

Issue 001 // Spring 2016

east



Travel inspiration from **InsideAsia Tours**

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**NEW
TRAVEL
MAGAZINE
STARRING
INDOCHINA,
BURMA &
JAPAN**

BEYOND ANGKOR WAT

Discover Cambodia
away from the crowds



Burma by water // Japan's Seto Islands // Asia's great escapes



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Welcome to *East*...



Welcome to the first edition of *East*, InsideAsia Tours' new magazine dedicated to providing travel inspiration to everyone who feels the pull of the Orient.

It was an insatiable curiosity for the 'otherness' of Asia that first drove us to travel halfway across the world to spend three years living in Japan, and it

is this same curiosity and love of travel that drives the InsideAsia team today.

Each of our destinations offers endless opportunities for unforgettable travel experiences, and we created *East* in order to share these with you. In this first edition, the weird and wonderful world of Vietnamese street food will have your taste buds tingling, the remote serenity of Burma's Inle Lake will fill your daydreams, you'll discover Japan's burgeoning contemporary art scene, and be inspired by the best of Asia's festivals.

Finally, don't forget to enter our competition for a chance to win a trip to Japan for two! We'd love to hear your travel stories and your feedback on this first issue of *East*, so don't hesitate to get in touch.



Alastair Donnelly
Simon King

ALASTAIR DONNELLY & SIMON KING, DIRECTORS OF INSIDEASIA TOURS

Meet the team



Vicky Garnett

Just back from: VIETNAM

Vicky combined cruising on Halong Bay and cooking in Hoi An with cycling through beautiful scenery of Ninh Binh in Vietnam.

Memorable moment: Taking a Vespa street food tour of Saigon. Exhilarating but slightly terrifying!



James Mundy

Just back from: CAMBODIA

James zipped out to Cambodia in October with a view to exploring the

country behind the temples, from the capital to its laid-back beach resorts.

Memorable moment: Getting his first taste of fried tarantulas. The verdict? Not as good as crickets.



Charlotte Bower

Just back from: BURMA

Charlotte explored the former hill station of Pyin Oo Lwin ("like 1920s

England") and the temple-studded plains of Bagan on her recent trip to Burma.

Memorable moment: Crossing the spectacular Goteik Viaduct by train, 102 metres above the ground!



Ali Muskett

Just back from: JAPAN

Ali headed off the beaten path on her trip to Japan in December, exploring the

ancient pilgrims' paths of the Kumano Kodo and the smallest of Japan's main islands: Shikoku.

Memorable moment: Revisiting spiritual Mount Koya, her favourite place in Japan.

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insidescoop

NEWS & WHAT'S NEW IN OUR DESTINATIONS

Blooming great
The flowers of
Furano are just
one of Hokkaido's
natural attractions



 JAPAN

Go high speed to Hokkaido

Japan's newest bullet train line speeds visitors to one of the country's most beautiful islands, home of wild scenery and marvellous wildlife

Japan's bullet train is one of the country's most exciting – and fastest – attractions. The newest addition to the service is due to depart on the 26 March 2016, connecting the capital, Tokyo, with the island of Hokkaido via the Seikan undersea tunnel, and there are plenty of reasons to book your seats.

The second-largest of Japan's four main islands, northerly Hokkaido, is one of the country's wildest and most beautiful regions. In summer it is a landscape made for driving holidays, with rolling fields of lavender, rugged national parks, and some fantastic hiking opportunities. In winter, these scenes are transformed into deep snowfields

dotted with steaming hot springs, providing the setting for Japan's best ski slopes, the amazing Sapporo Snow Festival (see p24), and the beautiful red-crowned cranes – who come here to perform their enchanting mating dance every year.

The new *Shinkansen* line will connect Aomori at the tip of Honshu island with Hakodate in the south of Hokkaido, and there are plans to extend the line further north in the future. Once open, the journey from Tokyo to Hakodate will be slashed to just over four hours – a good hour's improvement on current rail times.

So what difference will this make to travellers? Until now, Hokkaido has only been accessible by

a costly and inconvenient domestic flight. Travelling by bullet train will not only be significantly cheaper, but will eliminate the need for the hassle of check-in procedures and give travellers the opportunity to make stops in Honshu's beautiful northern regions along the way. As long-time fans of Japan's little-visited northern reaches, we consider this a very good thing!

GET IN TOUCH: *Our Wild Hokkaido itinerary combines the best of this northern island with a ride on the new bullet train. from £2,349 pp (exc. intl. flights). Call our Japan experts on 0117 244 3463 to find out more.*

JAPAN

Experience a little Northern Soul

A Northern Soul is back! 2016 sees the return of this much-beloved Small Group Tour through northern Japan. This two-week adventure begins in Tokyo before heading deep into the heart of the Tohoku region, returning southwards by way of rural Sado Island.

The itinerary is characterised by stays in little-known rural destinations; hands-on cultural activities such as *taiko* drumming; illustrious World Heritage Sites; and

beautiful walks through the countryside of northern Japan. In addition to this, we've added a visit to Ishinomaki: a small town on the eastern coast that was one of the places worst affected by the great earthquake and tsunami of 2011.

Ishinomaki was utterly flattened, almost every building reduced to wreckage, and many people killed – but thanks to the get-up-and-go attitude of the local people it was not long before the recovery was

well underway. We are proud to support the economic rejuvenation of Ishinomaki and, thanks to the unfailingly warm welcome we always receive, a visit here is often an unexpected highlight of any trip to northern Japan.

DO IT: *The new and improved A Northern Soul will run from spring 2016. Speak to one of our Japan experts on 0117 244 3463 to find out more.*



VIETNAM

Living the high life in rural Vietnam

Get an authentic perspective on Vietnam – from a few feet off the ground. Located amid the spectacular scenery of the Truong Son Mountain Range in central Vietnam, Bho Hoong gives visitors an insight into the way of life of one of Vietnam's ethnic minorities.

Bho Hoong Bungalows is a collaborative venture between the project organisers and the former king of the Co Tu people, Yi Kong. Guests are invited to stay in authentic stilt bungalows, observe the traditional practices of the tribe, have adventures in the surrounding countryside and join in with the evening's feasting and dancing. Far from being rough and ready, the bungalows themselves are very comfy – boasting high-quality linen, private balconies, en suite bathrooms and traditional Co Tu décor.

While some tribal visits in Southeast Asia can feel a little exploitative, any such doubts are altogether absent from Bho Hoong. Activities on offer are a great mix of the cultural and the adventurous, ranging from crossbow shooting to handicrafts, trekking, and motorcycle touring, and revenue from the project goes directly into educational, health and environmental initiatives. Meanwhile, tourism is kept at a manageable level by deliberately limiting access to the village.

Through their careful planning and excellent sustainable credentials, this team has devised a way to bring prosperity to the Co Tu community without commodifying their culture or paving the way for a mass influx of gawping tourists – cultural tourism the way it should be done.

DO IT: *Bho Hoong is located 80 km inland from Danang Airport in central Vietnam. Call our Indochina experts on 0117 244 3464 to find out more.*

JAPAN

Last chance to visit: Tsukiji Fish Market

Tokyo's early-morning tuna auctions and bustling inner market at Tsukiji have been tempting tourists out of bed at the crack of dawn for years. Now, with the market set to move to a new Toyosu location in November 2016, it really is your last chance to see it before it disappears.

Tsukiji's successor will be located a 15-minute train ride from its old spot. Plans for the shiny new headquarters unveiled in October showed that it will be a far cry from its current murky, mucky incarnation. For the traders and fishermen who work here, this is good news, but for visitors who enjoyed its authentic charm, it's the end of an era.

For visitors to Tsukiji today, our advice is to skip the auctions (where your welcome will be decidedly grudging) and head straight to the inner market at 09:00. After perusing the weird and wonderful produce and watching massive tuna being skilfully carved up, head to Umai Sushi Kan (06:00-15:00, Mon-Sat) within the market precincts for a mouthwatering sushi breakfast.

Get in touch: Call our Japan experts on **0117 244 3463** to find out more.



Burma election: The results are in

Changes are well underway in Burma. On 8 November, the country held its first openly contested general election in 25 years. As predicted, Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy swept to victory, claiming a landslide majority. For a country that has lived under a repressive military dictatorship for the past 50 years, that is a very big deal.

As Ms Suu Kyi knows all too well, however: victory is not always what it seems. The last time the NLD stood for election, in 1990, it won a similar landslide but was prevented from taking office by the military. Not only this, but 'The Lady' herself was placed under house arrest for the better part of the next 25 years.

Given the government's track record of locking up its opponents, it is not surprising that the world at

large has been hesitant to celebrate November's result. The military has so far appeared magnanimous in defeat, but perhaps this is because it knows its "disciplined democracy" will ensure it still has fingers in many pies – reserving 25% of all government seats and retaining control over defence and national security. Furthermore, Ms Suu Kyi will be constitutionally barred from the presidency because her children have foreign nationality.

For now though, let's not rain on the NLD's parade. Five years ago Aung San Suu Kyi was still under house arrest; today she is poised to become the most powerful woman in Burma. She has made it clear that she isn't going to let small matter of the constitution stand in her way. Whichever way you look at it, this is a huge step forward and an incredibly exciting time for Burma.

VIETNAM

Take the high road to Cat Tien

With its astonishing biodiversity, Cat Tien is one of Vietnam's most important national parks. Found 160 km northeast of Ho Chi Minh City, this 720 sq km swathe of dense lowland rainforest and grassland is one of the last refuges for Indochina's rare wildlife. Though visitors are unlikely to run into any large mammals today, the park is

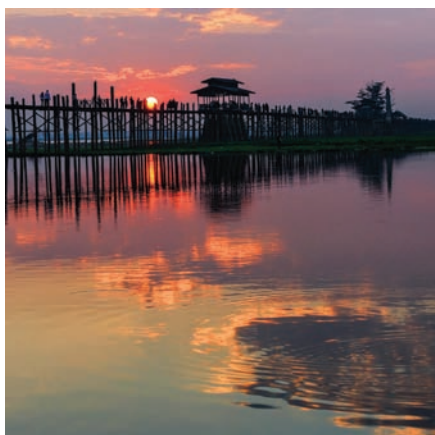
the finest place for hiking and birdwatching in southern Vietnam, and an eco-lodge stay here contrasts nicely with the hustle and bustle of Vietnam's most populous city.

Good news, then, that the road from Ho Chi Minh City to Cat Tien National Park has been upgraded. Visitors can now access the park's

gibbon and bear sanctuaries, jungle trekking and night safari experiences in just three hours or less.

DO IT: Our Indochina Conservation independent itinerary includes an eco-lodge stay in Cat Tien. From £3,580 pp for 14 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call our Indochina experts on **0117 244 3464** to find out more.





BURMA

Cruise along 'the road to Mandalay'

Get off the beaten track – quite literally – and on to the water in Burma. In a country where many remote regions are still inaccessible by road, waterborne exploration allows you to visit destinations virtually untouched by tourism.

The Strand and Anawrahta cruise lines offer new ways to do so in elegant luxury. Both cruises ply a variety of routes on the Irrawaddy and Chindwin rivers, each offering the best in waterborne comfort – including an onboard

swimming pool, a spa & gym, excellent restaurants and rooms with private balconies.

It's been over a century since Rudyard Kipling described the Irrawaddy River as 'the road to Mandalay', yet taking a boat remains one of the best and most evocative ways to discover Burma.

DO IT: Most cruises available Jul until Apr/May; itineraries range from 3 to 11 nights. Call our experts on **0117 244 3465** to find out more.

VIETNAM

Go underground

Fancy climbing into the world's third-largest cave? Hang En is one of the high – or low – lights of Vietnam's Phong Nha National Park and just one of the vast cave complexes that riddle this UNESCO World Heritage Site. What's more, it's rumoured to have been used in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, which the *East* team are excitedly anticipating as we go to print!

You can unlock your inner Luke or Leia on a two-day trek to Hang En, hiking and swimming through systems of stunning caverns, with an overnight camp stop on the sands of a beach inside the great cave itself.

DO IT: This tour can be included in any itinerary, such as our Vietnam Adventure, from £2,745 pp for 16 night (exc. intl. flights). Cave tour available Dec-Aug. Call our Indochina experts on **0117 244 3464** to find out more.



JAPAN

Game for a Tokyo arcade tour?

Tokyo can make you feel like you're in a video game, but InsideAsia's new tour powers this up to the next level. Our resident game enthusiast, Brett Plotz, has designed this new geektastic route, celebrating Japan's contribution to the industry and delving into all things *otaku*.

On the tour, which can be taken in the daytime or condensed into an evening, Brett steers his flock through the capital's maze of towering arcade palaces, bewildering *pachinko*

parlours, hidden retro game stores and infamous maid cafés, breaking for lunch at one of the capital's cult game-themed restaurants.

DO IT: Brett's video game tour can be incorporated into any Japan itinerary. Our Manga & Anime Self-Guided Adventure is a great example, from £1,300 pp for 10 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call our Japan experts on **0117 244 3463** to find out more.

BURMA

Sneezing monkeys & walking fish

A Noah's Ark of wild wonders has been uncovered in the Eastern Himalayas, where the WWF has announced the discovery of 211 new species.

Among the discoveries are a snake with a jewel-like head, a fish that can breathe air and survive on land for up to four days, and a type of Burmese monkey that sneezes every time it rains – due to its unfortunate upturned nose. To deal with its unusual problem, the monkey (nicknamed "Snubby" by scientists) spends rainy days sitting with its head tucked between its knees.

JAPAN

New year, new Aman property

Fans of the Aman's blend of luxury and seclusion have cause to rejoice: 2016 sees the launch of the hotel chain's second Japanese property. Opening in spring, The Amanemu is located in the Ise Shima National Park and celebrates Japan's much-loved *onsen* culture. The hotel takes its inspiration from traditional *ryokan* inns, and will be the first Aman resort to integrate natural hot springs (*onsen*) into its spa, suites and villas.

Ise is little-known outside of Japan, but is home to the country's most sacred Shinto shrine. Surrounded by forested mountains and ancient pilgrimage routes, it is also just a couple of hours by train from Kyoto and Osaka.

DO IT: Call our Japan experts on **0117 244 3463** to find out more.

Beyond Angkor Wat

Cambodia isn't just about its star attraction – there are plenty of other temples to visit, each one rich in history, culture and adventure

Angkor Wat is Cambodia's national icon, and rightly so. Built in the 12th century, it is preserved in a remarkable state of repair and on a staggering scale: a vast monument to human industry, with kilometres of intricate bas-reliefs and an overall volume greater than the Great Pyramid of Giza.

But Angkor Wat isn't the only temple worth visiting. Though it may be the closest to perfection, there are many others in Cambodia – such as Banteay Srei (*pictured*) – that rival it for beauty and even surpass it for atmosphere and adventure.



Back on the map
The UNESCO-listed site of Preah Vihear is once again safe for visitors

BENG MEALEA

Best for: Indulging your inner Indiana Jones

Where Angkor Wat is pruned and prettied to the highest possible degree of perfection, Beng Mealea has been allowed to truly run wild: half-swallowed by the jungle, covered in moss and falling to pieces under a proliferation of foliage. Its central tower has collapsed, its surviving chambers are dark and strangled by vines, and visitors are permitted to climb and scramble over the rubble unchecked.

Beng Mealea certainly isn't unknown: it's a popular day-trip destination from Siem Reap and can be very busy at times. Nevertheless, its tumbledown state and air of abandonment provides one of the most adventurous experiences of any of Cambodia's temples, making it well worth the trip.

GETTING THERE: 1.5 hours' drive from Siem Reap.



PREAH VIHEAR

Best for: Views

Most travellers have never heard of the name Preah Vihear, so it may come as a surprise to discover that this obscure northern temple is actually the second of Cambodia's two UNESCO World Heritage Sites. No prizes for guessing the first.

There's a good reason why Preah Vihear might have slipped under most people's radar until now: Up until 2011 this far-flung corner of northern Cambodia was the site of a border dispute with neighbouring Thailand, and it was only in August 2015 that the UK's Foreign & Commonwealth Office removed their warning against travel to the area.

Today, however, any threat of violence is thankfully long gone, and Preah Vihear offers a superb place to not only admire remarkably well-preserved Khmer ruins – dating back to the 10th century – but to do so with very few crowds around to clutter your photos. Built on a lone hill 525 metres above the surrounding plains, it also has the most spectacular views of any temple we've ever visited.

GETTING THERE: Preah Vihear is pretty remote – over three hours of good road from Siem Reap. Given the drive, it's best to spend a night at the very pleasant Boutique Hotel, located nearby.

KOH KER

Best for: Peace and quiet

Visitors who only set aside time for the tourist-ready temples of Angkor Wat will miss out on the thrill of discovering an ancient, overgrown temple complex in what can often be complete solitude. Though it is now accessible within a couple of hours by road from Siem Reap, Koh Ker was for a long time one of the most remote complexes in Cambodia; a forgotten capital of the Angkorian Empire.

Even today, visitors can often find themselves wandering the city's remaining temples and sanctuaries without another soul in sight, happening upon its overgrown causeways and multi-tiered, Mayan-esque pyramid like the first explorers.

GETTING THERE: 2 hours' drive from Siem Reap.



Man at arms
Banteay Chhmar's
ancient images
resist being reclaimed
by the jungle



BANTEAY CHHMAR

Best for: Combining temples and countryside

Located in the depths of northern Cambodia, Banteay Chhmar is home to what was once one of the country's largest temple complexes: the 'Citadel of Cats'. Built by the warrior king responsible for the famous faces of Bayon, root-strangled Ta Prohm and the Terrace of the Elephants, most of its Angkorian relics have now all but been subsumed by their surroundings.

Though this means there are fewer really striking edifices than at some sites, it does make for a more exciting and adventurous experience, as you scramble over rubble and tramp through thick jungle to make your own discoveries. One of the best things about Banteay Chhmar is the proximity of the local village and surrounding countryside. This means that the ruins feel less like a vast museum – as can be the case at more controlled sites – and more like a piece of living history.

GETTING THERE: 4.5 hours' drive from Preah Vihear or 2.5 hours' drive from Siem Reap.

TOP TIP: Leave time to combine your visit to the ruins with some exploration of the surrounding countryside. We recommend spending the night at a local homestay for an insight into rural Cambodian life.

BANTEAY SREI

Best for: Stunning bas-reliefs

Unique amongst Angkorian temples, Banteay Srei's pink sandstone certainly sets it apart from its neighbours. Not only known for its vibrant colour, the 'Citadel of Women' is also renowned for its astonishingly intricate bas-reliefs, which are widely acknowledged to be the best of any temple in Cambodia. So well does this pink sandstone lend itself to this style of carving that the beautiful designs have survived almost completely undiminished for over a millennium.

GETTING THERE: 45 minutes' drive from Siem Reap.

TOP TIP: Visit in the late afternoon to witness the bas-reliefs come to life in the dying light.

DO IT: Our Hidden Temples of Cambodia itinerary focuses on Cambodia's lesser-known temples, including all of the sites mentioned in this article. The trip also includes three nights in Phnom Penh, an introduction to Khmer art at the National Museum, and some of Angkor's more famous sites: Bayon, Ta Keo, Angkor Thom and the magnificent Angkor Wat. From £1,530 pp for 10 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call our Indochina experts on **0117 244 3464** to find out more.



SAMBOR PREI KUK

Best for: Strangling roots

If you have been seduced by photos of the engulfing roots at Ta Prohm (AKA 'Tomb Raider Temple') but don't like the thought of jostling for space with a hundred like-minded individuals, Sambor Prei Kuk is a wonderful alternative. Unlike the other temples on this list, Sambor is actually pre-Angkorian – built by the Chenla civilisation of the sixth to the ninth centuries. With no grand centrepiece, the site instead consists of small, ramshackle towers dotted through the surrounding jungle, many of them well on their way to being completely consumed by strangling vines and vegetation.

GETTING THERE: 50 minutes' drive from Kampong Thom; 2h 45 drive from Siem Reap. We recommend spending the night in Kampong Thom.

TOP TIP: Rent a bicycle and explore these jungle-clad temples under your own steam.

Cambodia Essentials

GETTING THERE: Flight time from London to Siem Reap/Phnom Penh: approx. 14-15h with at least one stop. From £650 return.

WHEN TO GO: November to March offer the best conditions for travel in Cambodia. Though 'green season' travel has many merits, most of the destinations featured here are remote, and may not have access during the wetter months.

VISAS: UK citizens can obtain a visa on arrival in Cambodia for USD20.

CURRENCY: Cambodian riel (KHR). £1 = approx. KHR6,000. US dollars are as commonly used as riel.

MORE ONLINE: Visit our website to find out more: www.insideasiatours.com



Children's channels

InsideAsia's co-director Simon King recommends taking the whole family to Asia

An easy adventure for the whole family

Parenthood doesn't spell the end of wanderlust. Here's our guide to bringing the kids on a stress-free Asian journey that's unforgettable for all the right reasons...

Despite having lived in Japan for several years, I still had my worries about taking my daughter Florence there for the first time at the age of one-and-a-half. These fears will be very familiar to any parent who has considered long-haul travel with a toddler: will she eat the food? How much should we pack for her? What will we do in the evenings after she has gone to sleep? And so on. It is enough to make any parent pack it in and settle for a week in a caravan in Cornwall. No offence to Cornwall – or caravans.

The reality is really not that bad. Yes, travelling with children can be challenging, tiring and, at times, infuriating – but the huge benefits far outweigh any negatives.

The long-haul flight is the first hurdle, and the biggest for many parents. Trapped in a small space with a toddler and hundreds of strangers for 10 hours plus? You must be joking. We were actually pleasantly surprised by our flying experiences with Florence. Our tactic – and one I highly recommend – was to bring a succession of small presents to whip out as soon as we saw a storm brewing.


The food is another big concern for many parents. The good news is that Western-style food is widely available in Asia these days, and

you will not have to go far to find a burger or pizza in almost any Asian town. Burma is the notable exception: although tolerable Western food is available in some places, I would certainly recommend bringing a stock of snacks from home for emergencies.

Parents also worry whether it's safe and clean enough for kids. Having lived in Japan, probably the safest, cleanest country in the world, I wasn't worried about this. In Southeast Asia, things are a little more rough and ready, but by no means a cause for concern – and hospitals are of an


excellent standard if the worst were to happen. People generally have no hidden agenda in their desire to help, and at times it can seem as though you're travelling with a mini celebrity!


'They won't even remember it, anyway.' This is such a common argument, and so misguided! Florence still talks about Japan two


years after she first visited. And in any case, how much do you remember from that trip you took ten years ago? Travel is a massively mind-opening and stimulating experience, encouraging your kids to build up an interest in other cultures and nurturing a desire to learn more. Whether they can give you a blow-by-blow account of it five years later is completely beside the point. 


'Our tactic for tackling plane travel with the children was to bring a succession of small presents to whip out as soon as we saw a storm brewing'


Simon's Top Tips For Trips With Toddlers


 If possible, travel before your tot turns two! They'll travel for free on planes and trains and cost virtually nothing at hotels, too.

 Avoid one-night stays and give yourself time to settle in. Two-centre holidays work well.

 Don't expect to do as much as you would on your own; one area/activity per day is usually enough.

 Bring a baby carrier and pushchair – great for naps on the go. They're free to bring on planes, too.

 Vaccinations are required for some areas. Speak to a travel nurse to find out more before you go.

 Don't worry about planning special activities for your toddler. Everyday activities like catching the train, going to the park, or just spending time with mum and dad will be excitement enough!

*Our independent itineraries start from £700 per person for 7 nights (exc. intl. flights). Any trip can be adapted to a family of any size or age range – just speak to one of our experts to find out more (Japan: **0117 244 3463** / Indochina: **0117 244 3464** / Burma: **0117 244 3465**).*



Simon King, co-director of InsideAsia Tours and dad to four-year-old Florence and two-year-old Colum, is no stranger to travelling long-haul with young children.



FIND YOUR zen

Asia's fast-paced energy is legendary, but if you know where to look you can take a break from the bustle. Try one of these relaxing escapes...



Take the plunge
An *onsen* is a vital part of Japanese culture; (below) find enlightenment with Buddhist monk Join-san at Kyoto's Gesshin-in Temple

Soak in a hot spring, Japan

Ask any expat what they love most about Japan, and the list rarely varies: the people, the food and especially the *onsen*. Thanks to a wealth of volcanic activity throughout the country, *onsen* (hot springs) are plentiful in Japan. Thought to have healing properties, they are such an integral facet of Japanese society that whole towns have been built around them and the Japanese will travel across the country just to visit a particular one. There is even a phrase in Japanese for the bond of friendship formed in a hot spring: *hadaka no tsukiai*, or 'naked communion'.

Onsen come in all shapes and sizes. The Japanese use bathhouses called *sento* for their everyday bathing, and traditional *ryokan* inns almost always have their own baths for the use of guests and visitors. The really special ones, however, are to be found in areas of outstanding natural beauty: enclosed by verdant mountains, surrounded by falling snow, on beaches looking out to sea, or dug from stony riverbeds. Once you've plucked up the courage to bare all (and yes, nudity is obligatory!) we promise you'll never look back.

DO IT: All of our Japan trips include the chance to soak in a hot spring. Our Best of Japan itinerary is a great example, with two nights in the hot spring region of Hakone: from £1,200 pp for 14 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call our Japan experts on **0117 244 3463** to find out more.

MORE ONLINE: For more info see 'The best onsen hot springs in Japan' (www.insidejapanblog.com)

Meditate with monks, Japan

In Zen Buddhist tradition, it is believed that everybody is already enlightened; they just need to realise the true nature that lies within. *Zazen*, or seated meditation, is central to realising this enlightenment, and is practised by monks throughout Japan. It's a kind of 'philosophical detox' – allowing you to push all the little things out of your mind and take a moment just to exist.

Everybody can find their own meaning in Zen, and taking part in a session of *zazen* meditation under the guidance of a Buddhist priest can be a wonderful experience. Give yourself a chance to clear your mind and appreciate the moment: it's sure to make your trip all the more memorable.

DO IT: Our *Pilgrim's Paths* itinerary follows ancient pilgrimage routes across the Kii Peninsula, and can be tailored to include a meditation experience in Kyoto. From £2,220 pp for 14 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call our Japan experts on **0117 244 3463** to find out more.



Karst away

The final light of day illuminates Halong Bay's karst landscape; (below) a waterfall gushes on one of the 4,000 Islands



Relax among the 4,000 Islands, Laos



At one of the widest points of its epic journey from the Tibetan Plateau to the steamy jungles of southern Vietnam, the Mekong River fragments into myriad tributaries, washing around thousands of islands and sandbars. This region is Si Phan Don, or 4,000 Islands.

4,000 Islands offers a microcosm of Southeast Asia's famous charms: a beach-like atmosphere; palm-lined streets;

impressive waterfalls and untouched rainforests. All of this with just a fraction of the tourist crowds that can so often mar more famous spots. We recommend spending a few nights at one of the riverside lodges scattered through the river's many islands, enjoying the laid-back pace of life and perhaps heading out in a longtail boat to try to spot the rare Irrawaddy dolphin.

DO IT: *4,000 Islands can be included as a destination in any tailored trip. Laos Overland: Along the Mekong is a great option, concluding with four relaxing nights in Si Phan Don. From £1,975 pp for 14 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call our Indochina experts on 0117 244 3464 to find out more.*



Cruise through Halong Bay, Vietnam



Chinese-style junk boats pass to and fro between towering karst pinnacles, looming like stone giants out of the morning mist; communities conduct their lives in floating villages; fishermen glide between rocks and old women sell seashells from their boats.

Halong Bay seems to belong more to the Vietnam of ancient legend than in the pages of a guidebook, and indeed it even has its own creation myth: to defend Vietnam against invasion from the sea, a celestial dragon breathed out 1,000 beautiful pearls, which turned into the islands of Halong Bay.

The best (and only) way to soak up the stunning Halong scenery is on a cruise through the bay. The options encompass junks, modern boats, and colonial-style paddle steamers, ranging from the basic to the luxurious. Opt for a longer trip (two nights or more) and you'll be able to travel further into the bay, escaping the tourist crowds and really giving yourself a chance to unwind.

DO IT: *A Halong Bay cruise can be incorporated into any tailored itinerary – just call our Indochina experts on 0117 244 3464 to find out more.*

MORE ONLINE: See 'How to choose a Halong Bay cruise – the definitive guide' to find out which cruise is best for you.

www.insidevietnamblog.com



Unwind on an inclusive spa stay, **Vietnam**



If you're looking for a place to forget the stresses of everyday life and reboot for the year ahead, an inclusive spa retreat in Vietnam is the ideal way to chill. During our last stay at the Fusion Maia in Danang, the General Manager told us that she can see a visible change in her guests as the days go on. They begin to noticeably relax: they get up later, they walk more slowly, they stop checking their phones and trying to pack in activities.

In fact, they stop doing much at all – abandoning themselves instead to the indulgence of inactivity.

Vietnam has quite an array of spa resorts, but the luxurious Fusion resorts in Danang and Nha Trang are amongst our favourites. Guests are each assigned their own personal Fusionista to attend to their needs, and there are at least two spa treatments included on each day of your stay. We recommend ordering breakfast on the beach at sunrise – you won't regret it.

DO IT: *A stay at a Fusion resort can be incorporated into any itinerary that visits Danang, Hoi An, or Nha Trang. Call our Indochina experts on **0117 244 3464** to find out more.*

Discover paradise on Macleod Island, **Burma**



A pristine enclave in the Myeik Archipelago off the coast of Burma's southern prong, Macleod Island is the stuff that desert-island fantasies are made of. Think Koh Phi Phi before the hordes descended and you'd be close.

The only man-made structure on the island is the Myanmar Andaman Resort, an eco-lodge that proudly declares its eschewal of traditional five-star luxury in favour of unfussy lodgings and eco cred. Though you will be kept well supplied with beachside cocktails and massages if you so desire, for the most part Macleod Island is left to speak for itself: stunning white beaches, miles of untouched jungle, and spectacular diving conditions.

The Andaman can arrange guided treks, dives, and kayaking trips – but we certainly wouldn't blame you for remaining horizontal for the duration.

DO IT: *Our Southern Burma Uncovered itinerary introduces some of Burma's lesser-known regions, concluding with four nights on Macleod Island. From £2,385 pp for 15 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call our Burma experts on **0117 244 3465** to find out more.*

Grains of paradise
Macleod Island's beachy haven; (above) relax in a luxury Vietnamese spa



Traditional culture, eye-popping art and national treasures: the Seto Inland Sea stretches over 400 km and boasts nearly 3,000 unforgettable, off-the-beaten-track islands perfect for exploration. Barely known outside of Japan, here are our top five tips for visiting the islands, compiled by our team of Japan experts

TOP 5 TIPS: SETO ISLANDS, JAPAN

1 ENJOY JAPAN'S BEST BIKE RIDE



JOCELYN KNIGHTLY BROWN

Two-time Shimanami Kaido veteran Jocelyn spent two years living in Shizuoka Prefecture.

The Shimanami Kaido is Japan's most spectacular bike ride. Linking mainland Japan with Shikoku, the smallest of Japan's four main islands, the route covers 60 km of toll road and links six of the tiny Seto Islands, offering beautiful views and a glimpse into small-town Japanese life. Head off-piste to explore the islands and make your own discoveries – my favourite island is Ikuchijima, home of the flamboyant Kosanji Temple and Hirayama Art Museum. Just hire a bike and go.

STAY: The U2 Cycle Hotel, Onomichi, is a stylishly converted warehouse with its own bike hire shop, built for visitors to the Shimanami Kaido.



2 ENJOY CULTURE AT THE SETOUCHI ART FESTIVAL



LILY BASCOMBE

Lily lived on the art-rich Shikoku coast for two years.

Taking place every three years and linking 12 different Seto islands, the Setouchi Triennale is unlike any art festival you've experienced before. Buy a ferry pass for one of the festival's three seasons (spring, summer, or autumn) and you'll have the freedom to zip between islands that would otherwise barely see visitors, stumbling across exhibits in the most unexpected places. My favourite island was Awashima, where the locals use all the washed-up flotsam and jetsam to create animal sculptures around the island – like tiny hidden zoos!

2016 DATES: 20 Mar – 17 Apr; 18 Jul – 4 Sep; 8 Oct – 6 Nov.

3 SEE MIYAJIMA'S FLOATING GATE



HARRY SARGANT

Harry lived in Japan for three years, and honeymooned on Miyajima.

The most well-known of the Seto Islands, Miyajima is a short ferry from Hiroshima. Though best-known for Itsukushima Shrine, whose 'floating' *torii* gate offers one of the most recognisable views in Japan, it has plenty of other charms. I suggest sampling the oysters, climbing to the top of Mount Misen for views across the Seto Inland Sea, and mingling with the impassive *shika* deer who roam the traditional town centre.

STAY: On Miyajima, only a traditional *ryokan* inn will do. The Yamaichi Bekkan is a favourite for those on a modest budget, while the Iwaso offers a taste of luxury in a woodland setting.

4 EXPLORE NAOSHIMA 'ART ISLAND'



ALASTAIR DONNELLY

Co-Director Alastair was overwhelmed by Monet's Water Lilies on display at the Chichu Museum.

Not so long ago, Naoshima was just another small fishing community. Today, art spills out of the island's museums and into abandoned workshops, derelict shrines, and windswept beaches, taking over the landscape. Lovers of kitsch are well provided-for at the 'I Love Yuu' bathhouse, while museums such as Benesse House and the Chichu provide international clout – with such greats as Monet, de Maria, Hockney and Warhol.

STAY: Spend the night among the artworks at the Benesse House Museum, which doubles as a luxury hotel.



5 ADMIRE EXQUISITE JAPANESE GARDENS



BRETT PLOTZ

Brett leads our Hidden Japan Small Group Tour.

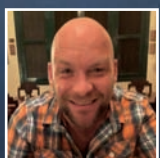
The oasis of Ritsurin, on the coast of Shikoku Island, is deserving of a place beside Japan's best gardens. The careful planning, pruning, and growing of the garden over centuries is evident as soon as you enter. Everything feels very deliberate: its exquisite waterfalls, ancient teahouse, and ponds full of carp have all been meticulously orchestrated.

STAY: The JR Clement Hotel is an elegant choice in Takamatsu.



Any of the destinations mentioned here can be incorporated into an independent trip of your choice – just call our Japan experts on **0117 244 3463** to find out more. Our Secrets of Shikoku itinerary visits both Naoshima and Takamatsu; from £1,310 pp for 14 nights (exc. intl. flights).

On the WATER



InsideAsia's **James Mundy** takes to a boat in Burma, exploring Pagoda Festivals and the vibrant local life around spectacular Inle Lake

Cutting through glass
Oarsmen power a boat
across Inle Lake's serene
mirrored surface



The outboard motor was on full throttle as we headed towards Inle Lake. As the sun gradually sank behind the trees and dusk encroached, our guide swung a lantern over the prow of our boat. In an instant our world shrank to a few metres' radius; its glow did not extend to the riverbanks, which were swallowed up

in darkness. The channel narrowed, the engines were cut, and all was silent.

Taking up his oar, our boatman propelled us along in the traditional Inle fashion, gripping the oar with one hand and using his ankle to guide its movement through the water. Without the motor, the noises of the night were suddenly clear: the chirp of the insects in the bushes, the rustling of the trees, the soft splash of water against the little

wooden boat. From somewhere in the distance, the sound of chanting drifted faintly across the treetops, while fireflies danced across the water like sparks from a fire, illuminating the green channel in their wake.

At length we emerged from our channel onto the lake – though its true scope couldn't be guessed at in the darkness. Gradually the chanting grew louder, until all of a sudden its source



became apparent: a wooden temple perched on stilts above the waterline, where the faithful were marking evening prayers in their eerie, melodious way. It was then that I realised Inle Lake was going to be something special.

Life on the lake

Inle is vast. A silvery-blue expanse surrounded by the green peaks of Shan State, this is no boating lake in

a local park. We're talking approximately 120 square kilometres of fresh water, with boats crossing to and fro across its surface, chugging from village to village while entire communities go about their day-to-day business suspended above the water. It is a city without roads.

The people of Inle call themselves Intha, and have developed ingenious methods for survival on the water. Their

famous leg-rowing technique was developed so that the oarsmen could see above the proliferation of plants that grow on the surface of the water. Lake farmers, meanwhile, grow their produce in floating fields constructed out of weeds and anchored to the lake bottom with bamboo poles. These rise and fall with the water level, providing a farming solution that is both abundantly fertile and resistant to floods.

Water ways

A traditional stilt village looms above the liquid pavement... just. During high water season, the lake can reach their doorsteps





'The sheer number of boats that had congregated was immense. There were boats filled with monks, boats filled with members of different hilltribes. All of Inle's magnificent diversity was on display'

My hotel was constructed in the same method as a traditional Intha dwelling: built from sturdy, long-lasting teakwood and balanced on stilts above the lake surface. In low season these houses tower above the water level; at high water the lake can almost lap their doorsteps.

The golden convoy

Arriving under cover of night meant that my first view of Inle's full splendour came in the morning – and what a view it was. This was the transition period between the rainy season and the dry season, and the weather was teasing us with the possibility of a storm. As I tucked into my *mohinga* (a traditional breakfast dish of noodle soup), angry black clouds replicated themselves in the glassy water, giving the disconcerting impression of infinite depth both below and above.

It was all bravado, however. The storm blew over without so much as a spot of rain, and it wasn't long after sunrise before we were out on the water again, cutting along past solitary fishermen casting their nets and longboat taxis packed with people in traditional dress, waving and smiling at us as we passed them by.

The further we travelled, the more crowded with boats the lake became, until the atmosphere was charged with excitement. It was still before nine o'clock yet here we were, jostling past hundreds of other boats for a peek at what everybody had turned out to see. Eventually, we pulled up alongside a shallow wooden barge carrying about 40 or 50 young oarsmen, each dressed identically and shaded by brightly coloured umbrellas.

The resplendent crew glided past us, slicing the water in perfect unison with their leg-driven oars, to be succeeded by a procession of more and more of the same, each sporting their own colours and rowing to their own music. Finally, at the tail end of the convoy, came a great golden barge styled in the shape of a giant bird, carrying its own shining, gilded shrine. A glimpse of this barge and its

precious cargo, the four sacred Buddha images of Inle Lake, was what everybody had been waiting for.

Taking place over 18 days in October each year, the Phaung Daw Oo Pagoda Festival is the largest celebration in Shan State – and one of the most important in the whole of Burma. Over the course of the festivities, the gilded barge is brought to each of the lake's villages in turn, stopping at each for a night of music and dance, boat races and general merry-making. Looking about us, the sheer number of boats that had congregated was immense. There were boats filled with monks, boats filled with members of different hilltribes (identifiable by their distinctive ethnic costumes), boats filled with young and old, and the occasional boat carrying foreign tourists like ourselves. All of Inle's magnificent diversity was on display, packed into one small area and united by their common enjoyment of the yearly festivities.

Going exploring

Having taken some time to soak up the atmosphere and enjoy the spectacle, we decided to take advantage of the hustle and bustle to sneak away to one of the local villages, Shwe Indein. After the excitement of the festival it was almost a relief to retreat to the peace and quiet of the lakeshore, where we whiled away the next hour or two exploring the hundreds of unkempt stupas that lie scattered between rice fields and waterways. Stepping over fallen masonry and brushing aside vines, I expected to see snakes and exotic wildlife – or at least some other tourists – but all we came across were a few wayfaring pigs.

Some claim that Inle has already become a victim of its own celebrity, but I disagree. It is true that development is continuing apace to cater to demand, and that some of Inle's 'attractions' smack uncomfortably of exploitation (avoid the Padaung 'giraffe women', and the inauthentic floating market), but I found plenty at Inle to be genuinely impressed by. Exploring the lakeshore by bicycle or taking a kayaking

trip to one of the lesser-known stilt villages is a fantastic way to strike out from the well-worn tourist path, and there is always a corner of peace out on the vastness of the water. As ever, it is the quieter, little-known parts of the region that remain its most beguiling.

After the sun sinks over Inle and the last of its dying light has vanished from the lake's great glassy eye, there is little for us to do but return to our lodge. There are no floating bars or clubs to tempt the weary traveller – not yet, at least, and hopefully not ever. Retiring to the veranda of my stilt cottage with a glass of the local red in hand, I thought how nice it was to have nothing – literally nothing – to do but listen to the gentle lapping of the lake and look forward to another day on the water.

Off the path

Inle's waterway take you through floating gardens, via stilt villages, and even (if you time your visit right) past the odd gilded procession

Burma Essentials


GETTING THERE: Flight time from London to Yangon: from 13h 25min with at least one stop. From £800 return. The Inle region is accessed via Heho Airport, a 1h 10min domestic flight from Yangon. From the airport it is a further hour by road to Nyaung Shwe, the gateway to Inle Lake.

WHEN TO GO: The 2016 Phaung Daw Oo Pagoda Festival will take place from the 2-19 October. In general, October through to May are the best months for travel to the lake (some rain is likely in the transitional months of October and May).

VISAS: UK citizens will need a visa to enter Burma. This can be arranged in advance with a physical visa in your passport via the Myanmar Embassy, or with an evisa via <http://evisa.moip.gov.mm/>.

CURRENCY: Myanmar kyat (MMK). £1 = approx. 1,965MMK. USD is the most popular form of currency accepted for conversion to kyat, which can only be done at official banks and currency exchange offices, not through hotels and other tourist services.



DO IT: Our Beautiful Burma Small Group Tour is timed to coincide with the Phaung Daw Oo Pagoda Festival, and combines three nights on the lake with Burma's most celebrated destinations: Yangon, Bagan, and Mandalay. From £2,575 pp for 13 nights (exc. intl. flights). Alternatively, you can include Inle as a destination as part of any tailored itinerary – just call our Burma experts on **0117 244 3465** to get planning. 

FESTIVAL FEVER

The best way to get to know the locals is to party with them.
Here's where to experience Asian culture at its most colourful

Visiting a festival is one of the best – and most enjoyable – ways to experience a different culture.

Festivals offer a window into age-old rituals, the chance to sample speciality foods, and an unparalleled opportunity to mingle with the locals. Swept up by the atmosphere (and perhaps a little beer), people are more open and ready to share their culture with outsiders – which is what travelling is all about. Here's a sneak peek at some of our favourites, and some ideas on how to incorporate them into your trip.

Lit up
InsideAsia's Rie Johnson
enjoys the Hoi An
lantern festival



SAPPORO SNOW FESTIVAL, JAPAN

WHAT? The Yuki Matsuri festival is a winter celebration of epic proportions. For a few days every year, the streets and open spaces of the city of Sapporo are filled with giant snow and ice sculptures up to 20 metres tall and 30 metres wide, with toboggan runs, games, ice bars and all sorts of fun for all ages. If you've ever fancied seeing a giant replica of the pyramids of Giza in snow, this is the festival for you!

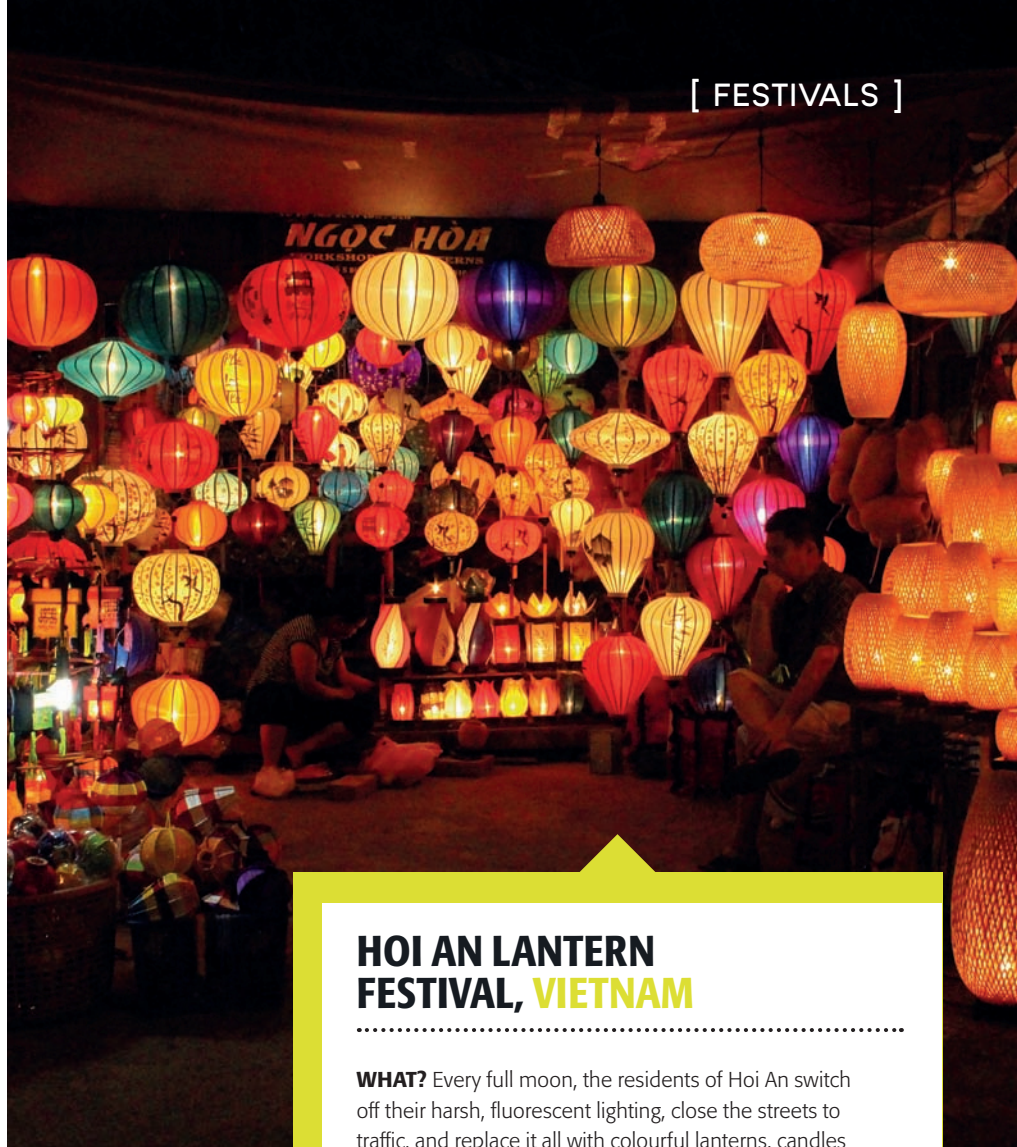
WHERE? Sapporo is the capital of Hokkaido, the second-largest of Japan's four main islands – and definitely the chilliest. It's best-known for its dramatic landscapes, excellent skiing conditions, warming hot springs and beautiful red-crowned cranes – so you'll have plenty of options to keep you busy once you've exhausted the festival.

WHEN? 5-11 February 2016.

GET IN: *There are numerous daily flights from Tokyo to Sapporo (1h 35 min). From 26 March 2016, the bullet train will also link Tokyo to Hakodate in southern Hokkaido, from where it is a 3.5hr train ride to Sapporo.*

STAY: *The Keio Plaza Hotel is a high-end option in an excellent city-centre location.*

SUGGESTED TRIP: *Our 14-night Winter Highlights Small Group Tour combines the snow festival with destinations on both Hokkaido and Honshu main island. Our 2017 tour is now booking – call our Japan experts on 0117 244 3463 to find out more.*



HOI AN LANTERN FESTIVAL, VIETNAM

WHAT? Every full moon, the residents of Hoi An switch off their harsh, fluorescent lighting, close the streets to traffic, and replace it all with colourful lanterns, candles and traditional music, taking the old town back to yesteryear. For the Vietnamese, the night of the full moon is a time to pay your respects to your ancestors, for monks to hold candlelit ceremonies at temples, and for fishermen to pay tribute to the goddess of the sea. The streets on this night are packed with people playing traditional games, eating delicious vegetarian food and buying lotus-shaped cardboard lanterns to float on the river – to bring luck, happiness and love.

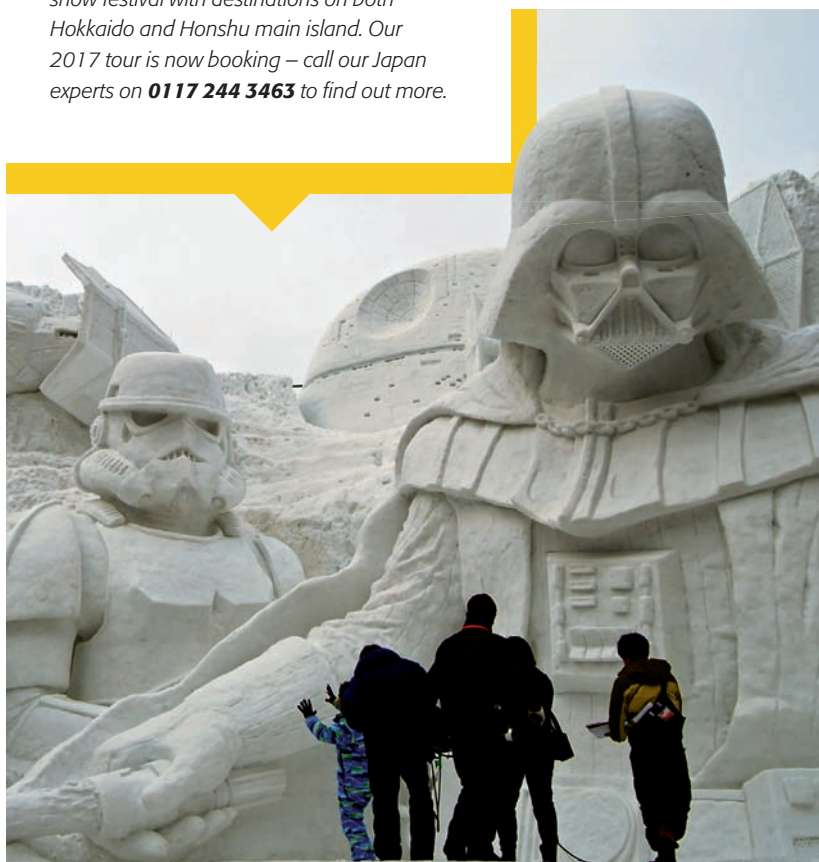
WHERE? Hoi An is an ancient port town on the coast of central Vietnam. Designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site for its beautifully preserved 15th-century buildings and jumble of international influences, it is always a firm favourite with visitors.

WHEN? On the 14th day of every lunar month. For more info and dates, see 'Hoi An Lantern Festival: 2016 dates' on our blog: www.insidevietnamblog.com.

GET IN: *Hoi An is 30 minutes by road from Danang Airport, which is accessible by domestic flight from either Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City (both 1h 15 min).*

STAY: *The deluxe Nam Hai is an excellent beachside option, while the Ancient House Village is a great choice on the edge of the town.*

SUGGESTED TRIP: *We have several group tours that take advantage of the monthly lantern festival. Vietnam & Cambodia Uncovered catches the festival on 23 January and 13 November (from £2,350 pp for 13 nights exc. intl. flights); Highlights of Vietnam coincides with it on 21 of February (from £1,595 pp for 11 nights exc. intl. flights). Call our Indochina experts on 0117 244 3464 to find out more.*



HUE FESTIVAL, VIETNAM

WHAT? Get ready for bright lights, giant dragons and plenty of fanfare. This is Vietnam's largest celebration of culture, featuring large-scale performances of international dance, music and acrobatics; art exhibitions; kite-flying; firework displays; historical reconstructions and more.

WHERE? Hue, central Vietnam. As the seat of the Nguyen Emperors, Vietnam's last royal dynasty, Hue is steeped in history. The Imperial City, a UNESCO World Heritage Site that serves as the focal point for festivities, is modelled on the Forbidden City in Beijing and provides festival-goers with a fascinating and evocative link to the past.

WHEN? 29 April – 4 May 2016

GET IN: It is about 2.5 hours by car from Danang Airport to the city of Hue. Danang is accessible by domestic flight from Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City (both 1h 15 min).

STAY: The art deco luxury of La Residence Hotel & Spa and the high-end Pilgrimage Village are our top picks.

SUGGESTED TRIP: Our Magnificent Vietnam Small Group Tour coincides with the 2016 Hue Festival. From £3,175 pp for 12 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call our Indochina experts on **0117 244 3464** to find out more.



TAKAYAMA FESTIVALS, JAPAN

WHAT? The floats are the big draw for Takayama Festivals – and we mean *big*. These floats, or *yatai*, are huge, brilliantly ornate, 17th-century wheeled carts, decorated with intricate wood carvings, embroidered drapes, and gilded metal sculptures. Each float is crowned with its own set of beautiful marionette puppets, and is lit up at night with hundreds of paper lanterns to be paraded through the streets of town. They're the centrepiece of both events: held in both spring and autumn, the Takayama Festival is an ancient ritual based around the farming calendar. This is one of Japan's largest and most impressive festivals, and a chance to see a ritual virtually unchanged since as far back as the 16th century.

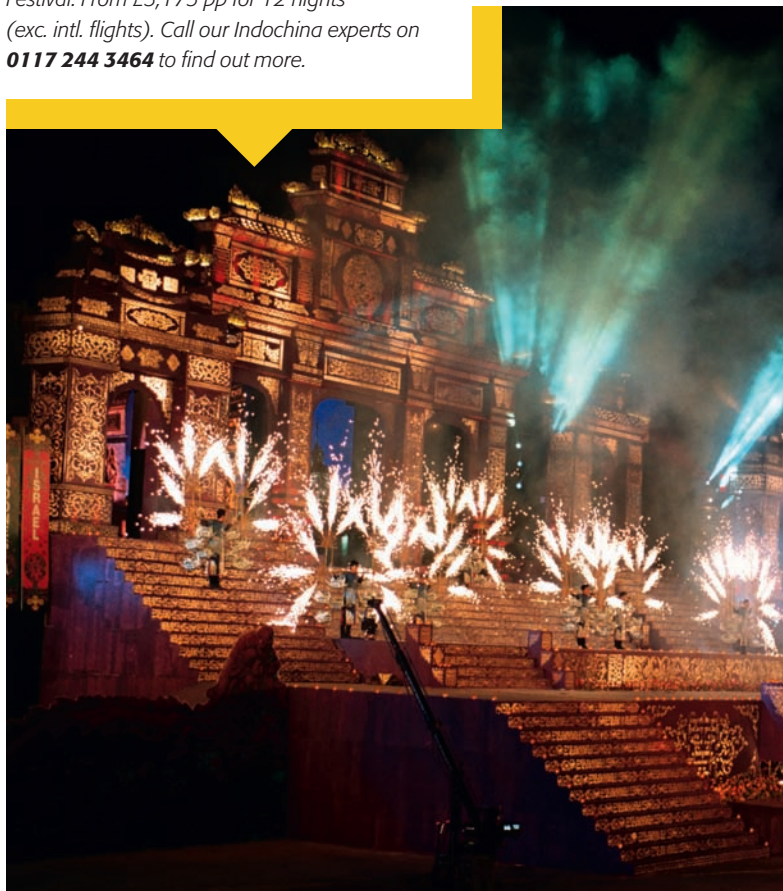
WHERE? Takayama is a town in the mountains of central Japan, best known for its traditional crafts, its well-preserved old-town district, and the beauty of the surrounding Hida countryside.

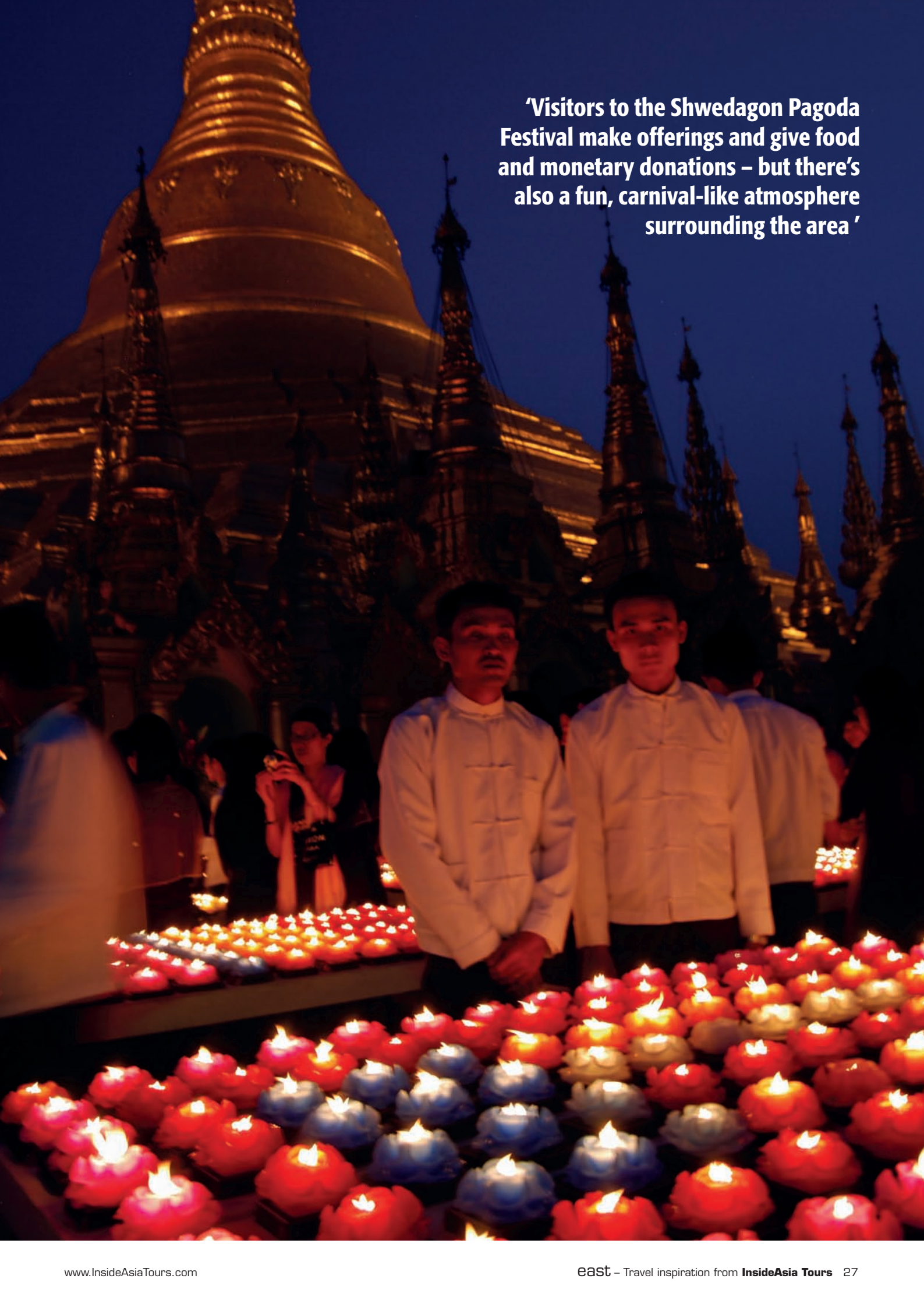
WHEN? 14-15 April & 9-10 October.

GET IN: Takayama can be reached in three hours from Kyoto, or 2h 20 min from Kanazawa (by local train and bullet train). Matsumoto is just under two hours away by road.

STAY: Our favourite overnight options are the Japanese-style Yamakyu and the Tanabe Ryokan inn (for something a bit more luxe). Be aware that accommodation rates rise significantly during festival dates.

SUGGESTED TRIP: Our Traditional Japan itinerary spends two nights in Takayama, and can be arranged to coincide with either of the Takayama festivals. From £1,710 pp for 14 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call our Japan experts on **0117 244 3463** to find out more.



A photograph of the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon, Myanmar, at night. The golden stupa is illuminated against a dark blue sky. In the foreground, two men in white traditional Burmese jackets stand behind a large display of lit candles. The candles are in the shape of lotus flowers and are colored red, blue, and white. Other visitors are visible in the background, some taking photos.

‘Visitors to the Shwedagon Pagoda Festival make offerings and give food and monetary donations – but there’s also a fun, carnival-like atmosphere surrounding the area’

SHWEDAGON PAGODA FESTIVAL, BURMA

WHAT? If you're going to visit one of Burma's pagoda festivals, why not aim for the largest? Visitors to the huge Shwedagon pagoda can make offerings and give food and monetary donations to the monks for the upkeep of the stupa. But in addition to the religious ritual, there is also a fun, carnival-like atmosphere surrounding the area – with drama, music, dancing and plenty of delicious street food. The Shwedagon Pagoda Festival was banned from 1988, not to be reinstated until 2012. This means that the 2016 celebration is only the fifth such event in 20 years!

WHERE? Located in Yangon (AKA Rangoon), the former capital of Burma, Shwedagon is the most important Buddhist pagoda in the country and is believed to contain relics of the four Buddhas of the present age: a staff, a water filter, a piece of robe, and eight strands of hair. According to historians, the pagoda was probably built between the sixth and tenth centuries AD. However legend says it is much older, dating back more than 2,600 years. If correct, Shwedagon is the oldest Buddhist pagoda in the world.

WHEN? 23 March - 6 April 2016.

GET IN: Yangon is the starting point for most trips to Burma, and is served by numerous international flights daily. Domestic flights link Yangon to Mandalay (1h 15 min), Heho/Inle Lake (1h 15 min) or Nyaung U/Bagan (1h 20 min).

STAY: The Belmond Governor's Residence offers impeccable colonial luxury, while the Yangon East Hotel is a great choice for those on a tighter budget.

SUGGESTED TRIP: Our Beautiful Burma tour is timed to take advantage of the Shwedagon Pagoda Festival. From £2,575 pp for 13 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call our Burma experts on **0117 244 3465** to find out more.



AOI MATSURI, JAPAN

WHAT? It would be difficult to think of a festival more steeped in Japanese history and culture than Kyoto's Aoi Matsuri, or 'Hollyhock Festival'. In fact, such was the festival's importance during the Heian Period (794-1185) that the Japanese word for festival came to refer to this celebration alone. The Aoi Matsuri is celebrated with a huge parade, wherein participants dressed in Heian Period costume escort a ceremonial princess from the Imperial Palace to Kamigamo Shrine to engage in horse races and traditional dances. The princess's retinue consists of around 500 attendants, accompanied by portable shrines, horseback riders, and ox-drawn carts.

WHERE? Kyoto was Japan's imperial capital for over 1,000 years, an illustrious history that has left it with a vast legacy of temples, shrines, gardens and historical buildings. So monumental is Kyoto's cultural heritage that the city was even spared bombing during WWII, and it is affectionately known as the 'City of 10,000 Temples'.

WHEN? 15 May

GET IN: Kyoto has excellent transport links to the rest of Japan. It is just 1.5 hours by train from Kansai International Airport, or 2h 15 min by bullet train from Tokyo.

STAY: We love Kyoto's machiya, or converted townhouse residences, for an unusual accommodation option in the city. The Ritz-Carlton Kyoto is an excellent Western-style luxury option, while the low-budget Yoshimizu Ryokan offers traditional charm in a secluded park.

SUGGESTED TRIP: Nearly all of our tailored itineraries make a stop in Kyoto, and can be organised to take advantage of the Aoi Matsuri. Our Golden Route itinerary is a great example, from £1,280 pp for 9 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call our Japan experts on **0117 244 3463** to find out more.





Phở

Probably Vietnam's most famous dish, *pho* is a kind of noodle soup packed with meat, herbs, and flat rice noodles in a flavoursome broth. Eat this at anytime, anywhere!



Chả giò/Nem rán

Called *nem ran* in the north and *cho gio* in the south, the fried spring roll is one of Vietnam's most famous snacks, popular throughout the country and beyond.



Bánh tôm

A prawn fritter commonly eaten as a snack in Hanoi.



Bún chả

Hanoi's signature lunch dish: grilled pork and rice.



Bún bò Huế

A type of spicy soup eaten for lunch in Hue, consisting of rice vermicelli, lemongrass, and beef.

Insider's guide to... Vietnam's street food

Vietnam is a Goliath of the culinary world, with a national cuisine that is adored all over the globe. Whether it's a fried spring roll or a bowl of *pho*, the chances are you've tried Vietnamese at some point in your life – and if you haven't, you're in for a treat.



Bia hơi

The perfect way to wash down any street food in Vietnam is a *bia hơi*: local draught beer, bought by the glass. *Mot, hai, ba, yo!* (That's 'cheers', in case you were wondering...)



Gỏi cuốn/Nem cuốn

Fresh spring rolls are often served as a starter at restaurants throughout Vietnam, and usually include some combination of prawns, pork, and vegetables. They are called *nem cuon* in the north and *goi cuon* in the south.

Bánh mì

Vietnam's ubiquitous lunchtime favourite is the *banh mi*, or baguette sandwich, originally introduced by the colonial French and most commonly found in southern Vietnam. The classic *banh mi* includes cold cuts, cheese, vegetables and pâté.

Bánh xèo

Literally 'sizzling cakes', *banh xeo* are savoury fried pancakes stuffed with pork, shrimp, diced green onion and bean sprouts. A common dinner dish in southern Vietnam.



Cao lầu

The signature lunch dish of Hoi An: flat noodles, lettuce, herbs, bean sprouts, and barbecued crispy pork.



Hải sản nướng

Hai san nuong, or fresh barbecued seafood marinated in lemon, chilli and fish sauce, is a speciality of Ho Chi Minh City. Prawns, clams and squid are particular favourites!



Ho Chi Minh City

DO IT: Our Culinary Vietnam itinerary covers the entire country and is perfect for foodies. From £1,875 pp for 11 nights (ex. intl. flights). Call our Vietnam experts on **0117 244 3464** to find out more.



Your travels

We love hearing where InsideAsia travellers have been exploring and will be printing our favourites. **This issue:** the Ford family visit Japan during peak cherry blossom season...

Blue skies, cherry blossom and Zozo-ji Temple, just ten minutes' walk from our hotel at Shiba Park... Tokyo was everything we could have hoped for on our first exciting afternoon. Everywhere we looked was a visual feast.

With Tokyo Tower making a dramatic backdrop to the temple and the smoke wafting through the cherry blossom from the huge incense burner, it was difficult to know where to look first. I spotted someone in a kimono; the boys spied 'Pocari Sweat' in a vending machine. As is the way with our family, camera phones were out and we instantly split in several different directions!

We only had a few days to spend in Tokyo. The city is vast and we realized that we couldn't possibly see everything on our long to-do list, so we had to prioritise. We decided to investigate Asakusa, home to Tokyo's most sacred temple. We all loved it. Not only is the temple simply spectacular in terms of its



colour, its garden, its pagoda and shrines, but also for the hustle and bustle of the surrounding ancient streets full of traders, tourists and worshippers. It feels authentic and timeless to visit shops that only sell hairpins or paper crafts – or to take a ride in a rickshaw through the back streets eating green tea ice cream!

Of all the cities we visited, my 16-year-old would say that Hiroshima was his favourite place. The Peace Memorial museum was eye-opening and very poignant. While my husband and teenage boys were totally absorbed in the history, it was too much for

our 11-year-old daughter so we whiled away the time in the Peace Park. While you couldn't have a trip to Hiroshima without acknowledging the absolute devastation of the past, the city has so much else to offer in terms of restaurants and shopping and we had lots of fun here.

Miyajima Island (see p16), just a short ferry ride away, was a real highlight of the whole trip – and the main reason we chose to stay in Hiroshima. Shrouded in mist, the island is picture-perfect with its 'floating' torii gate and Itsukushima Shrine. The tame deer that eat anything (including our map) wander among the tourists, and the craft shops are filled with lovely artisan products that we hadn't seen on the mainland. Away from the touristy waterfront, the Misen trail takes you to Daisho-in temple, which is as intriguing as it is beautiful.

These were just a few of our highlights, but there were countless more and we left Japan knowing we must go back soon. There is too much yet to be discovered! **Janne Ford**



east

PHOTO COMPETITION

Fancy winning
a week-long
trip to Japan?

To celebrate the first-ever *East* Travel Photo Competition, we are giving our readers a chance to win a trip to Japan for two, including eight nights' accommodation and return flights from London to Tokyo, courtesy of ANA! The trip will include four nights at the Park Hotel in Tokyo (home to some of Tokyo's best views), two nights at the luxurious

Hyatt Regency in Kyoto, and a final two nights at the Sunroute Plaza in Tokyo's vibrant Shinjuku district. We'll also provide two days of private guiding and cover your transport throughout the trip.

This issue's theme is 'water', and can be interpreted in any way you choose. The only rule is that entries must be taken in one of our destination countries: Japan, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, or Burma.

HOW TO ENTER:

- 1) Send your favourite image/s to east@insideasiatours.com by 5pm (GMT) on 1 April 2016, with a short caption for each entry. Include your name, address and contact details.
- 2) Read our terms and conditions (at: www.insideasiatours.com/eastmagazine)
- 3) Click send! The winner and runners up will have their shots published in the next issue of *East*.

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