

Welcome to Southeast Asia

Friendly and intense, historic and devout, Southeast Asia is a warm embrace, from its sun-kissed beaches and steamy jungles to its modern cities and sleepy villages.

Elemental Forces

Water has sculpted many Southeast Asian landscapes. The jungle-topped islands of the Malay peninsula are cradled by coral reefs that tame the ocean into azure pools. The languorous Vietnamese coastline greets the South China Sea from tip to tail, while inland there are karst mountains – evidence of long-vanished oceans. And the muddy Mekong River lopes through tightly knit mountains to flat rice baskets. The traditional ‘highways’ of Borneo are tannin-stained rivers. And the volcanoes of Indonesia and the Philippines provide a glimpse into the earth’s blacksmithing core.

Spiritual Spaces

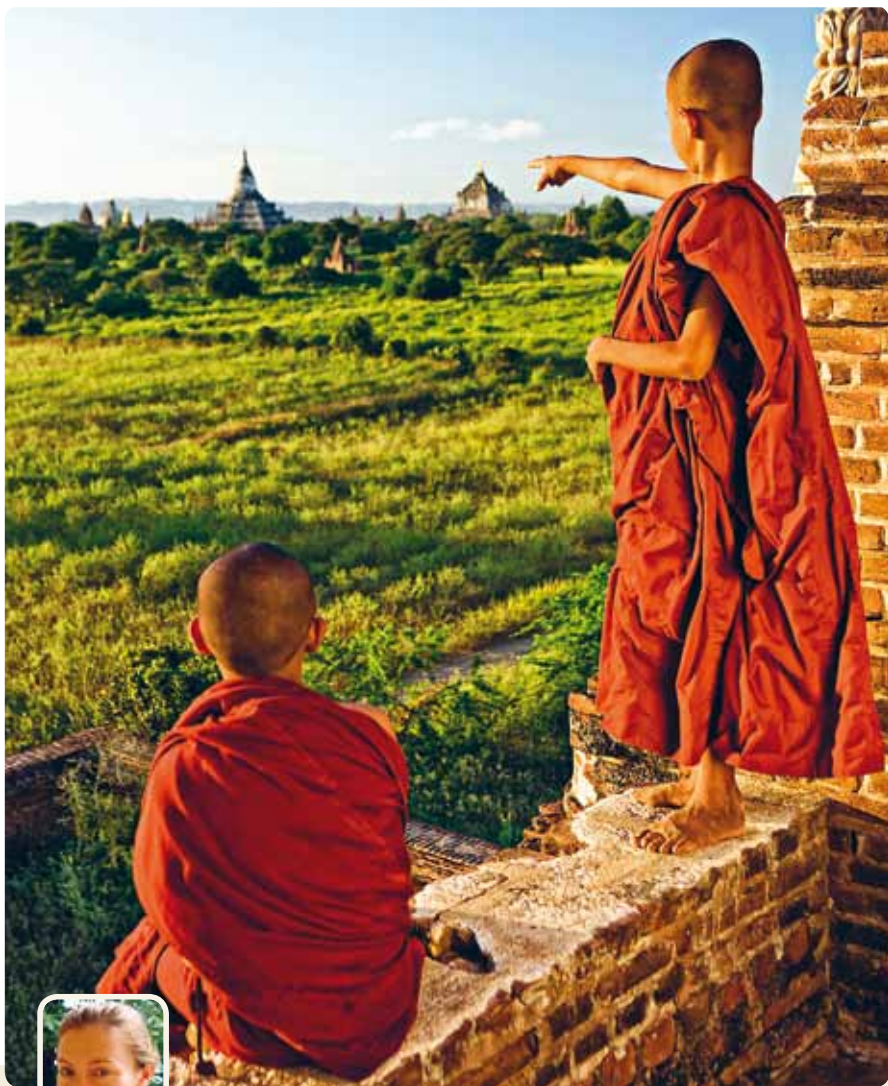
Southeast Asia bathes in spirituality. With the dawn, pots of rice come to a boil and religious supplications waft from earth to sky. Barefoot monks collect food alms from the faithful; the call to worship bellows from mosques summoning devotees to prayer; family altars are tended like thirsty house plants. And the region’s great monuments were built for the divine, from Angkor’s heaven incarnate to Bagan’s temples. This is a region in close communication with the divine. Visitors can join the conversation at meditation retreats or by hiking to a golden-spired temple or sacred mountain.

A Marriage of Old & New

Southeast Asian cities grabbed on to the future long before it became the present. Bangkok’s masses zip between shopping malls aboard suspended trains; Singapore shows off its multicultural heritage like a fashion show; and Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) is in a race to the top of the commercial heap. In between these modern marvels are rickety wooden villages filled with yawning dogs and napping water buffaloes, where the agricultural clock measures out the seasons. These rural landscapes are best visited by bike or on foot, so that you’re close enough to wave and chit-chat with the sandal-clad locals.

A Bountiful Harvest

With the absence of winter, the earth here is always pregnant with ambrosial fruits, spices once as prized as gold and the staple of rice, which is concocted into three square meals and dessert. Grazing is a Southeast Asian art, cultivated in the hawk centres of Penang and Singapore or by itinerant vendors in Thailand and Vietnam. From Indian curries to Chinese dim sum, cuisine tells a tale of migration and intermingling, and the flavours flirt with the climate, balancing spicy, sweet, salty and sour.



Why I Love Southeast Asia

By China Williams

People always have time for a chat in Southeast Asia. Be it a political brainstorm or personal exposé, this is a region where people will eclipse the common tourist attractions. All of my memories involve wandering around some city, making friends. I was the pied piper of a parade of kids in Penang, adopted by a bored civil servant in Sumatra, invited to share a picnic in Thailand and escorted around town by a Hanoi uni student. I've posed for a million pictures with strangers, mostly as a prop, but sometimes we were temporary besties.

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