

TRAVEL



DIVE IN

Beaches, buddhas and bicycles:
we've found the best holidays
in Southeast Asia

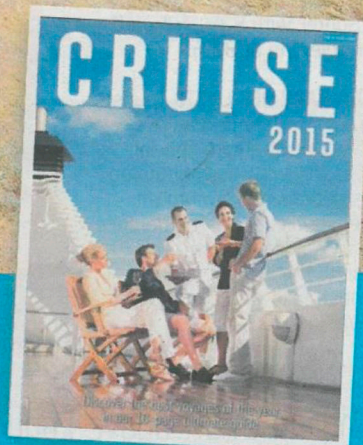
NERDLESQUE

That's burlesque for nerds.

Katie Glass watches a Dalek take its
clothes off in New York | p13

16-PAGE CRUISE SPECIAL INSIDE

Your guide to next year's most inspiring
sailings and exciting ships



The spiritual home of the backpack, Southeast Asia conjures images of rice-white sands, orange-robed monks and jungle-entwined temples. For decades, it was the preserve of the backpacker, but times have changed. With more and more tour operators veering off the beaten track, the region is easier than ever to explore – and you can even take a suitcase.

THAILAND

Despite the coup and rare incidents of violence against tourists, Thailand is still largely a safe country to visit. Just avoid protests, especially in Bangkok, as the Foreign and Commonwealth Office advises. The country now has to share the limelight with its increasingly tourist-friendly neighbours, but for temples, tuk-tuks and tranquil shores, this is still the region's box office sellout. And weather-wise, now's the time to go: the dry season begins next month and lasts at least until March.

Phuket

With international flights now jetting straight into Phuket, it's easy for families to reach their version of The Beach. For no-fuss, family-friendly frolics, head to the Merlin Beach Resort. Sandwiched between tropical gardens and the white sand of Tri Trang Beach on the west coast, the resort has three pools, a packed activities programme and a range of restaurants. Thomson has seven nights from £1,207pp, all-inclusive (0871 230 2555, thomson.co.uk).

Bangkok

After the recent demonstrations, the capital is calm again – or as calm as Bangkok ever gets. New life is being breathed into the Chao Phraya riverside districts – epitomised by the Siam hotel, one of the hottest new Asian properties. Owned by the Sukosol family (sort of like the Conrans of the East), the first luxury hotel in the old-town Dusit neighbourhood is a museum mansion with a rock 'n' roll twist, and it has a private fleet of long-tail boats, speedboats and river barges, so guests can get from their pool villas to the sights without being subjected to the city's notorious traffic. Cleveland Collection has three nights at the Siam, followed by four nights at the Rayavadee, Krabi, both B&B, from £2,199pp (020 7843 3531, clevelandcollection.co.uk).

Koh Phangan

Now that Goa's gone and grown up, the summer closing parties in Ibiza are followed by whirlwind winters in Koh Phangan. The year-round full-moon party set can now dance until dawn before bedding down in boutique beach pads, such as the Centara Pariya, which provide air-conditioned comfort at backpacker prices on the powdery coves of this hedonist's island. Expedia has seven nights at the Centara Pariya from £788pp (020 3564 4853, expedia.co.uk).

Koh Samui

Try your hand at Muay Thai kickboxing at the island's Four Seasons. Created by



The mysterious ex

It's the most exotic winter-sun destination – and also the most confusing. So

the design guru Bill Bensley, the newly elevated "ring with a view" looks over the miles of golden, palm-fringed sand of Laem Yai Bay to the Gulf of Thailand. Learn the "art of eight limbs" (so called because of the various body parts used) on the Muay Thai Adventure Package, in which you train with a professional fighter before bagging ringside seats for a local bout. Kuoni has eight nights from £2,156pp, B&B (0800 092 4444, kuoni.co.uk).

Isaan

While the old Golden Triangle trail from Chiang Mai is as busy with tourists as it once was with drugs, the Emerald Triangle offers a less-trodden path to Thailand's tribal heart. Up in the misty mountains of Loei province, on the border with Laos, legend has it that any couple hiking to the sandstone plateau of Phu Kra dueng without bickering will find everlasting love (along with an impressive two-country view). Make up or break up in the nearby timber town of Chiang Khan on the banks of the Mekong. Go in November for the Loy Krathong festival and join villagers in floating handmade Krathong lanterns downriver for good luck. Black Tomato has 14 nights from £3,775pp, B&B (020 3582 5072, blacktomato.com).

If your name's not on the list... A statue stands guard outside Bangkok's Grand Palace

VIETNAM

Wrapped in lettuce-green paddy fields, seasoned with spices of ancient, cycle-clogged cities, topped with dramatic mountain ranges and fringed with gorgeous beaches, Vietnam is a bite-size nation to be savoured on its own or as part of a multi-country holiday.

Hoi An

The one-time trading port has reinvented itself as a beach resort, but with culture, too. The streets are lined with grand

merchants' homes and wooden pagodas, and crisscrossed with cycle lanes. There's a lantern-lit riverside and a golden sliver of beach. The city is renowned for its tailors – this is the spot to get suited and bootied at a bargain price. Bamboo Travel has a 10-night stay at the Boutique Hoi An Resort from £1,195pp, B&B (020 7720 9285, bambootravel.co.uk).

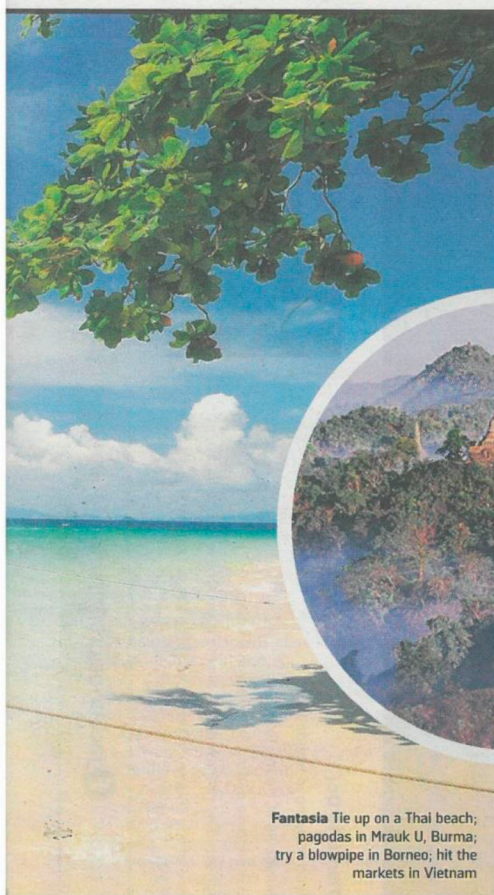
Viet-yum

Vietnamese cuisine is the dish of the day right now, so taste the real deal on a nationwide foodie tour involving cooking classes in the ancient imperial city of Huế, a private banquet in the old American ambassador's home in Hanoi, and a street-food tour of Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) by vintage Vespa – finding the best pho (beef noodle soup), ban minh (baguette sandwich) and spring rolls. Access Trips has eight nights from £1,860pp, B&B, plus some meals, but excluding flights (acesstrips.com). Emirates flies to Ho Chi Minh from £499 return (0344 800 2777, emirates.com).

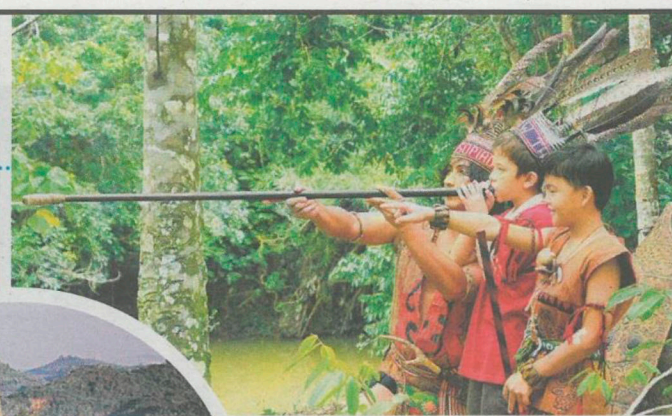


Mekong

Having made waves in Peru, the boutique boat company Aqua Expeditions has



Fantasia Tie up on a Thai beach; pagodas in Mrauk U, Burma; try a blowpipe in Borneo; hit the markets in Vietnam



Getty

Bali's biggest competitor. The colonial Sanchaya is the newest hotel of note on the island, with 19 private villas bookended by palm-bordered beaches and monkey-filled rainforest. Exsus has seven nights from £1,976pp, B&B (020 7337 9010, exsus.com).

Bali

There are still a few unspoilt corners of Bali that retain the magic that enchanted those first hippie travellers, and the Bali Refound trip unearths these. Among the rice terraces of Ubud, you'll find the Hindu heart of the island: temples, monkey sanctuaries and a cooking course. Then on to a volcanic lakeside spa in Tembok, followed by a trek up Mount Agung for sunrise and a breakfast of boiled eggs cooked in the hot, ashy earth, and world-class snorkelling in Amed. Audley has 11 nights from £2,155pp, B&B, including flights (01993 838100, audleytravel.com).

Flores and Komodo

Man-eating dragons, colourful tribes and smoking volcanoes make this part of the world feel like a movie set. G Adventures runs trips to some of the planet's wildest islands: hunt for Komodo dragons, greet the Ngada tribesmen and stare into the kaleidoscopic craters of Kelimutu. It has an eight-night trip from £999pp, B&B, with flights from Bali (0344 272 2060, gadventures.co.uk). Garuda flies to Bali from the UK from £579 return (0871 744 0190, garudaindonesia.co.uk).

LAOS

The Mekong is the heart of a trip to Laos, reflecting the sleepy pulse of a country that is both spiritually and naturally sublime. Orange-robed monks dive into the minty rock pools of Luang Prabang in the north, while Irrawaddy dolphins dip their pink fins off the 4,000 islands in the south.

The classic Laos adventure begins in Vientiane, a capital city with all the hustle and bustle of a village. Venture up through the limestone karsts of Vang Vieng — where river lodges line the Mekong — before visiting the temple town of Luang Prabang. Trailfinders has five nights, including B&B and some meals, but excluding flights, with options to add on tours to neighbouring Cambodia, Thailand or Vietnam, from £555pp (020 7368 1500, trailfinders.com). Flights from £673 (020 7491 7953, thaiairways.co.uk).

PHILIPPINES

The coconut coves and clear waters of the far-flung islands of the Philippines are the last uncharted idylls in the tropics — for us westerners, at least. With a closer-to-home target market of China, Japan and Korea, the Philippines are fluttering their eyelashes in a different direction. And with some of the best beaches in the world, we're really missing out.

Ariara Island

Think private islands are only for airline-owning tycoons and movie stars? Think again. With more than 7,000 islands, the Philippines can spare the odd one, and at a reasonable-ish price if you can get the numbers to club together. All you need is 15 friends and you can have this 125-acre private island, with its 30 staff, half a mile of Bounty-ad beach, 100ft yacht, two speedboats and catamaran for £3,666pp for the week, all-inclusive, through Red Savannah (01242 787800, redsavannah.com).

East — demystified

Let **Guyan Mitra** make it simple, with his pick of the spiciest Asian holidays

launched its Asian incarnation, Aqua Mekong. The 20-suite floating river barge — kitted out with on-deck spa, pool and screening room — sails from Saigon to Siem Reap, Cambodia, exploring previously unreachable corners of the river. Scott Dunn has an eight-night trip to Vietnam, including four nights on the Aqua Mekong, from £4,500pp, B&B (020 3603 2684, scottdunn.com).

Phu Quoc Island

If you just want beach, sea and island living, you could do worse than wash up on the sandy shores of Phu Quoc. Thanks to a recently opened international airport, it's the region's emerging fly-and-flop destination. Long ribbons of sand unfurl along the west coast, where former French colonial homes have been converted into chic guesthouses. Fleewinter has seven nights from £1,200pp, B&B, including flights (020 7112 0019, fleewinter.com).

CAMBODIA

Angkor Wat is one of the wonders of the world, and the former seat of the Khmer empire is on countless bucket lists. But as well as the most awe-inspiring temple complex on Earth, Cambodia is also home to some pretty special beaches.

Koh Rong Islands

Surrounded by some of the last undeveloped tropical islands in the Gulf of Thailand, the luxury eco-resort Song Saa has just launched philanthropic tours in which guests participate in conservation and community projects. Surveying coral reefs, helping on the Boat of Hope, a floating outreach clinic, and assisting in environment classes are some of the new volunteering opportunities. Scott Dunn has seven nights, all-inclusive, from £4,940pp (020 3582 0939, scottdunn.com).

Angkor

The 51-year restoration of the temple of Baphuon has been described as the world's biggest puzzle: 300,000 original sandstone blocks had to be put back into the right place in this three-tiered wedding cake of a temple, the latest site in the region to open for tourists. Hayes and Jarvis has seven-night tours of Cambodia, with a focus on the ancient temples, from £778pp, B&B (01293 735834, hayesandjarvis.co.uk).

INDONESIA

Compared to much of the rest of the region, Indonesia is a bit of a schlep, and the weather's upside down (the wet and dry seasons are reversed in much of the

country). But for those willing to endure the longer haul, the world's largest archipelago offers volcanoes, temples, beaches and jungles — all the Southeast Asian trappings — but, with the exception of Bali, without so many tourists.

Bintan

Since being discovered by weekend Singaporeans, Bintan is fast becoming

