

Issue 002 // Summer 2016

east



Travel inspiration from **InsideAsia Tours**

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A CAMERA
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Ancient adventure

Hiking and culture
on Japan's Kumano
Kodo trail



Top train trips // Ultimate wildlife experiences // Best boat tours



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Welcome to *East*



Train journeys, hiking and hot spring baths: this was how it all got started for InsideAsia Tours, so it feels a bit like the old days to have fabulous features on all three in this issue.

Our railway round-up includes Japan's iconic bullet train as well as the rickety, decidedly low-tech Battambang *Bamboo*

Train in Cambodia. On the hiking front, our Japan expert Ali takes us on an adventure along the ancient paths of the Kumano Kodo. Meanwhile, if you've never taken a Japanese hot spring bath, our insider guide will open your eyes to this most civilised of pastimes.

In addition to all this, we've got a head-to-head between Hanoi and Saigon (spoiler: you'll want to visit them both), a rundown of the best boat trips in Indochina, and an elephant experience in Laos – the highlight of Ruth's recent trip.

Finally, it is always great to hear from our customers – so a massive thanks is owed to Lesley and Alistair Greenhill for their piece on Burma and their beautiful photos.

We hope you enjoy the second issue of *East*!




ALASTAIR DONNELLY & SIMON KING, DIRECTORS OF INSIDEASIA TOURS

Just back...



Liam Koehler

Just back from: CAMBODIA & LAOS

Liam celebrated 20 years of Luang Prabang's World Heritage status in the city and checked out Cambodia's second UNESCO site on his trip to Indochina.

Memorable moment: Admiring the views from Preah Vihear, only recently declared safe for tourists.



Violet Cloutman

Just back from: VIETNAM

Violet just got back from a whirlwind trip through Vietnam, encompassing the Full Moon Lantern Festival in Hoi An, a cruise on Halong Bay and the imperial city of Hue.

Memorable moment: Trekking through the incredible caves of Phong Nha National Park.



Tara Engelen

Just back from: BURMA

Tour leader Tara recently returned from Burma, where she led our Beautiful Burma Small Group Tour and researched day trips from Yangon. Now she's back in her adopted home of Vietnam!

Memorable moment: Bath time at the Green Hill Valley Elephant Camp.



Graeme Dunn

Just back from: JAPAN

Website manager Graeme has travelled all over the world, but until recently he'd never been to Japan! He had a fantastic introduction as he travelled around the island of Kyushu.

Memorable moment: Taking a helicopter ride over Japan's most active volcano.

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insidescoop

NEWS & WHAT'S NEW IN OUR DESTINATIONS

Up, up and away...

Soar above the jungles of Ngapali in a new tour aboard a hot air balloon

 BURMA

Ngapali takes off

See a side of Burma that very few visitors have ever witnessed, skimming over the restricted jungles of Ngapali in a hot air balloon

For those who have heard of Ngapali, it's likely that its name will conjure images of palm-fringed coast, white beaches and the pristine waters of the Bay of Bengal. Until recently, that's the only side of the region that most visitors to Burma (Myanmar) were allowed to see. But this is all about to change thanks to Oriental Ballooning. Their new flight route gives travellers an unparalleled chance to look past government-imposed boundaries and into the jungles of Burma.

Ngapali (pronounced 'nah-pally' and said to have been named after Naples) is a tiny slice of beach on Burma's western coast, and currently

the only part of the troubled Rakhine State that travellers are allowed to visit. The rest of the region, like many of the more remote corners of Burma, is virtually unknown to tourism, partly for political reasons and partly because the infrastructure just doesn't exist yet.

What these new balloon flights over the area reveal are great swathes of jungle stretching over a thousand kilometres along the western coast of Burma, ranging up mountainsides and along river valleys studded with temples, treetop-skipping monkeys and exotic birds darting through the morning mist. It's a wild, untouched side of the country that you'll struggle to encounter

anywhere else – even in regions such as Putao and Kengtung, where the scenery is stunning but trips are largely restricted to established trails.

Oriental Ballooning already run fantastic flights over Inle Lake and Bagan, but we can't help but think that this new region is more exciting than anything we've seen before.

DO IT: Our Luxury Burma itinerary includes a balloon flight over Ngapali, from £3,600 for 13 nights (exc. intl. flights). The balloon season runs from early December until mid-March. For more information, call our Burma experts on **0117 244 3465**.



CAMBODIA

Country living

Once one of the greatest cities in the Khmer Empire, today the 'Citadel of Cats' is a forgotten ruin, tucked away in a pretty but little-visited corner of the countryside. It also offers a wonderful chance to immerse yourself in rural Cambodian life.

Run by excellent local project Community-Based Tourism (CBT), the Banteay Chhmar homestay programme allows visitors to stay in the homes of local families and learn about their everyday lives, with proceeds going to support the local community.

Spending the night at Banteay Chhmar is a fantastic way to experience rural Cambodian life away from the crowds and to support the development of sustainable tourism in the region. For those who want to immerse themselves in local culture while contributing to its preservation, we can't recommend Banteay Chhmar highly enough.

DO IT: Our Hidden Temples of Cambodia itinerary includes a night at a Banteay Chhmar homestay, from £1,740 for 10 nights (exc. intl. flights). For more information, call our Cambodia experts on **0117 244 3464**.

VIETNAM

Con Dao calling

Until now, those who wanted to visit Vietnam's beautiful Con Dao Island either had to shell out the GDP of a small country for a room at the Six Senses (à la the Jolie-Pitts) or risk a less-than-luxurious experience at one of the island's questionable budget options. For the traveller in search of a little treat that doesn't cost the earth, the pickings were slim to non-existent.

That's why we're so excited to hear that the Poulo Condor Boutique Resort & Spa will be opening its doors in summer 2016, offering a brand of affordable, colonial-style luxury seen nowhere

else on the island. It's still not cheap (you'll be paying in excess of £200 per night), but it's not eye-wateringly expensive either. With excellent eco credentials to boot (the hotel is built with local materials and runs entirely on solar power), this is going to be an instant hit.

DO IT: We recommend adding a beach extension in Con Dao to our Classic Vietnam itinerary (from £1,880 for 12 nights), which takes in the country's most iconic sights and concludes in Ho Chi Minh City. Get in touch with one of our Vietnam experts on **0117 244 3464** to find out more.



BURMA

Commemorating Burma's 'Death Railway'

Viewed purely as a feat of engineering, the building of the Burma Railway was a staggering accomplishment. Over 415 km of track and 600 bridges were thrown together in just one year using minimal tools and scant supplies, and under exceptionally harsh conditions. It came at a terrible cost, though.

An estimated 100,000 Burmese and 13,000 Allied POWs were killed in its construction: one man died for every sleeper laid. It's become known as the 'Death Railway', and at the end of World War II over 100 Japanese were tried for war crimes related to its construction.

To commemorate this tragic period, Burma opened a major new museum in January. Located at Thanbyuzayat (the north-western end of the railway), the museum covers four acres of land and offers visitors photographs, sculptures, paintings and 3D images relating to the railway's construction. It is a dark but important period in history, and the new museum is well worth visiting if you are interested in either Burma's past or World War II.

DO IT: To visit the museum, we recommend considering our Kipling's Burma itinerary. From £2,410 for 13 nights (exc. intl. flights). We can arrange a visit to the museum from Mawlamyine. Get in touch with one of our Burma experts on **0117 244 3465** to find out more.

JAPAN

Fuji Rock Festival line-up announced

Imagine a rock festival where festering portaloos, strewn litter and a ripe-smelling crowd are replaced by incredible alpine views, steaming hot spring baths and pristine lavatories – complete with running water! In short: imagine a festival run by the Japanese. Welcome to Fuji Rock.

This year's headliners are the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Sigur Rós and

Beck, supported by a stellar cast of Japanese and international artists. And when you're not getting into the music you'll be hard pressed to get bored – whether you're participating in a steak-eating competition, riding the cablecar to the top of a nearby mountain, or just observing Japan's coolest and quirkiest in their natural habitat.

DO IT: Our Fuji Rock itinerary includes a pre-festival night out in Tokyo, transport on the bullet train, and a tent waiting for you on arrival. From £900 pp for 7 nights (exc. intl. flights). Fuji Rock 2016 will take place from 22-24 July. Call one of our Japan experts on **0117 244 3463** to find out more.



JAPAN

Cartography controversy

Ahead of the Tokyo Olympics in 2020, Japan's official mapmaking body has proposed some changes to foreign-language maps. Not exactly contentious, you might think – but you'd be wrong. One suggestion has proved particularly divisive: the replacement of the swastika, which is currently used to mark Japanese temples, with a three-storey pagoda.

The swastika is an ancient Sanskrit symbol considered sacred by various religions – Buddhism included – and has been used since before the 2nd century BC. Sadly, it is much better known in the West as the symbol of Nazi Germany.

To avoid confusion, the Geospatial Information Authority of Japan (GSI) has suggested that temples should be marked with a small pagoda on maps for foreigners, but critics argue that this would be pandering to the misconceptions of visitors, who should instead familiarise themselves with the symbol's cultural importance.

The GSI has promised to conduct a public survey before making a final decision.



Discover a hidden Burmese paradise

Trailing for hundreds of miles along the southern edge of Burma, the Myeik (or Mergui) Archipelago just might be Southeast Asia's last undiscovered paradise.

There's hardly a building to be found among the 800-odd islands, their jungle-clad profiles rising sharply out of the Andaman Sea. It's also often claimed that there's more wildlife below the waves than above, making for fantastic snorkelling and diving opportunities.

It is against this stunning natural backdrop that Burma Boating offer their luxurious multi-day sailing trips. Burma Boating was the first business (excluding dive boats) to begin operating tours in the archipelago, and they are trying hard to ensure that their impact on the region is

a positive one. Their fleet of seven yachts leaves no carbon footprint; they buy as much as possible from local communities; and they support a wide variety of initiatives in conservation, medical care and the arts.

Whether you choose to rent a cabin or charter a vessel in its entirety, this is a fantastic way to explore the untouched jungles, deserted white beaches and teeming coral reefs of this amazing archipelago.

DO IT: Our Exclusive Burma *itinerary includes five nights aboard a luxurious yacht in the Andaman Sea, from £4,800 for 13 nights (exc. intl. flights).* Get in touch with one of our Burma experts on **0117 244 3465** to find out more.

JAPAN

Monopoly gets a crafty update



We've seen 3D New York Monopoly, Oceanopoly, even Episcopopoly... so one might be forgiven for assuming that the list of Monopoly variations must be nearly at its end. But no: to celebrate its 300th anniversary, the Japanese company Nakagawa Masashichi Shoten has released a 'Traditional Japanese Arts & Crafts Edition' of the iconic board game.

In this beautiful collector's edition, decorated with the *asanoha* motif often found on Japanese kimono, the aim is to form a monopoly on handmade toys, traditional porcelain and folk art. Unfortunately, they have only released 5,000 games for the Japanese market so far – here's hoping for an English translation! www.nakagawa-masashichi.jp

Pan-Asia Railway

What was once a colonial pipe dream is set to become reality this May, as China launches its ambitious plan to build a great Pan-Asia Railway. The network, which would link the countries of mainland Southeast Asia, is a massive undertaking and will not be completed anytime soon. However, for a region where many rail networks are either antiquated or non-existent, this could be fantastic news for travellers, making it far easier to move between countries.



LAOS

Will UNESCO go potty for Laos?

The Plain of Jars is one of the world's great mysteries. What are 2,500 giant stone jars doing scattered across hundreds of square kilometres in central Laos? No one really knows.

So it is good news that in 2016 Laos will be submitting an application for World Heritage status for the region, which could channel much-needed funds into preserving and researching the jar sites. If granted, UNESCO recognition would also mean greater efforts to clear unexploded ordnance from

the area, which was subject to one of the most intensive bombing campaigns in history during the Vietnam War. Good luck, Laos!

DO IT: Our Northern Laos Explorer itinerary combines a visit to the Plain of Jars with some of the finest lesser-known destinations in Laos, from £2,510 for 15 nights (exc. intl. flights). Get in touch with one of our Laos experts on **0117 244 3464** to find out more.



JAPAN

Explore Tokyo's architectural revolution

Few places in the world have such a wealth of cutting-edge architecture as Tokyo. As Tyler Palma, the brains behind this new day tour, will gladly explain, this is partly out of necessity. After all, this is one of the world's most densely populated regions balanced on top of one of its most seismically active zones. Innovation is a requirement, not a luxury.

The guided tour begins in the upmarket district of Ginza, with the seminal Maison Hermès by Renzo Piano and the eye-catching facades of Armani, Dior, Gucci and Chanel. From here, you'll get an introduction to the Metabolist Movement with a visit to Kenzo Tange's Pritzker Prize-winning Olympic Stadium and Kisho Kurokawa's unmistakable Nakagin Capsule Tower; admire self-taught architect Tadao

Ando's Omotesando Hills; gaze on the Jewels of Aoyama by Jun Mitsui & Associates; and marvel at the Shibuya Ice Cubes and matchstick-esque Sunny Hills, among many, many more.

You could spend countless hours exploring Tokyo's amazing architecture and feel as though you haven't scratched the surface, but this day tour definitely tilts the scales in your favour.

DO IT: Our architecture day tour can be included in any itinerary that stops in Tokyo, and can be tailor-made to suit your personal interests. We recommend adding it to our Japan Arts Trail itinerary, from £1,520 pp for 15 nights (excl. intl. flights). Call our Japan experts on **0117 244 3463** to find out more.

BURMA

A little slice of Japan in Yangon

Old Japanese trams that once trundled through the city of Hiroshima have been given a new lease of life in Burma. The Yangon electric railway has been reinstated almost a century after its last trams stopped running in 1921. The new line was jointly funded by Burma and Japan, and currently plies a three-mile route along Strand Road. Japanese Ambassador Tateshi Higuchi recently explained that this is just the first step in the modernisation of Yangon's lumbering and little-used circular railway – which will be good news for locals and visitors alike.

DO IT: Jump aboard the Yangon tram on your next trip to Burma. Our Best of Burma itinerary begins and ends in the city, from £1,060 for 8 nights. Call our Burma experts on **0117 244 3465** to find out more.



Picture perfect

The Nachi Pagoda, backed by its famous 133-metre-high waterfall – is one of the highlights of the Kumano Kodo region



A SOLO PILGRIMAGE



Following in the footsteps of samurai and priests,
Ali Muskett goes in search of a spiritual side of Japan as
she walks the pilgrimage routes of the Kumano Kodo

When the sun goes down (right) The end of a hard day's walking along the stunning Daimonzaka route; (below) my lunchbox

Tired and physically exhausted, I stopped still in the middle of the forest and listened. All I could hear was a slight rustling in the leaves above me as

rain began to gently fall. Resting a hand carefully on the giant tree next to me, I felt its ancient bark beneath my fingers and steadied myself. I was slightly giddy, perhaps from the elevation (I'd lost count of the number of steps I had climbed), or perhaps it was the elation of thinking about what I had achieved that day. Or maybe I was just dehydrated and hungry.

I'm not a hiker, and to be honest I'm not even that fit, but the idea of a solo journey along the ancient paths of the Kumano Kodo appealed greatly. Inspired by the pilgrimages of Matsuo Basho, who wrote about his odyssey in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*; and by the writer Lesley Downer, who followed in his footsteps 300 years later; and Alan Booth, who also published tales of walking across Japan, I yearned to make my own pilgrimage.

hiked in small sections, taking just two to five nights to cover the main areas. Now it was my turn to follow in the footsteps of the pilgrims before me, if only for three days.

The journey begins...

Starting out from the ancient capital of Kyoto, I took an express train down the western coast of the Kii Peninsula to Tanabe. I like Kyoto a lot, but it's a massive, bustling city, full of tourists, and I was excited to be heading away from it all into what I hoped would be a quieter, more serene place. After arriving at Kii-Tanabe Station, I headed straight to the Tanabe City Kumano Tourist Information Centre where I had an appointment for my orientation.

A solo pilgrimage sounds like an exciting adventure on paper, but the reality of it was pretty scary. Even in Japan, one of the safest countries on the planet, I wondered if it was safe for a girl like me, with a terrible sense of direction, to simply set off into the forests alone. Fortunately, after my orientation with the fantastic staff at the tourist office I not

Ryokan and settled in for the evening. A dinner of local seafood cooked in broth and warmed over a small candle, accompanied by vegetables cut into the shape of maple leaves, was brought to my room. I washed it down with a local beer while poring over the maps I had spread out over the *tatami* floor.

The next morning, I refuelled on rice, fish and *miso* soup, then headed straight out to begin my adventure. Staff from the *ryokan* (inn) drove me to my starting point: Hosshinmon-oji. This is known as the 'gate of awakening of the aspiration to enlightenment', and marks the outermost entrance to Kumano Hongu Taisha's sacred precincts. From here on in it would be just me, the ground and the trees.

After excitedly taking a photo of the first official Kumano Kodo sign I spotted, I set off along a rather ordinary-looking road. Starting a hike like this is strange – I didn't know how long it would take me or exactly what to expect. I was alone in my own head, with just the sound of my feet on the ground to keep me going. Before long, I spotted another

'Tall, skinny trees towered above me, and a rough stone path laid into the mud stretched out ahead. This was more like it – this was what adventure looked like!'

Lacking in time, as one so often is in this modern world, I found the perfect solution. I couldn't take a three-month sabbatical to hike across Japan, but I could squeeze in a three-day hike.

The Kumano Kodo is a series of pilgrimage trails that criss-cross the Kii Peninsula. For over 1,000 years everyone from samurai warriors and aristocrats to priests and commoners have made the trek between the region's

Three Grand Shrines:

Kumano Hongu Taisha, Kumano Nachi Taisha and Kumano Hayatama Taisha. Compared with other sacred sites in Japan, where women were banned, everyone was (and still is) welcome in Kumano regardless of sect, class or gender.

These days, the well-preserved paths of the Kumano Kodo can be

only felt ready, I felt reassured. They armed me with maps, information, timetables and even a weather forecast for the days ahead. My accommodation was confirmed, lunchboxes ordered, and luggage forwarding pre-arranged.

One of the most exciting things they gave me was a small clear plastic wallet containing my 'Dual Pilgrim passport'. On one side was information about the Kumano Kodo, with spaces for me to collect red ink stamps from each location I visited, and on the other was the Camino de Santiago, or the Way of St James. These two pilgrimage routes are the only ones in the world to be designated UNESCO World Heritage sites, and the 'Dual Pilgrim' programme was developed to celebrate the stories of those who have completed both routes. I immediately decided I couldn't stop just at the Kumano Kodo and would have to head to Spain in the near future.

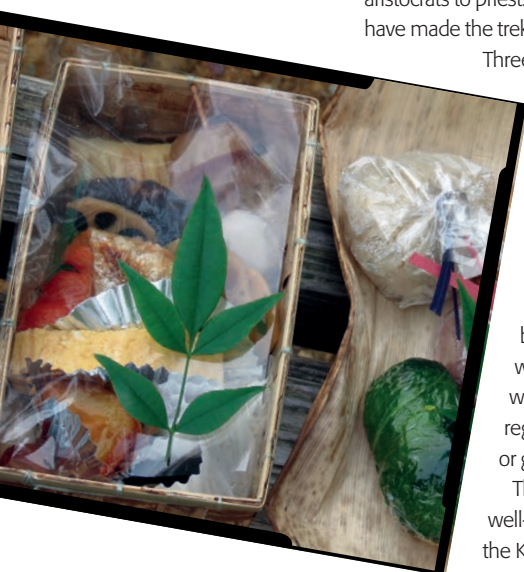
Stamp collecting

Leaving Tanabe behind, I travelled by bus for just under two hours to reach Kawayu Onsen. I checked in to the Fujiya

sign telling me to head off down a much rougher-looking path. It took me past houses and farmers' fields, and eventually to Mizunomi-oji, the first of my places of interest and the first point at which I could collect a stamp.

Passing through Mizunomi-oji, a small shrine with nothing much of note besides a statue of Jizo, protector of children and travellers, I suddenly found myself in the forest. Tall, skinny trees towered above me, and a rough stone path laid into the mud stretched out ahead. This was more like it – this was what adventure looked like!

The next rest point was Fushigami-oji, the site where pilgrims are said to have fallen to their knees and prayed after catching their first glimpse of the Grand Shrine in the distant valley below. I may not have quite fallen to my knees at the sight, but I certainly felt my breath catch in my throat. Blue-green mountains stretched out before me, and I could just make out the valley below. As I stood alone, taking it all in, slightly ominous grey clouds filled the sky.







Keeping afloat
The journey along the Kumano River to the grand shrines is a fantastic experience

Much to my delight, here was a small rest house where I could sit for a while and contemplate what I had seen so far over a steaming coffee made with hot spring water. I'm usually a fancy-lattes-with-syrups kind of girl, but this was the best coffee I'd had in a long time!

Refreshed and ready for more, I continued on to Kumano Hongu Taisha, the Grand Shrine and central point of the Kumano Kodo. They say life is often about the journey more than the destination, and although Kumano Hongu Taisha was impressive (in an understated kind of way), I would say that the journey to get there impressed me even more.

'Gold shone from the edges of the roof, and paper flags moved gently in the breeze. I saw a few other pilgrims while I sat at the shrine, but it still felt like I was in another world, and possibly another time'

There was something about arriving at such an important and grand shrine on foot, with the feeling of having walked so very far (although it was only around seven kilometres), that made me feel like a true pilgrim. I sat and looked at the plain, wooden buildings of Kumano Hongu Taisha a while, imagining those who had been there before me. Gold shone from the edges of the roof, and paper flags moved gently in the breeze. I saw a few other pilgrims while I sat at the shrine – more than I had seen all day so far – but still felt like I was in another world, and possibly another time.

Taking to the water

After a quick visit to Oyunohara, home to Japan's largest *torii* gate, I had a choice to make. I could either take a bus to Yunomine Onsen, where I would spend the night, or I could walk. My notes warned me that the 3.5-kilometre hike was 'relatively steep', but I chose the option of walking nonetheless.

From Kumano Hongu Taisha to Yunomine Onsen I walked the Dainichi-goe trail, which was one of the physically toughest things I have ever done, but utterly worth it. The trail took me up steep stone steps, which in turn led me to dirt paths through forests. Tree roots interrupted my path as I climbed higher and higher over Mount Dainichi. At one point I paused and held on to a tree to steady myself. Sweat dripped off me, and I didn't mind that it was starting to rain. I had committed to the hike now, and there was no turning back.

Yunomine Onsen appeared before me, just as the heavens opened and the rain began to fall. The Adumaya Ryokan wasn't far along the road, and I quickly headed in to take shelter from the rain. A tiny, simple hot spring bath was waiting for me, and my legs couldn't have been happier. After a dinner of salty, grilled *ayu* (sweetfish), I settled back on my futon and listened to the rain fall.





I awoke fearful of the weather, but found a glorious, sunny day waiting for me. A bus took me to Hitari, just 30 minutes away, where I met the guide who would be taking me on a traditional boat cruise along the Kumano River. There was a group of about nine of us, and once we had all put on our lifejackets and customary conical straw hats, we clambered into a tiny narrow boat and set off.

The guide was fantastic, speaking both English and Japanese throughout the tour, and explaining a lot of the sights along the way. The river glistened before us, reflecting the cloudless blue sky. The boat was powered by a small motor, but towards the end of the tour we cruised the old-fashioned way for a while to the sound of the guide playing a traditional wooden flute. The music pierced the air as I shut my eyes, allowing the sun to warm my face and feeling the boat drift and bob along the river.

More hiking followed this relaxing start to the day, and after a visit to Kumano Hayatama Taisha, one of the Three Grand Shrines, I took a bus to Daimonzaka and hiked to Nachi. This is home to Kumano Nachi Taisha, the third of the grand shrines I would visit, and also Nachi-no-Otaki, the tallest waterfall in Japan, which stands 133 metres high and 13 metres wide.

The route from Daimonzaka took me up an impressive cobblestone staircase, with steps that seemed to go on forever. Tall trees lined the path, and when I looked up I could barely see the tops. At the start of the trail I saw some hiking sticks – these are provided with the understanding that hikers will put them back when they are done. It's a great system, and I don't think I could have managed all of those steps without one.

Chasing waterfalls

I wouldn't call myself a massive fan of waterfalls, but Nachi-no-Otaki was breathtaking. Kumano Nachi Taisha's red pagoda is conveniently placed to make the perfect picture-postcard. I naturally lined up alongside the other tourists to capture the moment. This was miles away from the serenity of the forest, but still a fantastic part of the journey.

One more bus ride took me from Nachi back to the coast of Katsuura Onsen. My hotel, the Nakanoshima Hotel, was located on its own private island, so I hopped on a boat and headed out there. The sun was setting as the boat chugged towards the island, and I looked back at the mainland with a feeling of accomplishment.

My first solo pilgrimage had been an adventure, and a success. Although I was treading the ground so many had

Japan Essentials

CAPITAL CITY: Tokyo
MAIN RELIGIONS: Shinto and Buddhism
POPULATION: 127 million
LANGUAGE: Japanese
TIME: GMT+9

GETTING THERE: Flight time from London to Tokyo: 11h 50 mins (direct) or 13h 20+ (connecting). From £500 return.

WHEN TO GO: Japan is an excellent holiday destination all year round. Though the Kumano Kodo can be tackled at any time of year, the best conditions for hiking are Mar-Jun and Oct-Nov.

VISAS: Citizens of the UK do not need a visa to travel to Japan.

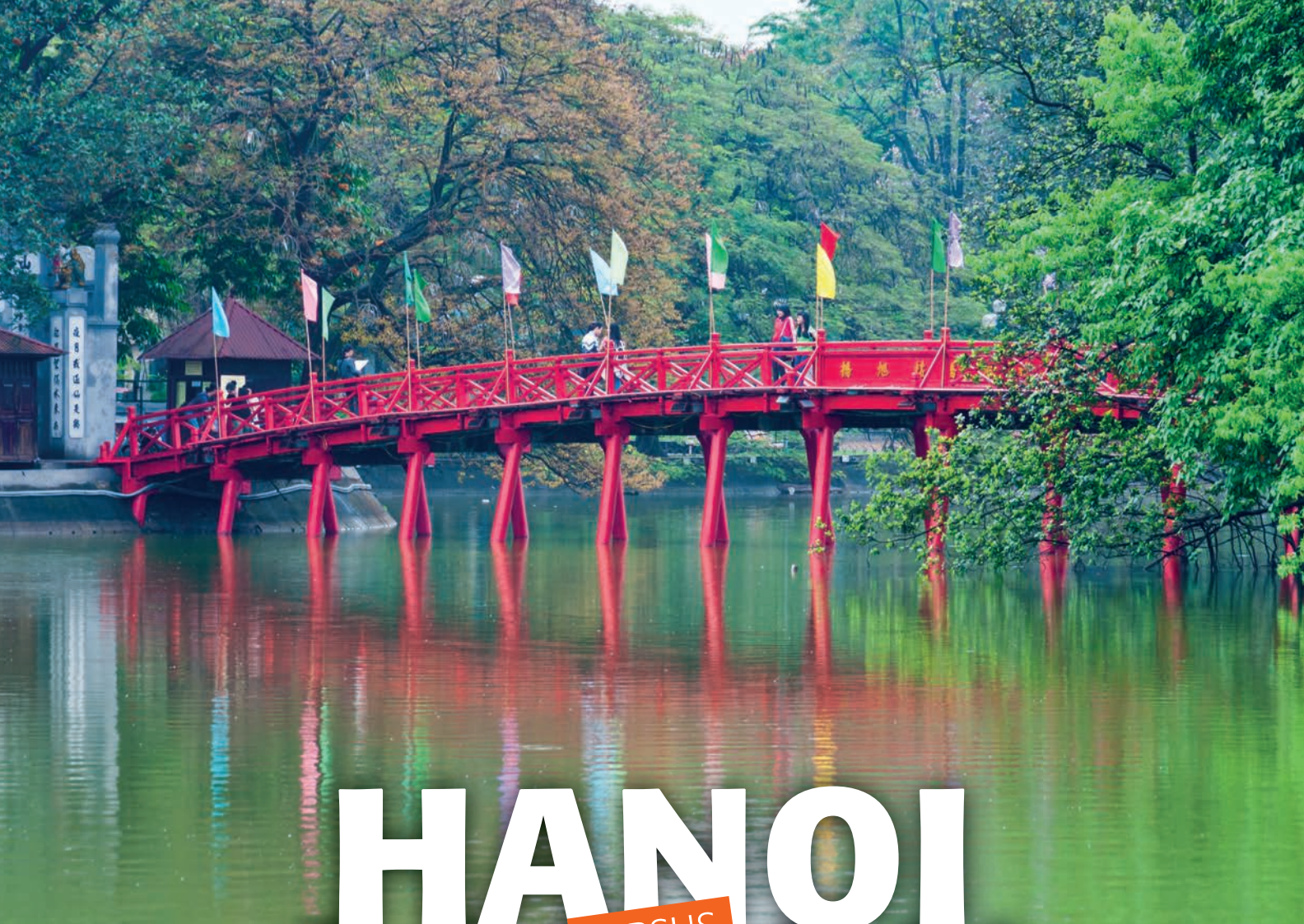
CURRENCY: Japanese yen (JPY). £1 = approx. JPY150.

MORE ONLINE: www.insidejapantours.com



walked before me, I felt like I had discovered something very few people knew existed. Tomorrow, I would be back in the bright lights of Osaka, but I vowed to bring a little bit of Kumano Kodo with me; a feeling that would travel with me on all of my future pilgrimages.

DO IT: We offer a range of Kumano Kodo hiking modules of varying length and difficulty, which are designed to be added to any tailored trip. Ali followed our Three-night Module (Gentle Walking), from £700 (exc. intl. flights). Get in touch with our Japan experts on **0117 244 3463** to find out more. 



HANOI VERSUS SAIGON

It's culture versus progress; old versus new! Things get heated as two of our experts discuss the finer points of Vietnam's North-South divide



North and south
Choose between
the gentler charms
of Hanoi and life in
Saigon's fast lane



WHAT'S IN A NAME?

After the Fall of Saigon in 1975, the conquering North Vietnamese renamed the city after their late leader: Ho Chi Minh. Though it's officially known as Ho Chi Minh City, the name Saigon is still commonly used by foreigners and Vietnamese alike.

Southern comforts

The North might have culture, but the South is Vietnam's modern metropolis

For those planning to visit Vietnam, the chances are that the northern capital of Hanoi and the southern hub of Saigon (AKA Ho Chi Minh City) will be right at the top of your list. Separated by a swathe of land over a thousand miles long, these two cities differ on almost every point – from food and culture to size, history, geography and climate. So if you're only able to visit one, which should it be? As ever, there's no easy answer.

SAIGON

LIAM KOEHLER



Before joining us as a travel consultant, Liam spent two years living in Saigon. Here, he flies the flag for his former home.

If you're looking for Vietnam's most energetic, creative and cutting-edge city, you've found it in Saigon. As a former resident myself,

there's no doubt in my mind that it's the most dynamic and progressive place in the country.

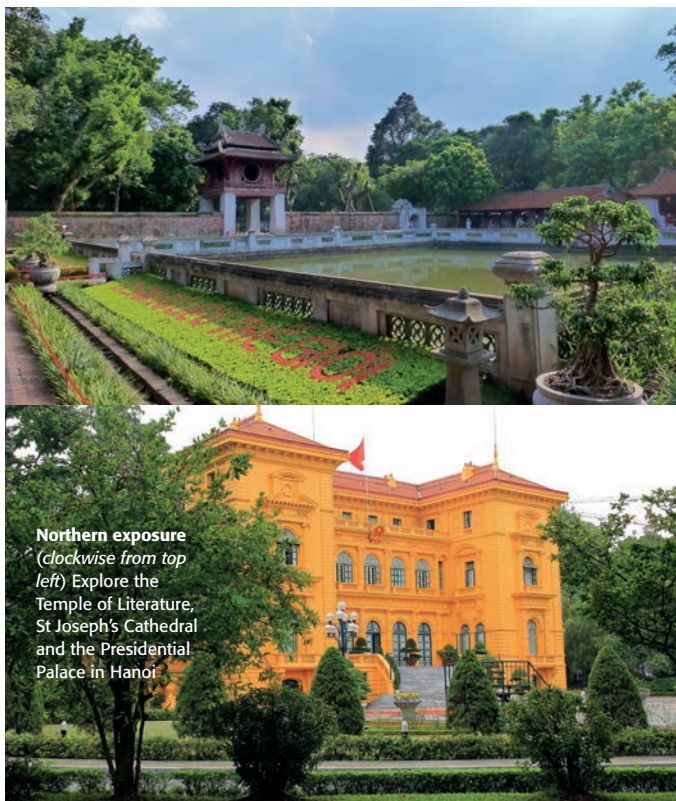
There's always a new art exhibition to go to, a new restaurant about to open, or a new band playing – the arts scene is constantly expanding and changing in so many exciting ways. Sure, there are exhibitions and gigs in Hanoi, but it's just not on the same level. You only need to look at the difference between Saigon's sleek skyscrapers and Hanoi's colonial style to see that this is a city that has embraced progress, and it is this forward-thinking attitude that gives Saigon its unique energy.

Hanoi might take the crown for ancient monuments, but Saigon's modern history is just as rich. Every traveller today has heard about the Vietnam War, and it's a primary source of interest for many visitors to the country. As most of the actual fighting occurred in the South, Saigon is home to the bulk of Vietnam's most fascinating war sites. The Cu Chi

Tunnels (a network of passages where the Viet Cong sheltered from American troops) make for a fascinating day trip, and the city itself is home to the country's finest collection of war memorabilia at the War Remnants Museum. In my opinion, these are both must-sees for anyone interested in the history of Vietnam.

Saigon also has the benefit of numerous excellent side trips, meaning that it's easily combined with a wide variety of destinations – an important consideration if you're short on time. The watery world of the Mekong Delta is an easy day trip or overnight excursion, and one of the country's finest beaches is just over four hours away by car at Mui Ne. Vietnam's best national park, Cat Tien, is also only three hours away by road (see p24). Sure, the North has Halong Bay and the highlands, but for its sheer variety of options, Saigon wins out.

For me, the choice is easy. If you want to experience a city on the move, it's Saigon all the way.



HANOI

TYLER PALMA



Working as an adventure tour leader, Tyler first made his home in Vietnam 15 years ago. Here, he explains why the northern capital still reigns supreme.

Sure, Saigon has glitz and glamour, but if it is the heart and soul of Vietnam that you are after, Hanoi is where you will find it. Where but Hanoi can you see so many layers of history coexisting in one place, from the tallest building in Vietnam (yes, Hanoi does high-rise too) to the thousand-year-old temples and winding tree-lined streets of the Old Quarter? With countless French, Chinese, Soviet and Southeast Asian influences all jostling for attention, Hanoi is a melting pot of architectural styles.

A day in Hanoi begins with French drip coffee and a pastry, or perhaps a bowl of *pho* and a walk around the serene Hoan Kiem Lake, where locals congregate in the morning to perform *t'ai chi*. Only in Hanoi can you step into the French-era glory of the old Post Office or Presidential Palace, see Vietnam's Confucian roots at the Temple of Literature, and catch a modern concerto at the old opera house all in one day. It is in Hanoi where you will meet the father of modern Vietnam with a visit to Ho Chi Minh's mausoleum and former residence. And it is

here that traditional culture splashes to life at the country's best water puppet theatre.

Visit the meandering streets of the Old Quarter and pull up a plastic stool to eat with the locals at a street-side food stall. Who knew that food this delicious could be so cheap? Of course, if street food isn't your style, you needn't worry. Hanoi's restaurants serve some of the finest food that Vietnam (and consequently the world) has to offer. Finish up a perfect Vietnamese day with sunset cocktails at a luxurious colonial-era hotel and you will wonder why anyone would want to venture south at all.

Saigon's wealth of side-trip options gives it undeniable appeal, but even the Mekong Delta can't challenge the sweeping majesty of Halong Bay, only a three-hour drive from the capital. What's more, Hanoi is the perfect jumping-off point for Vietnam's northern highlands, where lush rice paddies climb the mountainsides like giant staircases and the hills hide the ancestral villages of over 50 different ethnic tribes.

There is little in the world, let alone the south, that can rival

Northern Vietnam's geographical beauty. Hanoi's merits are in its old-fashioned ambience and time-honoured cuisine; its streets packed with character and its peaceful lakes that provide a respite from the rush of the city. There's nowhere in Vietnam that compares!



Vietnam Essentials:

CAPITAL CITY: Hanoi

MAIN RELIGION: Mahayana Buddhism

POPULATION: 90 million

LANGUAGE: Vietnamese

TIME: GMT+7

GETTING THERE: Flight time from London to Hanoi: 11h 15 direct or 14h 25+ with one stop. Flight time from London to Ho Chi Minh City is 12h direct or 14h 25+ with one stop. From £640 return.

WHEN TO GO: Peak seasons for travel to Hanoi are February-March and October-December, while conditions are best in Saigon from October-March. Outside these periods you are more likely to experience rain – but you'll also find fewer crowds, lower prices and more beautiful scenery.

VISAS: Vietnam is waiving visa requirements for UK citizens until 30 June 2016. Normal visa requirements are expected to resume after this date, when tourist visas will be available in advance from Vietnamese consulates worldwide or on arrival in exchange for a visa authorisation letter (arranged by Inside Vietnam Tours).

CURRENCY: Vietnamese dong (VND). £1 = approx. VND31,000. USD widely accepted in tourist areas.

MORE ONLINE: www.insidevietnamtours.com

DO IT: Nearly all of our Vietnam itineraries include both Hanoi and Saigon, so you can head out and decide for yourself which city is better! For inspiration, start with our Best of Vietnam itinerary, from £800 for 8 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call our Vietnam experts on **0117 244 3464** to find out more.

Are we there yet?
Parts of the temples of Angkor were used as a location for the film *Tomb Raider* – no wonder kids love exploring its ruins

Why visit Cambodia with kids?

It's difficult enough to keep kids entertained on holiday without adding 'culture' into the mix, but Cambodia is a surprisingly fun antidote to the usual noisy family resorts

Cambodia is unlikely to leap out at you as an obvious choice for a family holiday. The country is synonymous with the temples of Angkor and, as every parent knows, visits to cultural sites are likely to only elicit groans from kids.

This complaint can be addressed in two very important ways. Firstly, these aren't just any dull old temples, these are veritable snake-dangling, monkey-clambering, giant-faces-in-the-jungle, *Indiana Jones*-style temples. These are the very antithesis of the dry ruins your parents dragged you round as a child.

The second, and perhaps most important, point is that Cambodia has far more to offer than temples. Nearby Siem Reap has a fantastic range of excellent value family-friendly resorts, most boasting the all-important swimming pool to fill 'downtime' moments. For the active, there are rope courses, horse riding and cycling; for the more culturally inclined, try rice-planting, traditional thatching or Khmer cooking classes. Child-friendly eating options and even a kooky modern Cambodian take on the circus all make this an ideal spot for families.

Beyond Siem Reap there are plenty of other great family destinations. Who even knew that Cambodia had a coastline, yet squeezed in

between the popular beach destinations of Thailand and Vietnam is an, as yet, relatively undeveloped scattering of delightful islands. Quiet resorts with safe, warm, shallow seas await, while Koh Rong is the perfect spot for the traditional end-of-holiday wind-down.

Before you get to the beach, how about a boat ride through the stilt villages and floating markets of Tonlé Sap or a trip across the lake to Battambang? The latter is a charming colonial town; explore its

countryside by bicycle or by taking a ride on the famously hair-raising *Bamboo Train* (see p18).

Not far from the capital, Phnom Penh, is the Phnom Tamao Wildlife Rescue Centre – another guaranteed hit with the kids. Here, visitors can help out in the daily routines of rescued sun bears and other rare wildlife – a guaranteed way to curtail any potential groans.

'These aren't just any dull old temples, these are veritable snake-dangling, monkey-clambering, giant-faces-in-the-jungle *Indiana Jones*-style temples'

DO IT: Our Family Cambodia itinerary visits Siem Reap, Battambang, Phnom Penh and Koh Rong, and includes all the experiences mentioned here. This trip is recommended for families with children aged eight and above. From £1,300 for 12 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call our Cambodia experts on 0117 244 3464 to find out more.

Cambodia Essentials

CAPITAL CITY: Phnom Penh

MAIN RELIGION: Theravada Buddhism

POPULATION: 15 million

LANGUAGE: Khmer

TIME: GMT+7

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

WHEN TO GO: November-March offer the best conditions. Although the wet season (or 'green season') can offer lower prices, fewer crowds and more beautiful scenery, some remote regions may be inaccessible.

VISAS: UK citizens can obtain an e-visa online for USD37 in advance of travel at www.evisa.gov.kh or a visa on arrival in Cambodia for approx. USD30.

CURRENCY: Cambodian riel (KHR). £1 = approx. KHR5,500. USD widely accepted.

MORE ONLINE: www.insideasiatours.com



Sales Director Tom has travelled extensively in Cambodia. He has three children aged 6-9.

Asia's GREAT TRAIN JOURNEYS

From tearing through Japan at 320kph on a bullet train to rattling past Cambodia's countryside on a bamboo mat, we share some of the best Asian train experiences

Could there be a more romantic mode of transport than the train? InsideAsia Tours was born on a train (the *Trans-Siberian Express*, to be exact), so it feels rather fitting to be paying homage to the great world of rail in our second issue of *East*. And from the most futuristic of locomotives to the downright ramshackle; from Japan's great cities to the rolling highlands of Burma, we think Asia has some of the best train journeys in the world.

Vietnam's Victoria Express



Northern Vietnam is home to some of the most beautiful landscapes that Southeast Asia has to offer, with bright green rice paddies tracing concentric rings around steep-sided mountains and atmospheric mists engulfing towns, villages and forests alike. What better introduction to these stunning surroundings than chugging along on the fantastic *Victoria Express*, the train which links Vietnam's northern capital of Hanoi with Lao Cai in the heart of the highlands?

If you're looking for the romance of the Orient, you'll find it here – with rich red décor, Chinese-style latticework, hand-embroidered cushions and extremely attentive service throughout the eight-and-a-half hour journey. As the train runs overnight, you won't be able to see much of the scenery on your way, but you'll wake up well-rested amid the full grandeur of northern Vietnam.

DO IT: *Travel the length of Vietnam in style on our Colonial Vietnam itinerary, which travels from Hanoi to Sapa and back on the Victoria Express, from £2,700 for 13 nights (exc. intl. flights). Get in touch with one of our Vietnam experts on 0117 244 3464 to find out more.*



Gaining perspective
Vietnam's *Victoria Express*
sets off; (right) life inside
one of its compartments



Star and away
Travelling in style aboard
the *Kyushu Seven Stars*;
(below) doing the exact
opposite on Cambodia's
Bamboo Train



The Battambang Bamboo Train



Sometimes it's how you travel, not where you travel that matters. The Battambang *Bamboo Train* might be simple, rickety and low-tech, but therein lies the fun.

Consisting of little more than a bamboo mat balanced on a wooden frame, the 'train' is propelled along its overgrown, warped, single-track line by a small engine (often filched from a motorbike or tractor) at what many people consider rather jaw-clenching speeds for such a rudimentary vehicle.

If you happen to meet another train coming in the opposite direction, the entire thing is disassembled and lifted off the tracks to allow the more populated car to pass.

Today, most Cambodians travel by road rather than rail, and the *Bamboo Train* survives thanks to tourism alone. Don't let that put you off, though – it's still some of the best fun you can have on wheels!

DO IT: *Our Grand Cambodia itinerary introduces the highlights of the country, including a ride on the Bamboo Train, from £2,300 for 14 nights (exc. intl. flights). Get in touch with one of our Cambodia experts on 0117 244 3464 to find out more.*



Japan's Kyushu Seven Stars



Japan's bullet train may be nippy, but sometimes speed isn't really the point. That's where the *Kyushu Seven Stars* comes in.

Japan's first luxury sleeper train was introduced in 2013, and no expense has been spared. Its seven cars exude expert craftsmanship, with lashings of walnut, rosewood and maple. Designed for slow travel, it is the antithesis of the country's bullet trains and tailor-made for a leisurely chug in comfort.

Kyushu is the westernmost of Japan's four main islands – known for its dramatic volcanoes, bubbling hot springs, balmy climate and delicious *ramen* noodles. The *Kyushu Seven Stars* was conceived as a celebration of the island, combining a number of local excursions with luxurious cabins and the ultimate in French-Japanese fusion cuisine.

Each room has individually designed features, and there are expansive windows from which to watch the Kyushu countryside pass by. The golden *Seven Stars* logo has also been subtly incorporated into every aspect of its design – from the coffee cups at breakfast to the screws in the walls. Move over *Orient Express*! Now this is luxury.

DO IT: *Our Kyushu Seven Stars itinerary includes three nights aboard the service, from £10,250 for 13 nights (exc. intl. flights). Get in touch with one of our Japan experts on 0117 244 3463 to find out more.*

Terunobu Utsunomiya

The Mount Fuji bullet train




When it comes to classic train journeys, they don't come much more iconic than the bullet train. While the UK languishes in the comparative dark ages of rail travel, Japan opened its first high-speed line more than 50 years ago, in 1964.

The first of its kind, the bullet train's maximum operating speed is a cool 320kph (soon to be surpassed by the Maglev's blistering 500kph). It has transported over 10 billion passengers in its lifetime – more than the population of the world – with not a single fatal derailment or collision, and it operates at an average annual delay of under a minute. It is nothing short of godly.

And what the facts and figures don't tell you is that travelling on the bullet train is a thoroughly enjoyable experience in itself. Not only does it get you from A to B faster than you can say "Can I have a coffee with that", the staff also bow every time they leave the carriage. The facilities are spotlessly clean, every station has its own cheery jingle, and the snack trolley goes past about once an hour. There's not much you can say to knock it.

Though the bullet train network is extensive – and growing – the most iconic route is one of the very first: the track that whisks you west from Tokyo to Kyoto, past the perfect cone of Mount Fuji. Sadly Fuji-san is notoriously shy, so travel in the cool, clear winter months for the best chance of a sighting.

DO IT: Our Golden Route itinerary is the classic introduction to Japan, linking Tokyo, Hakone and Kyoto by way of the bullet train, from £1,560 for 9 nights (exc. intl. flights). Get in touch with our Japan experts on **0117 244 3465** to find out more. 



Burma's Goteik Viaduct



It is a well-known fact that if you want to get anywhere in Burma on time, you don't take the train. Burma's rail network is a lumbering, geriatric muddle, with timetabling erratic at best and top speeds that barely break walking pace. It is most definitely a case of experience over expedience.

A journey across the Goteik Viaduct is the very definition of this. But if you're lucky enough to be travelling by rail between the quaint former hill station of Pyin Oo Lwin and the highland town of Hsipaw, what an experience awaits you!

Built by the British in the late 19th century to expand their influence in northern Shan State, the Goteik Viaduct was the biggest railway trestle in the world when it was first constructed. Towering at 102 metres high, it remains the tallest bridge in Burma, and it is here that the ponderous speed of Burmese rail travel is a boon, allowing passengers to enjoy its full 689-metre span at a leisurely pace.

DO IT: Our challenging Shan State Adventure itinerary will have you hiking, biking and kayaking through Burma's highlands, including a train ride across the Goteik Viaduct, from £2,095 for 14 nights (exc. intl. flights). Get in touch with our Burma experts on **0117 244 3465** to find out more.

Faster than a bullet!
A Shinkansen speeds past Mount Fuji; (above) peering down from Burma's Goteik Viaduct

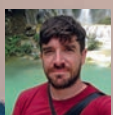


TOP 5 TIPS: BOATING IN INDOCHINA



Whether cruising the Mekong in luxury or riding the waterways of Vietnam in a traditional *sampan*, the best way to explore Indochina is by boat. Our experts reveal their favourite experiences on the water in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos

1 HALONG BAY MATT SPILLER



Agents Manager Matt remembers cruising through Halong Bay as part of a whirlwind trip through Indochina.

Few parts of Vietnam attract as many superlatives as Halong Bay, the undisputed king of Asia's waterscapes. Encompassing an area of over 1,500 square kilometres and studded with nearly 800 islets of various shapes and sizes, it inspires thousands of travellers to flock to Vietnam each year – and it's just as captivating whether shrouded in mist and cloud or sparkling in the sunshine.

DO IT: Cruises through Halong Bay range from basic to luxurious and from day trips to three-night cruises, with most vessels resembling traditional Chinese junk boats. Our *World Heritage Indochina* itinerary includes an overnight trip on the bay, with the opportunity to swim, kayak and explore the islands of the region. From £1,850 for 14 nights (exc. intl. flights).



2 NINH BINH SAMPAN CHARLOTTE BOWER



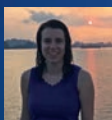
As a former deckhand on a maxi racing yacht, Charlotte more than knows her way around a boat. She visited Ninh Binh in 2014.

With its towering, sheer-sided karst scenery rising up from a flat patchwork of green fields, Ninh Binh is one of the most dramatic landscapes in Vietnam (a country that's not exactly short on scenery). Though it's called 'dry Halong Bay' by the locals, it's not completely devoid of water: lazy rivers snake across the valley floor carrying *sampans* (flat-bottomed fishing boats) loaded with locals and tourists, passing through wide, flat valleys and limestone grottoes under the shadow of the valley's huge stone pinnacles.

DO IT: Our *Vietnam Discovery* itinerary includes a *sampan* boat-ride through Ninh Binh. From £3,300 for 19 nights (exc. intl. flights).

3 MEKONG CRUISE

VICKY GARNETT



Vicky spent a month volunteering in the Mekong Delta, so she's well acquainted with the ins and outs of Southeast Asia's greatest river.

For a fantastic introduction to the scenery, wildlife and culture of rural Indochina – bookended by the region's largest city and its most famous historical monument – there's no better way than a Mekong cruise. Boarding an elegant, colonial-style cruise ship in Vietnam's Mekong Delta, just outside Ho Chi Minh City, you'll float northwards through jungle and countryside to conclude at Kampong Cham in Cambodia. Along the way there's ample time to relax and enjoy the scenery, visit floating markets, and to disembark and explore stilt villages and hidden temples.

DO IT: Our *Mekong Explorer* itinerary includes a seven-night cruise aboard the *RV Pandaw*, along with stays in Ho Chi Minh City and Siem Reap. From £2,820 for 12 nights (exc. intl. flights).



4 VAT PHOU CRUISE

RUTH HUBBARD



We sent Ruth out on a mission to explore the waters of southern Laos, where she was seduced by the laid-back atmosphere of the 4,000 Islands.

For a landlocked country, Laos certainly has more than its fair share of boating experiences. My favourite is the *Vat Phou* – a traditional, teak-wood vessel named after the region's UNESCO-listed ruins – which plies a course from Pakse through Si Phan Don, where the Mekong widens to accommodate hundreds of small islands. Over the course of the three-day cruise you'll have plenty of chances to disembark and visit quiet islands, thundering waterfalls and, of course, the beautiful ruins of Vat Phou itself, built over 800 years ago when the Khmer Empire was at its peak.

DO IT: Follow in Jocelyn's (right) & Ruth's footsteps on our *Mekong Boating Adventure* itinerary, which combines the *Luang Say* cruise and the *Vat Phou* cruise with four nights in Luang Prabang, concluding with a visit to Angkor in Cambodia. From £3,225 for 12 nights (exc. intl. flights).



5 LUANG SAY CRUISE

JOCELYN KNIGHTLY BROWN



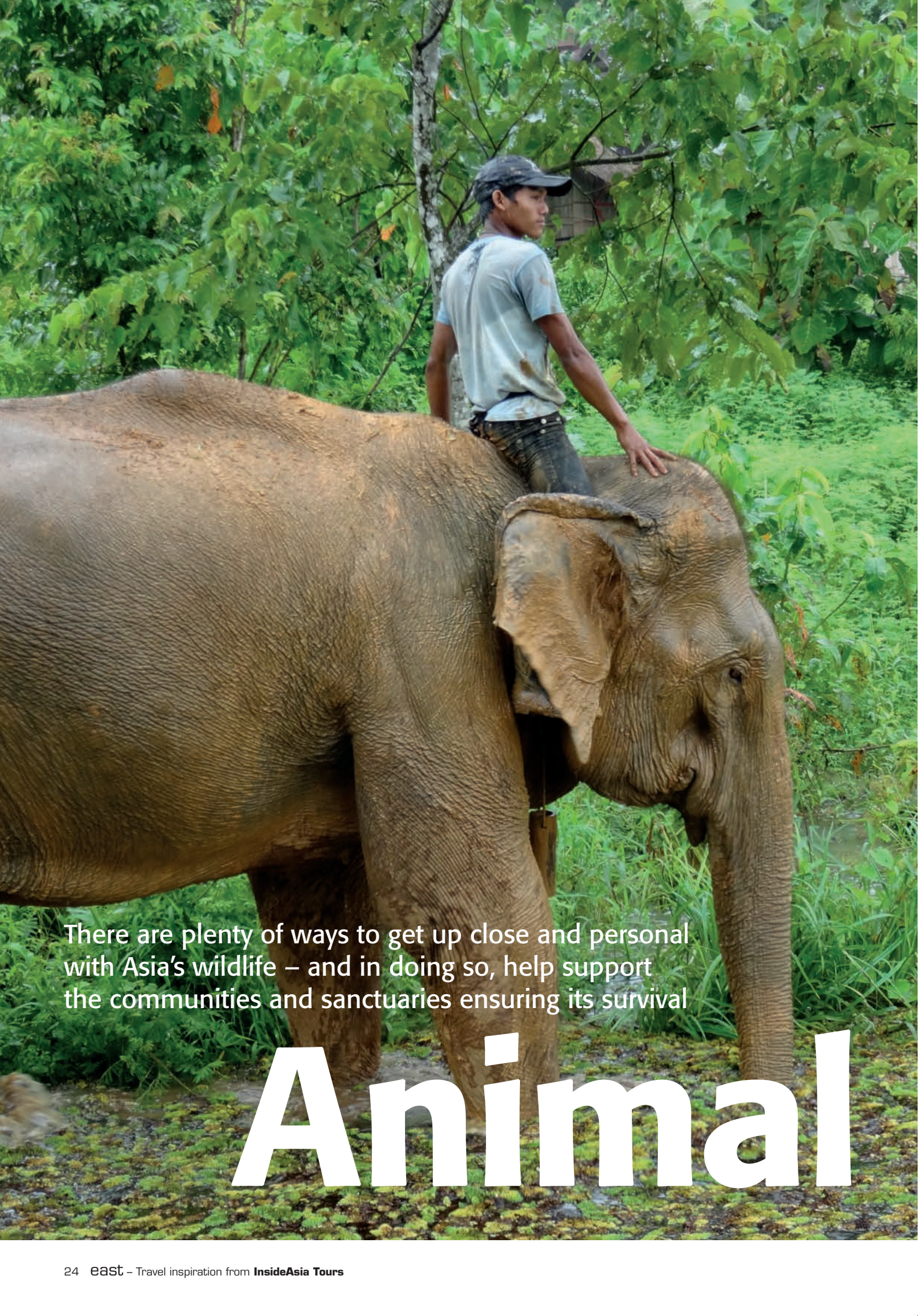
Jocelyn was lucky enough to enjoy a Luang Say cruise on a visit to Laos in early 2016.

Despite its scenery, food and fascinating local culture, Laos tends to slip under the radar for most travellers. In some ways this is a good thing, as it means the slow-moving waterways, craggy limestone scenery and tropical rainforests of its northern reaches remain largely undisturbed by mass tourism. Starting in Thailand, at the Golden Triangle, on a *Luang Say* cruise you'll cross the Thai border into Laos, spend the night by the riverside in a luxurious teak and rosewood bungalow in Pakbeng, then continue to drift along the Mekong River to the beautiful UNESCO-listed town of Luang Prabang.

DO IT: For travel details, see no.4, left.



If you're interested in any of the trips mentioned here, get in touch with one of our Indochina experts on **0117 244 3464** to find out more.



There are plenty of ways to get up close and personal with Asia's wildlife – and in doing so, help support the communities and sanctuaries ensuring its survival

Animal



Laos Essentials



CAPITAL CITY: Vientiane

MAIN RELIGION:
Theravada Buddhism

POPULATION: 6.5 million

LANGUAGE: Lao

TIME: GMT+7

GETTING THERE: Flight time from London to Luang Prabang/Vientiane: 14h 30+ with at least one stop.

WHEN TO GO: Peak season for Laos is October-March, when it is generally dry throughout the country. April is the hottest month of the year. The rainy season runs from around May-September, but also brings with it fewer crowds, lower prices and beautiful scenery.

VISAS: UK citizens can obtain a visa on arrival in Laos for approx. USD35.

CURRENCY: Lao Kip (LAK). £1 = approx. LAK12,520

MORE ONLINE: www.insideasiatours.com

RUTH HUBBARD



Product Manager Ruth fulfilled her childhood dream of meeting an elephant when she visited Sayaboury in Laos.

1 WALKING WITH ELEPHANTS

"Welcome to the Elephant Conservation Centre in Sayaboury!" said my guide Mr Lah, elongating the last syllable of Sayaboury with a long 'ee' sound that stretched his face into a wide grin. "Come and meet this lady elephant – Mae Dok. She is 50 years old!"

Mae Dok, the matriarch of the herd, placidly unfurled her long trunk and reached for the banana in my hand, her nostrils breathing warm air on my outstretched palm. Up close, I could see dark hairs sprouting from the wrinkles of her hide and a distinctive peach patch of skin between two crinkly eyes. Her ears flapped back and forth like giant fans.

"Mae Dok is a very kind elephant. I think she likes you! Would you like to go up?"

I nodded and Mr Lah patted the elephant's trunk and bellowed "Mep, mep!" Obliging, Mae Dok stretched her front legs forwards and lowered her head to her knees. Mr Lah

gave me a leg-up and soon I was perched on the thick muscles of Mae Dok's neck, peering down her long nose.

From my vantage point I had a great view of the Elephant Conservation Centre (ECC), located in a little-visited corner of northwest Laos, a four-hour bus ride from Luang Prabang. The centre occupies a lush peninsula that reaches into Nam Tien Lake, which is only accessible by boat. My accommodation was a small, terraced hut with sporadic solar-powered electricity, balanced on a ridge above the elephant yard with views across the water.

Visitors to the ECC are only allowed to sit on the elephants for a couple of minutes to avoid causing undue stress to the animals, and it was not long before I, rather clumsily, slithered from Mae Dok's back. Chairs or saddles (which weigh heavily on an elephant's back) are never used – exploitative tourism this is not. But elephants do need exercise and stimulation, and like horses they love to be stroked, so interaction with the animals is encouraged.

Aside from encounters with eager visitors like me, the last five years of Mae Dok's life have passed peacefully at the ECC. But, for a long time, she was a working elephant, employed in the illegal logging trade. Often worked to the point of exhaustion, such

elephants have shorter life spans, lower birth rates and a poorer quality of life compared to their wild counterparts. And once domesticated, working elephants will never be able to survive in the wild by themselves again.

Mr Lah explained further. "Only two elephants are born for every ten that die, which means that soon we will have no more Asian elephants. Lan Xang is the old name for Laos – it means 'land of a million elephants', but today we have fewer than one thousand."

Mae Dok is one of the lucky ones. She was rescued from the logging trade in 2011 and brought to the ECC where she can enjoy her retirement. Mae Dok and six other elephants are kept well fed and exercised by their *mahouts* – local elephant trainers who stay with their animals for life.

After more bananas, I followed Mae Dok and her young *mahout* down to the lake for her bath. I watched from the shore as the *mahout* massaged clods of terracotta-coloured mud from the folds of her hide. Cheekily, Mae Dok responded by blowing a shower of water from her trunk, which almost dislodged the *mahout* from her neck.

The *mahouts* also get a good life at the ECC. Ecotourism offers a safer and wealthier living than illegal logging, which requires long, arduous work in remote regions of Laos, far from their families. At the ECC the *mahouts* are encouraged to study English, learn advanced elephant care and share their knowledge of elephant behaviour and the forest environment. Here at least, the status of a once highly-respected tradition is being restored.

Things got more playful after lunch when I met Phu Surya, a two-year-old elephant calf that came to the centre with his mother when he was just two months old. A hairy little creature, Phu Surya skipped around and between his mother's legs, skidding in the mud.

magic

When he tried to venture too far afield, his mother reached a trunk to his tail and tugged him back to her side.

The ECC employs veterinarian staff who kindly showed us around the elephant hospital and explained the pre- and post-natal care they offer to cows and calves. Though the centre employs several elephant carers, they cannot provide an income for all the *mahouts* in Laos – most of whom have no other way to support themselves than the illegal logging industry. “An elephant pregnancy is two years, and lactation another two,” explained the vet. “So that’s four years in which a *mahout* cannot make an income from logging.” This is simply not an option for those who depend on their elephants to survive, and is the reason for Laos’ catastrophic elephant birth rate.

In an effort to rectify this, the ECC runs a Baby Bonus programme, which encourages elephant owners to let their animals breed by providing the *mahout* a salary, training and accommodation throughout their elephant’s pregnancy and nursing period. Though the centre cannot prevent the mother returning to work after four years, no baby born here can be used in the logging industry – which means that thanks to the ECC, Phu Surya has a long and peaceful life ahead of him.

As if he knew he was being talked about, Phu Surya gave a loud honk of approval through his trunk – the hopes for a new generation of Asian elephants resting on his tiny shoulders.

DO IT: *Our Indochina Conservation itinerary includes a dolphin-watching trip in Kratie, a visit to the gibbon centre in Cat Tien National Park, and a day with the elephants in Sayaboury. From £3,580 for 14 nights (exc. intl. flights). Get in touch with our Indochina experts on 0117 244 3464 to find out more.*

2 JAPAN'S SNOW MONKEYS

High in the mountains of central Japan, some of the country's most famous residents have devised a novel way of staving off the winter cold. These Japanese macaques share in their nation's love of *onsen* bathing, and visitors flock to see them sitting in their steaming hot spring baths surrounded by a thick layer of snow.

DO IT: *Our Winter Highlights group tour includes a visit to the snow monkeys, from £3,000 for 14 nights (exc. intl. flights). Get in touch with one of our Japan experts on 0117 244 3463 to find out more.*



3 IRRAWADDY DOLPHINS IN CAMBODIA

Irrawaddy dolphins live in small populations in rivers across Asia, and have been known to drive fish into fishermen's nets in return for a share of the catch. Sadly, they are now critically endangered everywhere except for Bangladesh and India, although you might still be lucky enough to spot some on a boat trip from Kratie, Cambodia, where a small enclave lives in the waters of the Mekong.

DO IT: For travel details, see no. 1.



4 BABY TURTLES ON YAKUSHIMA ISLAND

Most people don't think of Japan as a place with lush rainforests, sandy beaches and coral reefs, but that's because they have never been to Yakushima. This small, round island, off the coast of Kyushu, not only has copious numbers of deer and monkeys, but if you visit during the summer months you can have the privilege of seeing loggerhead turtles laying their eggs on the beaches, or baby turtles hatching and making their way to the sea.

DO IT: Our Kyushu Adventure itinerary can be arranged to coincide with the turtles' nesting season (May-August) or hatching season (July-September), from £2,370 for 14 nights (exc. intl. flights). Get in touch with one of our Japan experts on 0117 244 3463 to find out more.



5 KARUIZAWA FLYING SQUIRRELS

The Japanese flying squirrel is the largest species of flying squirrel in the world – weighing as much as 1.5 kg and gliding for up to 160 metres at a time. You might think that seeing one of these shy, nocturnal creatures in the wild would be difficult, but at the Picchio Wildlife Research Centre in Karuizawa, you've got a 97% chance of spotting one! Venture out to their nests with an English-speaking guide, watch them within their homes via infrared cameras, and even see them gliding from branch to branch as they head out into the forest for the evening.

DO IT: Our Japan Enchantment group tour includes a night-time flying squirrel tour in Karuizawa, from £3,600 for 14 nights (exc. intl. flights). Get in touch with one of our Japan experts on 0117 244 3463 to find out more.



6 BURMA'S ELEPHANTS

Visitors to Burma can have their own elephant experience. Visit the colonial hill station of Kalaw for the chance to stay at the Green Hill Valley Elephant Camp, where former

working elephants live out their senior years in peace and quiet. Tourism helps to pay for the elephant's upkeep and conserve their natural surroundings, as well as support the local community. A stay in the area can also include hiking and visits to local minority villages.

DO IT: *Our Beautiful Burma group tour includes a night at the Green Hill Valley Elephant Camp, combined with Burma's most iconic locations: Yangon, Mandalay, Inle Lake and Bagan, from £2,675 for 13 nights. Get in touch with our Burma experts on 0117 244 3465 to find out more.*



7 VIETNAM'S GIBBONS

Cat Tien National Park (see also p14) is probably the best place in Vietnam to

experience the jungle, with great swathes of lowland rainforest stretching across its 72 square kilometres. Such is the park's natural diversity that UNESCO designated it a biosphere reserve in 2001. Though you're unlikely to meet any large mammals in the wild here, visit the Dao Tien Endangered Primate Species Centre and you'll spot rescued gibbons, lorises and langurs in rehabilitation before they are returned to the wild.

DO IT: *For travel details, see no. 1.*

Insider guide...

How to onsen

Experiencing a traditional hot spring bath, or *onsen*, is an essential part of visiting Japan – but be sure to brush up on your etiquette beforehand

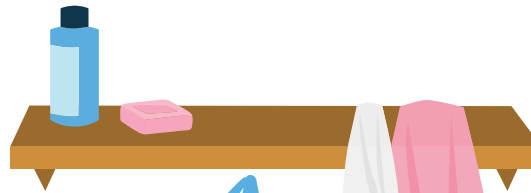
Hot spring bathing isn't just a popular pastime in Japan; it's a hallowed cultural institution. Until you've tried it, you can't even begin to call yourself a true Japanophile.

Hot springs, known as *onsen* in Japanese, are created wherever volcanically heated water emerges from the ground – which is all over the country. The baths can be indoors or outdoors, private or public,

housed in city bathhouses or in beautiful natural locations. Although they're for communal use, they're nearly always segregated by gender, unless you rent a *kashikiri* (private) bath.

You're most likely to come across an *onsen* at a *ryokan*, or traditional Japanese inn – but before you soak your cares away, be sure to familiarise yourself with *onsen* etiquette!

1 Bring two towels with you to the *onsen* (at *ryokan* inns, these are usually provided at the baths). The big one is for drying yourself, and the small one is for washing. Shampoo and soap are usually provided too, but bring your own if you like.



2 Get undressed in the changing room and leave your clothes and belongings in the baskets or lockers provided. Leave your large towel with your clothes, but take the small towel with you. Be warned – it's strictly birthday suits only once you leave the changing room!

3 Enter the bathroom and find a shower that's free. There are small stools and buckets provided. Sit down on a stool, fill the bucket with water and use your small towel to wash yourself thoroughly with soap and water. It's rude to stand up, in case you splash your neighbour.

4 Once you've rinsed yourself clean of soap, get into the bath for a soak. Be careful not to dip your hair or your small towel in the water; do as the Japanese do and place your towel on your head while you bathe.



5 When you've finished bathing, get out and wash yourself at the showers. Wipe any excess water away with your small towel before heading into the changing room, so that you don't make the floor slippery for others.



6 Get dry, get dressed and go! Most *onsen* provide hairdryers, and some provide all kinds of fancy products too. If you've borrowed towels, deposit them in the indicated bins before heading out to conclude with a nice cold drink.

DO IT: All of our Japan trips include the chance to soak in a natural hot spring bath. For example, our Northern Highlights itinerary includes the beautiful onsen town of Nyuto Onsen, from £2,460 for 14 nights (exc. intl. flights). Get in touch with one of our Japan experts on **0117 244 3463** to find out more.

A REMINDER

Those with tattoos might be refused entry to *onsen*. In Japan, tattoos are closely associated with organised crime and gang membership, so it's something of a social taboo. If you have a tattoo, you can use private baths, or (if it's small enough) cover it with a plaster to visit the public baths.



Your travels

We love hearing where InsideAsia travellers have been exploring and will be printing our favourites. **This issue:** the Greenhill family visit Burma as it enters a new democratic age...

Lesley and Alistair Greenhill travelled on our Beautiful Burma group tour (13 nights; from £2,675) during the recent Burmese elections. Here, Lesley describes the atmosphere of anticipation ahead of an event that could change the country forever...

As a young man, our tour guide Khin was arrested and sent to jail for being part of a pro-democracy demonstration. On another occasion, he was filmed taking part in a protest and had to go into hiding. His family begged him to stop his activities – they had spent all their savings on bribes to have him released from jail and could not afford to do it again – but he explained that he couldn't give it up.

Khin was a gentle, kindly man with a peaceful demeanour. A devout Buddhist, he spent some time every year in a monastery. We felt humbled by his bravery, but he just smiled and said: "I'm not afraid anymore."

While we were in Burma there was a great feeling of optimism about the elections, and

people were talking more openly than I expected. A young Burmese-Indian waiter told us how, in the past, the election process was purposefully made difficult. The election paper was waxy so that a vote could be rubbed out, and the stamps overfilled with ink so that they would smudge and the ballot could be declared spoiled. He told us he planned to be up early to wipe the excess ink off the election stamps and to explain to others what they needed to do. He was sure the National League for Democracy (NLD) would prevail.

Having lived through the 1990 election, Khin was more cautious – but still resolute in his determination that democracy would come to Burma. On the day before the elections, he wore a fetching tartan *longyi* with a smart collarless shirt. When I asked about it, he explained that it was a Kachin design from the north of Burma, not a Scottish tartan! I only discovered later that this particular outfit was the uniform of the so-called 'democracy men', and at one time you could be arrested for wearing it. Everywhere he went, Khin was making a political statement.

The next day was election day, and we saw queues of people at local schools waiting to vote. Khin was acting as an NLD monitor, and we were pleased to hear that the ink was good and the paper not waxy.

As we now know, the NLD won by a landslide, gaining 77% of the vote. Although the military will always hold 25% of the seats in the Burmese parliament (owing to a pre-election agreement), it seemed as if this time the old guard knew their time was up. The only fear we heard expressed was that everyone loves the NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi so much that it will be hard for her to meet their expectations.

I'm sure there are challenges ahead, and Burma won't change overnight – there is terrible corruption at all levels and that will be difficult to eradicate. But they are such a lovely, friendly people, with a beautiful country. I hope they have a better future in store.

This is an abridged version of Lesley's original piece. Read her full story online at www.insideburmablog.com.



We have a WINNER!

Congratulations to our first-ever photo competition winner, **Adrian Furner**, who won over our judges with this fantastic shot of fishermen using trained cormorants to catch fish on the Katsura River, Japan. We'll be in touch soon with details of your prize: a luxury week-long trip to Japan!

Thank you to everyone who took part in the competition. The standard was very high – as you can see from the runners up: Nick Board's

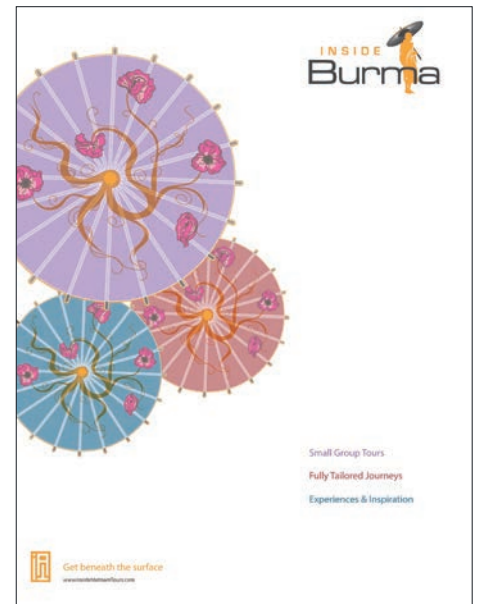
evocative shot of Sapa, Vietnam, came in second, while Kyle Taylor's classy image of Mount Fuji, Japan, took third place. Keep your eyes peeled for more fabulous prizes in issues to come...

EAST PHOTO COMPETITION

Enter our photo competition for a chance to win a QUMOX video camera! This issue's theme is 'people', and 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) Read our terms and conditions. You can find them at: www.insideasiatours.com/eastmagazine
- 2) Send your favourite image/s to east@insideasiatours.com by 5pm (GMT) on 30 June 2016, with a short caption for each entry. Include your name, address and contact details.
- 3) The winner and runners up will have their shots published in the next issue of *East*.



To find out more and start planning your next holiday, order a brochure, call our experts or visit our website.



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