

Issue 004 // Spring 2017

east



Travel inspiration from **InsideAsia Tours**
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The secret world of *Geisha*

OUR INSIDER'S GUIDE TO
A JAPANESE PHENOMENON



Discover north Vietnam

Top tips: Yangon

Cycling Asia

WIN!
LUXURY TRIP
FOR TWO TO
CAMBODIA!
HEAD TO
PAGE 31





WIN A TRIP TO CAMBODIA!

Enter our photo competition to be in with the chance of winning an awesome trip to Cambodia. Turn to page 31.

contents

8

REGULARS

4 The inside scoop

An insider's view of what's new and exciting in Japan, Burma and Indochina.

19 Family travels

Sisters Cait and Charli pick their highlights from a family trip to Burma.

24 Top 5 tips: Yangon

Our experts give us their top five things to do in the former Burmese capital.

30 Your adventures

Send us your stories for a chance to be seen in print; PLUS win a trip to Cambodia.



24

FEATURES

8 The secret world of geisha

Ben Walker offers us a rare sneak peek into the mysterious 'floating world' of Japan's enigmatic geisha.

14 Life on two wheels

Get pedalling with our favourite cycling trips across Asia, from half-day jaunts to epic week-long, temple-strewn explorations.

20 Northern star

Vicky Garnett escapes to the towering highlands of Vietnam's far north, home to some of the starkest and most beautiful landscapes in Asia.

26 Looking back

Indochina expert Liam Koehler gives us his top six places to learn about war history in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.



20



14



26

Welcome to *East*



Meeting a geisha for the first time is still a special memory for us, and so it is with great pleasure that we welcome you into their secret world – just one of the insider experiences you'll find within this latest edition of *East*.

Elsewhere, sisters Cait and Charli give us the lowdown on their family adventure in Burma; plus check out our 'top five tips'

for visiting the former Burmese capital, Yangon. Specialist Vicky takes us on a tour of the spectacular scenery of northern Vietnam, while Liam shows us where we can learn about the fascinating war history of Southeast Asia.

They say the journey is more important than the destination, and one of the best ways to get beneath the surface of a place is to see it by bike, which is why cycling takes centre stage in this issue. You can stop and start when you like, and the slower pace means you can grab your camera whenever you spot something picture-worthy. Talking of which – be sure to check out our photo competition on page 31, which could win you a trip to Indochina!

In Asia, what at first seems intimidating or impossible often just needs the right 'way in' – and that is what we are here for.

Happy travels!



Alastair Donnelly

Simon King

ALASTAIR DONNELLY & SIMON KING, DIRECTORS OF INSIDEASIA TOURS

Just back...



Vicky Garnett

Just back from: **BURMA**

Product executive Vicky recently returned from a whirlwind trip to Burma

– boating on Inle Lake, scaling the Golden Rock and touring the plains of Bagan.

Memorable moment: Discovering the hidden delights of Hpa An in southern Burma.



Amy Tadehara

Just back from: **VIETNAM, CAMBODIA & LAOS**

Travel consultant Amy travelled all over Indochina,

combining historic Angkor and Luang Prabang with Vietnam's most beautiful destinations.

Memorable moment: Having a go at farming and fishing in the Vietnamese town of Hoi An.



Kester Wright

Just back from: **JAPAN**

Kester recently returned from Japan, where he fulfilled a personal ambition of hiking

part of the old Nakasendo samurai highway and crossing the Seto Islands by bike.

Memorable moment: Cycling the Shimanami Kaido (see p14).



Simona Sampaolo

Just back from: **JAPAN**

On her trip back to Japan, Simona joined our *Hidden Japan* group tour and paid

a visit to her old stomping ground – getting to know the alpine town of Takayama anew.

Memorable moment: Winning 'best dancer' at the Awa Odori Kaikan in Tokushima!

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BURMA

Bagan 'quake has silver lining

A legend is rebuilt. Many feared the worst when an earthquake struck Burma's ancient city of Bagan in August 2016 but the disaster may offer a unique opportunity to renovate the site...

At first the damage seemed catastrophic: spires collapsed in clouds of dust, rubble cascaded down ancient stupas, the famous Sulamani Pagoda was partially ruined. As reports of the 2016 quake that struck Bagan emerged, the number of damaged pagodas swiftly rose from 66 to 200, then hit 450. The question was asked: would Bagan ever be the same again?

But as the dust cleared after the August 'quake, all was not as disastrous as it first seemed. Experts were quick to point out that most of what had collapsed had been shoddy building repairs carried out by the military junta. The original temples, which have weathered

earthquakes for centuries before this one, were mostly unharmed.

Bagan's renovations, carried out in the late 20th century without sensitivity to the original structures, have long been blamed for holding the ancient capital back from being granted UNESCO World Heritage status. But with some of this building work wiped out by the 'quake, and a new government now in charge, has Bagan been handed a clean slate?

The head of UNESCO's Yangon office, Sardar Umar Alam, thinks so. As long as future repairs are carried out professionally, it is "very likely," he said, that Bagan will be recognised as a World Heritage Site in 2019. It is a condition that Burma is clearly prepared to embrace, as State

Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi was quick to call a halt to the military clean up of the site, and insisted that they would wait for experts to arrive.

Indeed, it seems there is little chance of sloppy repairs this time around: a UNESCO team has been slated to conduct the restoration, with the total refurbishment of all 453 damaged monuments costing over £9 million. Our hopes are high!

DO IT: *Bagan remains a safe and rewarding destination despite recent earthquake damage. Our Best of Burma itinerary will introduce you to its wonders, from £1,195 for eight nights (exc. intl. flights). Call one of our Burma experts on 0117 244 3465 to find out more.*

Opportunity knocks

The recent earthquake may help Bagan finally achieve UNESCO World Heritage status





JAPAN

Imperial Palace opens its doors

Japan's historic capital, Kyoto, was once a natural fit for the Imperial Palace, where the Emperor of Japan resided. And while the official royal residence has been relocated numerous times over the centuries, this incarnation has remained in place since 1855.

Until recently, it was accessible only by prior arrangement and via guided tour. But as of last year, the rules have relaxed; it can now be visited without an appointment, and for free. Visitors can explore the park, gardens, shrines and mansions – but it's worth noting some buildings are still off-limits.

DO IT: *The Imperial Palace can be visited on any trip that stops in Kyoto, such as our World Heritage itinerary, from £3,110 for 17 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call our experts on 0117 244 3463 to find out more.*

JAPAN

Spotted! New Kusama exhibition in Tokyo

It's fair to say that artist Yayoi Kusama never quite fitted into conservative 1950s Japan – her work having been inspired by the visual hallucinations she has suffered from all her life. It was in the US that she found her niche, exhibiting alongside Pop Art icons Andy Warhol and George Segal in the early '60s, where she famously organised events in which her naked performers appeared painted in polka dots.

In the years that followed, it was not the artist who changed but Japan – as this major new exhibition at Tokyo's National Art Centre demonstrates. Kusama might have made her name – albeit little money – in New York's

counter cultural movement, but in the 1970s she returned to Japan, checking herself into the Seiwa Hospital for the Mentally Ill, where she has lived and worked, by choice, ever since.

Despite her ill health, Kusama continues to work well into her ninth decade, with this show set to be a fitting testament to one of Japan's eternal creatives – and to how the country itself has changed.

DO IT: *Yayoi Kusama: My Eternal Soul will take place at Tokyo's National Art Centre from 22 Feb to 22 May 2017. InsideJapan Tours can arrange tickets on request. For more details, call our experts on 0117 244 3463.*



VIETNAM

The Cambodian coast opens up

Sandwiched between the 3,000km seaboard of Vietnam and the world-famous islands of Thailand, Cambodia's modest 443km of coastline doesn't get the attention it deserves. With warm, palm-lined beaches and few visitors, it has more than enough charms to rival its neighbours. No doubt, it's this combination of beauty and seclusion that has enticed the ultra-luxurious Six Senses to open their first Cambodian resort on Koh Krabey, an idyllic island around 20 minutes' boat ride south of Sihanoukville.

Known for its sustainability, and working with local cultures, The Six Senses chain has a focus on 'wellness', offering personal training, sleep enhancement, nutritional programmes and plenty of spa treatments. We'll be watching closely to see how Cambodia's coast changes in the coming years, as it starts to rival Thailand as a luxury escape.

DO IT: *Our Indochina Luxury Honeymoon itinerary combines Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia in one tour. Why not tailor it to end at the Six Senses on Koh Krabey? From £4,995 for 14 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call our experts on 0117 244 3464 to find out more.*

JAPAN IN BLOOM: Spring sees the return of cherry blossom (*sakura*) season. The Japanese follow forecasts of this intently, watching the waves of pink sweep northwards from subtropical Okinawa to chilly Hokkaido each year. Check out bit.ly/10SaKuRa for our top 10 places to see cherry blossom in Japan.

LAOS

Discover jungle walks and turquoise pools in Laos

With its ice-blue waters, multi-tiered cascades and jungle canopies, Laos' Kuang Si Waterfall is one of the finest day trips from Luang Prabang. For most visitors, the journey to the falls is a bumpy 40-minute tuk-tuk ride, but now there's another option.

If you'd prefer to take it slow and experience the wonderful, tropical countryside that surrounds Luang

Prabang, opt instead for a hike that begins in the village of Ban Xeng Mouk, an hour west of town. Far from the tourist crowds, this gentle four-hour trek takes you through the villages of the Khmu ethnic minority, across rice paddies and into the jungle-clad mountains. Stop at spots along the way, such as a cave that doubled as a bomb shelter during

the Vietnam War, before relaxing in the blue pools of Kuang Si.

DO IT: *Incorporate this hike into any itinerary that visits Luang Prabang, such as Laos Overland: Along the Mekong, from £2,550 for 15 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call one of our Laos experts on 0117 244 3464 to find out more.*



JAPAN

Mystery in the city

Last year, tour leaders Brett Plotz and David Lovejoy played the fiendishly difficult Tokyo Real Escape Game, which required them to solve a set of puzzles to escape from the Tokyo Metro. Convinced that they could go one better, they decided to design their very own treasure hunt – and InsideJapan's *Tokyo Mystery Game* was born.

The game plunges players into a secret world, offering an *Alice in Wonderland* experience of the capital and revealing an alternative side of Tokyo that can't be found in the guidebooks. Manageable enough for puzzle novices to take a crack at, travellers will follow a trail of carefully laid-out clues through the city, using an alphanumeric key and local hints to work out their next step.

Escape the big sights to discover some little-visited neighbourhoods – and maybe you'll find you like this hidden version of Tokyo even better than the one you knew before.

DO IT: *The Tokyo Mystery Game is perfect for anyone who has seen the big sights and wants to get beneath the skin of the city. We suggest adding it to our Price Cruncher trip, from £980 for 7 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call our Japan experts on 0117 244 3463 to find out more.*



CAMBODIA

Help stop animal trafficking

With animal trafficking still a major problem in the world, you can now help do something practical about it.

Koh Kong Wildlife Release Station lies in one of Southeast Asia's largest contiguous jungle tracts, deep in the Cardamom Mountains. To reach it, the Wildlife Alliance guide visitors along old logging trails to the station, and it is here that you can help restore rescued animals to the wild.



Find your Zen
Discover the mysteries of this oft-misunderstood Buddhist philosophy

JAPAN

Discover Zen heritage in Kyoto

Zen: rarely has a word been more frequently or widely misappropriated. From 'Zen-like calm' to 'Zen and the art of something-or-other', the ancient Japanese term has been hijacked by popular culture as a universal adjective for calm and tranquillity. But what exactly is Zen?

We couldn't possibly begin to answer such a question here, but join InsideJapan's Richard Farmer on a Zen heritage tour of Kyoto and you'll gain a deep and fascinating insight into the history and meaning of one of the world's great religious philosophies.

Explore Kyoto's Zen temples, delving into the heart of Buddhist

beliefs and practices, and learn about Japan's three schools, Obaku, Rinzai and Soto. Then test your mettle on some enigmatic *koan* riddles, before mastering the art of *shikantaza* ('just sitting'). Even those without a pre-existing interest in Buddhism can't fail to be swept along with expert guide Richard's enthusiasm – you'll be a Zen master in no time.

DO IT: *Richard's Zen heritage tour of Kyoto can be added to any Self-Guided Adventure in Japan.*

We suggest incorporating it into our Traditional Japan itinerary, from £2,110 for 14 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call one of our Japan experts on 0117 244 3463 to find out more.

DID YOU KNOW?

Cambodia's Cardamom Mountains are home to 62 globally threatened species, including 14 endangered mammals. To find out more, see our blog: bit.ly/CardaMom

jungle chalet. It's a side of Cambodia few see, and one where your presence really makes a difference.

DO IT: *Add a trip to the Wildlife Release Centre to our Karma Cambodia itinerary, which visits Koh Kong. From £2,695 for 13 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call one of our Cambodia experts on 0117 244 3464 to find out more.*





BURMA

Yangon: Set for an urban makeover?

What will Yangon look like in ten years' time? Will its colonial buildings have been refurbished or torn down? Will the streets be packed with cars? These are just some of the questions the Yangon Heritage Trust (YHT) has attempted to answer.

The good news for travellers and residents is that the future looks rosy, with some innovative ideas to preserve the best of the city while modernising its transport system. Among the proposed initiatives are plans to lease disused historic buildings for public

use; opening up a city-wide network of parks and gardens with uninterrupted off-road paths; building a subway system; and increasing water ferry services. We can't wait to see which happens first.

DO IT: Our Kipling's Burma itinerary is a great introduction to Yangon and beyond, from £2,695 for 14 nights (exc. intl. flights), or you can tailor a trip to suit your preferences. Call our Burma experts on **0117 244 3465** to find out more.

VIETNAM MARKET CHALLENGE: An exciting new way to get to grips with the hustle and bustle of Vietnam's biggest city is the Ben Thanh Market Challenge – an old-fashioned treasure hunt through the winding alleys and steaming food stalls of Ho Chi Minh City's central market. To find out more, head to bit.ly/BTMkt



JAPAN

TAKING A LONG SHOT

Nowadays, every traveller with a smartphone and a selfie stick is an amateur photographer. But if you're serious about honing your camerawork, a new pair of specialised tours across Kyoto and Osaka are set to offer a hand.

Armed with your camera and a professional photographer to guide you, take to the traditional, wood-panelled streets of Kyoto to practise your skills on the public at large. Or instead get lost among the neon-drenched

alleyways of Osaka, to learn the combined skills of street and night photography.

Those in the mood for an eerier atmosphere can venture out to the wooded slopes of Fushimi Inari Shrine after dusk for a lesson in light painting and long exposures among its 10,000 *torii* gates.

From its glimmering cities to its wooded temples, Japan is ripe for photographic exploration. And being able to practise your skills and explore two fascinating

cities in the company of an expert promises to offer some rich photographic rewards. Both tours are suitable for all levels, from beginner to advanced, and can be booked as a private or group experience.

DO IT: Include a photography tour in any trip that visits Osaka, Kyoto or Tokyo. Best of Japan covers all three, from £1,860 for 14 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call our Japan experts on **0117 244 3465** to find out more.

JAPAN

Full speed ahead for Tokyo 2020

Japan is gearing up to become the centre of the sporting world, and Tokyo 2020 promises to be an Olympics like no other. This is partly down to the country's boundless capacity to make everything cleaner, cuter and more organised. But it is also thanks to the International Olympic Committee's decision to introduce five new sports to the programme for 2020.

As part of the IOC's drive to make the Tokyo games more relevant, they're including more 'youth-friendly' sports in the next Olympics. This means that in four years' time, athletes will also be able to go for gold in baseball/softball, karate, sport climbing, skateboarding and surfing.

But these additions have not been without controversy. By overlooking key criteria (such as the existence of official governing bodies) in order to fast-track these more-marketable games, the IOC has angered players of long-established sports such as squash, which have yet to win a coveted spot at the Games.

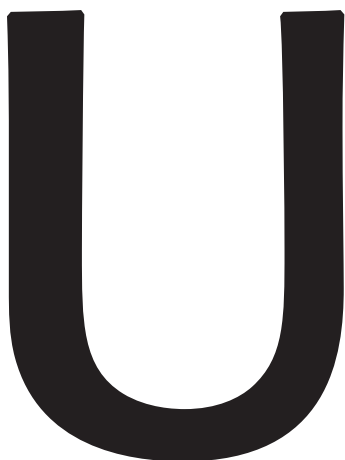
But these additions will only amp up the excitement: Tokyo 2020 promises to be the freshest Olympics ever, and we can't wait!

[JAPAN]

GLIMPSES OF THE FLOATING WORLD

Few visitors to Japan come away with any real sense of what a geisha is – let alone spend time with one. Tour leader **Ben Walker** opens the door on their secretive world...





voice, and despite the fact that she was, in reality, still a 17-year-old girl, something about the otherworldliness of the situation left us strangely quiet and, dare I say, a little bit shy.

The dark, lamp-lit interior, the *tatami* flooring and the smell of incense and *matcha* green tea added to the ambiance as we took our seats on the floor, and with that, we began our hour with a maiko-san.

Making a maiko

First, however, there are a few things worth knowing: Kyoto's geisha are not called 'geisha', but 'geiko'. The first *kanji* character, 'gei' (meaning 'art'), is the same, but the 'sha' character, which means 'person who does', becomes instead 'ko', which translates as 'child'. Despite these semantics, 'geisha' and 'geiko' refer to exactly the same thing, and apprentice geisha are known all over Japan as 'maiko', which translates as 'dancing girl'.

In Kyoto, a maiko will often start her training after she finishes junior high school, when she is between fifteen and sixteen years old. This does not mean that her education stops. On the contrary, she will study prodigiously for the next five to six years in one of the schools in her *hanamachi* (geisha district). She will learn calligraphy, tea ceremony and poetry. She must also become proficient in Japanese percussion, learn to play the *shakuhachi* (a type of Japanese flute) and master the *shamisen* (a three-stringed banjo-type instrument). She will learn traditional Japanese dancing, and have to remember a plethora of extremely complicated dances by heart.

Remarkably, this is still only a small part of the education a geiko receives. She also has to learn how to talk 'properly', as the geiko of Kyoto use a dialect unique to their role. Seeing as most of the girls come from other prefectures, it is akin to having to learn a completely different language. On top of this, she has to discover how to navigate the complex society that is the *hanamachi*, and from the beginning of training she must look to make contacts and find customers to secure her future. I soon came to realise that these were tough young women.

Before geiko even begin their training, there is a period that they spend simply observing, sometimes for up to twelve months. Not surprisingly, there is a 50 percent dropout rate during this time. You could draw parallels with special forces training, or the arduousness of elite sports. Knowing how hard it was, I could only conclude that these girls really want to be where they are.

pon stepping into the Maruume Teahouse in the Gion district of Kyoto, we were immediately transported back centuries, to Edo Period Japan (1603–1868). There, seated in the entrance, was a Japanese cultural icon in the flesh – a geisha (actually a trainee, or 'maiko'). As we clumsily took off our shoes, she greeted us in a cheerful sing-song

It's been this way, by and large, for centuries. The original geisha were descended from the tea servers at roadside inns, from dancing girls and from the artists who entertained customers waiting for popular courtesans in the Edo (Tokyo) pleasure districts. These first geisha were actually men, but by the 1750s there were female geisha also working as entertainers. They quickly gained popularity as skilled musicians, dancers and excellent raconteurs, and over time the gender balance shifted.

When the Tokugawa Shogunate took control of Japan in 1603, it ushered in a period of peace that allowed for a flourishing of the arts. This peace also led to the rise of the samurai class, retired warriors who began to look for other pursuits, and rich merchants, who had money to spend solely on pleasure and the arts. Their world became known as *ukiyo* (The Floating World), in which the newly in-demand geisha found their lucrative place.

Memoirs of a geisha

All of this swam through my mind in Gion as we met Fukuhana-san – although it should be noted that Fukuhana is not her real name; this is a title given to her by her house mother, and (as tradition dictates) includes a Chinese character from the name of the senior geiko in her house. I could tell by the fact that she only had her bottom lip painted red that she was a first-year apprentice. Despite this, she was remarkably self-assured and managed to keep up a stream of small talk until we

regained our composure and were ready with our questions. It soon became apparent that Fukuhana was no shrinking violet, and she was refreshingly frank with all her answers.

"Can you tell us a bit about your kimono?" I enquired.

"Sure," she said and stood up.

"The kimono are all seasonal," she elaborated. "This one is for early autumn – you can tell by the colour and the flowers."

She was wearing a light-green, hand-painted silk kimono that flowed along the ground, so you couldn't see her feet. It had incredibly long sleeves, which she quickly explained away.

"In the past, maiko were dancing girls, and they often had to wear the kimono of the older girls living in the *okiya* (geisha house). The way we wear our kimono today is a relic of those times."

She then turned to show us the *obi* (the broad sash worn with the kimono). "Can you see the way this is worn up high and hangs down at the back? It's called a *darari obi* and is only worn by us maiko." She then pointed to a crest printed on the end of her sash.

"That's my *okiya*'s crest. In the old days, that was there in case one of the dancing girls got lost and had to be taken home – it doesn't happen now," she added with a laugh.

The *obi* is so long and heavy that it takes a lot of strength to tie it up, and is only done by professional male kimono dressers, she told us. Incidentally, these are the only males allowed into the everyday world of the geisha, a province otherwise entirely dominated by women.

Then one of our party noticed that the white make-up she wore on her face and neck had two strips of skin left unpainted on the back.

"In Japan, the neck is often considered to be a woman's most beautiful feature, so we wear the collars of our kimono down low and paint the neck to draw attention to it – and to make it seem longer," she explained.

'The *obi* (sash) is so long and heavy that it takes a lot of strength to tie it up, and is only done by professional male kimono dressers'



Geisha life
The arts, make-up and dialects of a geisha take years (and a lot of yen) to learn, but high pay and status offer rich incentive



We're all fans

Geisha perform a traditional dance; a geiko on the streets of Kyoto; (right) InsideAsia's Ben with Fukuhana



"Do you do your own make-up?" someone asked incredulously. "Yes," she answered.

"And how long does it take?" came the follow-up question.

"Well, it used to take me ages but now I can do it in about 30 minutes," she smiled, miming the action of using two mirrors.

Behind the make-up

Question followed question, and it wasn't long before someone piped up to ask the obvious: why did she choose her profession? It turned out that her mother was quite a well-known *shamisen* player, who had often brought her young daughter to Kyoto when she came to perform. Fukuhana, an accomplished player herself, said that being a geiko was all she ever wanted to do, and behind her calm demeanour clearly hid a very driven young woman. She gave a sense that she genuinely wanted to preserve the art form, and seemed to see herself as more of a curator than a hostess.

"When do you get time to yourself?" we asked, now emboldened.

The answer came simply that she doesn't. Maiko have to study between late morning and afternoon, then go home to get ready before accompanying a geiko or an older maiko to learn how to entertain customers in the evening. They are always chaperoned, and forbidden from drinking until they reach legal age, but only get

one day off a week (and during busy periods, sometimes work for a month with no days off at all). Maiko are also expected to live in an *okiya* with their 'mother' (the house mistress) and 'older sister' (a senior geiko) – who together are responsible for their education.

The 'mother' covers the hefty expenses that accompany geiko training, (the kimono themselves run to millions of yen), and until a maiko debuts as a fully-fledged geiko, the money she earns goes back to the house.

But beneath all the responsibility, tradition and make-up, there is still a modern girl underneath, and when we asked Fukuhana what she did on her few days off, the young girl soon emerged – "Go to Starbuck's and watch TV." Of course.

Why do it?

You may ask yourself why these girls put themselves through this hardship, and I initially considered the same thing. But discussing this with one of my fellow

travellers changed my thinking. Are the arts of the geiko so different to what, say, a ballet dancer or gymnast has to go through? I guess to join the elite few in any discipline, you have to train and suffer for your art. But once you achieve your goal, there are amazing benefits to be had – and it's no different here. A geiko can not only earn very good money once she goes out on her own, but also traditionally achieves a high social rank as well as the kudos that goes with the profession.

'Maiko get their hair washed and set once a week, and sleep on a wooden-block pillow to preserve the style'



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).

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) thanks to mild weather conditions and beautiful blossoms/foliage.

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

CURRENCY: Japanese yen (JPY).

£1 = approx. JPY130

MORE ONLINE: www.insidejapantours.com



As Fukuhana poured us some tea, I commented on the dangling ornaments that hung from her hair – something you can't help but notice with every maiko.

"It's not a wig," she told me. "All maiko must keep their hair in the traditional style until they debut as a geiko."

This means they have to visit the hairdresser once a week to get it washed and set, and sleep on a *takamakura* (a wooden-block pillow) to preserve the style. "It takes a long time to get used to," she confessed.

After the tea and some more small talk, it was time to play a game. These games were traditionally used by the geiko to distract their clients and keep them drinking. We played an old drinking game – minus the sake – and let me tell you, she was a master. We played one called *Konpira Fune Fune*, one of the most famous, and none of us won. The game was accompanied by a lullaby-like song that made it even more difficult to concentrate.

Following the game, Fukuhana retired to get ready to dance for us. When she emerged, I had something of an epiphany. It finally dawned that this was not simply hosting but a genuine art form, and one that had been honed over many centuries. It was a slice of ancient Japan every bit as compelling and valuable as Kyoto's temples and shrines, and as she began to dance, I couldn't look away.

There soon followed a hush as my group became transfixed. Sung to a haunting traditional melody, the song was one about the *darari obi*, perfect for a maiko. As we watched and listened, Fukuhana told a story in dance about a young maiko in Kyoto, taking us through the four seasons. She mimed rivers, water, the heat, falling leaves and snow, leaving us with a sense of beauty, accompanied by a hint of loneliness and sadness. We were astonished by the skill in her movement and the depth of the story


that the dance conveyed. When it was over, there was complete silence as we took it all in and collectively decided whether to cry or give her a round of applause – we clapped.

The future for Fukuhana

Nobody knows how many geisha are left today. It's thought that in pre-war Japan there were over 80,000, and current estimates vary wildly from a couple of hundred to two thousand. But though their numbers have diminished, a revival in interest in traditional culture has led to a resurgence in young women entering the profession – despite its hardships. But it is still very rare to see a geisha or a maiko on the street, and even more special to meet one in person. I and my group can certainly testify to that.

DO IT: A meeting with a geiko or maiko can be incorporated into any trip or tour. Our Classic Japan group tour includes a private audience, from £2,850 for 13 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call one of our Japan experts on 01 17 244 3463 to find out more.



Ben Walker is a tour leader for InsideJapan. He is based in Fukuoka, on the southwestern island of Kyushu. 



BACK IN THE SADDLE

Nothing immerses you in a country quite like seeing it under your own steam. Cycle lush landscapes and ancient temples in our pedal-powered guide to Asia

**Flat out**

Pedal the plateau around Takayama for an easy way to see the sights

Japan: Hida Satoyama

DISTANCE: 22 km

DURATION: 2.5–3.5 hours

START/FINISH: Furukawa Station (17 minutes from Takayama Station)

WHEN TO GO: April–December

The alpine town of Takayama lies on a plateau in central Japan, surrounded by the thickly forested peaks of the Hida Mountain Range. Known throughout the ages as a centre for crafts – particularly carpentry – Takayama's woodworkers were drafted in to build many of the spectacular temples you'll see in Kyoto, and their work can be glimpsed in everything from traditional craft shops to spectacularly carved festival floats.

One of the true delights of a visit to Takayama, however, is getting out of the town and into its glorious rural surroundings. The Hida Satoyama cycle tour whisks you through lush paddy fields and into the countryside, stopping off at natural hot springs, steeply pitched wooden farmhouses, orchards and farms. With a local English-speaking guide alongside you,



you can delve into the history and culture of the region and chat to people you meet along the way – whether they're schoolchildren on their way home for lunch or elderly residents selling strawberries at the local farmers' market. No matter where you go, everyone seems to know each other, and the atmosphere is never less than convivial, giving a welcome glimpse into the cohesiveness of rural Japanese communities.

Stop at a hilltop shrine and pause for a breather, then cycle past wood-panelled sake breweries and streams filled with koi carp as you return through town.

DO IT: Our Autumn Splendour itinerary includes a half-day Hida Satoyama cycling experience. From £2,750 for 13 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call our Japan experts on **0117 244 3463** to find out more.

Cycling trips take us right back to what makes travel so endlessly fascinating and rewarding: the surprises, the chance encounters and the ordinary, everyday details. The humble bicycle gives us the freedom to roam under our own steam, take diversions, stop to chat and generally enjoy the experience of being immersed in a country and culture completely different from our own.

And Asia is one of the greatest places on the planet to explore on two wheels – whether that's navigating the vast temple complexes of Burma, crossing the roads that link Japan's historic islands, touring the rural villages and shrines of Laos and Cambodia or just meandering alongside the Mekong, admiring the wildlife. This is why we've created some spectacular bike trips to let visitors experience this region in the best possible way.

The trips we've chosen to feature here vary in length from a couple of hours to a whole week, but all of them are accessible to anyone with a moderate level of fitness – and each showcases a beautiful region of Asia that deserves a slower, freer form of travel. So what are you waiting for? Get on your bike...

Want a longer trip in Japan?

The Shimanami Kaido is a purpose-built cycling route that spans six islands in the Seto Inland Sea, offering gentle inclines, beautiful views and opportunities to depart from the prescribed route to explore these wonderful and little-visited islands. The route is well signposted, with bicycle hire at either end, and is easily tackled independently, although it's worth breaking up the ride with an overnight stay in the region. Call **0117 244 3463** to find out more.

DISTANCE: 70 km

DURATION: 1–2 days

START/FINISH: Onomichi/Imabari

WHEN TO GO: Year-round (conditions are best in spring and autumn)



Vietnam: Mekong Delta

DISTANCE: 200 km

DURATION: Four days, three nights

START/FINISH: Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon)

WHEN TO GO: November–April

Vietnam's Mekong Delta harbours over 1,000 different animal species and produces half the country's rice, as well as bumper crops of exotic fruit – from coconuts and mangoes to rambutan and dragonfruit. It is most often explored by boat, yet its flat topography makes it a wonderful spot for a cycling trip.

Starting at Cai Lay and travelling via a mixture of car transfer, boat and (of course) bike, explore river islands in the middle of the languid Mekong, cycle through bounteous orchards and traverse countless wooden bridges over chocolate-coloured waterways so narrow that the palm fronds meet overhead. At Vinh Long, pedal past buffalo wallowing in rice paddies and mangrove thickets bristling with bird life; on your way to Tra Vinh keep a lookout for barges piled high with everything from timber to watermelons as they part carpets of waterlilies and lotus.

Tucked away among the foliage are architectural curiosities, too, from



Khmer pagodas hidden amid buttress-rooted forests to war-era bunkers that once sheltered Viet Cong guerrillas from enemy raids. Thriving towns punctuate the life of the countryside, and you'll stop at traditional O Mon and bustling Phong Dien floating market before making your way to Can Tho – the region's biggest urban centre.

DO IT: *Our Vietnam Adventure could easily be adapted to include the Mekong Delta cycling experience. From £3,335 for 16 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call our Vietnam experts on 0117 244 3464 to find out more.*

Pressed for time in Vietnam?

If you don't have four days to dedicate to cycling, you can incorporate a shorter ride into your Vietnamese itinerary. Hoi An's one of our favourite places to explore: rent a bicycle, take the ferry across the river and ride out to paddy fields, boat workshops and bamboo groves to see a quieter side of this famous port on the banks of the Thu Bon River. Call **0117 244 3464** to find out more.

DISTANCE: Variable

DURATION: Half a day

START/FINISH: Hoi An town centre

WHEN TO GO: March–August



Remote Cambodia

DISTANCE: 400 km

DURATION: Eight days, seven nights

START/FINISH: Phnom Penh/Siem Reap

WHEN TO GO: November–March

Bisected by the mighty Mekong River and hemmed in by mountain ranges, with rainforests prowled by tigers, leopards, elephants and bears, Cambodia could have been conjured from the pages of *The Jungle Book*. Famous for the magnificent ruins at Angkor, few realise that, beyond this, the country is peppered with the remains of a great, ancient civilisation – the Khmer Empire – the scope of which is still being uncovered today. All of this makes Cambodia an incredibly



intriguing and rewarding destination for a week-long cycle tour, pit-stopping at the sights en route.



The wheel world
The temple complexes of Cambodia's Angkor and (right) Bagan, Burma are perfect for cycling; (left) pedal the banks of the Mekong to get a glimpse of local Vietnamese life



Burma: Mandalay to Bagan

DISTANCE: 100 km

DURATION: Two days, one night

START/FINISH: Mandalay/Bagan

WHEN TO GO: October–March

Mandalay: was there ever a name so rich with exotic connotations? Today, Myanmar's second-largest city is a bustling metropolis, but one with an eye on the past. A thriving arts and crafts tradition, exquisite pagodas and the sight of its elegant palace all recall an era when this was the heart of Burmese cultural life.

Begin your epic cycle ride in Myinmu. This small town in the outskirts of Mandalay has an interesting history: it was here that the British Indian Army camped during the Burma Campaign in World War II, and it sheltered Catholic missionaries from Portugal in the 19th century.

Cycling across the country, from the banks of the Irrawaddy to the Chindwin River, pit-stop in the town of Monywa. Here, the second-largest Buddha statue in the world – the gleaming, gold Laykyun Setkyar – gazes out across the landscape, its head scraping the sky at 116 metres. Next, follow the Chindwin, seeing the landscape changes from scrubby, open plains to rolling hills as you venture deeper into the Burmese countryside. Pass through villages where locals rarely meet foreigners, to arrive at last in Pakkoku. For centuries, this town served as the



gateway to Bagan, the country's royal capital. Take the opportunity to escape the saddle for a while and board a boat for the languid journey downstream, waiting for a glimpse of the magnificent stupas of Bagan as they appear on the horizon.

DO IT: Our Classic Burma itinerary could be adapted to include bicycle trip from Mandalay to Bagan. From £2,150 for 15 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call **0117 244 3465** to find out more.

In Oudong, stop off to climb to the top of Phnom Preah Reach to look out over the plains. Pedal through fruit plantations and villages in Kratie and past local mosques – an unusual sight in Buddhist Cambodia – in Chhlong, then give your legs a rest and spend the night on an island in the Mekong at Koh Trong.

The following day, hit the road for Kampi and a glimpse of the endangered Irrawaddy dolphins, then watch the scenery change from flat plains to rolling hills as you climb to Preah Vihear temple: a UNESCO

World Heritage site with unparalleled views over the central plains. Plenty of little-known but incredible temples are in store as you roll on to Koh Ker and Beng Mealea, the latter of which lay undiscovered for centuries, before finishing in Siem Reap.

DO IT: Our To Angkor and Beyond trip follows a similar route to the cycle trip shown here, and could be adapted for cyclists. From £1,895 for 10 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call our Cambodia experts on **0117 244 3464** to find out more.

Looking for a shorter cycle in Cambodia?

You don't need to be a devoted cyclist to enjoy Cambodia's countryside on two wheels. Simply rent a bike and explore the temples of Angkor – or opt for a guided day of cycling that'll introduce the temples and take you out into the countryside surrounding Siem Reap. Call **0117 244 3464** to find out more.

Want a shorter ride in Burma?

If you fancy a cycle but don't want to tackle the whole journey mentioned here, hire a bike in Bagan and explore the area on a half- or full-day tour. A local guide can introduce you to the region's impressive temples, or strike out on your own to discover it for yourself. Call **0117 244 3465** to find out more.

After the party

No longer the party town it once was, get the most out of beautiful Vang Vieng by exploring it on two wheels



Laos: Vang Vieng

DISTANCE: Variable

RECOMMENDED DURATION: Half day/full day

START/FINISH: Vang Vieng

WHEN TO GO: October–March

There was a time when the name Vang Vieng meant all-night parties, thumping music and backpackers floating downriver on innertubes. But fast-forward a few years and this ex-party animal has shaken off its reputation, meaning one of the most quintessentially picturesque landscapes in Laos is now ripe to explore on two wheels.

Huddled in a valley on the banks of the Nam Song River, Vang Vieng has always been a beautiful setting.

The town is ringed by forests and karst hills riddled with limestone caves, and a number of fine cycling routes thread the region. One good option is the loop that heads out of Vang Vieng and takes you around the nearby mountains in a counter-clockwise direction. Along the way, stop at the Blue Lagoon, a startlingly blue watering hole where locals gather to take a break from the heat of the day, before continuing back to town.

During the rainy season, cycle through tropical forests to a trio of waterfalls, including the 34-metre-high Kaeng Nyui. It's the perfect place for a swim after a hot ride. But whichever route you choose, you'll need a mountain bike, as the paths are muddy and rather bumpy!

DO IT: Our Northern Laos Explorer itinerary includes two nights in Vang Vieng, from £2,950 for 15 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call our Laos experts on **0117 244 3464** to find out more.



More time to spend in Laos?

If you're looking for a longer cycle tour in Laos, there are countless routes available. Talk to one of our experts for ideas and inspiration on where your wheels could take you. Call **0117 244 3464** to find out more.



Family matters
Cait relaxes in the sea while (right) Charli enjoys the beach; (below) riding in an old army vehicle-turned-bus



A family adventure in Burma

Cait (13) and **Charli** (11) travelled to Burma (Myanmar) with their family, including their uncle, Paul – a sales team leader in our Bristol office. We caught up with them to find out their highlights and what they learned...

Where was your favourite place?

Cait: I loved Ngapali. Everything was so beautiful, quiet and relaxed.

Charli: I actually preferred Yangon – especially visiting Shwedagon Pagoda at sunset. It's ten times prettier in the evening than in the daytime. The shrines around the base of the pagoda represent the days of the week, and you're supposed to find the day that you were born on and bless it. I really enjoyed doing that.

What were the things you enjoyed doing the most?

Cait: Being on the beach! Depending on the time of day, the water was so nice and warm. I loved just sitting on the sand and taking everything in.

Charli: One of my favourite experiences was going fishing on a boat at Ngapali. The guy who took us had made fishing rods out of nothing but water bottles and string; we were amazed that we caught fish with them! We had a competition to see who could catch the most fish – in the end we had about 15, but Cait didn't catch any.

Did you meet anyone interesting?

Charli: We nicknamed our tour guide 'Smiley' because every time we looked at her, she smiled. She's grinning from ear to ear in all our pictures. In fact, everyone in Burma seemed really happy.

Paul: Locals could be shy at first, but then they opened up when you started talking to them.

Charli: Yeah, it always gave me a really warm, fuzzy feeling inside whenever that happened.

Did you use any interesting kinds of transport?

Paul: Thandwe Airport was an unusual experience – at one point we were probably the

only people in the whole building, which was certainly a first for me.

Charli: And the shuttle bus was an old army vehicle, with murals painted on the side!

Cait: We also rented bikes to explore Ngapali. We even saw people cycling through the shallow water and riding buffalo on the beach.

What was the most interesting thing you discovered about Burma?

Cait & Charli: The paste that local Burmese put on their faces is called *thanaka* – it comes from a bark, which they then grind up with water to use as a natural sunscreen. We also learned that nearly the whole population of Burma is Buddhist.

Did you learn any Burmese?

Cait & Charli: *Mingalaba!* It means 'hello'. That's the best word to learn as it's a good icebreaker.

Do you have any advice for other families going to Burma?

Cait: Don't try to cram too much in (like someone we know – Dad). Instead, pick a couple of activities that perhaps take a little longer and spend more time on doing those. The only thing we regretted was being rushed.

Charli: Bring hats, sunscreen, toiletries and bug spray – and an extra pair of sunglasses in case you lose yours! 📷

DO IT: *Planning a family holiday to Burma? Our Burmese Family Adventure is just the ticket. From £2,100 for 13 nights (exc. intl. flights), it includes Yangon, Ngapali, Bagan, Inle Lake and Mandalay – among others. Call our 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.

WHEN TO GO:

Burma is a great destination all year around, but experiences a rainy season from May until September. It is still possible to visit most destinations during this period, but the resorts and restaurants at Ngapali will be closed.

VISAS: UK citizens will need a visa to enter Burma. This can be arranged in advance with a physical visa in your passport, applied for via a Myanmar Embassy, or with an e-visa, which can be applied for at evisa.moip.gov.mm.

CURRENCY: Myanmar kyat (MMK). £1 = approx. MMK1,620. USD is the most popular form of currency accepted for conversion to kyat, which can only be done at official banks and currency exchange offices, not through hotels and other tourist services.



Northern Star



Vietnam might be known for its greenery, but amid the treeless highlands of its distant north, **Vicky Garnett** discovers dramatic peaks and a warm welcome on the slopes of Ha Giang Province

As our car rounded another hairpin switchback, the sheer scale of the area was starting to dawn on me. Zig-zagging up sheer mountainsides, with a vertiginous drop to one side and endless twists and turns, the road that led between Meo Vac and Yen Minh in Vietnam's Ha Giang Province managed to be at once terrifying and exhilarating. But as we climbed higher into the northern reaches of Vietnam, any sense of fear vanished from my thoughts to be replaced with wonder.

Hitting the road

It's hard to know how to describe a landscape so dramatic and unfamiliar. Soaring skywards, jagged, tooth-like peaks of limestone mountains tore holes in the clouds, while a thin ribbon of river snaked through the valley hundreds of metres below. This was the Ma Pi Leng Pass (or 'Heaven's Gate') in

the northern reaches of the highlands – the roof of Vietnam – and it felt a little like we'd entered a different world.

I had left Hanoi on my journey northwards just days before. Rolling out of the capital, I passed lush fields full of sugarcane, rice and tea, until the landscape began to bulge with limestone hills as we entered Ba Be National Park. Here, surrounded by the

'Luscious vegetation became rocky scree, and the gentle, green curves of the lower hills were replaced by steep, jagged valleys'

shrieks and hoots of the rainforest, every thicket seemed to teem with exotic life, as multi-tiered waterfalls ushered forth and spilled into green lakes.

Ascending higher into the mountains, the scenery changed with every twist and turn. Trees gave way to boulders, luscious vegetation became rocky scree, and the gentle, green curves of the lower hills were replaced by steep, jagged valleys, like giant machete marks hacked into the cliffs.

The high life

It may be known as 'Heaven's Gate' but this rugged landscape is a harsh paradise. As the terrain becomes ever more dramatic, it also becomes more difficult to farm. The Hmong people who live here know better than anybody how difficult it is to scratch a living from the earth.

"With no wood to build with, we use mud bricks or stone," a Hmong woman told me, gesturing at the solid-looking, packed-earth walls of her house. Little grows here, yet as I wandered through low-rise villages clinging



The bare and the beautiful
The barren peaks of Ha Giang Province have a desolate kind of beauty; *(below)* life continues for the Hmong people who live here





to steep slopes, I glimpsed patchwork plots of soybeans, corn and bamboo. It dawned on me that life always finds a way to survive, even in the toughest of conditions.

The people of the Hmong ethnic minority occupy the highlands of China, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. Though they all share a rich heritage, each tribe adheres to its own customs and is identified by the dominant colour or pattern of its traditional garb – such as the Black Hmong, White Hmong, or Green Hmong. Most of those I met were members of the Flower Hmong tribe, known for their full skirts, intricately embroidered fabrics and brightly coloured headscarves.

These days the Hmong tribes are among Vietnam's poorest minorities, but it wasn't always this way. Crossing the rocky Dong Van Plateau, where rocks jutted from the ground like petrified trees, we had a glimpse of a more

prosperous age at Vuong Palace – a two-storey mansion that wouldn't look out of place in an old martial arts movie. Arranged around a central courtyard, with Chinese-style terracotta roofs and intricate wooden latticework, it was built by the French in 1914 for a local Hmong king, Vuong Chinh Duc, and stands proud against a backdrop of rocky peaks.

"They call it the 'Opium Palace,'" My guide told me, explaining that Vuong's kingdom stretched from Meo Vac across the Dong Van Plateau, and was once lavishly funded by the area's booming trade in narcotics. Wandering through the palace's 64 rooms, she pointed out beautiful carvings of fruits and poppy flowers – a legacy of the crop that made her ancestors rich and fuelled the coffers of its once-powerful king.

"It is said that Vuong's wife used to bathe in goat's milk," she said, gesturing to

a half-moon-shaped stone tub in the backyard. That such extravagance existed here as little as a century ago was hard to believe, but here stood the proof.

Back on the ground

Moving on from the stark scenery of the plateau to the better-known Hoang Su Phi, the rough, craggy mountains gave way once more to gentler, more cultivated slopes. Here was a landscape rippling with rice paddies – each curve traced with countless perfect lines, as though the hills had been built by stacking layer upon layer of thick felt.

"At this time of year we're still preparing the fields for planting," my guide explained, as we picked our way between the plots. "By September this will all be bright green."

Before reaching my final destination, the market town of Bac Ha, I stopped to visit the



The village people
Working in the shadows
of the peaks that line
Vietnam's northern borders;
(left) everyday life for the
people of the highlands

workshop of Ms Vang Thi Mai in Hop Tien. Ms Mai set up a women's collective to offer a lifeline to victims of human trafficking – a problem that was widespread in Vietnam's borderlands just a decade ago. The rescued women, who were disowned by their families out of shame, found a home with Ms Mai, who taught them to spin and dye hemp threads, weave beautiful fabrics, and sew them into garments and bags.

Today Ms Mai's collective sells handmade products to tourists, hotels, embassies and export companies – and employs over 100 local women, not just those who have been ostracised. It is a chance for these local women to earn a living without abandoning their cultural heritage – and it's a chance for victims of trafficking to start anew. As Ms Mai explains, not everyone in the village agrees with her – but

little by little, these women are regaining their status in the community.

My journey through the highlands of Vietnam had taken me to a hidden realm in the heart of Vietnam's wild north, beyond the famous rice terraces of the foothills and deep into the stark and raw grandeur of its highlands. But what impressed me most on my journey was not the dramatic scenery, but the warmth, skills and resilience of the people who call this incredible place home.

DO IT: *Vicky has designed our Northern Star itinerary to follow her route through the mountains, exploring the lush lower highlands as well as the more rugged north. From £1,770 for 12 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call our Vietnam experts on 0117 244 3464 to find out more.*

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.

WHEN TO GO: Conditions are best from October to May. Rice paddies will be green and lush in Ba Be National Park around March and April.

VISAS: Vietnam has extended its visa waiver programme until 30th June 2017, meaning that UK citizens do not currently need a visa to travel.

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

MORE ONLINE: www.insidevietnamtours.com



Top 5 things to do in YANGON

For most travellers to Burma (Myanmar), Yangon is their first introduction to the country. Presided over by Shwedagon Pagoda – the ‘winking wonder’, as Rudyard Kipling described it – this laid-back former capital is a world away from the rest of Southeast Asia. Our Burma experts give their top five things to do in the city...

1 VISIT SHWEDAGON PAGODA AT DUSK

TOM WESTON



Tom is sales director for InsideAsia Tours. He was struck by the atmosphere of Yangon's great pagoda.

Standing in the presence of Shwedagon Pagoda, you can see why the author Rudyard Kipling was so awestruck when he saw it. Crowning a hill in the heart of the city, its golden spire is visible above the greenery from all corners of town, providing a religious focal point for the local population and a great navigation tool for visitors. Surrounding the central stupa are hundreds of shady halls and galleries, as well as pavilions where families flock to have picnics out of the heat of the sun. Robed monks sit in silent meditation as children play around them, faces painted with the traditional Burmese *thanaka*. With sun-warmed marble tiles beneath your bare feet, a visit to Shwedagon is a magical introduction to the sacred and the human side of life in Burma.



2 ADMIRE YANGON'S ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE

VICKY GARNETT



Vicky is in charge of our Burma product department and has only recently returned from her last visit to Yangon.

Yangon's streets are filled with historical buildings, many of which have a faded colonial charm not matched elsewhere in Asia, with The Strand Hotel and the Minister's Office just two examples. But as you walk around, don't forget to look up at the narrow apartment buildings that cluster between colonial landmarks, offering an insight into the daily lives of locals. You can find examples of this fascinating clash of traditional and modern architecture across the city, with perhaps the most striking illustration being the gold-covered Sule Pagoda, which occupies the centre of a busy roundabout!

3 BROWSE THE FOOD MARKETS

PAUL O'BRIEN



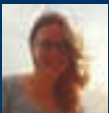
Paul leads one of our sales teams in Bristol. One of the highlights of his trips to Yangon has been the food markets.

Most visitors have heard of Bogyoke Market (or Scott's Market, as it's often known), but there are so many other options to explore in the capital, especially for those with a love of food. As the afternoon draws on in the Chinatown area, the stalls that line its roads start to set up their produce for the night market, offering a photo opportunity at every turn as you try to work out what exactly is on offer. Often unfamiliar, the range of foods includes glorious fresh fruits, barbecued meats and fish, and even the odd beetle on a stick. The bright lights and bustle let you know that this is a genuine experience and not one set up for tourists, so get stuck in and eat like a local.



4 TAKE TEA AT THE STRAND HOTEL

CHARLOTTE BOWER



Charlotte is one of our senior Burma travel consultants. She has visited Yangon several times, and recommends making time for tea at The Strand.

The Strand Hotel first opened its doors in 1901 – when Burma was still a part of the British Raj. The hotel's Victorian influences are clear in The Strand Café, where tall teak-framed windows, marble floors and ceiling fans evoke the city's colonial past. Afternoon tea is served from 2.30pm to 5pm every day, and choices include both traditional British (think cucumber sandwiches and fine china) and more exotic Burmese menus. You don't need to be a guest of the hotel to visit the café, so if you find yourself with a spare afternoon and want a taste of the Victorian high life, this is a brilliant way to spend a few hours. If you stay late, you can also continue your evening with a few cocktails in the elegant hotel bar.



5 RIDE THE CIRCLE TRAIN

JAMES MUNDY



James is head of marketing at InsideAsia. He first rode Burma's iconic circle train in 2014.

If you want to get around the city at top speed, this won't be your transport of choice; but if you want to see Yangon from a local perspective, it's just the ticket. The train chugs around its 47km looped track at a ponderous speed, taking you on a tour of suburbs and satellite towns and allowing you to hop off and on as many times as you choose, while vendors selling water, nuts and fried grasshoppers do the same. Like the rest of Burma, everyone is friendly and interested in their foreign fellow riders, and at around 200 kyat (13p) for a ticket, it's a bargain!

DO IT: Yangon is included on all of our Burma itineraries. Try our *Classic Burma* itinerary, from £2,150 for 15 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call one of our Burma experts on **0117 244 3465** to find out more details.

WAR IS HISTORY

The Vietnam War had a huge impact across much of Indochina, where its legacy is still felt. Visiting without exploring its war tunnels, caves and museums is only getting half the story, explains **Liam Koehler**

Remembering the past
(clockwise from this)
Photos of prisoners taken
by the Khmer Rouge;
A doorway at Tuol
Sleng; Vietnam's Vinh
Moc tunnels



Known to the Vietnamese as the 'American War', and to the West as the Vietnam War, the conflict that took place between 1955 and 1975 brought Vietnam to the forefront of the world's attention. What most people don't realise is that the war had an equally devastating effect on neighbouring Cambodia and Laos, which also suffered massive bombing campaigns and their own associated political upheavals as a result of the conflict.

For the older generations from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, this turbulent period is well within living memory. Many remember sheltering in caves or working in the war effort, watching bombs dropping overhead – and their children and grandchildren have grown up hearing their stories. It is such a part of the fabric of life here, and integral to any appreciation of modern Indochina, that visitors who leave this region without any knowledge of its war history are only hearing half the story. For me, the following places are the top destinations to learn about this sad but fascinating period of history.

Vinh Moc Tunnels & Demilitarised Zone (DMZ), Vietnam

There are two sets of preserved tunnels open to visitors in Vietnam – the Cu Chi Tunnels near Ho Chi Minh City, in the south of the country, and the Vinh Moc Tunnels, on the old border between North and South Vietnam. Though both are interesting and well worth a visit, for me the Vinh Moc Tunnels have more to offer.

In contrast to the Cu Chi Tunnels, which were part of a countrywide network used to ambush American patrols and were regularly abandoned upon discovery, the Vinh Moc Tunnels were designed as permanent structures to shelter whole villagers from the almost constant bombing of the land above.

'During the "Secret War" with the USA, up to 23,000 people lived in Laos' Viengxay Caves – which they called the "City of Victory" – where they built a hospital, school, shops, offices and even a theatre'

The tunnels are made of sandstone, which is soft to dig through yet structurally sound. They are much more extensive than the section you can see at Cu Chi (although the full network of Cu Chi Tunnels was originally far more wide-reaching), and unlike the Cu Chi Tunnels, they were designed for people to live in for years on end. This also meant the tunnels needed to be made taller and wider, which makes scrambling through them a lot easier for visitors! Around 60 families lived here from 1966 until 1972, and it's thought that as many as 17 children were born underground.

War Remnants Museum, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Ho Chi Minh City – formerly known as Saigon – was the stronghold of the beleaguered South Vietnamese government and its US allies during the war. Its fall in 1975, as tanks crashed through the front gates of the Independence Palace, actually marked the end of the war.

In my opinion, the War Remnants Museum is a 'must-see' for anybody who has an interest in

Vietnam's turbulent past. The museum contains an impressive range of exhibits depicting the conflict with the US as well as some smaller ones that cover the period of French colonisation and Vietnamese resistance.

Though presented from an unavoidably biased viewpoint, it is nonetheless shocking to see and learn about the various methods deployed by the South Vietnamese, US and French armies in Vietnam. One building displays 'tiger cages' in which the South Vietnamese government kept political prisoners. Other exhibits include graphic photographs documenting the effects of Agent Orange, napalm and war atrocities. An exhibition of posters from the international anti-war movement provides a moment of relief from the barbarity, while a retrospective of work by photographers killed in the conflict is particularly moving.

Viengxay Caves, Laos

Hidden away in dramatic karst landscape near the village of Viengxay are a series of limestone caves, seemingly forgotten by all except the handful of tourists who visit them. Yet only a couple of decades ago these caves were being used as a base by Communist Pathet Lao forces during America's war with Vietnam – a period far from forgotten in northern Laos.

The bombing campaign carried out by the US in Laos is now known as the 'Secret War', and to this day remains little known outside of Indochina. Their target was the Ho Chi Minh Trail (which linked North and South Vietnam), and between 1964 and '73, Laos was on the receiving end of more bombs than any other country in history: over two million tonnes of ordnance. To this day, unexploded bombs continue to kill on average 300 Lao people per year, totalling 50,000 since 1964.

During the campaign, the Pathet Lao, allied with the North Vietnamese, used these natural caves as a base to fight against the Americans, living underground in vast numbers. Up to 23,000 people lived in the caves – which they called the 'City of Victory' – where they built a hospital, school, shops, offices and even a theatre. Visitors to the site can still see the home of the 'Red Prince', Prince Souphanouvong,





Still standing
(clockwise from this) The walled city of Hue, site of a major battle in the war; wreckage of a B-52 Stratofortress in Hanoi; just a few relics from the War Remnants Museum

along with original crockery, thermoses, books and other items that hint at daily life in the caves.

Hanoi war sites, Vietnam

Since most of the fighting during the Vietnam War occurred in the south, most visitors interested in the history of the conflict head to Ho Chi Minh City – but Hanoi has a fascinating collection of wartime sites that provide a counterpoint to those in the south.

Take the tangled wreckage of the B-52 bomber that protrudes from Huu Tiep Lake, where it was shot down during the so-called ‘Christmas Bombings’ over 40 years ago. This unusual monument commemorates a brutal and ultimately ineffective bombing campaign carried out by the US over Christmas 1972, in which 1,318 North Vietnamese civilians were killed and 15 bombers were shot down.

Hoa Lo Prison, meanwhile, was originally built by the French in 1896, before being repurposed during the war to house US airmen – including Senator John McCain and Pete Peterson, the first US ambassador to unified Vietnam in 1995. It was known by servicemen as the ‘Hanoi

Hilton’, and photographs and possessions relating to the prisoners can still be seen there today. The B-52 Victory Museum and strategic Long Bien Bridge are also worth a visit.

Tuol Sleng, Cambodia

Though it isn’t a ‘war history’ museum per se, the period of major violence and social upheaval explored in the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum grew directly out of the war in Vietnam – particularly America’s campaign of carpet bombing the Cambodian countryside. The aim was to destroy supply routes, known collectively as the ‘Ho Chi Minh Trail’, and the devastation left behind paved the way for the rise of the brutal regime of the Khmer Rouge.

Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge held power in Cambodia from 1975 until their removal by the Vietnamese in 1979. During this period, Cambodians whose profile didn’t match the criteria for recruitment into the regime were sent into the countryside and made to work long hours growing rice, with very little food to eat. Those who were deemed a threat were sent to designated spots to be executed – the infamous ‘Killing Fields’ on the outskirts of the capital, Phnom Penh.

For those associated with the previous regime or who matched certain ‘negative’ criteria, an even darker fate awaited in S21. Formerly a school called Tuol Sleng, it became a prison after the Khmer Rouge took control,



and was used as a base to punish, torture and interrogate captives.

Today, S21 is the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, devoted to the Cambodian Genocide and the punishments meted out on its victims. Photographs of prisoners taken before and after torture are displayed upon exiting the museum, where, if you’re fortunate, you might have the opportunity to meet one of the only remaining survivors. Though this is a harrowing experience and not one for the faint-hearted, it is a must if you wish to understand a period of Cambodian history that shapes the country to this day.

Imperial City, Hue, Vietnam

The Imperial City is a walled fortress and palace in Hue, the former imperial capital of Vietnam. It was also the setting for one of the most bitterly fought battles between the American and North Vietnamese armies during the war. The site contains many well preserved buildings and interesting old photographs of the Vietnamese royal family, as well as bearing the scars of the fighting that took place there.

Hue was one of the main focuses of the Tet Offensive, carried out by the North Vietnamese in 1968. Just south of the old border dividing the country, it was a strategically important city and would have been a major victory for the Communists had they managed to gain full control. Many iconic photographs from the war were taken within the Imperial City walls during the battle, including Don McCullin’s ‘Shell-Shocked US Marine’ and a harrowing series of images that documented the photographer being hit by shrapnel.



DO IT: Our World Heritage Indochina itinerary covers most of the destinations mentioned in this article, from £1,995 for 14 nights (exc. intl. flights). Call one of our experts on **0117 244 3464** to find out more.



LIAM KOEHLER

Liam is a travel consultant in our Bristol office, and spent two years living in Ho Chi Minh City.





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Your travels

We love hearing where InsideAsia travellers have been exploring and will be printing our favourites. **This issue:** Tom and Roberta Bulloch explore Japan on a Self-Guided Adventure

"It changed our lives"

My wife was looking over my shoulder at the *Golden Route Self-Guided Adventure* on the Inside Japan Tours website. We both much prefer independent travel – and the incomparable discoveries, freedom and surprises that come with it – but, of course, there is 'adventure' and there is 'foolish.' Never having been to Japan, and Japanese being all Greek to me, having our itinerary pre-arranged seemed like a wise use of our money and our even-more-precious time.

The joys of independent travel lie in working things out as you go along, and so it proved for us. However, as we travelled, there were plenty of things we learned that we felt would be useful to pass on.

Don't be afraid to explore at any time of day – especially at night, when the crowds are gone

and many of the temples and historic buildings are beautifully lit. Japan is probably the safest country in the world, so get out of the hotel and wander. We found remarkable little hole-in-the-wall restaurants, inexpensive and delicious, whose owners were thrilled to see us. We also discovered a small, lonely Shinto shrine, almost completely hidden in the forest, where we were the only people there. This tiny, moss-covered testament to the Shinto faith had an atmosphere and impact far beyond its modest size, and we would never have seen it were we not inclined to explore.

The Hiroshima day trip that we added is simply a must. It is impossible to see what transpired here without being moved. There are no politics, no blame, no excessive sentimentality, simply an incredibly accurate and poignant retelling of the events of 6 August 1945. I'd suggest seeing the museum first, and the time you'll spend in the Peace Park itself will mean that much more. Then, after all that history, be sure to wander

around and find a tiny *okonomiyaki* (savoury pancake) restaurant to try the Japanese treat for which the city is known.

Friends have asked: "What was the thing about Japan you enjoyed the most?" The answer is by far the remarkable kindness, politeness, and welcome we experienced from the Japanese people – especially the delightful schoolchildren you encounter everywhere, dressed in crisp uniforms, impeccably behaved and eager to practise their English.

Our trip to Japan started on a whim. It ended up changing our lives on several levels – in how we eat, how we view life and what we learned from one of the world's oldest, most refined cultures. We will return.

Tom and Roberta travelled on our Golden Route (Superior grade) itinerary, from £3,250 for nine nights (exc. intl. flights). This is an abridged version of Tom's original piece. Read his full story, 'First-timer's Japan: Top tips', at www.insidejapanblog.com.



Congratulations to wordsmith Molly Matthewman, whose haiku won the third *East* competition. Budding poets Denise Stephens and Mandy Huggins were our runners-up. A big thank you to everyone who took part – we had great fun voting for our favourites! Molly, your box of Japanese cooking goodies will be on its way to you shortly.

WINNER: Molly Matthewman, UK

*Flashing neon lights
As bright faces hurry by
Stone lanterns stand still*

**FIRST RUNNER-UP: Denise Stephens,
New Zealand**

*Dear business hotel
Your rooms are small but comfy
I depart refreshed*

SECOND RUNNER-UP: Mandy Huggins, UK

*Blossom falls; pink tears
That settle like soft spring snow
On your hair and lap*

EAST PHOTO COMPETITION

In this issue of *East*, it's time for our annual grand prize giveaway. Last year, Adrian Furner won a trip to Japan; this year, we have a luxury holiday for two to Cambodia to give away!

The prize includes return flights from London to Siem Reap, courtesy of Vietnam Airlines, along with seven nights at Navutu Dreams Resort, the home of Angkor Wat. All you need to do is send us your photographs!

The theme of this issue's photo competition is '**movement**', and this can be interpreted in any way you choose. The only rule is that entries must be taken in one of our destination countries: Japan, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos or Burma. Good luck!



HOW TO ENTER:

- 1) Read our terms & conditions. You can find them at: www.insideasiatours.com/eastmagazine
- 2) Send your photos to east@insideasiatours.com by 5pm (GMT) on 1 April 2017. Include your name, address & contact details.
- 3) The winner and runners up will have their photos published in the next issue of *East*.

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