only two restaurants in a tiny village with no electricity. Today, there are hundreds of restaurants in Ubud, but Canderi still has the same menu and still has some of her old clientele, including her 108-year-old mother.

Other things have changed a lot. Today, Phuket has over 30,000 hotel beds, but just over 30 years ago there was nowhere to stay on the beach except for 'one beach restaurant that offers you a patch on the floor for three baht a night'.

There are also some once popular hidden gems from which the backpacker crowds have long since disappeared. Samosir Island in Sumatra, which was described as 'a most delightful island', was home to 'probably the nicest cheap accommodation in Asia' and 'the best fruit salad in South East Asia'. They are both still true, but there is hardly a backpacker in sight. The Tye Ann Hotel in Georgetown doesn't serve the 'best porridge' anymore though. That's because it's now Peter Siew & Tan Advocates & Solicitors.

*Brian Thacker is the author of six travel books including Rule No 5: No Sex on the Bus and Sleeping Around. You can read all about Brian Thacker's adventures travelling with the original Lonely Planet guidebook in Tell Them To Get Lost, due out in late 2010.*



## Meals

Although meals in Southeast Asia appear informal, there are many unspoken rules that communicate appreciation and respect, which will vary with the situation. Try to figure out the country's table-side quirks beforehand or just ask as politely as possible if you're confused. In some situations you'll be the honoured guest and everyone will wait until you've been served before they begin to eat. In other cases you should show deference to the host or to the oldest person at the table. If eating with a Southeast Asian friend, it is always a nice gesture to pay for the meal. But if you're invited out with a large group, it is usually safe to let the host foot the bill.

## Taboos

Southeast Asia is seriously foot-phobic. Feet for the most part should stay on the ground, not on chairs, tables or bags. Showing someone the bottom of your foot expresses the same insult as flipping them your middle finger. Remove your shoes when entering a home. Don't point your feet towards sacred images or people, and follow the locals' lead in sitting in a temple or mosque.

### SOUTHEAST ASIA PLANNING CHECKLIST

#### What to Take

Take as little as possible because you're going to have to carry it everywhere, and try to get your pack small enough so that it will fit into the aircraft's overhead locker. The reward: the less junk in your trunk, the less of a target you are for touts and con artists.

**Cash and credit cards** Some small US dollar bills will be useful in places where ATMs are limited. Make sure the bills are crisp and clean as some money changers can be fickle. Take both a Visa and a MasterCard credit card in case merchants only accept one brand.

**Clothes** Bright lightweight, light-coloured, breathable clothes – leave the denim at home. Pack silk long johns and a fleece for cool climates, and remember rain gear. Line your pack with a plastic bag to keep the contents dry.

**Earplugs** These are a great sleep aid through your neighbours' drunken fight or the rooster's predawn alert.

**Medicine** Pack a first-aid kit and any speciality medicines from home. Most large cities have pharmacies and clinics with English-speaking staff. See p956 for advice on stocking a first-aid kit.

**Odds and ends** A sewing kit, padlock, Swiss army knife, money belt, safety pins, toilet paper, universal sink plug, small torch (flashlight) and travel adaptor can all come in handy.

**Photocopies of important documents** Definitely photocopy your passport, tickets, travellers-cheque serial numbers, and credit and ATM cards, and pack the copies separately from the originals. Leave a copy at home with a friend, just in case.

**Repellent** A heavy-duty spray helps fend off the mozzies.

**Speciality gear** If you plan to do serious (not occasional) camping, trekking or climbing, you should bring the equipment from home.

**Toiletries** Tampons and heavy-duty deodorant aren't so easy to come by, so stock up before leaving home. Also pack some biodegradable soap – it washes easily in cold water and is gentle on the environment.

**USB drive** A USB drive allows you to store photos and files. Also save a portable web browser on the drive so that you can protect your password at public machines.

#### What to Get There

In the large cities, you can buy every imaginable Western product, as well as medicines, and the following useful products are available at local markets:

**Mosquito coils** These coils are lit and placed at your feet to discourage a mozzie feast.

**Sarong** Can be used as a towel, mosquito net, sheet, head gear and general backpacker fashion.

**Talcum powder** Does wonders for heat rash and keeps you and your clothes smelling pretty, even when you've been sweating for months.

**Tiger balm** This all-purpose salve, available at pharmacies, relieves headaches, soothes mosquito bites and acts as a bug repellent.



# TOP 10



## THINGS WE LOVE ABOUT SOUTHEAST ASIA

- 1 The small shrines that decorate lowly noodle shops, crooks of trees and car dashboards.
- 2 The constant street activity of commerce, transport and average living.
- 3 The way the local guides can scramble up a steep mountain in flip-flops while smoking a cigarette.
- 4 The 'shirtless' masters, usually older Chinese men, who guard the cash registers at sweaty open-air restaurants.
- 5 The way the vegetable vendors don plastic bags as hats during a sudden downpour.
- 6 Taxi drivers who will turn your map upside down to try to figure out where you want to go.
- 7 The ladies who carry around small-scale kitchens on either end of a bamboo pole.
- 8 Shaking hands with a 101 schoolchildren you happened to meet on a jungle trail.
- 9 Picnicking families who wave you over like an honoured guest.
- 10 Your trip's scrapbook of photos filled with smiling strangers who befriended you for a day.

### Taking Photographs

Southeast Asians are not shy in front of the camera – most outings with friends and family involve extensive photo shoots in front of pretty scenery or in group huddles. In fact they'll probably snap pictures of you before you're even focused. But it is always polite to ask permission before taking someone's picture, especially if you haven't yet introduced yourself. Also be aware that some minority tribes have spiritual beliefs that mean they are suspicious of photography.

# Itineraries

## BEACH BOUND, BABY!

From **Bangkok** (p710), make a beeline for the beach-bumming islands in the Gulf of Thailand: boisterous **Ko Samui** (p791), hippy **Ko Pha-Ngan** (p795) or dive-crazy **Ko Tao** (p799). Then follow the herd across to the Andaman coast to **Khao Lak** (p808), the base for live-aboard trips to world-class dive sites, polished **Phuket**, adrenaline-charged **Krabi** (p815), home to rock-climbing and cave exploring, (p810), beautiful **Ko Phi Phi** (p817), and laid-back **Ko Lanta** (p818). Rest awhile on the barely developed beaches of **Ko Tarutao National Marine Park** (p820).

Jump the Thailand–Malaysia border from **Satun** (p820) to the family-friendly beaches of **Pulau Langkawi** (p469). Then putter down to **Georgetown** (p461), for an urban antidote before bussing over to **Kota Bharu** (p482), the jumping-off point for the fabulous jungle islands of **Pulau Perhentian** (p481). Chase the coastline

### HOW LONG?

1-2 months

### WHEN TO GO?

Thailand, Malaysia &  
Philippines: Nov–May

Indonesia: Apr–Jul

### BUDGET?

US\$20–40 per day



south to **Mersing** (p473), the mainland port for a dose of Malay village life on **Pulau Tioman** (p473), before returning to civilisation in **Kuala Lumpur** (p438).

From Kuala Lumpur you can fly to the 'other' Malaysia, on the island of Borneo, to sample the dive sites of the **Semporna Archipelago** (p505), accessible via **Semporna** (p505).

Still haven't found the perfect beach? From KL fly across the Strait of Melaka with a layover in **Medan** (p276) and then onward to Indonesia's **Banda Aceh** (p280) to **Pulau Weh** (p281), with its underwater canyons and coral. Pulau Weh is what Thai beaches used to be like 20 years ago.

Otherwise catapult yourself from **Singapore** (p669) to **Manila** (p611) in the Philippines with access to the island of **Palawan** (p657), a self-contained paradise hardly marred by modernity.

Wherever you end up be sure to visit the sun-worshipping temple of **Bali** (p222), and learn how to surf trouble free. Check out the uninterrupted R&R on **Lombok** (p286), then ferry to the celebrated **Gili Islands** (p292) for translucent water and technicolour reefs, or to **Sumbawa** (p300) for surf-able swells and a dramatic deserted coastline.



**Mix socialising with sunbathing on the busy beaches of Thailand. Get dive certified on Ko Tao so you can go down on Thailand, Malaysian Borneo, Indonesia and Philippines. Tap into the village vibe in Malaysia. And don't forget to meet the paradise pin-up of Bali, still a bargain beach.**

## SPICE ISLANDS & VOLCANOES: ANGLING THROUGH THE ARCHIPELAGOS

Both Singapore (p669) and Kuala Lumpur (p438) have relatively cheap airfares for forays into the spice islands that adorn the equator.

It is a quick flight to Sumatra, landing in the not-so-spectacular town of **Medan** (p276) – a necessary transfer point for the bumpy bus ride to the orangutan outpost in **Bukit Lawang** (p279) and volcano hiking in **Berastagi** (p274).

Buzz by plane from Medan to Java, touching down in the mayhem of **Jakarta** (p179). Follow the route through highland tea plantations to **Yogyakarta** (p203), Java's centre of batik, culture and busy markets. Day trip to the giant stupa of **Borobudur** (p210), or huff-and-puff your way to the top of nature's version of a stupa at **Gunung Bromo** (p220), an active volcano.

Leapfrog to **Denpasar** (p234), in blessed Bali, where you can nuzzle with sandy beaches (see *Beach Bound, Baby!* p30) or dive into Balinese culture in **Ubud** (p237). Skip across the islands for a dragon-spotting tour on **Komodo** (p302). Then catch a flight from the port town of **Labuanbajo** (p304) via Denpasar to **Sulawesi** (p328), a scorpion-shaped island filled with unique

### HOW LONG?

1-2 months

### WHEN TO GO?

Feb-Jun

### BUDGET?

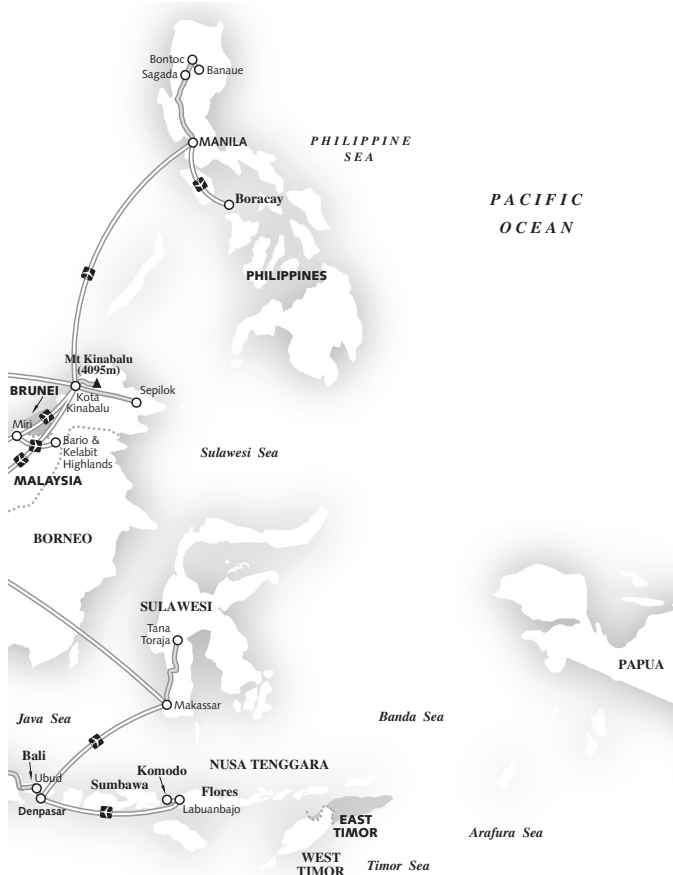
US\$25-30 per day



tribal people. From Sulawesi's entry point of **Makassar** (p328) bus to **Tana Toraja** (p331), where funeral rituals take on a Carnival-like spectacle.

By now your Indonesian visa might soon expire so hop back to the Malay peninsula to catch a flight to **Kota Kinabalu** (p492) to slip and slither through Borneo's jungles. Buses deliver pilgrims to Kinabalu National Park, where towering **Mt Kinabalu** (p497) tickles the clouds. Pay a visit to **Sepilok** (p502), home to a sanctuary where orang-utans get back are reunited with to nature. Swing on over to **Kuching** (p508), a gateway to trekking in **Bako National Park** (p514), for wildlife trekking, or **Batang Rejang** (p516), a mighty riverine highway dotted by the traditional longhouses of indigenous people. Or fly to **Miri** (p521), which has air access to the remote **Bario** and **the Kelabit Highlands** (p523).

If you've had enough of nature, fly from Kota Kinabalu to manic **Manila** (p611) in the Philippines. Then bus north to the lush and toothy Cordillera region, with stops in laid-back **Sagada** (p627) and the hand-hewn rice terraces around **Banaue** (p628) and **Bontoc** (p628). Reward your aching travelling muscles with some island R&R by returning to Manila and hopping to **Boracay** (p637).



Bring your hiking boots because you'll be climbing mountains in these jungle-clad islands, formed by temperamental volcanoes and inhabited by ethnic minorities. You'll need more cash and time for this trip as bus travel can be slow and flights a little pricey.

**HOW LONG?**

1-2 months

**WHEN TO GO?**

Just after the wet season  
(Nov-Jan) when the  
landscape is green

**BUDGET?**

US\$20-35 per day

**KINGDOMS & COLONIES: THE MAINLAND ROUTE**

Tour trendy **Bangkok** (p710) and the old Thai capital of **Ayuthaya** (p738), and then break off of the tourist trail with a jungle escape to **Khao Yai National Park** (p773). Connect through **Nakhon Ratchasima** (p769) to visit the frontier Khmer temple at **Phimai** (p772) before making the pilgrimage to the centrepiece of Angkor Wat. From Nakhon Ratchasima catch a bus to the Thai-Cambodian border at **Aranya Prathet-Poipet** (p731) for the long pilgrimage to glorious **Angkor** (p95).

Bus to the shabby-genteel capital of **Phnom Penh** (p73) to learn about Cambodia's dramatic history. Sail the mighty Mekong River through the **Kaam Samnor-Vinh Xuong border** (p85) – a scenic gateway to Vietnam's high-energy **Ho Chi Minh City** (Saigon; p901). Push north along the stunning coastline with a detour to the hill station of **Dalat** (p894), then on to the old GI beach of **Nha Trang** (p886) and the antique streets of sartorial **Hoi An** (p881). Wander the leafy boulevards and visit a preserved Uncle Ho in **Hanoi** (p842). Shuffle into the mountain hill-tribe town of **Sapa** (p868) or float through the mountain-studded **Halong Bay** (p861).

Be air-lifted out of Vietnam's intensity to laid-back Laos, and head for **Luang Prabang** (p383), a tranquil city of temples. Then bus to the ecotrekking enclave of **Luang Nam Tha** (p399) or **Muang Sing** (p401), both of which have access into the Nam Ha National Protected Area, which is a pristine jungle and home to ethnic minorities.

From Luang Nam Tha, ride the Mekong River to the Laos-Thailand border crossing at **Huay Xai-Chiang Khong** (p404). Hightail it to **Chiang Mai** (p749), where you can learn to cook, speak and massage like a Thai. Escape into the mountains with the hippies in **Pai** (p759) or trek into the highlands in **Mae Hong Son** (p762). Then drop down to old ruins in **Sukhothai** (p744) before returning to Bangkok from where you can fly into the cloistered world of Myanmar (Burma), starting in **Yangon** (Rangoon; p544) and stopping along the way at the ruins of **Bagan** (Pagan; p581), the island monasteries of **Inle Lake** (p565), and the ancient capital of **Mandalay** (p570).

Otherwise, skip Burma and slide down the Malay peninsula stopping at the beaches, or fly to multi-ethnic **Kuala Lumpur** (p438). Take a break from the heat in the Cameron Highland's **Tanah Rata** (p456), and then bus to **Jerantut** (p485), where long-tail boats swim into the primordial rainforests of **Taman Negara** (p487). And wrap it all up with a street-side bowl of noodles and a little mall mayhem in sensational **Singapore** (p669).



This is the classic, guidebook-toting tour through Southeast Asia but we've given enough detours that you'll feel like you're escaping the 'Lonely Planet' bus...



## FORGOTTEN CORNERS

If you've done all the highlights and the lowlights and are ready for the lesser-known lights then forge a path from **Bangkok** (p710) to the riverside charmer of **Nong Khai** (p779). You could cross the Mekong River here to **Vientiane** (p366) in Laos but for the less-common route follow the river road east toward **Nakhon Phanom** (p778), a little slice of Indochina in Siam. Cross into Laos at **Tha Khaek** (p407) and snake through the jumbled karst peaks on Route 8 to **Lak Sao** (p406).

Exploring odd corners means you'll rack up some long bus rides, one of them being the journey south to **Pakse** (p411). Detour to the cool waterfalls of **Bolaven Plateau** (p415) before splashing down in **Si Phan Don** (Four Thousand Islands; p417), where the Mekong becomes a tropical playground instead of a muddy workhorse. You're back on a tourist trail now and the sensible route leads to Cambodia via **Stung Treng** (p128). But take a detour to remote **Ratanakiri Province** (p128), which shelters the **Virachey National Park** (p130), a burgeoning ecotrekking destination. Slice through the interior of Cambodia to the backpacker beach of **Sihanoukville** (p116) or to the **Koh Kong Conservation Corridor** (p113), where a visit to an ethnic-minority village helps develop a sustainable industry for the fragile rainforest. And here you are at Thailand's door where you can cruise, depending on traffic, into Bangkok.

### HOW LONG?

2 weeks

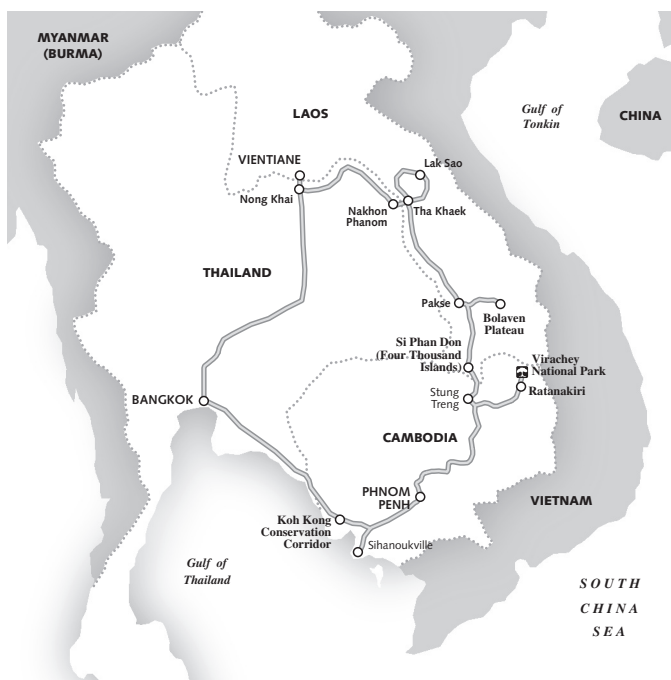
### WHEN TO GO?

Nov-Mar

### BUDGET?

US\$15-25 per day

Village life is in full force in these rural corners of Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. You can play hide and seek with the Mekong River, bunk down in homestays, go elephant spotting and spend your money at a grass-roots level.



SOUTH  
CHINA  
SEA

# Snapshots

## CURRENT EVENTS

During the boom times of last decade, Southeast Asia rode a steady wave of prosperity. Bangkok climbed a few notches closer to First World status. Laos woke up from its backwater slumber to find that China needed it for natural resources and for access to its neighbours, as modern highways ploughed through former opium pack-mule trails. Money was found aplenty in Vietnam's full-throttle economy and the country has today embraced such a youthful optimism that it is easy to forget about the old communist guard. Even Cambodia, which is consistently ranked high on Transparency International's corruption index, sampled the economic buffet with an ever-strengthening tourist economy.

Politically, the fireworks were in Thailand, where the 2006 coup opened a deep rift within the country's power structure, culminating in the 2008 closure of Bangkok's two airports and another 'silent' coup that removed the ruling and popularly elected party (again). The warring political factions have bruised Thailand's economy, tourist reputation and prospects for a peaceful future. And with the king in failing health, there will likely be more power-grabbing to come.

With Thailand's uncertain political future, Malaysia has started scooping up tourists thanks to the success of Air Asia, a no-frills airline based in the capital, Kuala Lumpur. Internally the multicultural country has been questioning the merits of the *bumiputra* system, in which the government favours ethnic Malays for government contracts and scholarships. Whether they reach an honest answer remains to be seen. Singapore is hustling to boost its population and build itself up bigger and better, though the global recession has taken its toll.

Indonesia was tacking towards the middle path with its smooth 2009 elections, however in July of that year, suicide bombings at the JW Marriott and Ritz-Carlton hotels in Jakarta killed nine people and wounded 53, serving as a reminder that the nation is still plagued by terrorist activity. Following the attack, Indonesian forces started a manhunt for Noordin Mohamed Top, believed to be the organiser of the most recent bombings as well as similar attacks from 2003 to 2005 in Jakarta and Bali. Top allegedly led a radical splinter group of Jemaah Islamiyah and was believed to be the head of Al-Qaeda in Southeast Asia. After an unsuccessful house raid a month prior, authorities caught up with Top who was hiding out in Solo (Java) in September 2009. The nine-hour siege resulted in the shooting death of Top, who was found with firearms and 200kg of explosives.

The Philippines has been largely subdued through the scandal-ridden tenure of President Gloria-Macapagal Arroyo, though her administration is still dogged by the insurgency in the far southern island of Mindanao. Meanwhile, East Timor's transition to democracy remains transitional.

Amidst all this success is the ongoing sad tale of Myanmar, whose ruling military junta has been widely sanctioned by the international community for human rights abuses. In 2007, evidence of the military's crackdown on the so-called Saffron Revolution escaped to the world beyond, followed closely by Cyclone Nargis, which roared ashore in 2008 and ripped away lives and livelihoods. The government insisted upon tending to its own humanitarian crisis: outside aid groups were held up by a lack of visas and the Myanmar military's refusal to allow foreign planes to deliver aid while, according to the UN, one million people waited for help. This was followed shortly thereafter by another

*The Irrawaddy* ([www.irrawaddy.org](http://www.irrawaddy.org)), a print and online magazine, covers news and analysis of Myanmar and South-east Asia.

episode condemned by human rights groups, including Amnesty International: the alleged violation of Aung San Suu Kyi's terms of house arrest, a sentence awarded to her after she won the country's only legitimate elections.

In Cambodia, the UN-backed trials of the surviving Khmer Rouge members have been excruciatingly slow. It has taken three years to begin prosecution of one defendant and the recently resigned co-prosecutor told the press that the tribunal remains underfunded and hampered by political interference.

## HISTORY

### Early Kingdoms

The mainland Southeast Asia countries owe much of their early historical happenings to the more dominant kingdoms of China and India. As early as 150 BC, China and India interacted with the scattered Southeast Asian communities for trade and tribute. Vietnam, within short reach of China, was a subject, student and reluctant offspring of its more powerful neighbour for over 1000 years. India, on the other hand, conquered by spiritual means, spreading Hinduism, Buddhism and later Islam across the region, and influencing art and architecture.

Several highly organised states emerged in the region as a result of contact with India. From the 7th to the 9th centuries AD, the Srivijaya empire controlled all shipping through the Java Sea from its capital at Palembang in southeast Sumatra. The Srivijaya capital was also a religious centre for Mahayana Buddhism (Greater Vehicle Buddhism; see p46) and attracted scholars as well as merchants.

But the region's most famous fallen empire emerged in the interior of present-day Cambodia. The Khmer empire ruled the land for four centuries, consuming territory and labour to build unparalleled and enduring Hindu-Buddhist monuments to its god-kings. Eventually the Khmer empire included most of what is now Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. Its economy was based on agriculture, and a sophisticated irrigation system cultivated vast tracts of land around Tonlé Sap (Great Lake). Attacks from emerging city-states on the Thai frontier contributed to the decline of the empire and the abandonment of the Angkor capital.

### The Classical Period, Arrival of Europeans & Imperialism

As the larger powers withered, Southeast Asia entered an age of cultural definition and international influence. Regional kingdoms created distinctive works of art and literature, and joined the international sphere as important ports. The Thais expanded into the dying Khmer empire and exerted control over parts of Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar. Starting around 1331, the Hindu kingdom of Majapahit united the Indonesian archipelago from Sumatra to New Guinea and dominated the trade routes between India and China. The kingdom's reign continued until the advent of Islamic kingdoms and the emergence of the port town of Melaka on the Malay peninsula in 1402. Melaka's prosperity soon attracted European interest, and it fell first to the Portuguese in 1511, then the Dutch and finally the English.

Initially these European nations were only interested in controlling shipping in the region, usually brokering agreements and alliances with local authorities. Centred on Java and Sumatra, the Dutch monopolised European commerce with Asia for 200 years. The Spanish, French and later the English had civilisation and proselytising on their minds. Spain occupied the loosely related tribes of the Philippine archipelago. Britain steadily rolled through India, Myanmar and the Malay peninsula, while the Dutch grasped Indonesia to cement a presence in the region. And France, with a foothold in Vietnam, usurped Cambodia and Laos to form Indochina.

The Indonesian island of Java is home to a 'missing link', an early human ancestor approximately 1.8 million years old, that suggests the first humans might have migrated out of Asia instead of Africa.

Although its sphere of influence was diminished, Thailand was the only Southeast Asian nation to remain independent. One reason for this was that England and France agreed to leave Thailand as a 'buffer' between their two colonies. Credit is also frequently given to the Thai kings who Westernised the country and played competing European powers against each other.

### **Independence & the Modern Day**

The 20th century and WWII signalled an end to European domination in Southeast Asia. As European power receded, the Japanese expanded control throughout the region, invading Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia. After the war, the power vacuums in formerly colonised countries provided leverage for a region-wide independence movement. Vietnam and Indonesia clamoured most violently for freedom, resulting in long-term wars with their respective colonial powers. For the latter half of the 20th century, Vietnam fought almost uninterrupted conflicts against foreign powers. After the French were defeated by communist nationals, Vietnam faced another enemy, the USA, which hoped to contain the spread of communism within the region. Cambodia's civil war ended in one of the worst nightmares of modern times, with the ascension of the Khmer Rouge. The revolutionary army evacuated the cities, separated families into labour camps and closed the country off from the rest of the world. An estimated 1.7 million people were killed by the regime during its brief four-year term (1975–79).

Many of the newly liberated countries struggled to unite a land mass that shared only a colonial legacy. Dictatorships in Myanmar, Indonesia and the Philippines thwarted the populace's hopes for representative governments and civil liberties. Civilian rioters, minority insurgents and communist guerrillas further provoked the unstable governments, and the internal chaos was usually agitated by the major superpowers: China, the Soviet Union and the USA.

With the thawing of the Cold War, several raging national economies in the 1990s, and the onset of the new millennium, Southeast Asia enjoyed renewed stability and vitality. Today Singapore has become the shining star, while Thailand and Malaysia boast an affluent, educated middle class. Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia are now wide open to foreign trade, regional cooperation and tourism. Vietnam is racing through the milestones of development with almost unprecedented speed, boosted by a new generation of young people flush with disposable income and unscarred by the war with the USA. Development cash from China has turned Laos into its northern neighbour's backyard battery, by supplying hydroelectric power and natural resources to Chinese factories. On the mainland, only Myanmar remains cloistered and oppressed today.

Indonesia and the Philippines rode the first wave of postcolonial development, but have since stalled with the attendant industrialised problems of unemployment, corruption and urban pollution. The global recession has thus far had little effect on these countries, who were already struggling with their own downturns, meaning that their economies only have one direction left in which to go.

### **THE CULTURE**

The most remarkable and unifying aspect of the diverse Southeast Asian societies is the importance placed on acting in a group. Social harmony is ensured by the concept of 'face' – that is, avoiding embarrassment of yourself or others. This is translated into everyday life by not showing anger or frustration and by avoiding serious debates that could cause offence. When the bus breaks down, the passengers calmly file out into the sun and wait for

The classic introduction to regional history is Milton Osborne's *Southeast Asia: An Introductory History*.

### COMMON MYTHS BUSTED

Think you've already got this Southeast Asian nut cracked? Here's the real deal on some common misconceptions:

- Indonesia isn't a repressive Muslim state. The country prides itself on its ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity. Sharia is not enforced nationally but is in some localities, like the province of Aceh, which is a delightful and welcoming place for foreigners, including women.
- Singapore is far from a sterile 'Disneyland'. It is a fantastic fusion of the best of Asia (food, street activity, friendliness) and the West (working infrastructure, coherent traffic patterns, obedience to simple rules of civility).
- Malaysia isn't boring. It has fewer touts than Thailand and more local English speakers to chew the proverbial fat with.

the repairs without causing a scene – in this way an undercurrent of peace is brought to a chaotic situation.

See the Culture sections in specific country chapters in this book for notes on each country's culture and lifestyle.

### Lifestyle

The setting may vary – from the hulking megacities of Singapore, Bangkok and Jakarta to rural villages in Laos – but Southeast Asia moves through time with the underlying architecture of an agricultural village, no matter how big or small the town or how distant the rice fields. Families tend to stick together, pitching in to run the family noodle shop or helping Grandma do her market shopping. Because of the tropical temperature, most family life spreads out into the public space, replacing a sense of privacy with community. Babies get lots of group mothering, neighbours do lots of gossiping, and possessions are often shared or pooled, depending on the affluence of the community. In addition to blood, religion binds the society and the family with daily obligations of prayers in Muslim communities or spirit offerings in Buddhist countries.

In the villages, life revolves around the harvest, a calendar set by the rains, the sun and the moon. In these old-fashioned corners, the food markets and the mosque or temple are the 'happening' parts of town.

More and more, the trappings of a modern and decidedly Western world are moving in and replacing the open-air markets and providing the new middle class with new things to consume. In the cities, the young dare to be different to their parents by adopting the latest fashions, texting their friends and scooting around town till all hours of the night. These countries are becoming transient, with the young people leaving the villages for jobs elsewhere. Their children may grow up separated from the rhythms of an agrarian society, feeling more comfortable in a shopping mall than a rice field. Fully entrenched in a middle-class world, Singaporeans often enjoy holidays to rural villages, where they can reconnect with a romantic version of the past.

### Population

Each country in Southeast Asia has a dominant ruling class, typically the national ethnicity. It is believed that many of the mainland Southeast Asian peoples are descendants of Austronesian, Tai and Mon-Khmer peoples who migrated south from China. Countries with a high percentage of homogeneity include Vietnam, Cambodia, Brunei, Thailand and Singapore. More demographically diverse countries include Myanmar, the Philippines, Indonesia and East Timor, which doesn't have a majority ethnicity.

Thailand is getting fatter. In a 2008 study, it was revealed that one in six Thais is overweight.

Polish up your karaoke skills because Southeast Asians love to sing with a microphone.

Many of the Southeast Asian countries share varying percentages of minority groups in isolated pockets or cultural islands. Ethnic Chinese filtered into the region as merchants and labourers, establishing distinct neighbourhoods within their host communities. Depending on the diaspora, most small towns have a Chinese-run business district. In places such as Malaysia and Singapore, the Chinese influence has formed a distinct entity, frequently termed Straits Chinese that merges Chinese and Malay customs. While most countries derive cultural and commercial strength from Chinese immigrants, in times of economic hardship ethnic Chinese are frequently targets of abuse because of their prosperity; this is especially the case in Malaysia and Indonesia. Ethnic Indians from the southern provinces of Tamil Nadu have also settled along the Malay peninsula and remain a distinct group.

High up in the mountains that run through Myanmar, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, a diverse mix of minority groups, collectively referred to as hill tribes, maintain prehistoric traditions and wear elaborate tribal costumes. Believed to have migrated from the Himalaya or southern China, hill-tribe communities such as the Akha, Karen and Mon, thanks to the geography, have been relatively isolated from foreign influences. They were considered a nuisance by lowland governments until hill-tribe trekking became a widespread tourist attraction. Myanmar represents the largest concentration of hill tribes. In the outer areas of Indonesia, such as Kalimantan, Papua, Sulawesi and Sumba, indigenous people practise customs that have entered the global imagination through the pages of *National Geographic*.

## Food

Southeast Asia's tropical climate creates a year-round bounty. Rice and fish are the primary staples and are often revered in various harvest festivals and local legends. A penchant for chillies is another hallmark, with almost every cuisine claiming a variation on a chilli condiment, including *sambal* in Indonesia and Malaysia and *naam phrik* in Thailand.

Traces of Southeast Asia's cultural parents – India and China – can be detected in the individual nations' cuisines. Myanmar has many Indian-inspired curries as do Thailand and Malaysia. Roti, an Indian flat bread, often accompanies curry dishes in Malaysia. The Chinese donated noodle soups, which have assumed various aliases: *laksa* in Malaysia and Singapore, *pho* in Vietnam or *kúaytiaw* in Thailand. Noodle soups are the quintessential comfort food, eaten in the morning, after a night carousing, or at midday when pressed for time. Culinary imports also came from the French, who left behind recipes for crusty baguettes and thick coffees in former Indochina.

Vietnam has perfected the cuisine of its culinary professor. Where Chinese food can be bland and oily, Vietnamese dishes are light and refreshing. A quintessential Vietnamese dish is the spring roll stuffed with shrimp, mint, basil leaves and cucumber that are sold at roadside stands.

Thailand and Laos share many common dishes, often competing for the honour of spiciest cuisine. Green papaya salad is a mainstay of the two – the Thais like theirs with peanuts and dried shrimp; the Lao version uses fermented fish sauce and inland crab. In Laos and in neighbouring Thai provinces, the local people eat 'sticky rice' (a shorter grain than the standard fluffy white rice), which is eaten with the hands, usually rolled into balls and dipped into spicy sauces.

As dictated by the strictures of Islam, Muslim communities in Malaysia and Indonesia don't eat pork. Indonesians traditionally eat with their fingers – hence the rice is a little stickier than in mainland Southeast Asia. Perfecting the delicate shovelling motion is a true traveller accomplishment.

East Timor is a young nation in two ways: it gained independence in 2002 and 50% of its population is under 18 years old.

*Green Mangoes & Lemon Grass: Southeast Asia's Best Recipes from Bangkok to Bali*, by Wendy Hutton, Charmaine Solomon and Masano Kawana, presents an edible journey through the region.

Filipino cooking is a mixture of Malay, Spanish and Chinese influences blended with typical Filipino exuberance. *Adobo*, a Spanish-inspired stew with local modifications, has come to symbolise Filipino cuisine.

In a postcolonial age, Singapore displays its position as a cosmopolitan crossroads with its development of Pacific Rim fusion cuisine while at the same time it stays true to its ancestral heritages with an amazing amount of cheap and delicious hawker food.

## Art

Southeast Asia's most notable artistic endeavours are religious in nature, and distinctively depict the deities of Hinduism and Buddhism.

Both an artistic and architectural wonder, the temples of Angkor in Cambodia define much of the region's artistic output. Hindu temples include elaborate sculptured murals that pay homage to the Hindu gods Brahma (represented as a four-headed, four-armed figure) and Shiva (styled either in an embrace with his consort or as an ascetic), while also recording historical events and creation myths. Many of the temples were later altered to include images of Buddha after the kingdom converted to Buddhism.

Statues of Buddha reflect the individual countries' artistic interpretations of an art form governed by highly symbolic strictures. Across mainland Southeast Asia, the Buddha is depicted sitting, standing and reclining – all representations of moments in his life that act as visual parables or sermons. In Vietnam, representations of the Buddha are more reminiscent of Chinese religious art. *Naga* (mythical serpent beings) are found decorating many temple railings in the region; they represent the life-giving power of water and played a role in protecting the meditating Buddha.

In Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines, Islamic art and architecture intermingle with Hindu and animist traditions. Every town in Malaysia has a grand mosque with an Arabic minaret and Moorish tile work. Indonesia is also home to Borobudur, a Buddhist monument that complements the temples of Angkor in its splendour. Hand-loomed silk and wood carvings also define a country's or ethnic people's handicrafts tradition.

The literary epic of the Ramayana serves as cultural fodder for traditional art, dance and shadow puppetry throughout the region. In this fantastic tale, Prince Rama (an incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu) falls in love with beautiful Sita and wins her hand in marriage by completing the challenge of stringing a magic bow. Before the couple can live in peace, Rama is banished from his kingdom and his wife is kidnapped by Ravana. With the help of the monkey king, Hanuman, Sita is rescued, but a great battle ensues. Rama and his allies defeat Ravana and restore peace and goodness to the land.

'the temples of Angkor in Cambodia define much of the region's artistic output'

### ART HOUSE BUZZ

The 2009 Cannes Film Festival was awash with Southeast Asian film directors. Winner of the festival's best director award was Filipino Brillante Mendoza with *Kinatay* (Butchered; 2009), a violent tale about the kidnapping, rape and murder of a prostitute by police. Mendoza had made a previous appearance in Cannes with *Serbis* (Service; 2008), which was set in a XXX-movie theatre. Thailand's leading new-wave director, Pen-Ek Ratanaruang visited the festival with his latest movie *Nang Mai* (Nymph; 2009). Ho Tzu Nyen, a Singaporean visual artist, won an award for *Here* (2009), which was set in a mental hospital. *Karaoke* (2009), by Chris Chong, was the first Malaysian movie in more than 10 years to be invited to Cannes. The movie depicts the return of a city boy to his home village, set in a palm-oil plantation.

Other regional directors are often spotlighted at the annual film festivals in Bangkok, Singapore and Jakarta.



## ENVIRONMENT

### The Land

Diverse and fertile, this tropical landmass spans the easternmost range of the Himalaya, which reaches through northern Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam; the rich flood plains of the Mekong River; and the scattered archipelagos of Indonesia and the Philippines, formed by crashing tectonic plates and exploding volcanoes.

Much of the landmass of Southeast Asia is covered with a thick layer of limestone, the erosion of which yields distinctive towers known as karsts that jut out of the Andaman Sea to the southwest of Thailand, in Vietnam's Halong Bay or in parts of central Laos.

Indonesia and the Philippines, the world's largest island chains, together contain more than 20,000 islands, some of them uninhabited. The Philippines has 11 active volcanoes; Indonesia has at least 120. Although the fiery exhausts destroy homes and forests, the ashen remains of the earth's inner core creates fertile farmland – a constant cycle of destruction and rebirth.

More regulative than the seasonal temperature is the seasonal deposit of rain. When the rains come, the rivers transform from sluggish mud pits to watery bulldozers that sweep towards the sea. In the wet season, the dry deciduous forests of central mainland Southeast Asia spring to life. Also classified as monsoon forests, they occur in regions with a dry season of at least three months, and most trees shed their leaves in an attempt to conserve water.

The tropical rainforests of the Malay peninsula, Sumatra and Borneo get two monsoon seasons, and like sponges they soak up the moisture to feed their dense canopies. Rainforests occur in areas where rain falls more than nine months a year.

Living as a parasite in the thick jungles, the leafless plant rafflesia sprouts what looks like a cabbage head, which opens some nine months later to reveal one of the world's largest flowers – and an unrivalled putrid scent. Other plant species include a huge variety of bamboo and orchids. One of the region's most famous exports, teak, grows in the monsoon forests of Myanmar.

Coastal areas of Southeast Asia are famous around the world for their blonde sandy beaches and protective barriers of coral reefs. Part of the region's coastline is protected by the Gulf of Thailand, a shallow body water taming the greater ocean. But the real power of the sea can be felt in Indonesia, where the Indian Ocean hammers at the landmass, creating barrel waves and destructive walls of water. The land's primary defence against ocean invasions is the mangrove forest or dune forest, which both grow along the high-tide line, and consist of palms, hibiscus, casuarinas and other tree varieties that can withstand high winds and waves.

### Wildlife

Tigers, elephants, monkeys, and Sumatran and Javan rhinoceroses once reigned over the region's forests. Today these animals are facing extinction due to habitat loss and poaching. Of the 'celebrity' species, monkeys and, to a lesser extent, elephants are the forest dwellers visitors are most likely to meet, although most encounters are in domesticated settings. Found in Sumatra and Kalimantan, the orang-utan is the only great ape species found outside of Africa.

There are numerous bird species in Southeast Asia: Indonesia's Papua alone has more than 600 species; Thailand has more than 1000, making up an estimated 10% of the world's total. Parts of Southeast Asia are flyover zones for migratory species, and their arrival often heralds the approach of the monsoons. The Borneo rainforests boast a stunning array of birdlife,

[www.ecologyasia.com](http://www.ecologyasia.com)  
profiles the region's flora  
and fauna.

Bornean Sun Bear  
Conservation Centre  
([www.sunbears.wildlife  
direct.org](http://www.sunbears.wildlife<br/>direct.org)) works to save  
the dwindling population  
of sun bears often killed  
for their gall bladder.

from the turkey-sized hornbill, to ground-dwelling pheasants. Many parts of the Indonesian jungle are so thick and remote that scientists have yet to explore and catalogue the resident flora and fauna.

The Mekong River is an expanding area of scientific study. Thousands of previously unidentified species of flora and fauna have been discovered in the last decade in the Mekong region, considered to boast a biodiversity that rivals the Amazon. The Irrawaddy dolphin is something of a tourist attraction; although it is actually an ocean species, it tends to inhabit brackish rivers.

The Mekong River flows through six countries and is home to the Mekong giant catfish, the world's largest freshwater fish.

Some species of tropical reptile have successfully adapted to the human environment. Geckos are frequently spotted catching bugs around fluorescent lights. The shy tookay is more frequently heard than seen: in rural areas this type of lizard croaks its name again and again. But perhaps the star of the Southeast Asian animal theatre is the komodo dragon, the world's largest lizard, which is found on the Indonesian island of Komodo and a few neighbouring islands. The monitor lizard, a smaller cousin, hangs out in the cool shade of the region's jungles.

## National Parks

In recent years there has been an increase in the amount of land set aside across Southeast Asia as national parks and wildlife sanctuaries, but these protected areas are often undermined by logging interests (often illicit) and inadequate funding for conservation enforcement.

Thailand leads the conservation path with an astonishing 13% of land and sea under protection. Indonesia and Malaysia also boast fairly extensive national park systems. Laos remains one of the most environmentally undisturbed countries in the region, though this is changing as natural resource extraction increases.

Southeast Asia's national parks play an ever-increasing role in the region's tourism industry. Some parks are relatively undisturbed with little infrastructure, but in parks such as those of Thailand's marine islands, development and profit often outstrip environmental protection.

## Environmental Issues

Environmental degradation is immediately tangible in Southeast Asia: smoke fills the air as the forests are cleared for more beach bungalows or small-scale farms; major cities are choked with smog and pollution; the waterways are clogged with plastic bags and soft-drink cans; and raw sewage is dumped into turquoise waters. Southeast Asia also faces huge challenges from its growing population and increased energy consumption. A recent study by the Asian Development Bank determined that Southeast Asia could suffer more serious economic losses than the global average if carbon emissions continue to rise.

## LAND

The final half of the 20th century saw massive deforestation in Southeast Asia through logging and slash-and-burn agriculture. Indonesia, which contains 10% of the world's remaining tropical forests, is estimated to be losing up to 2% of its forest cover per year. This is the highest deforestation rate in the world, a superlative that has earned Indonesia a listing in the *Guinness World Records* in 2008 and 2009. Forests in all of the Southeast Asian countries are disappearing at extreme rates and their destruction is the region's biggest contributor to carbon emissions – 80% of Indonesia's carbon emissions come from deforestation (mainly conversion into palm-oil plantations), according to an Asian Development Bank study.

### STORMY WEATHER

Tropical Storm Ketsana swept through the region as we were going to press, causing major damage to Manila and the Philippines before slamming into the central coast of Vietnam, causing widespread flooding in Hoi An and the Central Highlands. It then moved over northern Cambodia and southern Laos causing localised flooding. Always check local weather forecasts when travelling during typhoon season. Note that infrastructure may have been affected in the aforementioned countries and this may lengthen some journey times given in this book.

The few remaining natural areas are suffering high species loss, primarily due to poaching. Local people often augment subsistence farming with hunting of endangered animals for the lucrative wildlife trade. Thailand is one of the primary conduits through which live wildlife and harvested wildlife parts (which are often prized for perceived health and stamina benefits) travel to overseas markets in China, the USA and Europe. Favoured species include the sun bear, tigers and the pangolins (a type of anteater). The number of plant species lost is probably higher, but precise figures are unavailable because science has yet to catalogue all that the forests have to offer.

### WATER

Southeast Asia's coral reefs are regarded as some of the world's most diverse and include a 6-million-sq-km area known as the Coral Triangle, which stretches all the way from Malaysia to the Solomon Islands. The Coral Triangle contains 75% of the world's coral species, 45% of reef-fish species and 90% of the world's marine-turtle species. Reefs around the region provide livelihood for the local people, from small-scale fishing to tourism. But the environmental pressures, such as overfishing, dynamiting and cyanide fishing, sediment run-off from coastal development, as well as the threat of climate change, have put immense pressure on these fragile ecosystems. According to a 2002 study by the World Resources Institute, the 1997-98 El Niño event caused the damage or destruction of 18% of Southeast Asia's reefs.

In recent years, some of the governments of Southeast Asia have made efforts to preserve their reefs, by establishing marine parks and other protected zones; however, enforcement is somewhat spotty and the contributing factors to reef decline are complicated and often sanctioned for their economic benefits.

Mangrove forests along the coasts have also suffered. Countries such as the Philippines, Thailand, Myanmar and Cambodia have each been clearing mangrove forests for prawn farming and tourism development. Many scientists believe that the disastrous effects of the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami and 2008's Cyclone Nargis could have been reduced if the mangrove forests had been intact to absorb the tidal surges.

As the region continues to urbanise, the pressures on the environment will grow – indeed, the pace of building commercial enterprises often exceeds municipal infrastructure such as sewage treatment and garbage removal that would mitigate environmental degradation.

Along the Mekong River, hydroelectric dams are significantly altering the river's ecosystem, from sediment transport to fish migration, as well as water levels downstream. Recent dams in southwest China have already cut off an estimated 50% of the upper river's sediment input, and there are apparently plans to dam the entire length of the Mekong in Yunnan and in parts of Laos and Cambodia.

**'The Coral Triangle contains 75% of the world's coral species, 45% of reef-fish species and 90% of the world's marine-turtle species'**

## RELIGION

The dominant religions of Southeast Asia have absorbed many of the traditional animistic beliefs of spirits, ancestor worship, and fortune-telling through astrology. Southeast Asia's connection to the realm of magic and miracles commands more respect, even among intellectual circles, than the remnants of paganism in Western Christianity: Thais erect spirit houses in front of their homes, ethnic Chinese set out daily offerings to their ancestors, and Vietnamese consult fortune-tellers for life advice.

### Buddhism

The serene smile of the Buddhist statues that decorate the landscapes and temples reflects the nature of the religion in Southeast Asia. Religious devotion within the Buddhist countries is highly individualistic and omnipresent with many daily rituals rooted in the indigenous ancestor worship.

Buddhism began with the story of an Indian prince named Siddhartha Gautama in the 6th century BC, who left his life of privilege at the age of 29 on a quest to find the truth. After years of experimentation and ascetic practices, he meditated under a Bodhi Tree for 49 days, reaching final emancipation and breaking the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. He returned as Buddha, the 'Awakened One', to teach the 'middle way' between extremes. Passion, desire, love and hate are regarded as extremes in Asia, so Buddhism counsels that constant patience, detachment, and renouncing desire for worldly pleasures and expectations brings peace and liberation from suffering.

Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar practise Theravada Buddhism (Teaching of the Elders), which travelled to the region via Sri Lanka. Vietnam adopted Mahayana (Greater Vehicle) Buddhism, which is also found in Tibet, China and Japan. One of the major theological differences between the two types of Buddhism lies in the outcome of a devout life. In Theravada, followers strive to obtain nirvana (release from the cycle of existence), which is accomplished over the course of many reincarnations, the final one of which is as a member of the monastic order. In Mahayana, a layperson can become a bodhisattva (one who has almost reached nirvana but renounces it in order to help others attain it) within a single lifetime. The artistic expressions of temple architecture and sculpture create the greatest cultural differences between the Theravada Buddhist countries; similarly, religious art and temples in Vietnam favour Chinese influences over those of their Theravada neighbours.

### Islam

Islam in Southeast Asia bears much of the region's hallmark passivity, lacking the fervour that results from religious persecution. Trade played an important role in the introduction of the religion to the region, with Southeast Asians converting to Islam to join a brotherhood of spice traders and to escape the inflexible caste system of the previous Hindu empires. The mystical Sufi sect of Islam also played an important role in spreading Islamic belief through Malaysia, Indonesia, parts of the Philippines and southern Thailand.

Revealed by the Prophet Mohammed in the 7th century, and meaning 'Submission' in Arabic, Islam states that the duty of every Muslim is to submit to Allah (God). This profession of faith is the first of the five pillars of Islam; the other four are to pray five times a day, give alms to the poor, fast during Ramadan and make the pilgrimage to Mecca.

A type of Sharia (Islamic law) is in effect in the Indonesian province of Aceh, and in some areas of Java and Sulawesi. It is also in effect in Malaysia, but it is only enforced for Muslim Malays. Traditionally, Southeast Asian

Get an insight into the Buddhist cultures with the book *Buddhism for Beginners*, by Thubten Chodron.

*Living Faith: Inside the Muslim World of Southeast Asia*, by Steve Raymer, is a beautiful pictorial essay on Islam outside the Arab world.

Muslim women were never cloistered, but headscarves have proliferated in recent years. While the traditional Muslim cultures retain many animistic beliefs and practices, there are periodic attempts to purge Islam of its pagan past, especially in Indonesia.

Muslim independence movements affecting southern Thailand and the southern Philippines are considered to be more economic than jihadist; typically the movements are in the poorest parts of their respective countries, and are virtually ignored by the majority government.

## Christianity

Catholicism was introduced to Vietnam by the French, to the Philippines by the Spanish and to East Timor by the Portuguese. Parts of Indonesia are Christian, mainly Protestant, due to the efforts of Western missionary groups. In each of these converted groups there will be remnants of the original animistic beliefs and an almost personal emphasis on preferred aspects of the liturgy or the ideology. The local adaptations can often be so pronounced that Westerners of the same faith might still observe the practice as foreign.

## Hinduism

Hinduism ruled the spiritual lives of Southeast Asians more than 1500 years ago, and the great Hindu empires of Angkor and Srivijaya built grand monuments to their pantheon of gods. The primary representations of the multiple faces of the one omnipresent god are Brahma, the creator; Vishnu, the preserver; and Shiva, the destroyer or reproducer. All three gods are usually shown with four arms, but Brahma has the added advantage of four heads to represent his all-seeing presence. Although Buddhism and Islam have filtered across the continent, Hinduism has managed to survive on the island of Bali. Within the last 100 years, the influx of Indian labourers to Southeast Asia has bolstered the religion's followers. Buddhism still retains many aspects of Hinduism and still regards the Hindu deities with respect.

The finale to the Christmas season in the Philippines is the celebration of the Santo Niño de Cebu, celebrating Cebu's patron saint, a depiction of the infant Christ much like the Infant of Prague.

# The Authors



## CHINA WILLIAMS

### Coordinating Author & Thailand

China has been a Southeast Asia watcher for more than a decade and it just gets better with age. She first arrived as an English teacher in the provincial Thai town of Surin just as the Asian currencies started to crumble in 1997. Since then she's migrated back and forth from the US to find that Thailand is still an old pal with new toys. After years of long-distance commuting for various Lonely Planet titles, China is now mainly a full-time mum with a side job as a guidebook writer and her two-year-old son as her sidekick. She and her family (including hubby, Matt) live in Catonsville, Maryland, near a fantastic Asian supermarket.



## GREG BLOOM

### Philippines

Greg lived in Manila for almost five years before moving to Phnom Penh with his family in 2008. Travelling the Philippines in the service of Lonely Planet, Greg has fallen off a tricycle, flown out the back of a jeepney, and survived a bus crash on the back roads of Bicol. When not writing about his favourite travel destination, Greg might be found snouting around the former Soviet Union (he once called Kyiv home) or running around Asia's ultimate frisbee fields. His blogs about this and other research trips are at [www.mytripjournal.com/bloomblogs](http://www.mytripjournal.com/bloomblogs).



## CELESTE BRASH

### Malaysia

Celeste first visited Malaysia while studying at Chiang Mai University, Thailand, in 1993. She's grazed through the hawker capital of the world several times since, travelling on cross-Asia trips and researching for a handful of Lonely Planet titles. When not desensitising her taste buds with sambal, Celeste lives in chilli-challenged French Polynesia with her husband and two children, where her attempts at re-creating Penang street food have earned her the nickname 'Spice Girl'. She's contributed to over a dozen Lonely Planet guidebooks including *Travel with Children*.

### LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

Why is our travel information the best in the world? It's simple: our authors are passionate, dedicated travellers. They don't take freebies in exchange for positive coverage so you can be sure the advice you're given is impartial. They travel widely to all the popular spots, and off the beaten track. They don't research using just the internet or phone. They discover new places not included in any other guidebook. They personally visit thousands of hotels, restaurants, palaces, trails, galleries, temples and more. They speak with dozens of locals every day to make sure you get the kind of insider knowledge only a local could tell you. They take pride in getting all the details right, and in telling it how it is. Think you can do it? Find out how at [lonelyplanet.com](http://lonelyplanet.com).



## ANDREW BURKE

**Myanmar**

Andrew was first seduced by Myanmar in 1999 when, as a backpacker, he found it beguiling, inspiring and heartbreaking in equal measure. Several trips later and the emotions are still the same, so being able to travel around and write about one of his favourite travel destinations was impossible to resist. Andrew has spent more than 15 years travelling through, photographing, filming and writing about Asia, the Middle East and Africa, including authoring books for Lonely Planet on other personal favourites Iran and Laos. Over the last 10 years he has lived in Hong Kong, Phnom Penh and now Bangkok.



## JAYNE D'ARCY

**East Timor**

In 2003 Jayne signed a nine-week contract to work with East Timor's community radio stations. Over the next 18 months she learnt to live without electricity (and the goodies it powers) and concentrated on other things, like learning Tetun and developing a taste for warm VB beer. Returning after five years to research this chapter, Jayne was blown away by the changes. Many of her radio friends have moved on to bigger and brighter things; Dili now actually resembles a city; and the beer of choice is (cold) Tiger.



## SHAWN LOW

**Singapore**

After 23 hot, sticky and sweaty years in Singapore, Shawn made for the cooler but more temperamental climes of Melbourne in 2001. He found his way into Lonely Planet as a book editor in 2006 (and still constantly pinches himself to see if he's dreaming). Since then, he's done a stint as a commissioning editor and has constantly (sometimes successfully) flirted with Lonely Planet TV. Authoring has always been on his 'to do' list, and if being paid to return home to write the 'definitive' guide to Singapore sounds like a dream job, it probably is. Note: the bruises on his arms are from the constant pinching. OW!



## BRANDON PRESSER

**Malaysia & Brunei Darussalam**

His wanderlust always bigger than his wallet, Brandon has championed the shoestring lifestyle for almost a decade with myriad treks through Southeast Asia and an epic overland adventure from Morocco to Russia. Brandon holds a degree in art history from Harvard University, but these days he spends his time trotting the globe, pen in hand. He has authored over a dozen Lonely Planet guides including *Thailand*, *Thailand's Islands & Beaches* and *Malaysia, Singapore & Brunei*. When he's not writing his way around the world, Brandon enjoys scuba diving, crossword puzzles and TV reruns.





### NICK RAY

**Vietnam**

A Londoner of sorts, Nick comes from Watford, the sort of town that makes you want to travel. He has been floating around the Mekong region for a more than a decade now, first as a traveller, later leading people astray as a tour leader for adventure travel companies, and more recently as a location scout for film and TV. Living in Phnom Penh, the Mekong is his backyard of sorts; he has authored several editions of *Cambodia* for Lonely Planet, as well as co-authoring the *Vietnam* book and *Cycling Vietnam, Laos & Cambodia*. While he enjoys Angkor Beer and Larue Export, his tippie of choice is Beer Lao.



### DANIEL ROBINSON

**Cambodia**

Daniel researched the award-winning 1st edition of Lonely Planet's *Cambodia* guide back in 1989, when the ageing Soviet turboprops on the Phnom Penh–Siem Reap run stayed over the middle of the Tonlé Sap to avoid ground fire, and he was Angkor's sole foreign visitor for three whole days. These days his favourite spot for chilling is the (for now) pristine west coast of Koh Kong Island. Daniel is based in Los Angeles and Tel Aviv.



### RYAN VER BERKMOES

**Indonesia**

Ryan first visited Southeast Asia in 1989 as a reporter covering refugee camps on the Thai–Cambodian border. My how things have improved. On visits since he has explored every one of the region's countries, especially Indonesia and especially Bali. But as much as he likes Indonesia, he's yet to find a place with banana pancakes to equal the orgasmic ones from a certain cart on Phuket. Off-island, Ryan lives in Portland, Oregon, and writes about Bali and more at [www.ryanverberkmoes.com](http://www.ryanverberkmoes.com).



### RICHARD WATERS

**Laos**

A chance visit to Laos in 1999, as the country was still thawing to the West, began a close association that sees Richard returning regularly. His first travels were around Europe as a teenager, then Central America, and the US by campervan. These days he satisfies his itchy-feet cravings by writing for newspapers such as the *Sunday Times*, the *Independent* and the *Observer*, and magazines, *Elle*, *Tatler* and *CNN Traveller*. To read more of his work and articles about Laos visit [www.richardwaters.co.uk](http://www.richardwaters.co.uk). He lives with his family in Brighton.

---

## CONTRIBUTING AUTHOR

**Dr Trish Batchelor** is a general practitioner and travel-medicine specialist who works at the CIWEC Clinic in Kathmandu, Nepal, as well as being a medical adviser to the Travel Doctor New Zealand clinics. Trish teaches travel medicine through the University of Otago, New Zealand, and is interested in underwater and high-altitude medicine, and in the impact of tourism on host countries. She wrote the Health chapter.

© Lonely Planet. To make it easier for you to use, access to this chapter is not digitally restricted. In return, we think it's fair to ask you to use it for personal, non-commercial purposes only. In other words, please don't upload this chapter to a peer-to-peer site, mass email it to everyone you know, or resell it. See the terms and conditions on our site for a longer way of saying the above - 'Do the right thing with our content.'