

Issue 003 // Autumn 2016

east



Travel inspiration from **InsideAsia Tours**

www.insideasiatours.com

Secret Tokyo

Discover the hidden highlights and dodge the crowds

WIN!
A BOX
OF JAPAN
GOODIES
P31

Vietnam's caves // Top foodie tips // Burma's little-visited south



Ryan Deboodt

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Sara Pretelli: InsideAsia Staff

Welcome to *East*



Welcome back to *East* – we hope you are enjoying the journey so far!

It's all about new experiences this month, as we help you 'get beneath the surface' of our destinations – whether tucking into street food while riding on the back of a Vespa in Ho Chi Minh City, cave trekking in Vietnam's Quang Binh

Province, or exploring Burma's Golden Rock.

We also search out fresh perspectives on our old favourite, Tokyo. The Japanese capital is one of the world's great cities, yet nearly impossible to get to know without inside knowledge. Just what makes a city of 20 million people tick, and how do you get the most from it? Turn to page 24 to find out. Elsewhere, we hear from one of our experts about the joys of travelling as a teen in Japan.

Finally, for all you creative minds, we have a haiku competition this month. This ancient poetic form (the forerunner to Twitter?) tasks you with creating a three-line poem that consists of five, seven and five syllables and describes a mood, an idea or an image – often through incongruous yet playful juxtapositions. Good luck, and we are looking forward to reading your entries.



Alastair Donnelly



Simon King

ALASTAIR DONNELLY & SIMON KING, DIRECTORS OF INSIDEASIA TOURS

Just back...



Jocelyn Knightly Brown

Just back from: LAOS

Sales team leader Jocelyn made it out to Laos earlier this year, where she got a taste of the northern Laos countryside and enjoyed the laid-back atmosphere of sunny Luang Prabang.

Memorable moment: Cruising along the Mekong into the heart of Laos.



Tim Grisbrooke

Just back from: JAPAN

Travel consultant Tim ventured to Japan to join our *Japan Unmasked* group tour, before heading off to explore the garden city of Kanazawa and the neon-lit streets of Osaka.

Memorable moment: Watching crazy all-female cabaret the Takarazuka Revue.



Charlotte Bower

Just back from: BURMA

Travel consultant Charlotte headed back to Burma, where she visited a temple in the sea, checked out the new Death Railway Museum, and made a pilgrimage to the Golden Rock (p18).

Memorable moment: Kayaking on Inle Lake.



Grant Ekelund

Just back from: JAPAN

Travel consultant Grant revisited Japan to join our *Hidden Japan* group tour, which takes visitors off the beaten track through Shikoku Island and the Seto Inland Sea.

Memorable moment: Taking a *kembu* (samurai sword dance) class in Kyoto.

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CAMBODIA

Move over Angkor...

There's a new ancient Khmer capital in town, as dramatic findings reveal several lost cities beneath Cambodia's jungle, including one the size of Phnom Penh...

On 11 June, Australian archaeologist Dr Damian Evans revealed the dramatic results of an extensive aerial survey of Cambodia. His lidar (light detection and ranging) system used lasers to penetrate Cambodia's dense vegetation and 'see through' modern constructions and agriculture, allowing Evans and his team to reconstruct images of what the country would have looked like hundreds of years ago.

Among their findings were not one but several ancient cities thought to have been built between

900 and 1,400 years ago. One of them, Mahendraparvata, had been partially uncovered by a lidar survey in 2012, but its true extent was only revealed when the team returned in 2015. It's now clear that the city was bigger than Angkor – around the size of modern Phnom Penh – making it the largest pre-industrial urban centre in the world.

The survey also showed a complex system of waterways, reservoirs, roads and temples linking the cities, and revealed mysterious geometric patterns whose purpose remains unknown. But the most important discovery is that these findings reveal Angkorian civilisation to be much more

extensive than ever previously imagined. It writes hundreds of thousands of forgotten people back into the history books and calls into question the whole concept of an Angkorian collapse as we currently understand it.

There is so much left to learn about the Khmer Empire, but this discovery brings us one step closer to solving its mysteries.

DO IT: Explore Cambodia's Khmer history on our Hidden Temples of Cambodia *itinerary*, from £1,895 for 10 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call one of our experts on **0117 244 3464** to find out more.

Lost and found
Cambodia has uncovered an ancient city to rival even Angkor





VIETNAM

History in Hanoi

For many visitors, the history of the Vietnam War is that of the south. The story of Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City) is well known, and it is here that you can visit the famous Cu Chi Tunnels of the Viet Cong. Consequently, Hanoi's wartime sites are often overlooked.

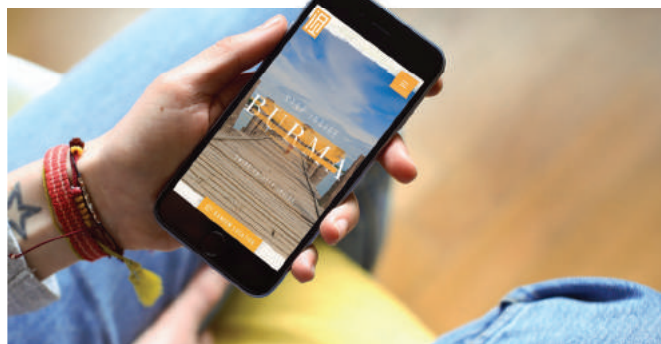
A new half-day history tour of the capital aims to redress the balance. It begins with a visit to the Military History Museum before moving on to sites such as the Hoa Lo Prison (where US Senator John McCain was held) and concluding with a walking tour.

DO IT: The military history tour can be included in any itinerary that visits Hanoi, such as Best of Vietnam, from **£850** for eight nights (exc. intl. flights). Call our Vietnam experts on **0117 244 3464** to find out more.

Explore our new map app

While our travel consultants, tour leaders and operations team have been busy putting together incredible holidays, the creative department at InsideAsia Tours has been working on something completely different.

We've always been keen to exploit the creative potential of new technology, and earlier this year we were proud to launch our most exciting travel tool so far: 'Step Inside', a set of beautiful interactive maps covering all of our destination countries. These maps offer a truly immersive experience, introducing some of the most stunning destinations in Japan, Burma and Indochina via animated graphics and 360-degree photospheres.



DID YOU KNOW?

There are over 2,500 pagodas on Burma's Bagan Plains – but there were once over 10,000. For more brilliant Burmese facts, see our infographic at bit.ly/BurmaFacts

Besides exploring our specially selected locations, you can also use the 'Random Location' button to wander the backstreets and unknown pockets of all these countries. And when 'Street View' is enabled, you can even stroll the pavements of Asia without leaving the comfort of your home.

Working with our partners at Green Chameleon design, our 'Step Inside' project pushes the boundaries of creativity and technology, and, so far, it has earned much-coveted honours from FWA (Favourite Website Awards), Awwwards, and the CCS Design Awards. If you want to see what all the fuss is about, head to www.insideasiatours.com/step-inside.

LAOS

Staying in a 'nest' at Nam Nern

We've long been fans of the night safari at Nam Nern, so we were very excited to hear that the national park have launched some brand-new, family-friendly hiking experiences.

On these carefully planned trails, visitors can travel with guides to an observation tower in the forest, spotting animals such as the rare Sambar deer gathered around its Pong Nied salt lick, then ascend into the cloud forests of Forever Mountain or sample traditional Khmu culture with a homestay at a local minority village.

Treks range from one night to several, but whichever option you choose, one of the high points (literally) will be spending the night in one of the park's new 'nests': spherical, covered baskets suspended from the trees.

DO IT: Our Northern Laos Explorer itinerary includes a one-night trek in Nam Nern, from **£2,950** for 15 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call our Laos experts on **0117 244 3464** to find out more.

TAKE THE SLOW TRAIN Cambodia has a passenger train for the first time in 14 years! The new service began in May and links capital Phnom Penh with coastal Sihanoukville in around six-and-a-half hours. This is expected to be cut by two hours before the year is out, making it just as quick (and twice as cheap) as the bus.

BURMA

A quieter side to Inle Lake

Inle Lake is one of Burma's most beautiful destinations. But while most travellers (and locals) zip about its glassy surface in noisy motorised longtail boats, why not try kayaking?

When we heard that kayaks had come to Inle, our hearts leapt, and now it is our favourite way to see the lake. Not only is it quieter and more peaceful than the usual method, but

it offers unprecedented levels of independence, allowing you to explore its floating gardens and stilted buildings under your own steam.

DO IT: Our Burmese Family Adventure itinerary includes kayaking on Inle Lake, from **£2,100** for 13 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call our Burma experts on **0117 244 3465** to find out more.



CAMBODIA

New national park for Cardamoms

It's not often you hear good news from the world of conservation, but environmentalists had cause to rejoice in 2016, with Cambodia announcing the creation of a new protected area: the Southern Cardamom National Park.

The park fills in a crucial gap in south Cambodia, connecting six existing national parks to create one vast 18,200-square-kilometre protected area. This region is one of the last remaining corridors for a litany of endangered species, including Asian elephants, Indochinese tigers, clouded leopards and Asiatic black bears.

The Cardamom Mountains have escaped development through the efforts of the Rainforest Trust and the Wildlife Alliance, who, together with their local partners, have set up ranger patrols, cleared land mines and fought off large-scale industrial plantations, keeping this haven to biodiversity safe for generations to come.

DO IT: Our Grand Cambodia itinerary includes two nights in Koh Kong, the gateway to the Cardamom Mountains, from £2,495 for 14 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call our Cambodia experts on **0117 244 3464** to find out more.



DID YOU KNOW?

Japan was the first team in 20 years to beat South Africa in a World Cup opener. There's more on rugby in Japan on our website at bit.ly/RugbyJapan.

Preparing for a Japanese scrum

So we've said goodbye to the Olympics for another four years – what next? Call it jumping the gun, but the next event we're all eagerly anticipating is the Rugby World Cup (RWC) in 2019!

This time in three years, we'll all be settling down to watch the opening match of Japan's first-ever RWC. Before 2015, this wouldn't have caused much excitement beyond the InsideJapan office, but ever since The Brave Blossoms' shock victory over South Africa a year ago, Japan's rugby team has been busy cementing its reputation as one of the most exciting outsider teams to watch in the game today. The 2019 cup is going to really shake things up.

We'll be gearing up for the cup by following the first tests this coming November, all the while anticipating the draw in Japan next spring – the first time any Rugby World Cup draw has taken place outside of Europe. These are exciting times for rugby, and with the next tournament on Japan's home soil, who knows what could happen? We can't wait.

DO IT: Tickets for the 2019 RWC have yet to be released, but InsideJapan will be organising trips to the Land of the Rising Sun for those who want to catch the action. Call our Japan experts on **0117 244 3463** to register your interest and we'll keep you updated on all rugby-related developments.

JAPAN

Discovering art in the mountains

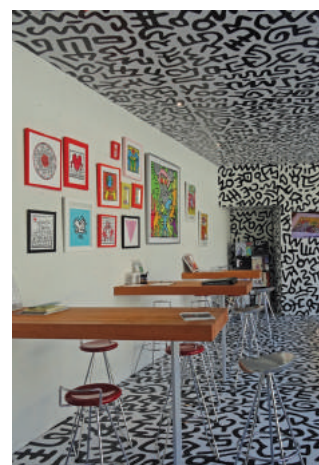
Kobuchizawa is a rural spot known to few but those who live there. Yet, unlikely as it may seem, this quiet country town – located in Yamanashi Prefecture, en route from Tokyo to the Japanese Alps – is home to the world's first private museum dedicated to the work of Keith Haring, the New York artist whose cartoonish, politically charged imagery rose to fame in the 1980s.

But why? Gallery owner Kazuo Nakamura makes comparisons between Haring's Primitive style and the Jomon-era (13,000-300 BC) pottery figures discovered nearby in Kobuchizawa. The connection may seem tenuous, but the museum is a fantastic tribute to the artist's life and work, guaranteed to delight.

If you do manage to make time for Kobuchizawa, don't leave without

spending a night at the Keyforest Hokuto, a luxury hotel linked to the gallery and designed by Kitagawara Atsushi, who took inspiration from Haring's work and Jomon artefacts.

DO IT: A night in Kobuchizawa is easily added to any itinerary that links Tokyo with Matsumoto. Call our Japan experts on **0117 244 3463** to find out more.





VIETNAM

Falling for Fusion on Phu Quoc

Vietnam's desert-island jewel is getting an exciting new stay option. The Fusion Resort on Phu Quoc Island will let visitors relax through its combination of stylish design and all-inclusive spa treatments. Guests receive at least two treatments on each day of their stay. If it's anything like its sister resorts in Nha Trang and Danang, then we're in for a treat!

With white-sand beaches, turquoise waters and tropical interior forests, the tear-shaped island ticks all the boxes of a bona fide paradise. Most of

Phu Quoc is a national park, meaning it's escaped overdevelopment, but also that demand for hotels is high – another reason to be excited about Fusion!

DO IT: *Fusion Phu Quoc opens in early 2017. Our Honeymoon Vietnam itinerary visits Phu Quoc, and could be tailored to include a stay at Fusion, from £2,235 for 13 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call one of our Vietnam experts on 0117 244 3464 to find out more.*

VIETNAM EXTENDS VISA WAIVER: It was fantastic news for many travellers in July, as Vietnam decided to officially extend its visa waiver programme until 30 June 2017. This means citizens of the UK, Spain, France, Germany and Italy can visit Vietnam for up to 15 days without a costly visa. Hooray!



BURMA

New trek gives something back

New Burma, new adventures. As the country adjusts to its tourism boom, travellers are getting excited about the wealth of fresh opportunities it offers to venture off the beaten track, exploring areas that were once off-limits.

One of our favourite new Inle Lake trekking discoveries lets you not only escape the crowds but also give a little something back to the local community. The walk begins with an early morning boat ride across the lake to Nanpan on the lakeshore, from where, in the company of a local trekking guide, you'll set off through bamboo forests and farming villages, over green hills and past paddy fields, to reach the Pa'O village of Hti Ne. Here, you can stop for a traditional lunch before heading back to the lake – or opting to spend the night in a local guesthouse there.

Treks that introduce you to ethnic minorities can sometimes feel exploitative, but this trip is run by Community Involved Tourism (CIT), whose guides are English-speaking Pa'O locals. This allows genuine interaction with the people here, with the lion's share of its profits reinvested in the Pa'O community.

When Burma finally opened its doors to tourism, many feared for the future of its local minorities. Now those doors have been open for some time, it's good to see projects like this helping benefit those very communities.

DO IT: *Our Shan State Adventure itinerary includes an overnight trek to Hti Ne, from £2,175 for 13 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call one of our Burma experts on 0117 244 3465 to find out more.*

JAPAN

Visit amazing worlds at new theme parks

Fancy visiting a theme park that prioritises ideas over profit margins? Then get ready for what's been described as the 'anti-Disneyland', the newest brainchild from Hayao Miyazaki, the genius behind the animation powerhouse Studio Ghibli.

Miyazaki's idea is a theme park for kids on the island of Kumejima in Okinawa. Set in the Zendo Forest, the park's purpose is to encourage children to get closer to nature. As well as a 'natural playground', there'll be a library and rooms for 30 guests. It's scheduled to open in 2018.

For those who can't wait until then for their next Japanese theme park fix, 2017 will see the opening of its Moomin theme park on the shores of Lake Miyazawa, while a new Legoland theme park opens in Nagoya on 1 April 2017.

DO IT: *Fans of theme parks should also see our Theme Park Family Adventure itinerary from £8,160 for a family of four for 12 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call our Japan experts on 0117 244 3463 to find out more.*

[VIETNAM]

Long time no see...
Parts of Vietnam's Tu Lan cave system date back over 5 million years, but it was only discovered in the early 1990s

ENTER THE JUNGLE



Vietnam is home to some of the largest (and best hidden) caves on Earth – **Violet Cloutman** hikes, climbs and swims the underground wonders of Quang Binh Province



Hidden passages

(clockwise from this)

An exhilarating trek through Quang Binh's dense forest brings you to some of the planet's most extraordinary caves; inside the Tu Lan cave system; waterfall inside Tu Lan Cave; Paradise Cave

"Don't jump, you could collapse the caves!" I stopped, poised to hop off the rock where I'd been positioning myself to get a better photo of Kim Cave's main chamber. The ground suddenly seemed rather less solid than it had a few moments ago.

You wouldn't know it from above ground, but the thickly forested mountains of Quang Binh Province are a brittle honeycomb of caverns and passages, all lying beneath a perilously thin limestone crust. Nothing could seem more permanent than these massive rocky caverns – but they are still constantly growing and changing as old caves collapse and rivers course through solid rock to form new ones. Even the cave where I was standing was

once two caverns – until the upper floor collapsed into the void below. Who knew what lay beneath it now, and when the same might happen again? Perhaps I was about to find out...

Quang Binh Province, which lies roughly in the middle of Vietnam's thin central spine, is one of the richest places in the world for caving, and yet serious exploration only began in the 1990s. Some of the area's biggest caves – including largest in the world Son Doong – were only discovered in the last ten years. My own expedition would be taking me through a system not extensively explored until 2012: the Tu Lan Caves.

Looking on a map at the tiny sliver of land that constitutes central Vietnam – a mere 50 kilometres wide at its narrowest point – it was hard to believe that so many caves could have slipped beneath the radar for so long. The reason is accessibility: for years, the region has been under close control by the Vietnamese military, and areas are still peppered with unexploded ordnance left over from the war.

The caves are also well hidden. For example, around 96% of Phong Nha National Park's 1,000 square kilometres is forested – nearly all of it unspoiled even by the considerable damage wrought during the war. Even the biggest caves often have just tiny openings, easily overlooked by the casual mountain wanderer.

Heading down

A case in point is Paradise Cave in Phong Nha National Park, which we had visited the day before. With a length of 31 kilometres and caverns up to 100 metres tall, it's one of the largest caves in the region – and easily the most impressive – but its entrance is so small and well-hidden that it went completely unnoticed until 2005. Descending into the depths, dwarfed

by the vast scale of its stalactites and stalagmites, I felt like JRR Tolkien's Frodo venturing into the Mines of Moria. It was a spectacular taster of what was to come.

Elsewhere beneath Phong Nha's forests lurks the biggest cave in the world: Son Doong. This cavern is so enormous that it has its own ecosystem and climate, sheltering a jungle of trees up to 30 metres in height. Its main chamber could accommodate a 40-storey skyscraper with room to spare, and it's said you could fly a Boeing 747 straight through it – although it isn't recommended.

Sadly, access to Son Doong is restricted to a few visitors per year and, at USD3,000 a pop, it's an expensive tour. Luckily, as I would soon find out, some of the largest and most beautiful caves in Quang Binh Province are much more accessible – as long as you don't mind a bit of hiking.

One small step...

Our trek to the Tu Lan cave system began in the village of Tan Hoa, 70km outside Phong Nha National Park. Here we listened to a briefing from our trekking guides, Tha and Lam, before strapping on our boots and heading out.

The scenery was stunning from the very beginning. Glittering rivers snaked along flat, green valleys while towering, jungle-clad mountains soared all around us. Children cycled past, cows grazed in the fields and the only disturbance was the odd passing motorbike (it's Vietnam; they'd take motorbikes to the moon if they could). I could hardly imagine a more idyllic setting.

But despite its peaceful appearance, life in Quang Binh Province is far from easy. The area suffers from extremes of weather: in summer it can be blisteringly hot and dry, while the

CAVES FOR NON-HIKERS

If you can't swim, or you shudder at the thought of hiking, don't be put off visiting Phong Nha, as the region's most spectacular caves are easily accessed. Visitors enter Phong Nha Cave by longtail boat from a nearby town and have the option to disembark for further exploration on foot. At Paradise Cave (pictured), visitors are driven to the base of a mountain by golf buggy and must ascend a set of 500 steps to the cave entrance, then navigate one kilometre of the cave on foot via wooden walkways and a further 200 steps. Both caves can easily be combined as part of a half-day trip.







Ryan Deboodt

Going underground
(clockwise from this)
Waterfall inside the Tu
Lan system; dining out
below the surface

rainy-season floods turn the scenery into a sort of inland Halong Bay. Later in the trek, Lam pointed out a watermark on a rock – the high point of the floods in 2010. In that year, the water reached 12 metres above ground level, submerging buildings and washing away cattle. In the cool, comfortable spring weather I found it hard to imagine such extremes.

After half an hour of walking along the flat valley floor we began to ascend into the mountains – where the going got decidedly tougher. We climbed steadily upwards, scrambling over fallen trees and squeezing between boulders, constantly surrounded by close jungle vegetation.

These forests contain a dizzying catalogue of flora and fauna, many of them endemic to Vietnam, with new species being discovered all the time. We passed plants with leaves the size of bedsheets, ducked under thick vines that snaked across our path, and stood in the shadow of 500-year-old trees with buttress roots taller than me.

Our guides taught us which plants to avoid – a bush that would bring you out in painful hives if brushed, or a vine

with angry-looking thorns that you certainly wouldn't want to grab hold of. But not all the plants here want to hurt you. Hidden within the jungles of Quang Binh Province are plants that can make you richer than your wildest dreams. One rare tree found here, Lam explained, can fetch many millions of Vietnamese *dong* due to its use in Chinese medicine.

At lunchtime, we paused for a picnic lunch in a cave overlooking a plateau, surrounded on all sides by wooded peaks. As I looked out over the landscape, I wondered whether much had changed here since the dawn of human history. The whole scene had such a prehistoric air about it that I wouldn't have been surprised to see a Stegosaurus wander out from among the trees.

Wet and wild

Finishing up our lunch of sandwiches and fruit (lugged up the mountainside by our porters, who put us all to shame with their mountain-goat-like agility), we took a while to recoup our energy and admire the surroundings. The cave tunnel where the porters had spread our picnic blanket disappeared into the

blackness of the mountain. As one of our party began wandering into the darkness, using his phone as a torch, our guides ushered him urgently back to the entrance, warning him not to explore alone.

After lunch, the trek to Tu Lan became more challenging. We scrambled ever upwards, slipping on slick muddy paths and climbing up rocky stretches strewn with boulders, until at last we arrived at our campsite. Positioned at the confluence of two streams, the site was sheltered on all sides by mountain and forest, a sheer rock cliff towering on one side. At the cliff's edge gaped a huge opening – the entrance to Ken Cave – with a waterfall pouring forth from its base into a perfect swimming pool, complete with little rowing boats bobbing along its sandy shore. In short, it was as perfect a spot for a campsite as I could imagine.

That evening, we fell upon our nightly meal with gusto – a delicious spread that our porters seemingly conjured from nowhere. I don't know whether it was the food or mild exhaustion, but the women in the mountains were right: food really does taste better out here.



InsideAsia Staff

It wasn't long after dinner that we retired to our hammocks, all tucked out and ready for sleep. Tomorrow we would finally be heading underground to the Tu Lan caves.

The descent

The Tu Lan cave system is hidden deep in Quang Binh's dense rainforest. No artful lighting illuminates its rock formations and no wooden walkways or stone-carved steps are there to make your journey easier. Kitted up with lifejackets, helmets, headlamps and waterproof rucksacks, we clambered to the top of the waterfall and took our first look into the gaping mouth of Ken Cave. As we launched ourselves into the river and began swimming into the darkness (somewhat awkwardly, impeded by our equipment), I felt a thrill of excitement. No tour buses, no chattering crowds; this felt like the beginning of a real adventure.

As the bright mouth of the cave gradually retreated, a deep gloom was replaced by total blackness. Our headlamps illuminated only our immediate vicinity, occasionally glancing off a rock or dancing across the water's surface to hint at the unknown space around us. Insects flocked to our headlamps, contributing an eerie flickering quality to the light as we each silently wondered what lay ahead – or below.

Penetrating deeper into the cave system, we climbed out of the water and began making our way on foot. We scrambled through narrow gaps and climbed through some tricky passages, where a wrong step would have meant a pretty steep fall. I'm not usually the nervous type, but I have to admit that my heart was in my mouth as I stepped carefully over black

cavities, trying not to imagine pointy rocks waiting for me at the bottom. In broad daylight I wouldn't have thought twice, but that is the suggestive magic of the caves: where your eyes don't see, your imagination fills in the gaps. Vast chambers, miles upon miles of tunnels, deep holes that could go to the centre of the earth – if recent discoveries here have taught us anything, it's that you can never really know what lies just beneath your feet.

We moved from cave to cave, going from small, almost cosy-feeling grottoes to vast, cathedral-like caverns, as the air temperature dipped from warm to cold and back again. Tha and Lam pointed out interesting rock formations: tiny, delicate 'cave pearls' formed by rocks rolling gently in water pools; long, thin 'soda straws' drooping downwards from the ceiling; and the

'We moved from cave to cave, going from small, almost cosy-feeling spaces to vast, cathedral-like caverns, as the air temperature changed from warm to cold and back again'

occasional fossilised snail. What moved me more than any of these delicate structures was the sheer magnitude of time involved in their formation. Stalactites and stalagmites typically grow less than one millimetre per year, making some of Tu Lan's formations unimaginably ancient.

At the end of the cave system we emerged via a wide opening into the jungle and made our way to Kim Cave, where more swimming and scrambling brought us, via an underground waterfall, to the conclusion of our adventure: a vertiginous climb up a six-metre ladder to a precipice far above. Here the darkness had its benefits, and I was glad not to be

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: 12h direct or 14h 25+ with one stop. From £500 return. The nearest airport to Phong Nha is Dong Hoi, which is 1h 30 from HCMC or 1h 10 from Hanoi. It is a further hour by road to Phong Nha.

WHEN TO GO: Cave treks run year-round, except for the month of October. Be aware that if you travel in the cooler months (November to April) it can get rather chilly! May to August offers warmer conditions.

VISAS: Vietnam has extended its visa waiver programme until 30 June 2017, so UK citizens do not need a visa to travel for up to 15 days.

CURRENCY: Vietnamese dong (VND).
 £1 = approx. VND30,000. USD widely accepted in tourist areas.

MORE ONLINE: www.insidevietnamtours.com

able to see the floor below as I made my way gingerly to the top.

As I surfaced, I was surprised to find myself within a few feet of the spot where we'd picnicked the day before, looking out across the fields and forest. Suddenly my guide's earlier warning about the dangers of wandering off into the darkness became clear. They knew that only a few steps lay between our picnic spot and becoming a human pancake. I felt my legs involuntarily wobble and promised myself to always listen to guides – they do know best.

A sedate walk through the valleys brought us back to Oxalis headquarters, where we could have much-needed showers and change into dry clothes. I was muddy, exhausted, but exhilarated. It may have been hard work getting there, but for just a little while, as I made my way through those underground passageways and chambers, I had felt like a real explorer.

The mysteries of this small but dramatic section of caves were now uncovered for me. But then I remembered the gap in the trees, where the entrance to Paradise had lain hidden for all those years. Quang Binh still had so much more left uncharted, so many miles of tunnels and caverns just waiting to be discovered, and that thought made me smile. 🌿

DO IT: Violet travelled on the Tu Lan Cave Trek, which consists of two days of hiking and one night of camping, and is included on our Vietnam Adventure itinerary, from £3,335 for 16 nights (exc. intl. flights). We can also arrange treks to various other cave systems in and around Phong Nha National Park, including Hang En (where you'll camp on a beach in the mouth of the cave) and the extraordinary rock formations of Hang Va. Call our Vietnam experts on **0117 244 3464** to find out more.



Feasts in the East

From dining amid the ruins of a Cambodian temple to touring the street-food stalls of Vietnam on the back of a scooter – discover Asian cuisine in some of Indochina's most remarkable locations

When it comes to food, nowhere in the world can compete with Asia for sheer diversity. From fragrant curries and soups to dazzling noodle and rice dishes; from the most delicate flavours to the hottest spices, this is a continent with a food cart on every corner and Michelin-starred dining aplenty. Whether exploring Vietnamese street food from the back of a Vespa, sampling bar snacks in an authentic Japanese *izakaya*, or dining on treats aboard a sunset cruise on Laos' Mekong River, these gastronomic experiences will introduce you to the very best cuisine in Asia and some unforgettable settings...

Laos: Sunset dinner cruise



Peaceful Luang Prabang is one of the most laid-back destinations in Indochina. While it is part of a well-worn tourist trail (and for good reason: it recently celebrated 20 years of World Heritage status), the town has somehow avoided the thronging crowds and pushy touts that have become a problem elsewhere. Instead, visitors are greeted by quiet, palm-lined streets and a beautiful blend of traditional Buddhist and colonial French architecture.

Lying at the confluence of the Mekong and Nam Ou rivers, this chilled-out town is also the starting point for an unmissable culinary experience: a sunset dinner cruise aboard the Nava Mekong. This elegant, traditional longboat will convey

you downriver to a village on the banks of the Mekong, where you'll moor for the evening and enjoy a spread of delicious Lao cuisine to the accompaniment of traditional music and dance.

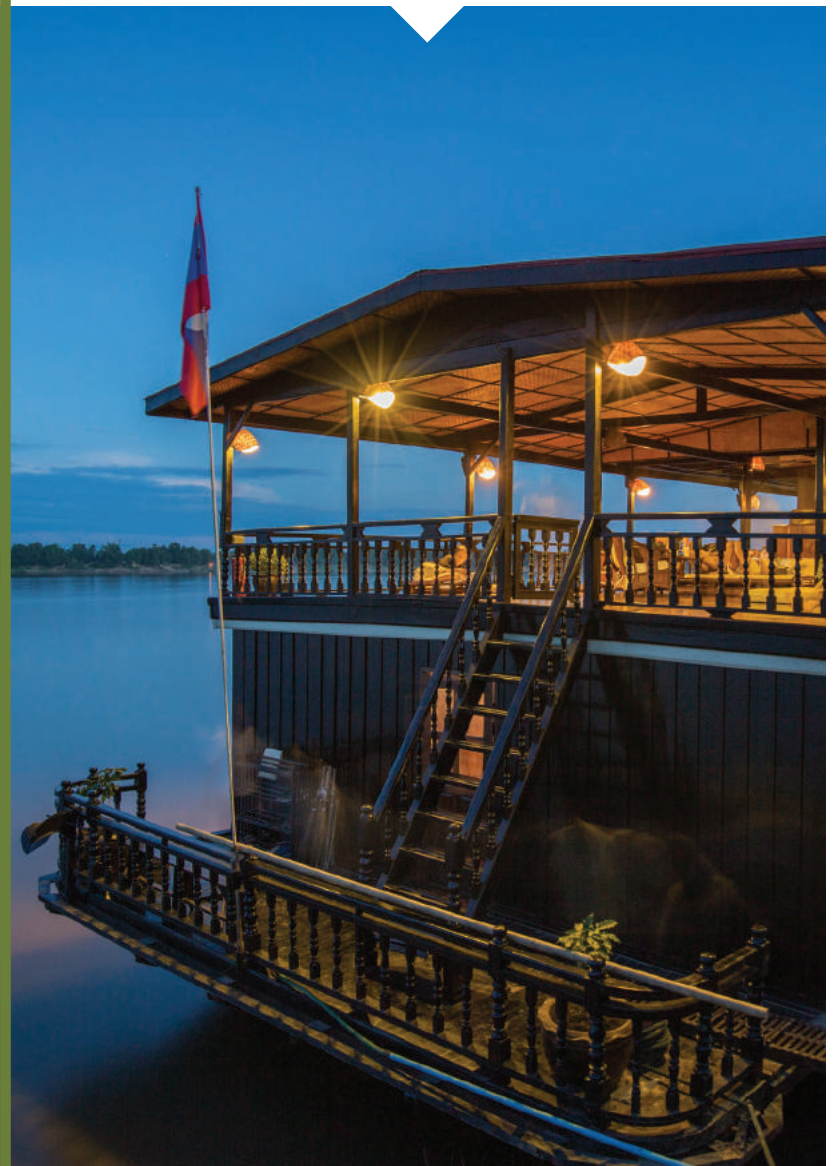
Following the meal, you'll return to Luang Prabang by lantern-light, watching tropical jungle drift languorously past as the sun sets over the water.

TOP TIP: Luang Prabang has one of Indochina's best night markets, so head into town after your cruise to pick up some bargains and a drink or two.

DO IT: Our Indochina Luxury Honeymoon itinerary includes a sunset dinner cruise along the Mekong, from £4,995 for 14 nights (exc. intl. flights). Alternatively, you can add a cruise to any trip that visits Luang Prabang. Call our Laos experts on **0117 244 3464** to find out more.



Laaping it up
Sticky rice and *laap*, a traditional Laotian mince salad; (right) setting the scene for an unforgettable river cruise



Lesley Fisher



Start your engines...
Getting revved up for a street food tour in Vietnam; (below) making traditional Shan cuisine in a Burmese village

Burma: Shan cookery class



Deep in the rolling hills of Burma's southern Shan State lies the town of Pindaya, celebrated for its ancient grottoes packed with golden Buddha statues. From here, it's a short hop out to a peaceful and little-visited minority village, where you'll discover an excellent – and unexpected – cookery school.

Shan cuisine is distinct from the Bamar (Burma's largest ethnic group) style of cooking found across the rest of the country, but has contributed some popular dishes to the national repertoire, such as

Shan noodles and the ubiquitous *lahpet* (pickled tea leaf salad). In this quiet village setting, you'll learn to create some local specialities in the kitchen of the village headman, using local ingredients to create some rare and unique dishes – river fish steamed in cabbage is a particular favourite!

TOP TIP: Pindaya's just a short drive from Inle Lake, so you can combine your cookery class with a visit to one of Burma's most beautiful areas.

DO IT: Our Classic Burma itinerary includes a Shan cookery lesson, from £1,995 for 15 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call one of our Burma experts on **0117 244 3465** to find out more.



Vietnam: Vespa street food tour



Discover the street food of Vietnam in two very different ways!

Motor through Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), the largest metropolis in Indochina, weaving in and out of traffic on the back of a Vespa. Zip between cafés, restaurants, street-food stalls and music venues, eating as you go and stopping at some of the city's most famous sites.

Or, in a decidedly more laid-back option, explore peaceful Hoi An, the ancient port town known for its lantern festival, and sample white rose dumplings and *banh can* pancakes as you tour its local bars. Then take a riverboat out to a restaurant deep in the surrounding paddy fields.

Both options offer the chance to ditch the usual guidebook haunts for something more authentic, learning about each delicacy as it's served. Street food is a great way to not just taste something new and exciting, but get under the skin of a culture that is fiercely proud of its culinary traditions – and the dishes are amazing.

TOP TIP: Be brave and head out on a Vespa tour on your first night in Vietnam. You might not think you're up for it, but there is no better cure for jetlag – trust us!

DO IT: Our Culinary Vietnam itinerary includes a Vespa tour of Ho Chi Minh City, from £1,950 for 11 nights (exc. intl. flights). Alternatively, you can add a food tour to any trip that visits Ho Chi Minh or Hoi An. Call our Vietnam experts on **0117 244 3464** to find out more.

Cambodia: Dinner at an ancient temple




Cambodia is famous for its temples, but few travellers ever venture beyond the main sites at Angkor. And yet the country is home to a vast array of ancient Khmer ruins – many of them spectacular yet rarely visited.

Banteay Chhmar is just one site among many that has snuck beneath the radars of travellers. In its heyday it was one of the largest Angkorian citadels; today, it is a crumbling and little-known outpost in the process of being reclaimed by the jungle that surrounds it. All of which might make this seem like an unlikely destination for foodies, but there are few more atmospheric locations in Cambodia in which to spend an evening.

Dining by candlelight, surrounded by centuries-old bas reliefs and the sounds of the jungle, is a truly unforgettable experience. Sample locally made Khmer cuisine amid the strains of traditional music and cast your imagination back to a time when the 'Citadel of Cats' was once home to a thriving community that lay at the heart of the world's largest empire. Unmissable.

TOP TIP: Banteay Chhmar is a great place to try a local homestay run by Community Based Tourism (CBT), who ensure funds go toward community projects.

DO IT: You can add dinner at the temple complex to our Hidden Temples of Cambodia itinerary, which includes a homestay in Banteay Chhmar, from £1,895 for 10 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call our Cambodia experts on **0117 244 3464** to find out more. 



Japan: An evening at an izakaya



Japanese food is so delicious and varied that picking just one style is next to impossible – but if we absolutely had to choose, an *izakaya* night with an Inside Japan tour leader just might come out on top.

Izakaya are often described as 'Japanese pubs', but that barely covers it. 'Pub grub' here is far more ambitious than a steak pie and chips: establishments range from the cramped to the cavernous, with prices going from discount diner to Michelin-star.

What they all have in common is a large menu of bar snacks, served *tapas*-style. Small dishes can range from edamame beans and

delicate tofu to chicken skewers (*yakitori*) and pizza – often all on the same menu.

Visiting an *izakaya* is a must if you're in Japan, but plucking up the courage to go inside and tackle the menu can be daunting, which is why it helps to have an expert with you. It's worth it, though, to gain an insight into both Japanese food *and* culture.

TOP TIP: Visit an *izakaya* on your first night and you'll feel confident to go time and again throughout your trip.

DO IT: An *izakaya* evening can be included in any tailored trip. We recommend our Gastronomic Adventure itinerary, which includes an *izakaya* night – plus all kinds of culinary experiences. From £2,830 for 13 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call one of our Japan experts on **0117 244 3463** to find out more.



Temple treats

Dining amid the ruins of Cambodia's Banteay Chhmar temple; (above) sharing Japanese-style tapas in an *izakaya*

GOING FOR GOLD



Exploring Burma's lesser-visited south offers a rare glimpse into its complex world of devotion and pilgrims, as InsideAsia consultant **Charlotte Bower** discovers...

All that glitters
Visitors paste gold leaf onto the rock beneath Kyauktiyo Pagoda as a sign of devotion

Meet the folks

Those making the pilgrimage to the Golden Rock often stay over a week – although women aren't allowed to see it up close



Since I was a young child, I've always wanted to be an explorer, finding parts of the world that other people have yet to see. Unfortunately I was born in the wrong era for that. Short of lacing up my trekking boots and getting lost in the Amazon, there is not much left that has not already been reported. However, there are still places that hold the appeal of being little-known and little-visited, and Burma, which only really opened up to tourism over the last couple of decades, fulfils all these requirements.

There is already a popular tourist route around the centre of the country, but to break away from the crowds, you only need to head south.

The Golden Rock, a day's drive from Yangon, is the perfect example of a destination that doesn't make its way onto half the itineraries it deserves. I had the good fortune to make it part of my trip last May, slightly outside of the peak pilgrimage season, and counted only a handful of other Western tourists among the crowds.

'Golden Rock is not only visually stunning, but one of the most important religious sites in Burma'

We started our morning in Hpa An, where we had spent the last few days exploring its various caves and limestone peaks. From here, a drive of around two-and-a-half hours brought us to the base of the mountain, where we had a quick (and essential) ice-cream break to take the edge off the 40-degree heat before

boarding a truck to the top of the mountain.

The only way to reach the Golden Rock is via the open-top pickup trucks, which have been converted into buses with wooden benches and flatbeds in the back. Our guide advised us to pay the extra thousand *kyat* (60p) for a seat in the driver's cabin, and it proved sage advice!

I've heard the drive described as everything from an exciting rollercoaster ride to a necessary evil. After experiencing the adventure myself, my feelings are mixed. The road is curved and steep, and the speed at which the drivers approach the hairpin bends leaves a little to be desired. I was glad of my cushioned front seat and slightly concerned for the people behind me – but the smiles of the children as we got to the top told me that I was in the minority with my concerns.

On arrival at the peak of the mountain, we left the truck and headed to our hotel. The area itself feels somewhat of an oddity – a mix between a small town and a theme park. Unlike Sara and I, who were planning on spending only one night



Burma chronicles
(clockwise from top left) Pilgrims have to climb high up into the mountains; the Golden Rock at dawn

here, local Buddhists making a pilgrimage (especially the ones who have walked up the mountain) tend to stay for a week or longer. As a result, there are all sorts of food stalls, natural remedy counters, souvenirs and even balloons and cuddly toys to keep the children occupied.

After a quick break and a chance to shower away the sweat and dust of the ride, we headed to the pagoda itself. Golden Rock (otherwise known as Kyaiktiyo Pagoda) is not only visually stunning, but one of the most important religious sites in Burma. Teetering on the very edge of a cliff as though poised to tumble into the valley below, it almost defies belief. There are several legends that surround its existence, all of which hinge on the belief that the boulder is balancing on a strand of the Buddha's hair.

Visitors can walk around the rock to see its logic-defying position from all angles, but while men are allowed to approach it directly to affix gold leaf, women must keep to a viewing platform slightly further back. Women are traditionally not allowed in the direct vicinity of Buddhist monuments, as this is where sacrifices would once have taken place. Today, while the practice of making sacrifices has vanished, the custom remains. On this occasion, the viewing platform was close enough that I did not feel like I was missing out on the experience at all – if anything, it's even more impressive from a distance than up close and personal.

The gilding of the boulder, now its defining feature, is a fairly new phenomenon – starting

within the last 100 years. In many Burmese temples and shrines, the applying of gold leaf as an act of devotion is common – hence the 'lumpy' gold Buddha at Mahamuni Pagoda in Mandalay. But not all of the rock can be reached from the access area, so it has to be regilded under scaffolding every five years.

However amazing the rock itself is, the highlight of my trip was the people I met there. Many had travelled for several days and would be sleeping on straw floormats for the rest of the week. Most of them had never met a Western person before, and our Burmese guide provided an invaluable connection to these people, whose stories revealed an image of life in even the remotest parts of Burma. Of course, we also had to pose for plenty of photos, so they could tell everyone in the village that they had met us!

After staying for sunset to watch the rock glow orange in the dying light, we headed back to our hotel for the evening. The next morning, it was back to the trucks and down the hill to return to Yangon – which, in our absence, seemed to have transformed from a relaxed and leafy city into a sprawling metropolis.

DO IT: *Our Kipling's Burma itinerary visits Golden Rock, as well as Yangon, Bagan, Mandalay, Mawlamyine and the hill station of Pyin Oo Lwin. From £2,555 for 13 nights (exc. intl. flights). Alternatively, add Golden Rock to your own tailored trip. Call our Burma experts on 0117 244 3465 to find out more.*



Burma Essentials

- CAPITAL CITY:** Naypyidaw
- MAIN RELIGION:** Theravada Buddhism
- POPULATION:** 53 million
- LANGUAGE:** Burmese
- TIME:** GMT+6.5
- GETTING THERE:** Flight time from London to Yangon: 13h 25+ with at least one stop. From £650 return. Golden Rock is a 3.5-hour drive from Yangon.
- WHEN TO GO:** Golden Rock is best visited during the Pagoda Festival season, from November to March. Outside this period, the rock is accessible but the nearby food stalls may not be open and inclement weather can make travelling in an open-top pickup truck undesirable!
- VISAS:** UK citizens will need a visa to enter Burma. This can be arranged in advance through the Myanmar Embassy. You can also apply for an e-visa at <http://evisa.moip.gov.mm>.
- CURRENCY:** Myanmar kyat (MMK). £1 = approx. 1,575MMK. 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, and not through hotels or other tourist services.



Portrait of a Japanophile
Hattie first visited Japan as a manga-obsessed teen; now she lives and works there

Japan for teenagers

Japan isn't just about *anime* and *manga*, but for young travellers they offer a gateway to exploring a wider culture, as InsideAsia consultant **Hattie Richardson** discovered when she first visited the country as a teen

There's nobody harder to please than a teenager on holiday. We all know, because we've all been one. And as the unrivalled Mecca of *manga* (comics) and *anime* (cartoons), Japan has plenty to keep this tricky age group occupied – as I found on my own first visit to Japan, travelling with my dad when I was 14.

Tokyo is the prime destination for fans of pop culture, but it's also a hotspot for sightseeing. As our first stop, it was easy to mix big sights and youth culture. We balanced out a visit to the great Meiji Shrine with a trip to vibrant Harajuku district and merged an outing to Hamarikyu Gardens with seeing the famous clock in Shiodome, created by animation company Studio Ghibli. Bustling Shibuya appealed to us both, and I enjoyed the temples of Asakusa because of its second-hand *anime* merchandise shops.

Of course, there were compromises. My dad dragged me around countless temples; I pushed him around the Pokémon Centre. A real highlight for the both of us was the Studio Ghibli Museum, which both indulged my love of director Hayao Miyazaki's animated classic *Spirited Away* and gave my father a full baptism into the opaque world of *manga* and *anime*.

In Kyoto, I was lucky enough to take part in a culture school for a few days, where I had the chance to try a tea ceremony, a *koto* harp lesson and calligraphy, all while wearing a kimono. It's not always easy for teenagers to take an interest in culture, and initially I could think of nothing worse than drinking tea for an hour. However, I now remember this day as the moment that changed my perception of Japan forever. It opened my eyes to the fact that manga and anime were just the

latest addition to its rich, diverse culture.

I'm so glad that my father nudged me to try something different, and I'd encourage any family with teenagers to do the same. Tea ceremonies, *taiko* drumming and calligraphy are also great group activities for all the family to enjoy.

My dad, on the other hand, learned how to play the Pokémon card game

on that holiday, and I've yet to beat him since. So I think we both learned something new.

DO IT: Our *Manga & Anime* itinerary is the perfect trip for anyone interested in Japanese popular culture, combining the must-see destinations of Tokyo, Kyoto and Osaka. From £1,670 for 10 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call our Japan experts on **0117 244 3463** to find out more.

'In Kyoto, I was lucky enough to take part in a culture school, where I had the chance to try a tea ceremony, a *koto* harp lesson and calligraphy, all while wearing a *kimono*'

Japan essentials

CAPITAL CITY: Tokyo

MAIN RELIGIONS: Shinto and Buddhism

LANGUAGE: Japanese

TIME: GMT+9

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

WHEN TO GO: Japan is an excellent destination all year round, but it's at its busiest during the spring (March to April) and autumn (October to November) seasons thanks to mild weather conditions and its beautiful blossoms and foliage.

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

CURRENCY: Japanese yen (JPY).

£1 = approx. JPY135

MORE ONLINE

www.insidejapantours.com



Travel consultant Hattie has travelled extensively in Japan, prompted by her early experiences of the country.

TOP 5 TIPS: AUTUMN LEAVES IN JAPAN



Autumn is one of the best times to be in Japan, as locals flock to see its forests and parks change colour. Our experts pick their favourite leaf-watching spots...

When it comes to autumn in Japan, nothing is anticipated with more excitement than the changing of the leaves – as a rich palette of reds, oranges, golds and yellows spreads gradually from north to south. During this period, which begins in September and concludes in December, the Japanese indulge in a centuries-old tradition as they head out to their favourite *koyo* (leaf-viewing) spots to admire the foliage in all its glory. As *koyo* connoisseurs ourselves, we have a few recommendations for 'leaf peepers' thinking of travelling to Japan! Here are our top five favourite spots...

1 NARUKO ONSEN JAMES MUNDY

James is head of marketing at InsideAsia. As a former tour leader, he has visited Naruko Gorge many times.



The little northern town of Naruko Onsen is renowned for its hot spring baths, but in autumn it's Naruko Gorge that becomes the star attraction. This 100-metre-deep ravine has a series of walking routes that allow *koyo* viewers to admire its forests of red-and-gold leaves. One of the best spots for viewing the autumnal spectacle is from the Ofukuzawa Bridge, which supplies views right across the leafy ravine, and just 20 minutes' drive from the gorge you'll find more natural wonders: the Jigokudani River and its hot-spring geysers.

Peak colours: Late October to early November

DO IT: Our *A Northern Soul Small Group Tour* catches the leaves at Naruko Gorge (17 October 2016; 16 October 2017). From £3,150 for 14 nights.



2 KYOTO CATHERINE DUKE

Catherine specialises in planning educational tours for Inside Japan. She has lived in Tokyo and Kyoto.



Late November, as the leaves are changing, is by far my favourite time to visit Kyoto. With brilliant red and burnt orange leaves reflecting in the ponds of the great temples, it's a special time of year, and Tenryu-ji Temple, in the district of Arashiyama, is the perfect spot to witness this change. Here, you can observe the spectacular colours of the leaves in the temple's landscaped garden, with the lush green of the pine-forested mountains behind them. Afterwards, stroll around the tranquil Arashiyama area, taking in more beautiful autumnal scenes and some truly wonderful views across Kyoto.

Peak colours: Mid-November to early December

DO IT: Our *Spirit of Honshu Small Group Tour* stops off in Kyoto for the autumn leaves (10 November 2017). From £3,450 for eight nights.

3 NIKKO TYLER PALMA



*Group Tours Ground Manager
Tyler has been based in Tokyo for
nearly a decade. He loves
exploring the lesser-known*

corners of Nikko National Park.

Less than two hours from Tokyo, the main draw for most visitors here are Nikko National Park's UNESCO World Heritage shrines and temples. But there is far more here than most visitors ever get to see. The Ryuo Gorge is not only beautiful, it's also one of the easiest places in Nikko NP to access. From the hot-spring resort of Kinugawa Onsen, a little train whisks you through dense forests to a station near the entrance to a walking path. This is the perfect route to take in the autumn scenery and will have you wondering if the bright neon of Tokyo was just a dream. Sure, you'll see a few tourists at the more famous sites (like Kegon Waterfall; *pictured*), but it's worth the effort.

Peak colours: Early October to mid-November

DO IT: Our *Japan Enchantment Small Group Tour* takes advantage of the autumn colours in Nikko NP (30 September, 7/28 October & 4 November 2017). From £5,250 for 14 nights.



4 MIYAJIMA HUGH CANN



*Hugh is a tour leader and has lived in Japan for over
14 years. He is currently based in Hiroshima, just 15
minutes by ferry from Miyajima Island.*

Every year, for a couple of weeks in November, people visit Momijidani Park at the foot of the Misen Virgin Forest to see its hundreds of Japanese maple trees change their colours all at once, revealing an unimaginable sea of vermillion and gold. At this time of year, few vistas can rival the spectacular scenery on view from the top of Mount Misen, all witnessed under a clear autumn sky.

Peak colours: Mid-November

DO IT: Our *Japan Unmasked Small Group Tour* visits Miyajima during the autumn leaves season (30 October & 13 November 2017). From £1,890 for 13 nights.



5 KAMIKOCHI VIVIENNE BOYACK



*Sales team leader Vivienne returned to Japan last year to
enjoy the beautiful autumn leaves in Kamikochi.*

Kamikochi offers some of Japan's most spectacular mountain scenery – especially in autumn leaf season. To get there, take the bus along winding roads high into the Japanese Alps. As you get higher and higher, the colours change from greens to oranges, yellows and reds. My favourite spots are at Kappabashi Bridge and Myojin Pond, which can easily be combined as part of a half-day hike. Longer trails can take the more adventurous up and out of the valley and into the mountaintops.

Peak colours: Early to mid-October

DO IT: Travel on our *Classic Japan Small Group Tour* to see the autumn foliage in Kamikochi (16 September & 14 October 2017). From £2,950 for 13 nights.

To find out more or book a place on one of our tours, please get in touch with one of our Japan experts on 0117 244 3463. All prices quoted exc. intl. flights.





Alternative

TOKYO

With its subcultures, private bars and insider geekery, Tokyo often feels like two cities: the one in the guidebook and another just out of reach – our experts pass on their tips to unlocking its secrets

Tokyo has been destroyed by Godzilla 28 times, it has both the world's busiest train station and most expensive restaurant, and if its denizens were to form a single conga line it would stretch all the way to Toronto. And yet, despite being one of the most famous cities on Earth, it is often a surprise to visitors to learn that Tokyo is also one of the most difficult places to scratch beneath the surface. Travellers often leave as baffled as when they arrived. Luckily for you, our Tokyo experts are on hand to let you in on a few insider secrets...



Shake, rattle and stroll
Surfing the bars of Shinjuku's Golden Gai area is a Tokyo rite of passage; (far left) the homey pleasures of Drunkard's Alley

Best for: NIGHTLIFE

TOKYO CLASSIC GOLDEN GAI

Tucked away in the heart of the skyscraper district of Shinjuku, Golden Gai definitely ranks as one of the more intriguing pockets of Tokyo. Despite being surrounded on all sides by towering concrete business districts, this tiny block of low-rise, ramshackle buildings has somehow survived intact since before Japan's economic miracle, making it a rarity in a city that has long prized the shiny and new. Consequently, its slim, dimly-lit alleys offer an altogether rare window into pre-boom Tokyo.

Golden Gai consists of six narrow streets, each linked by tiny, one-person-wide alleyways. To make things even more intriguing, this diminutive two-square-kilometre patch is positively groaning with bars – over 250 by our best estimates. Nearly all of these are appropriately minuscule, seating just a small handful of punters, and each one has its particular selling point, whether it be an extensive troll doll collection or full hospital-themed décor.

Many of the tinier bars only cater to a regular clientele, which means that outsiders are often turned away. It saves time to know which are open to all-comers, but there are a number of establishments that welcome newbies with open arms, so just poke your head around a few doorways and wander up a handful of staircases and we guarantee you'll find something interesting! If not, there's always another bar to try – you won't run out of venues in a hurry.

Nearest station: Shinjuku

VS

INSIDER TIP DRUNKARD'S ALLEY



MARK RAWLINS

Mark is one of our tour leaders, and spent three years in Fukuoka before moving to Tokyo a couple of years ago.

Nonbei Yokocho – or 'Drunkard's Alley' – feels more local and authentic than its cousin. I've heard there are plans for it to be knocked down – the same has been said about Golden Gai for years, to no avail – but, for now, it's holding on, so go while you can.

Nonbei Yokocho can't compete with Golden Gai for sheer capacity (it has around 35 bars compared with 250), but how many bars can you really visit in one night? It's a fantastic place, whether you want to pick up some tapas-style *izakaya* food (see p 14) or just drink into the night. Curva is the most lively bar and a great place to make friends, as it's popular with both tourists and locals, with nights out often spilling onto the street. Some slightly more chilled-out options include Namiki and Hana.

For more drinking-focused establishments, the best place to look is the alley that runs alongside the train tracks, while the inner alleys are more food-orientated. Some have table charges – the same applies in Golden Gai – but it's usually worth it. I particularly like Ren, where the owner speaks English and the atmosphere is really laid-back. October also sees the alley hold a festival that rivals even Golden Gai's September extravaganza!

Nearest station: Shibuya

Classical gas

Walking under the giant lanterns of Senso-ji, the oldest temple in Tokyo; (below) exploring the shops of Yanaka



Best for: **OLD-TIMEY TOKYO**

TOKYO CLASSIC

ASAKUSA

For many travellers, Asakusa constitutes their very first impression of Japan. On any given day of the year it buzzes with life: smoke billows from incense burners, throngs of schoolchildren and visitors pay their respects at the temple, and crowds browse the countless stalls on the market street that leads to Kaminarimon ('Thunder Gate'). Resplendent, vermilion Senso-ji is the oldest temple in Tokyo and the city's spiritual heart, while the long, lantern-lined approach to the area is packed with delicious street-food snacks, traditional knick-knacks and great souvenir-shopping opportunities.

After you've wandered around the temple grounds and admired its five-tiered pagoda, head around the corner to the wonderfully old-fashioned Hanayashiki amusement park. Then, once your stomach has settled, venture out onto the surrounding streets, which are packed with traditional *izakaya* bars serving up tapas-style bar snacks and *okonomiyaki* savoury pancakes, and ice-cream parlours vending every flavour imaginable, from green tea to *wasabi* (don't confuse the two!).

One of our top recommendations is to make the short walk to Kappabashi-dori ('Kitchen Street'), where you can not only pick up some high-quality cookware but see where they make Japan's ubiquitous plastic food.

Nearest station: Asakusa or Tawaramachi

VS

INSIDER TIP

YANAKA



YUKI HUNTER

Sales support co-ordinator Yuki is based in our Bristol office, but was born and bred in Tokyo.

Take the JR Yamanote line and get off at Nippori Station, leaving through the north exit. Continue past a peaceful, park-like cemetery and make your way down the Sunset Dan-Dan stairs to Yanaka market street – much more chilled-out than bustling Asakusa! Here, you can shop for authentic Japanese clothing, get your hands on good-quality crafts and browse the street food being cooked at stalls along the street. Yanaka is particularly famous for its cats – both real and otherwise – so keep your eyes peeled for feline friends! There isn't a grand temple focal point to compete with Asakusa's Senso-ji, but there are lots of smaller temples that are quiet and pleasant to wander, such as Daien-ji, Zuirin-ji or leafy Tenno-ji.

Try to visit Yanesen, where you can take part in traditional activities, such as tea ceremonies or calligraphy (on prior arrangement), and stop by at Scai, an art gallery in a converted bathhouse. When I take friends to visit Tokyo, I always rent a bicycle and cycle through the neighbourhood to Ueno Park and 'Kitchen Street' before finishing at Asakusa. If you're into sewing, you might also like to head out of the south exit of Nippori Station, where you'll find countless shops selling textiles and haberdashery.

Don't come to Yanaka expecting the wood-panelled streets of Gion or Takayama, but there's nowhere better to enjoy a bit of authentic old-fashioned charm and get a sense of the Tokyo of days gone by.

Nearest station: Nippori or Sendagi



Best for: **GEEKERY**

TOKYO CLASSIC

AKIHABARA

Akihabara is the acknowledged heartland of the *otaku*, Japan's home-grown geek community. If you're looking to browse *manga* comics or racks of *anime* films, Akihabara – or 'Akiba' as it's affectionately known – is packed to the rafters with everything you could desire.

As soon as you leave the station you're surrounded by glowing signs, anime characters the size of buildings, multi-storey gaming arcades in block-coloured towers and girls dressed in frilly outfits handing out flyers for maid cafés. It's almost like being inside one of the arcade games that the area is famous for.

Venture inside these neon palaces and you'll find comic-book archives, every kind of game under the sun, and whole department stores devoted to retro video games, manga figurines and memorabilia. For the full *otaku* experience, you can even book yourself a booth at a manga café – with internet access and a vast library of comics at your disposal. We recommend making time to head to Don Quijote, the much-loved and eclectic late-night department store, for that 'only-in-Japan' souvenir.

Before it became a haven of geekery, Akiba was already well-known as the place to browse the latest tech and pick up tax-free electronics, earning it the nickname 'electric town'. Check out Yodobashi Camera for the biggest selection, and make sure you ask for international models to avoid wasting your cash!

Nearest station: Akihabara

VS

INSIDER TIP

NAKANO**DAVID LOVEJOY**

Tour leader David has lived in and around Tokyo for nearly ten years and has a soft spot for Nakano.

Only four minutes from Shinjuku on the rapid trains, Nakano can make you feel nostalgic for a time you may or may not

have been a part of. Just north of the station is Sun Mall, a long, glass-covered shopping arcade leading to one of Nakano's most unique destinations: Nakano Broadway.

This is a true *otaku* paradise, and even if you aren't a *manga* or *anime* fanatic, Nakano offers a glimpse into a fascinating subculture. Mandarake, a world-famous vendor of rare memorabilia, also has its headquarters here and about a dozen different stores spread throughout the retro mall. There is also an eclectic assortment of other shops and even some rather hip venues, including Bar Zingaro, which was opened by

megastar artist Takashi Murakami.

Just a short walk north of Nakano Broadway is the quiet neighbourhood of Arai, where you can find a few charming little restaurants. And if you prefer a more lively scene, the alleyways of Sanbangai, adjacent to Sun Mall, are packed with bars and restaurants, each with their own style.

Nearest station: Nakano

**Digital revolution**

Akiba is an *otaku's* dream, with games, tech and more *manga* than you can shake a *nunchaku* at; (top) the less neon (but still geeky) delights of Nakano Broadway

The young ones
The fashion tribes of Harajuku are known for their outrageous styles; (below) the hipster haven of Shimokitazawa



Best for: **SHOPPING & CAFÉ CULTURE**

TOKYO CLASSIC HARAJUKU

How to begin to describe Harajuku? Sweet shop meets fashion show? Hansel and Gretel meets Pokémon? Alice in Wonderland meets Marilyn Manson? There are endless links you could make to describe this candy-coloured Tokyo shopping district, but none quite capture its eccentricity.

Influenced by the Western culture spread by the Americans that lived here during the post-war period, Harajuku has been a fashion hotspot since the 1970s. But it wasn't until it became a meeting point for street-fashion fans in the late 1990s that its reputation for the weird and wonderful was cemented. From Lolita fashion to Decora; from Ganguro to Manba, it's home to a kaleidoscope of subcultures that converge each Sunday to parade nearby Yoyogi Park, sealing Harajuku's reputation for outlandish fashion and teen culture. Today, it remains the best place to pick up everything from Victorian-style aprons to Hello Kitty-shaped backpacks.

If you find yourself in Harajuku, wander out of the quaintly Tudor-esque station and along Takeshita-dori, the area's main drag. Stop in at Daiso, Japan's popular 100 yen store, then indulge in tea and multi-coloured spaghetti at the nutty Kawaii Monster Café. Afterwards, turn right at the end of the street to reach Chicago – a great place to pick up a cheap vintage kimono. It's also just a short walk from Harajuku to Meiji Shrine, the city's essential Shinto site – make sure you wander its wooded precincts before you leave!

Nearest station: Harajuku or Meiji-jingumae

INSIDER TIP VS SHIMOKITAZAWA



KATRINA CORDERY

Katrina is a sales team leader in our Bristol office, and spent a year living near Shimokitazawa during her five years in Japan.

Just a short hop from Shinjuku on the Odakyu line, or from Shibuya on the Keio Inokashiro line, Shimokitazawa is Harajuku for grown-ups. I lived a couple of stops away during my year in Tokyo, so I'm well acquainted with its shops, bars and cafés!

The north side is quieter and filled with coffee shops, while the south side has more of a buzz, with an array of bars catering to Tokyo's hipster crowd. Whether you want to shop for clothes that are categorised by fruit instead of price, drink a latte with a cute face drawn in foam, or simply attend an instant ramen party at a reggae bar, it's all just great fun.

What Shimokitazawa is best-known for is its impressive array of second-hand clothes shops, which make it easily one of the best places in the capital to pick up a bargain. In fact, the residents of Shimokitazawa are well-known among Tokyoites for having fended off plans for a vast underground station shopping mall of the kind commonly found at stations across Japan, preferring to protect their thriving independent shopping culture.

Harajuku is great if you're looking for *kawaii* (cutesy) threads and the kind of Lolita fashion Tokyo is famous for, but, as any Tokyoite will tell you, Shimokitazawa is where the cool kids are.

Nearest station: Shimokitazawa




These are just a few recommendations from our team. To read more, see our 'Alternative guide to Tokyo' at www.insidejapanblog.com

DO IT: Nearly all of our itineraries begin and end in Tokyo. Why not try Best of Japan, from £1,860 for 14 nights, which combines visits to the capital, Hakone, Kyoto, Hiroshima, Osaka and Takayama. Call our Japan experts on **0117 244 3463** to find out more.

Tokyo essentials

Population: 13.5 million

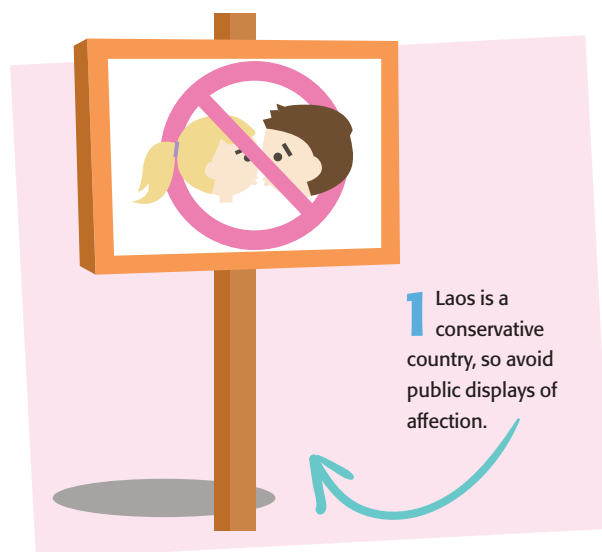
Getting there: Tokyo has two international airports: Narita and Haneda. Narita is an hour by train, 70 mins by taxi, or 90 minutes by shuttle bus from central Tokyo; Haneda is roughly 25 minutes by train or 30 mins by taxi.

Getting around: Tokyo's public transport system is extensive, cheap and easy to use. We recommend using the subway for most journeys – purchase an IC top-up card (such as Suica, Pasmo, or Manaca) and you'll be able to tap in and out of every subway line. Inside Japan Tours can provide IC cards for customers. 

Insider guide...

Etiquette & customs in Laos

Indochina is full of customs and traditions that travellers are often unaware of before visiting, so brush up on local etiquette to avoid misunderstandings



1 Laos is a conservative country, so avoid public displays of affection.



2 Lao people greet each other with a 'nop'. To *nop*, place your palms together and bow. Men can also greet each other by shaking hands.



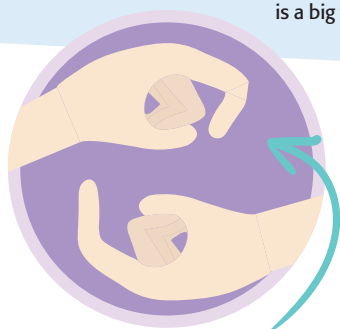
3 In Buddhist countries, the head is considered sacred and the feet profane. Thus, touching anyone on the head is considered very rude. Likewise, propping your feet up on furniture, pointing at anything with your feet, sitting with your feet directed at a holy image, or stepping over somebody in your way is a big faux pas.



4 Dress conservatively, ideally covering your shoulders and knees. Lao people appreciate neatly dressed visitors and are rarely scruffy themselves. This is especially important at religious sites.

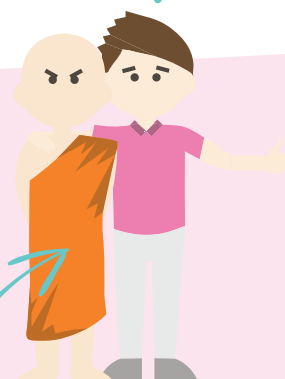


5 If you're invited into a Lao person's home, take your shoes off before you enter.



6 If you want to beckon somebody over, do so with your fingers pointing downwards. To do so with the fingers pointing upwards (as in Western countries) is considered rude.

7 Physical contact with monks is generally frowned upon in Laos, as in other Buddhist countries.



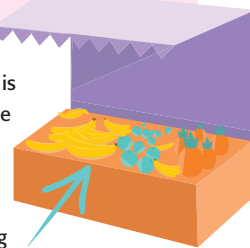
8 Skinny dipping is likely to earn you more than a few raised eyebrows. Lao people usually cover up when swimming, and bathing nude is considered offensive.

9 Lao people tend to speak softly, which can be a blessing when you've just come from noisy Vietnam or Cambodia. They also shy away from confrontation, so try to keep your voice down and never lose your temper, as this causes both parties to lose face – a big no-no in many Asian societies.



10 Haggling is par for the course in Laos, but be sure to do it with a smile

and don't push too hard. Tipping isn't expected but is now commonplace in tourist areas, and a tip to show appreciation to your guide is always appreciated, but not obligatory.



DO IT: We can organise tailored trips to Laos as a single destination or in combination with Vietnam and Cambodia; see our Laos Overland itinerary, from £2,295 for 14 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call our Laos experts on **0117 244 3464** to find out more.



Your travels

Gilded temples, beautiful monasteries, local cultures and chaotic cities: Sandra Stewart finds out for herself why Burma has become one of travel's most essential new destinations

Burma was a country that I had never thought of visiting until two years ago. It was while enjoying an InsideAsia group tour in Vietnam and Cambodia with tour leader Tyler that I was enticed to discover its secrets, and in 2015 our group met up again – anticipating a Burma tour full of exciting places, good food, fun-filled activities and beautiful landscapes. We were not disappointed!

Burma today reminds me of Bali when I first visited 35 years ago, minus the tourists. We never tired of photographing its unique, beautiful vistas – except perhaps after walking barefoot up 777 steps to Mount Popa. Drifting peacefully in a hot air balloon over Bagan's many stupas below, with the Irrawaddy River and mountains in the distance, was an amazing experience.

Of all the destinations we were to visit, I was particularly looking forward to Inle Lake – and my expectations were more than met. On the first morning of our stay, a few of us got up early for a sunrise boat trip in a traditional longtail

vessel. Although the hazy morning meant the sunrise wasn't the most spectacular that I've seen, it was well worth the ride to explore the waterways of the lake, passing local people taking fresh produce to market.

Inle is famous for its Intha leg-rowing fishermen, some of whom posed for us out on the lake while our local guide explained their distinctive technique – and there was plenty else to look at on the water too. In just one morning we passed villages of stilted houses along the shoreline, visited the local pagoda, watched boats being built by hand, and returned to our accommodation past fishing boats and floating gardens.

Leaving Inle Lake for the country's former capital Yangon, we realised that our trip was coming to an end. I knew that as this city would be in total contrast to the beautiful Shan hills and the peaceful atmosphere of the lake – but even I was not prepared for the chaotic gridlock we found ourselves in!

But once we entered our hotel, the Chatrium opposite Kandawgyi Lake, all our traffic woes

were quickly forgotten and forgiven. We had time to freshen up and relax for a while before we headed out to the spectacularly beautiful Shwedagon Pagoda, decked out in its gold leaf and diamonds. Watching the sun set on the top of the stupas was stunning – this was one pagoda I didn't mind taking my shoes off for. Even a little bit of rain couldn't dampen the atmosphere of this amazing place.

Having now travelled to Vietnam, Cambodia and Burma with InsideAsia Tours, I am looking forward to my next adventure in the area – hopefully with the wonderful group that I enjoyed my time with in both Burma and Indochina. Thank you Tara for being such a wonderful guide, and Tyler for enticing us to visit Burma. We were not disappointed.

Sandra travelled on our Beautiful Burma group tour (13 nights; from £2,325 exc. intl. flights) during the recent Burmese elections. This is an abridged version of Sandra's original piece. Read her full story online at www.insideburmablog.com.

1st2nd3rd

WIN Japan goodies!

Congratulations to **Pat Stancliffe**, whose image of a motorcyclist taking a break in Hanoi, Vietnam, won the second *East* competition, thanks to its highly original take on an iconic Asian transport. Your QUMOX sports camera will be on its way to you shortly. The runners up were **Jenni Sarafilovic**, with her photo of monks in the rain at Mount Koya, Japan, and **Ian Hazlewood**, with his image of an elderly woman at Burma's Inle Lake. The standard, as ever, was high, and picking

a winner was no easy business. We'd like to thank everybody who took the time to enter.

EAST HAIKU COMPETITION

We're giving you the chance to win a box packed with Japanese cooking goodies courtesy of the Japan Centre! To enter, compose a haiku (a three-line poem of five, seven and five syllables) relating to any aspect of life, culture or geography in Japan, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos or Burma. Entries are limited to five poems per person, so come up with something Matsuo Basho would be proud of!

HOW TO ENTER:

- 1) Read our terms & conditions. You can find them at: www.insideasiatours.com/eastmagazine
- 2) Send up to five haiku to east@insideasiatours.com by 5pm (GMT) on 15 November 2016. Include your name, address & contact details.
- 3) The winner and runners up will have their haiku published in the next issue of *East*, out in December.

JAPAN CENTRE



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



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