

# Understand Southeast Asia

## **SOUTHEAST ASIA TODAY..... 916**

While the political climate is somewhat unpredictable right now, the economic changes occurring throughout the Southeast Asian region offer hope for greater unity and prosperity in the coming decade.

## **HISTORY ..... 918**

Surrounded by the empires of India and China and coveted by European traders and colonists alike, Southeast Asia has a rich cultural heritage and a long history of independence struggles.

## **PEOPLE & CULTURE ..... 922**

From the dominant cultures to the minority tribes, Southeast Asia has long traded and adapted artistic traditions, religious expression and cultural attributes. Though standards of living vary across countries, each country honours its agricultural heritage.

# Southeast Asia Today

From democracies to dictatorships, the political landscape of Southeast Asia is far from simple. Myanmar is the new poster child for democracy, while other players in the region revert to bad habits such as military coups in Thailand and political repression in Cambodia. China casts a long shadow over the region with its ambitious claims to the South China Sea. But a booming economy continues to deliver better lives to a growing population.

## Best in Print

**Burmese Days** (1934) George Orwell's classic tale of close-minded colonials living in Burma.

**Phaic Tân: Sunstroke on a Shoe-string** (2004) Ultimate spoof guidebook pokes fun at locals, travellers and guidebook authors.

**The Beach** (1998) Alex Garland's now-legendary tale about a backpacker utopia in southern Thailand.

**The Quiet American** (1955) Graham Greene's classic novel about intrigues in Saigon as the US slowly descends into war in Vietnam.

## Best on Film

**Apocalypse Now** (1979) Set in Vietnam, filmed in the Philippines, this is the ultimate anti-war film.

**The Killing Fields** (1984) Oscar-winning classic based on a true story of survival during the Khmer Rouge takeover.

**The Lady** (2011) A French-directed biopic about Myanmar's democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

**The Look of Silence** (2014) Acclaimed follow-up to *The Act of Killing* in which an optician confronts his brother's killers.

**Metro Manila** (2013) Filipino film showing the harsh realities of adjusting from a simple rural life to an edgy urban life.

## A New Myanmar

The headline news in 2015 was the birth of democracy in Myanmar. The Aung San Suu Kyi-led National League for Democracy won a landslide victory in the historic 2015 election, but Myanmar's powerful military continues to play an influential role with 25% of seats in parliament. Myanmar remains a work in progress, even if the country is heading in the right direction.

## Same Old Thailand

With the military in charge again and no real prospect of elections before 2017, the country remains divided politically between the rural poor at one end and the traditional elite and urban middle classes at the other. A poor human-rights record has tarnished Thailand's image as an oasis of relative stability in Southeast Asia, yet tourism hasn't taken much of a hit, with visitors still arriving in droves.

## The Political Jungle

Malaysia is stumbling along, with opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim in prison once again and allegations of corruption against Prime Minister Najib Razak. By comparison, the democracies in Indonesia, the Philippines and Timor-Leste appear somewhat healthier. Joko Widodo, nicknamed Jokowi, has grand plans to redefine Indonesia, but has riled international allies by resuming the execution of foreigners on death row for drug offences. Indonesia has also angered near neighbours, as the smoke from forest fires cloaks Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand in a polluting haze. Brunei, meanwhile, made international headlines with the phasing in of sharia Islamic laws from April 2014. It mainly applies to Muslims, however non-Muslims can also be charged for offences including drinking alcohol in public, adultery