

**THE
ASIA
BOOK**

**A JOURNEY THROUGH
EVERY COUNTRY IN THE
CONTINENT**

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FOREWORD

WHAT IS A CONTINENT? IT'S NOT EASY TO DEFINE: A PHYSICAL LANDMASS, COUNTRIES IN GEOGRAPHICAL PROXIMITY, A UNITING CULTURE – NONE OF THESE QUITE CAPTURES WHAT MAKES ASIA ASIA.

Asia means different things to different people. It's the tranquillity of a watery rice terrace reflecting the clouds; it's the eternal emptiness of the desert; it's the über-modernity of a neon-bathed city. It's all this, and infinitely more.

A continent is certainly more than just a list of countries. In creating a book about every country in Asia, we faced a challenge in deciding exactly what that meant. There's no definitive list to refer to, experts disagree, and to add to the confusion some countries are transcontinental, like Turkey, divided along the Bosphorus, and Russia, whose vast Siberia has its feet in frozen Asian soil.

You won't find these two countries in this book. Turkey's bid for entry into the European Union helped place it in our Europe Book. And while most of Russia's landmass is in Asia, its capital and most of its population, historical and cultural activity is firmly in Europe. Similarly, we've reserved transcontinental Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan for Europe, but several other republics of the former USSR are undoubtedly part of Central Asia.

The Middle East is much closer in culture to North Africa than to Thailand or Japan, but it is traditionally understood to be part of Asia and is sometimes known as Western Asia. Two countries in this region are transcontinental, but we've divided them along the geographical line of the Red Sea, keeping Yemen in Asia and including Egypt in our Africa Book.

Australians and New Zealanders consider themselves part of the Asia-Pacific region. But for the most part, there's a clear dividing line between what's Asia and what's Pacific, with the possible exception of Indonesia and the world's newest country, East Timor, which straddle both but which we've included here.

But the diversity of our final list of countries didn't present a problem – rather, a joy. This is a region laden with history and yet bursting noisily into the modern world. From the austere silence of the Mongolian steppe to the sweaty and raucous jungles of Malaysian Borneo, and from the holy pilgrimage site of Mecca to the temples of fashion in Hong Kong, Asia offered an almost impossibly varied palette of experiences for our authors to draw from.

But there are unifying themes to the concept of Asia. We've explored some of these in the essays at the end of this book: the deep spirituality of the region that has spawned all of the world's great religions; the importance of the landscape and its influence on lifestyle and traditions; the pop culture whose endless creativity delights the world on celluloid, on the airwaves and on the streets; and the tradition of adventurous travel this continent has inspired, which began with Marco Polo, had its renaissance with the backpackers' hippy trail, and continues to thrive today.

The traveller's perspective led us to structure this book into five distinct regions, with the countries of each ordered by a logical travel route, meandering from east to west. For the traveller, the experience of each of these countries is unique, with its own sights, sounds, people, trademarks and surprises.

To further inspire readers to become travellers, we've suggested a number of routes, both famous and challenging, by which to see the best of this intriguing continent. Using our Great Journeys section, follow the path of the mighty Mekong, uncover the mysteries of the Silk Road, or trace the footsteps of the great adventurer TE Lawrence.

In addition we've asked our community of travellers to contribute mementoes of their own encounters with the continent. Among the images and text from our regional expert authors you'll find the photographs and words of everyday travellers sharing a moment in time and reflecting on what Asia has meant to them.

Many journeys have gone into the creation of this book, as inimitable and surprising as the continent itself. Yet here, we hope, begins a new journey, wherein both the uninitiated and the most seasoned of Asian travellers will discover something new.

ROZ HOPKINS,
PUBLISHER, TRADE & REFERENCE,
LONELY PLANET PUBLICATIONS

INTRODUCING ASIA



WHEN MARCO POLO FIRST VENTURED INTO THE COLLIDING WORLDS ALONG THE SILK ROAD, HE BROUGHT BACK TO THE ISOLATED WEST SUCH MAMMOTH AND MYSTERIOUS TALES THAT MANY LISTENERS COULD NOT FATHOM SUCH A PLACE.

And when Christopher Columbus sought to carve a new route to the Indies from Europe, it allegedly came as a disappointment that a new continent stood between the two. Whether story collectors, merchants or ordinary travellers in search of adventure, intrigue, solace or spirituality, all have found what they're looking for in Asia. And all return home with the same euphoric disorientation, unable to fully articulate what it is about so incomprehensible a continent that fixates them. For how can a region of such contrast, controversy and contradiction be expressed in a way that captures the experience of it?

DEFINING ASIA

What is meant by the word 'Asia' has been debated for centuries; its borders have been fought over and redrawn, its cultures exoticised and eroticised, its nationalism assumed and imposed and its people feared and misunderstood. To some, 'Asia' is merely a term that became synonymous with the world's largest continent, which begins at the eastern part of the Eurasian landmass and its adjacent islands, distinct from Europe and separated from it by the Ural Mountains, and stretches east until it fronts the Pacific. And for others, Asia can be divided into parts, including Northeast Asia, the subcontinent and the

Middle East: regions which were in turn bestowed with the loaded labels 'Orient', 'British India' and 'Arabia'. These Occidental terms romanticised, colonised and homogenised the landscapes, cultures and people whose identities were ascribed to them. Ultimately, the European empires that once presided over Asia came to refer to it in definitional defeat as the 'Mysterious East'.

HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF

This continent has contributed a cast of villains and heroes to global history. Most of the significant achievements of the modern world had their infancy in Asia. Ancient trading routes sliced across epic terrain as expanding empires competed to trade goods and ideas throughout the continent and beyond. Immense expanses of desert, seemingly impenetrable jungles and inhospitable mountains were all surmounted by the ambitious civilisations that ultimately gave rise to some of the world's most revolutionary ideas. Asia is the birthplace of Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam and Christianity. Siddhartha Gautama's enlightenment continues to be shared across generations and continents as his 14th successor Tenzin Gyatso teaches the meaning of peaceful conviction.



Historical figures like Jesus Christ and Mohammed advocated compassion over conflict. But no matter how profound and peaceful Asia's religious revelations, ancient struggles to reconcile differences continue to mar the human story.

ASIA ASCENDING

In an age when one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter, and when aggression can be carried out using bigger weapons and louder mouthpieces than ever before, the eyes of the world look to the east in trepidation and hope. Asia, with its prolific economic, cultural, social, political and ideological influences, will continue to shape the direction of the world. You don't have to have been to Asia to have experienced it. Its people, cuisines, philosophies and inventions are themselves the quintessential travellers, having spread so far for so long that their origins become hard to recall. More than 100 million people around the world practise Hinduism in the form of yoga. Chinese acupuncture is increasingly used alongside mainstream Western medicine. The compact disc has circumnavigated the globe since it first appeared in Asia in 1982. Japanese technology has infiltrated European homes, and American cars are fuelled by Arabian oil. Indian, Chinese, Japanese and Middle

Eastern cuisine are all familiar to the Western palate. World-class writers, artists, musicians and filmmakers from this creative continent are fêted by critics around the globe. China and India vie for superpower status, and places like Běijīng, Dubai, Hong Kong, Tokyo and Singapore have stepped forward to take their place among the recognised global cities.

Indian-born British writer Rudyard Kipling said that 'East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet'. But in resistance to the powers that tried to define it, Asia boldly projects its ever-evolving identities into the global consciousness, reinventing and reclaiming itself from Occidental simplifications. The increasing prosperity, ingenuity, spirituality and unsurpassed hospitality of this continent have made the Occident realise its accident. Since Asia has revealed itself to the rest of the world and travellers have deepened their affinity with it, the once 'Mysterious East' has more affectionately come to be considered 'the same, but different'. Indeed, by looking into the complicated continent of Asia, we see that the struggles of humanity to define and express itself remain the same the world over, and that it is the exchange of difference that makes the attempt worthwhile.

TIMELINE

563–483 BC

Siddhartha Gautama, born in Lumbini, Nepal, becomes the historical founder of Buddhism.



500–400 BC

Persian Empire (modern-day Iran) conquers the Middle East.



334 BC

Alexander the Great of Macedonia claims the Middle East.



c 200–300 BC

Romans gain control over all of the Middle East (except for Persia).



c 30 BC

After the Roman conquest of Egypt, trade between Europe, the Middle East, India and China increases along the famed Silk Road.



8–2 BC

Jesus Christ born in Bethlehem of Judea.



3RD CENTURY AD

Gupta dynasty oversees India's golden age.



570–632

Mohammed founds Islam and leads the beginning of an Arab-Islamic empire.



802–50

King Jayavarman consolidates the Angkor Empire based in Cambodia.



11–13TH CENTURIES

European kingdoms crusade against the Muslim empires of the Middle East, in a bid to reclaim the Holy Land for Christianity.



1206–1360

The Mongol empire expands through the Asian continent, helping re-establish the Silk Road. Marco Polo reaches the Mongol capital Khanbaliq (Beijing) in 1266.



1368–1644

Ming dynasty rules China.



15TH CENTURY

Ottoman Empire expands into almost all of the Middle East, except for Iran.



1511

Melaka (in present-day Malaysia) falls to the Portuguese, marking the start of European colonisation of Southeast Asia.



1526–1707

Mughal empire rules Hindustan (the Indian subcontinent and parts of Afghanistan and Iran).



1644–1911

Qing dynasty rules China.



1912

Sun Yat-sen establishes the Republic of China.



1932–1971

Colonised countries in the Middle East, Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia gain independence.



1939–45

World War II. Japan occupies much of Southeast Asia. The war ends with the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, Japan.



1947

The United Nations partitions Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state.



1949

The Communist Party of China, under Mao Zedong, establishes the People's Republic of China.



1967

Six-Day War between Israel and an alliance of Egypt, Syria and Jordan results in Israeli control of the Sinai peninsula, the West Bank and the Golan Heights.



1973

Saigon falls to the North Vietnamese, bringing an end to US military action in the region.



1987–1989

The Intifada (uprising) of Palestinian refugees living in Israel begins.



1990–1991

Iraq invades Kuwait; the first Gulf War, backed by a multinational coalition, ensues.



1995

Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin of Israel is assassinated by a Jew opposed to liberal policies on the peace process between Israel and the PLO.



1997

Economic crisis hits Southeast Asian countries.



2001

The September 11 terrorist attacks lead US President George Bush to launch an invasion against Afghanistan and to overthrow the Taliban regime.



2003

The US and its 'coalition of the willing' invade Iraq on the basis that it is harbouring weapons of mass destruction. No such weapons are found.



2004

Tsunami strikes in the Indian Ocean, killing approximately 230,000 people.



2008

Games of the XXIX Olympiad take place in Beijing, China.



ASIA AT A GLANCE



⇒ READING THE QURAN IN THE MOSQUE OF THE PROPHET, SAUDI ARABIA



⇒ RIDING A DRAGON DOWN THE YANGZI RIVER, CHINA



⇒ INDONESIA'S FORMIDABLE KOMODO DRAGON

POPULATION 3.75 BILLION

Asia is the most populated continent on earth, with some 60 per cent of us living there.

AREA 30.3 MILLION SQ KM

Asia covers almost nine per cent of the earth's total surface area or 30 per cent of its land area.

COUNTRIES 44

OFFICIAL LANGUAGES 40

HIGHEST MOUNTAIN

At 8848 metres, Mt Everest, which straddles Nepal and Tibet, is the highest mountain on earth.

TALLEST BUILDING

The 509-metre Taipei 101 has been the tallest building in the world since 2004 – though it's likely to be superseded with the completion of Burj Dubai in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

BEST OFF-THE-BEATEN-TRACK DESTINATION

The only country in the world to have a gross national happiness indicator, Bhutan also has strong policies to limit tourism.

BEST SUNRISE

Pilgrims of different faiths gather at Adam's Peak, Sri Lanka, to watch the mountain form a perfectly triangular shadow as the sun rises. The lotus flower that emerges with the rising sun in Angkor Wat is also a wonder...

MOST CONTROVERSIAL TRAVEL DESTINATION

Is travel in Myanmar a means of reducing the isolation of its people, or does it merely bolster the power of the military regime?

MOST BIZARRE ANIMAL

The Komodo dragon on the Indonesian island of Komodo proves that tales of prehistoric beasts aren't just bedtime stories.

MOST ELUSIVE CHARACTER

Kim Jong-il succeeded his father in 1994 to lead North Korea – is he a great leader or a crazy dictator?

MAJOR INFLUENTIAL LITERARY WORKS

The Bible and the Quran both have their origins in this epic region of the world.

LONGEST RIVER

The Yangzi, Asia's longest river, flows through 6211 kilometres of China, and is spanned by the world's largest hydroelectric dam, the Three Gorges Dam.

NEWEST COUNTRY

After years of struggling against Indonesian oppression, East Timor became independent in 2002, and was the first new country of the 21st century.

LARGEST ETHNIC GROUP

There are some 1.2 billion Han Chinese in Asia.

MOST EPIC RAILWAY JOURNEY

The Trans-Siberian Railway, spanning 9288 kilometres and eight time zones, connects Russia with Mongolia, China and the Sea of Japan.

WETTEST PLACE

Mawsynram, Assam, India, is the wettest place in Asia, with an average rainfall of 11,873 millimetres per year.

LOWEST PLACE

The Dead Sea between Israel and Jordan is almost 420 metres below sea level.

MOST TRANQUIL PLACE TO WATCH THE STARS

The Gobi Desert in northern China and southern Mongolia (Asia's largest desert) lies prostrate for the nightly display of the Milky Way.

GREATEST MAN-MADE CONSTRUCTION

The Great Wall of China, India's Taj Mahal and Petra in Jordan are impossible to compare and rank.

BEST PLACE TO SPECULATE

One day, visit Iraq and ponder whether the Hanging Gardens of Babylon and weapons of mass destruction ever existed.