

CHINESE *WHISPERS*

THE LATEST TRAVEL NEWS AND INSPIRATION FROM WENDY WU TOURS

TRAVEL TALES

Find out more
about India's
Golden Triangle

INTRODUCING Stunning Sri Lanka

**CUSTOMER
CORNER**
Vietnam at a Glance

HEAD TO HEAD

Japan's cherry
blossoms vs
autumn leaves

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UNDISCOVERED CHINA

Welcome To
Breathtaking Tibet

A MESSAGE FROM WENDY



Welcome to our latest issue of Chinese Whispers, filled with inspiring travel articles, tour ideas and the latest news at Wendy Wu Tours.

With winter hitting thick and fast, we're sure you'll agree when we say we're very much looking forward to those warm, long days whether it be here at home or somewhere a little more exotic. If you're ready to plan your 2018 travel, take a look at our Early Bird savings on page 5.

As always, there's plenty of inspiring articles for you to get stuck into – from our first-timer's guide to the paradise island of Sri Lanka and even an exploration of Laos' beautiful Luang Prabang.

Plus, we share with you an insiders experience of both Vietnam and India, through the eyes of two recent travellers.

I hope you enjoy reading this issue and look forward to welcoming you on a Wendy Wu holiday very soon.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Wendy Wu".

Wendy Wu,
Owner & Founder, Wendy Wu Tours

Cover image: Geisha, Japan

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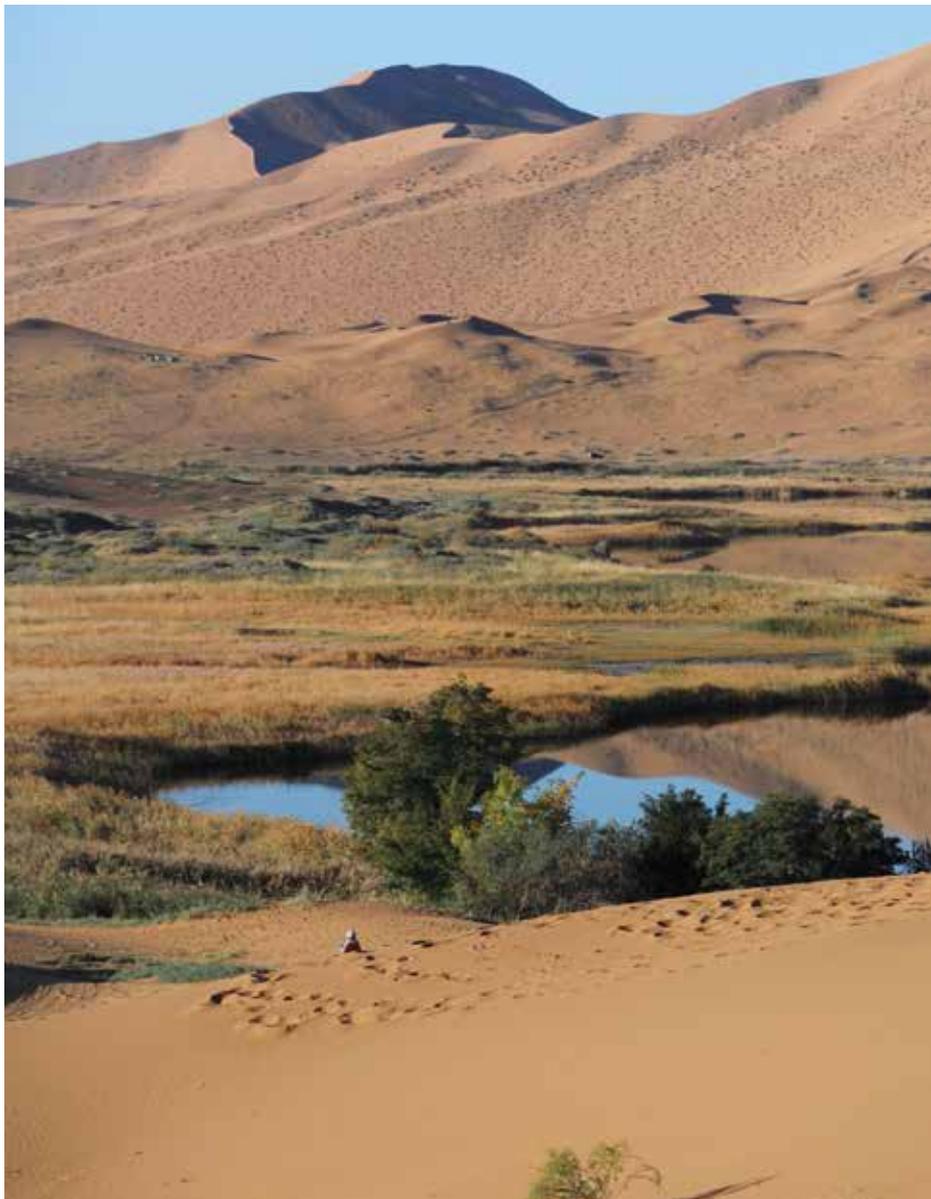
Japan's cherry blossoms vs autumn leaves.



CUSTOMER CORNER

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Mr and Mrs Baldwin share their experiences exploring Vietnam.





INTRODUCING SRI LANKA

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From palm-fringed beaches to rolling hills of tea, Sri Lanka packs a punch.



UNDISCOVERED CHINA

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Find out more about mystical Tibet.



TRAVEL TALES

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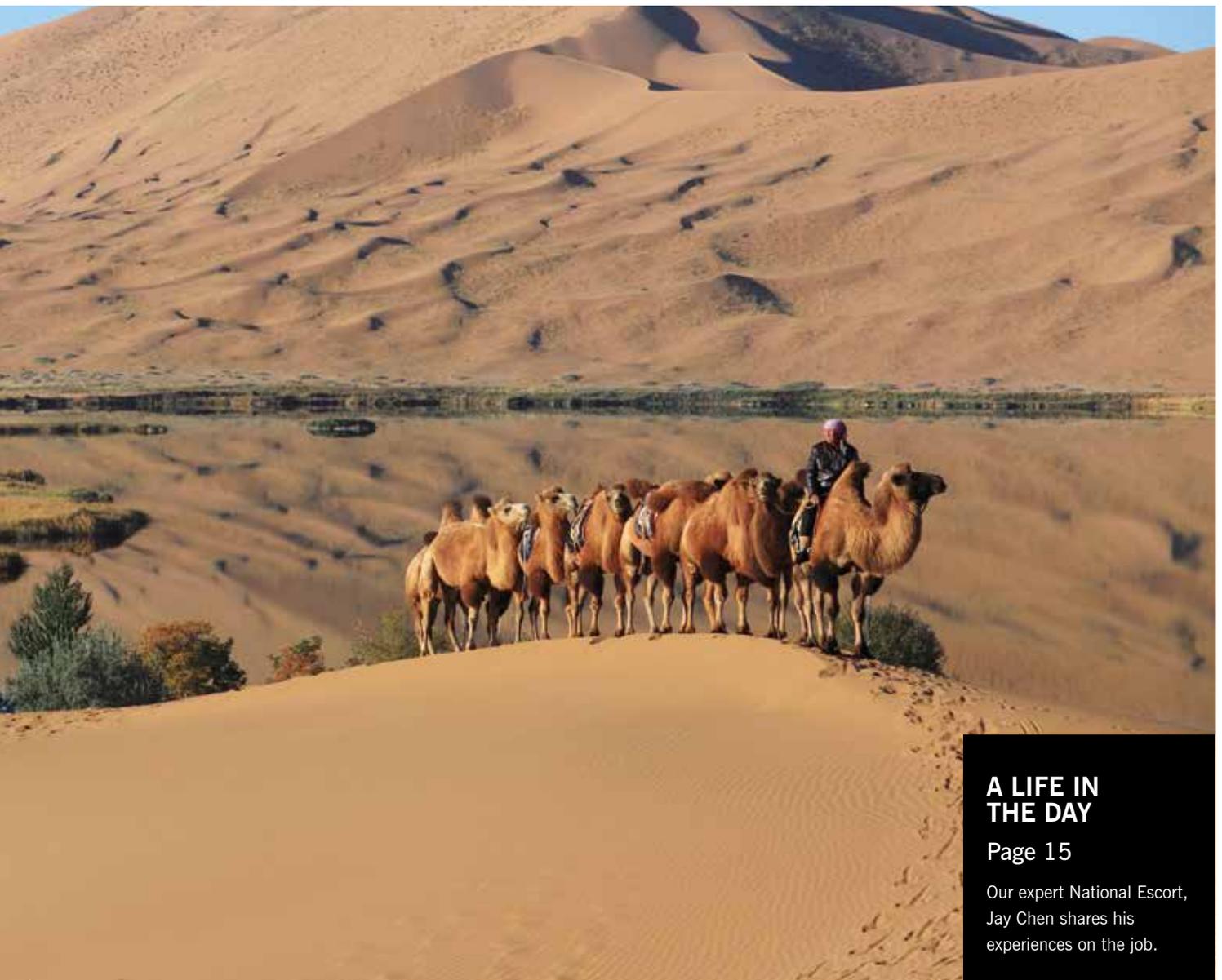
Our Reservations Supervisor Aaron Phillips shares his recent experience in India's Golden Triangle.



48 HOURS IN LUANG PRABANG

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Find out how to spend the perfect 48 hours in one of Laos' most captivating cities.



A LIFE IN THE DAY

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Our expert National Escort, Jay Chen shares his experiences on the job.

WHAT'S NEW?

OUR EXPERTS BRING YOU THE LATEST NEWS FROM WENDY WU TOURS

NEW INSPIRATIONAL CHINA TOUR

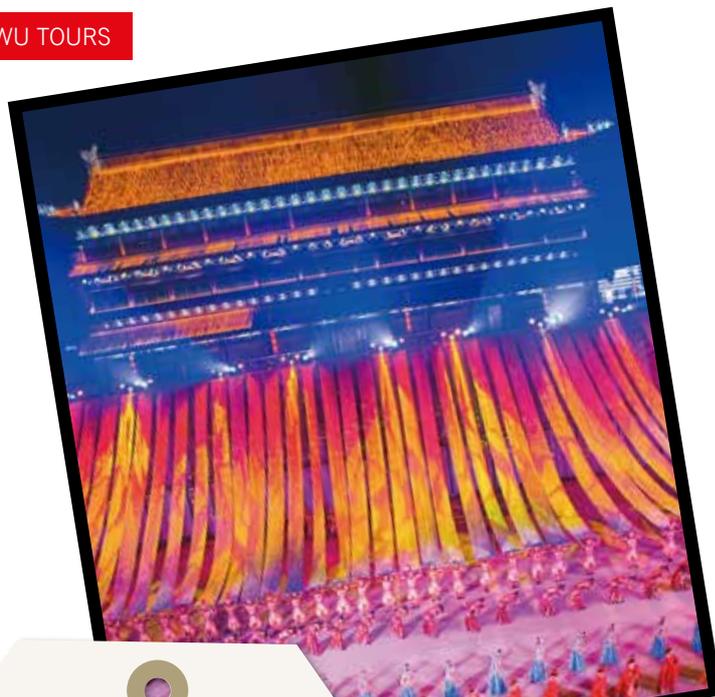
WITH EXCLUSIVE TANG DYNASTY WELCOMING CEREMONY IN XIAN

2017 celebrates the China–Australia Year of Tourism, a partnership between both nations. To mark this event, join us for an a Chang-an Impression Tang Dynasty Welcoming Ceremony at the ancient city wall in Xian. This prestigious, one-of-a-kind performance will welcome you to China in an exciting and remarkable way that will leave you with lasting memories. This ceremony has been held only on very limited occasions to welcome official dignitaries in previous years, including former President Bill Clinton. Only 1000 seats are available, and Wendy Wu Tours is one of the few exclusive tour operators to be invited to attend.

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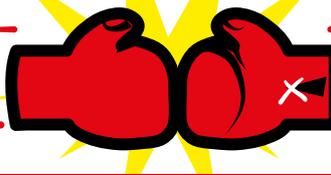
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HEAD TO HEAD

JAPAN'S CHERRY BLOSSOMS



JAPAN'S AUTUMN LEAVES

TWO OF JAPAN'S MOST LOVED SEASONS
FIGHT IT OUT TO WIN YOUR VOTE



CULTURE

The art of watching the cherry blossoms is known as *hanami*. As the cherry blossom season approaches, there is great fervour in Japan as locals prepare for large picnic parties beneath the blossoms with their friends and families. Even companies reserve spots under the trees for their after-work parties! The Japanese will then drink saké and feast on bento boxes and pink themed sweets, such as a sakura flavoured KitKat chocolate bar.

WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

There's a phenomena known as *sakura* that takes hold of Japan at the start of Spring every year. It's so highly anticipated, that the Japanese Meteorological Agency even forecasts its arrival. We are of course talking about Japan's famous cherry blossoms, where the country's cherry trees spectacularly bloom into beautiful shades of white and pink. Only in bloom from late March to mid-April for around 2 weeks from south to north Japan, this fleeting and sought-after event has captured the world.



HISTORY

The art of waiting for the cherry blossoms to bloom stems from 1,200 years ago where its appearance signified the start of the rice-planting season. As time passed, its popularity grew alongside the philosophical beliefs of the Japanese, where appreciation of nature and the natural order is rife. Today, the few weeks where the cherry blossoms bloom are the most popular time to visit Japan, but also its most stunning.



CULTURE

The art of following the autumn leaves is known as *momijigari*. As Japan's maple and ginkgo trees turn from green to hues of gold, orange and red, both locals and tourists alike travel around the country to be dazzled by the bright foliage. It's a celebration of the start of autumn, and one which is now ingrained into Japanese culture; many wearing kimonos with maple leaf patterns whilst enjoying *momiji tempura* – delicious deep fried maple leaves. It may not be anticipated as much as the famous cherry blossoms, but don't underestimate the beautiful array of leaves – they've been written into many Japanese poems and novels.

WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

We all know what happens in the autumn; leaves change their colour before they drop. In Japan, this change of colour is hugely celebrated – in fact about 70% of Japan is covered in forests of deciduous trees and unlike the cherry blossoms, the sweep of colour change occurs from north to south and lasts much longer – around two months – from September in Hokkaido, to Tokyo and Kyoto by the end of November.

HISTORY

The tradition of *momijigari* has its roots in the Heian Period (794 – 1185AD) where noble families and scholars would enjoy nature's shift from green to gold. It was a tradition that the general public did not observe until much later in Japan's history, in the Edo Period (1603 – 1868AD). It became popular to travel around Japan so when news of stunning foliage reaches their ears, locals made the journey to distant areas solely to view them. The tradition continues today!



Conclusion

Japan in either cherry blossom or autumn leaves season is a wonderful and stunning experience. Both seasons will allow you to see the vivid colours of the landscape as well as peeking into Japan's culture as locals celebrate all around.

So for us, we would choose the season that best suits you! One thing's for sure: whenever you go, you'll have a memorable time!

TAKE ME THERE

Whichever season you decide is for you. Choose from group tours, short stays or create your very own tailormade Japan itinerary.

Visit wendywutours.com.au/japan to find out more.

To book call **1300 798 118**

INSIDERS TIP: Cherry Blossom season is the most popular time to visit Japan and tour places fill quickly. If you'd like to see the Cherry Blossoms in 2018, book early to avoid disappointment.

SIZZLING **SICHUAN**

Home to towering peaks, fertile plains and swathes of verdant forest. Sichuan Province in China's southwest is known for its fiery cuisine and awe-inspiring beauty as well as being the natural home of the lackadaisical Giant Panda. Being China's second largest province, there is so much to see and do, so if you've been to China once before, Sichuan is the perfect choice for a second visit.

The Bear Necessities

The Giant Panda has taken its place in the hearts of both the Chinese and people around the world as everyone's favourite bear. Native to a few of the mountain ranges of central China, particularly Sichuan, due to development and deforestation, pandas have become a conservation reliant endangered species. There are now several panda conservation centres available to visit both in Chengdu and the surrounds, offering more in-depth interactions. You will also have the opportunity to see another of China's native species, the Red Panda. Whilst they do share a name the Giant Panda and the Red Panda aren't closely related but both are equally fun to watch.



Hot Pot

In a recent tourism survey, a staggering 70 per cent of respondents revealed that the main reason they travelled to the city was to taste Chengdu's renowned gourmet food. Sichuan cuisine is probably the most well-known in China and is famous for its hot spicy taste and the flavour of the Sichuan pepper. The Hot Pot is its most famous dish. It consists of a simmering metal pot with broth at the centre of a table, and all raw ingredients placed beside the metal pot, so people can add and cook whatever they like in the broth. It's a great way to socialise as well as clearing the head with the mix of herbs and spices.

Nine Villages Valley

Any visit to Sichuan would not be the same without a few days spent exploring the incredible World Heritage listed Jiuzhaigou National Park (or sometimes known as the Nine Villages Valley). The park is named for the nine Tibetan villages that call it home. Encircled by snow-capped peaks, this unique region of blue-toned lakes, rushing waterfalls and thick forest is not only visually spectacular but also filled with diverse flora and fauna.



SICHUAN'S TOP 4



The Giant Panda



Fiery cuisine



Jaw dropping scenery



Jiuzhaigou

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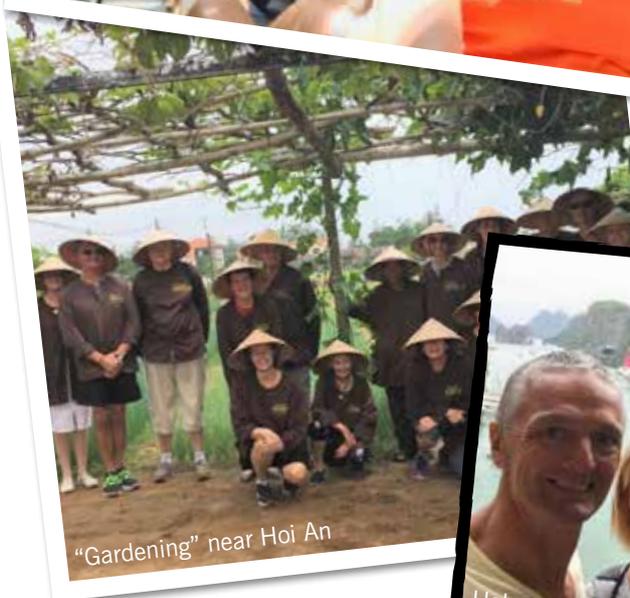
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CUSTOMER CORNER

Tell us about your Wendy Wu holiday

We're always encouraging our customers to share their experiences and feedback from their Wendy Wu Tours holiday. Your feedback helps us create the perfect trip for you.

Julia and Gary Baldwin had long dreamed of visiting Vietnam – and this April, had the pleasure of making it happen. After their much-awaited 'Vietnam at a Glance' trip, they were delighted to share their thoughts on some of their favourite places in this incredible country.



“ Thuan, our guide, was fabulous, bringing an abundance of knowledge. He wanted the group to understand and enjoy his country that he is so proud of. ”

On the Mekong... In the Mekong, we were greeted with some traditional music and songs as well as some honey tea. Our first boat ride was fun and relaxing because it was so peaceful and tranquil. It was nice having interactions with some local Vietnamese people. The next boat trip allowed us a look at the larger part of the river.

On Hoi An... Hoi An, another place steeped in history, was very pretty along the riverbank especially in the evening when lanterns are everywhere. The hotel was located within walking distance of markets which were not only for tourists but also frequented by locals. Experiencing local lifestyle and habits is all part of visiting other countries and helps you to understand different cultures. We, like most of our tour group, enjoyed visiting the food markets and seeing so many different types of produce, some live!

On Hue... The historical sites visited such as the Imperial Citadel and the Forbidden Purple City were interesting and provided more information about the history of Vietnam. We walked to a local market, which was an amazing sight.

On Halong Bay... In Halong Bay, we were truly amazed at the vastness of the area. A favourite was our visit to Titop island where we were able to climb the many steps to the top and see yet another amazing view.

On Hanoi... In Hanoi we travelled through streets on the cyclo and also explored the surrounding areas to our hotel on a number of independent walks. We find that walking is the best way to experience a city and we especially enjoyed visiting the local markets and the thriving Old Town with themed streets. The lake and bridge were a quiet contrast which helped us to feel we had discovered Hanoi's diversity. We discovered that weekends in this area are quite different as many of the streets are pedestrianised and many local families attend enjoying family-friendly street activities.

Our favourite place! It is so difficult to choose just one memory as a favourite. The 'Vietnam at a Glance' tour is so well planned to cater for diverse interests. A summary would be that the tour included historical places of interests, glimpses of countryside, various boat trips, bus rides and more than anything fun times. We both enjoyed the gardening experience in Hoi An, and listening to our host whose family had lived and maintained the 'garden' for many generations. Even though we didn't do too much actual gardening it was great fun and really nice to be a part of local life. Being treated to a foot soak and a cooking lesson added to this experience. We were able to cook our lovely lunch but were treated to even more amazing food provided by our hosts. A fabulous day of fun!



YOUR LOYALTY MATTERS

As a thank you for your loyalty, there are a series of rewards for your valued custom with Wendy Wu Tours:



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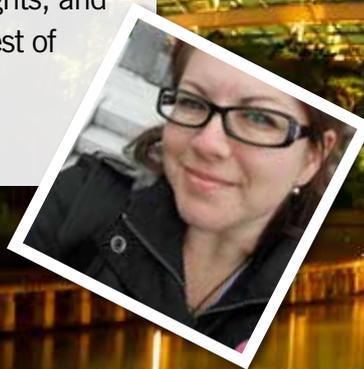
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GARDENS BY THE BAY

Rising from the buzz of Singapore's Marina Bay, the Gardens by the Bay is a 21st-century botanic garden, complete with varied habitats and futuristic Supertrees. With a huge 101-hectares to explore, you can spend days getting purposely lost in this wonderland.

We sent our roving reporter, Lauren Rafter, to the Gardens by the Bay, to uncover the highlights, and give us her top tips for experiencing the best of this beautiful spot, with limited time.



Arriving at the Gardens by the Bay, I'm a little overwhelmed by their enormity. There's over 100 hectares to see here, and I want to experience it all. But how can I possibly see everything? Camera in hand, and walking shoes laced, I'm equipped for a day in this urban jungle. So, here goes!

10am Flower Dome

I head straight to the Cooled Conservatories Flower Dome. This place is the largest glass greenhouse in the world, and designed with glass that sits on a steel grid, acting like an eggshell. I wandered amongst thousand-year-old olive trees and some of the most unusual Baobabs of the Mediterranean. There are also plants from semi-arid regions, including a Succulent Garden full of prickly desert plants, and a South African garden filled with colourful bulbs and evergreen shrubs. I need to rest my legs, so I hear to Bakerzin for a coffee and a French pastry. Drool.

12pm Cloud Forest

Next stop, the Cloud Forest, where I explore the highlands amidst orchids and pitcher plants, a mysterious world veiled in mist. Incredibly, there is also a man-made 35m-tall mountain covered in lush vegetation, and the world's tallest indoor waterfall. At the highest point, I meet carnivorous plants, like the Venus Fly-Catcher and ponder – animal or vegetable? Either way, incredible. Up here, I wander along Cloud Walk, then head to the mystical Secret Garden, where I touch rare plants, once abundant, but today very limited. Prehistoric ferns, ancient Ginger and rare Heliconias fill my view, and on the ground, in the misty ravine, begonias and peperomias. Those carnivorous plants have reminded me that I'm hungry, but never fear – there are nine restaurants and cafes for me to choose from for my lunch. I choose to eat at IndoChine, a Pan-Asian bistro with contemporary versions of Singapore's heritage dishes.

2pm The Supertrees

Looking up in the distance, I see the Supertrees. Like something from a science fiction movie, these dramatic vertical plant displays tower over me. There are 16 of them in total in the Supertree Grove, with the tallest one measuring up to 16 storeys in height, and covered with a huge 162,000 (yes, one hundred and sixty two thousand) plants. At night, the Supertrees come alive, with a dazzling display of lights bursting across the sky. I don't know where to look first, but I feel like I'm in the movie Avatar.

3pm Skyway

I walk up the OCBC Skyway, a full 22 metres above the ground and feel like a giant. In the distance I can see panoramic views of the Gardens and Marina Bay skyline. From here, I can see how these Supertrees are made, and their construction of steel, concrete and planting panels.

4pm World of Plants

Down on Earth again, I head to the collection of six gardens, together known as the World of Plants. As I round the corner into a clearing, giant orang-utan, pangolin and hornbill materialise before me – all topiary styled plants. There's also some of the oldest evolved plants on the planet, including the rare Chinese Desmos and the Multipinnate Cycas.

5pm Heritage Gardens

At the intersection of flora and culture, I find myself at the Heritage Gardens that house a collection of plants that play a part in the culture of Singapore's different ethnic backgrounds – Chinese, Malay, Indian and Colonial. At the Indian Garden, Hinduism and the principles of the Vedas, the collection of hymns to gods, influence the plants on display.

I learn that in Ayurveda, forests represent endless self-regeneration of life and plants are offerings to deities. The fascinating Chinese Garden shows a balanced landscape and how gardens are designed to reproduce natural scenery where art imitates nature.

Rocks resemble mountains, water features represent rivers and waterfalls and trees pruned to appear windswept. Heading to the Malay garden is a veritable feast, with fruits like rambutan, jambu, coconut and durian, as well as bread fruit and pandan. Finally, I enter the Colonial garden, where I'm overwhelmed with the scents of aromatic plants. Cloves, Nutmeg, Coffee and Cocoa trees are the remnants of a history of Singapore at the geographical centre of the Spice Route. I need a little pick me up, so I head to Café Crema, for a hand-crafted gourmet coffee.

6pm Dragonfly Lake

Nearby, I see the Dragonfly Lake, and wander its 440-metre boardwalk. Inside, rich aquatic flora and fauna play an important role in maintaining the right amount of nutrients in the lake, acting as a natural eco-filter. It's a photographers dream, and with the backdrop of more than 40 curated sculptures, is a great relaxation spot.

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GARDENS BY THE BAY
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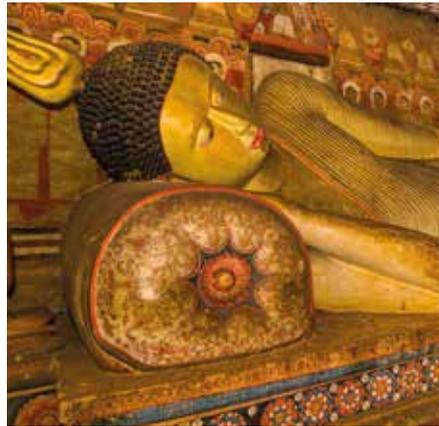
Floral Displays

INTRODUCING SRI LANKA

Sri Lanka. Known as Ceylon until 1972, zealously Buddhist, land of tea and cinnamon, where the most popular sport is cricket but the national sport is volleyball. The island has long been seducing adventurers – Marco Polo pulled out his best descriptive vocab when he described it as the ‘finest island of its size in the world’ (we’ll just assume he was too enchanted by the natural beauty to do better).

Signore Polo is right though, for a landmass of its size, Sri Lanka packs a real punch – incredible biodiversity, eight UNESCO World Heritage Sites covering an incredible history, palm-fringed beaches and rolling hills of tea, tea, tea.





Since the civil war ended in 2009, Sri Lanka has been well and truly back on the bucket list. Now is the ideal time to visit, with new infrastructure making it easier to get around to the Island's cultural and natural riches.

The Cultural Triangle

At the heart of Sri Lanka is an area of flat, arid shrubland that was once known as "The King's Land", and was the birthplace of early Sinhalese civilisation. The 'cultural triangle' encompasses this area, a treasure trove of Sri Lanka's rich cultural heritage, many of which are UNESCO World Heritage Sites. There includes ancient Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa, cities that heralded the golden age of Sinhalese culture and architecture, the cave temples of Dambulla that has been used for worship for 22 centuries, the unique and magnificent Sigiriya (Lion Rock) and the sacred city of Kandy, home to Sri Lanka's most revered Buddhist relic.

National Parks and Wildlife

When it comes to protecting its natural bounty, Sri Lanka has a long and illustrious history. It is thought that the Sri Lankan royals were preserving areas of land over 2,000 years ago – today there are over 100 protected spaces and these areas are home to a huge assortment of flora and fauna. Our favourites include: Horton Plains National Park, which is predominantly spectacular grassland and cloudforest; Yala National Park, particularly famous for its leopard population and Udawalawe National Park, the place to see elephants.

Beaches

Sri Lanka can boast swathes of gorgeous beaches, ranging from stretches of golden, palm-backed sands to untamed, surf-battered and rocky. Lapped by the warm waters of the Indian Ocean, no matter what sort of beach you fancy, Sri Lanka will have an option or two. Like water sports? Try Bentota. Want convenience and a lively atmosphere? Negombo is a good bet. Want intimate and low key? Mirissa would be a good choice for you. Craving undeveloped? Venture up to Uppuveli. There's plenty of sand to go around!

Tea

Sri Lanka is the world's 4th largest producers of tea – pretty impressive when you're talking about an island that is a bit smaller than Ireland. It was in a plantation close to Kandy that James Taylor developed Ceylon tea in 1867 after a disease killed off the coffee plants on which many Brits made their fortunes. Today the rolling hills of the central highland provinces are resplendent with tea plants and there are plenty of guided tours on offer. These usually include walking through the tea fields, a tour of the factory, and of course, a tea tasting. Nuwara Eliya is particularly known for producing fine tea, and is a spectacularly located highland town with plenty of colonial quirks.

“ Sri Lanka is the world's 4th largest producers of tea – pretty impressive when you're talking about an island that is a bit smaller than Ireland. ”

TAKE ME THERE

HIGHLIGHTS OF SRI LANKA

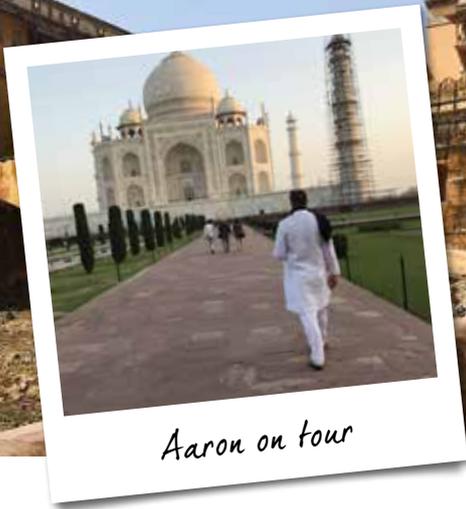
Explore the tropical paradise that is Sri Lanka, marvelling at magnificent temples, spotting elephants and leopards in Yala National Park, and exploring the wonders of the Cultural Triangle.

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TRAVEL TALES

IN INDIA



Aaron on tour



Amer Fort

Golden Triangle India presents a world of colour, splendour and opulence. Wendy Wu Tours' Reservations Supervisor, Aaron Phillips recently explored historic Rajasthan. Here, he tells us all about it.

What were your un-missable experiences in the Golden Triangle?

Where should I start? The entire trip was amazing, and I didn't realise how incredible India really is until I was there! There are so many highlights for me. Being first in line at the Taj Mahal and taking in the view with no one else in the background was magical, and well worth the early start.

Nearby the Taj Mahal, at Agra Fort, I wandered through courtyard after courtyard, and was rewarded with a stunning insight into Mughal architecture. This remarkable walled city was started in 1565.

Back in the capital, I loved whizzing through the streets of Old Delhi on a rickshaw. There's colours

and spices around every turn, and you truly feel like you're right 'in the thick of it'.

Jaipur was breathtaking. Watching the sun set over the famous Pink City was like something from a movie. Nearby, the Amer Fort was so lavish and opulent, it was like being transformed back in time to experience the life of a Maharaja.

How would you describe the locals in the Golden Triangle?

The kindness and care was something I have never experienced in my other travels. No matter where we were, or what their circumstance, the locals were always happy to smile, and they love a chat. The colourful turbans and saris are incredible, the markets full of bright spices, dyes and clothing.

How did your guides help you to experience India?

Our guide MK was so passionate about India, always taking care of us and making sure we were in the best spots for photos! Sonu was

equally impressive, as was our local guide in Jaipur. The guides helped us to uncover the local secrets and bring the history to life.

I loved Jaipur. There was so much to see and do. I woke to stunning views of the endless sea of buildings, toured the Amer Fort and the Palace of the Winds, and had an entertaining dinner at Spice Court.

What are your top travel tips for India?

Travelling to India in a group made it so much easier to just relax and enjoy this incredible country. Above all, it's important to have an open mind and go with the flow. Yes, India is loud and chaotic, but it can also be peaceful and serene. Remember that you're a traveller to someone else's country, so always be polite and patient. Culturally India is very different to Australia, so try to embrace it. My top tip though: go early to the Taj Mahal, only taking water, your camera and mozzie repellent. Don't bring a bag, and you'll avoid the bag queue! Then once you're in, just sit back and enjoy the view.

AARON'S TOP INDIA SIGHTS



Taj Mahal



Sunset in Jaipur



Rickshaw ride through Old Delhi



Agra Fort

TAKE ME THERE

GOLDEN TRIANGLE

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A LIFE IN THE DAY

Jay Chen...

One of our longest serving National Escorts in China, Jay Chen recently spoke to us about his experiences on the job, what he loves the most about travelling through his home-land and why China should be considered as your next holiday destination...



What tempted you to become a National Escort?

As the Chinese saying goes, "It's better to travel ten thousand miles than to read ten thousand books". This sums up my reasons for being a National Escort. I'd always known how vast China is – but when you live somewhere you often forget to travel within your own country. Doing it for a job though has made me appreciate what an incredibly diverse country China is; from city to city and village to village – no place is the same to the next. The food, the culture and the scenery changes everywhere you go.

Tell us about one memory that stands out for you the most?

2008 on my first Silk Road Explorer tour. Being from Xian, I hadn't ventured this far west in China before, so like my tour group, it was also a new experience for me!

One day we rode a camel and the next visited bustling bazaars – oh and the food was also an experience. We tried something called Nang Bread which I would recommend trying if you do this trip – it's essentially a crusty pancake, (which doesn't sound too appealing I know), but everyone on the trip enjoyed it and embraced the opportunity to try and experience the unique culture surrounding them.

What's the best part of China to experience its true culture and untouched scenery?

Culture wise, it must be Tibet. In 2010 it was a great honour to lead 15 customers from both the UK and Australia from Urumqi, all the way down to Lhasa, Tibet's capital. We travelled for 31 days and 16 of those days were by 4-wheel drive. Along the journey, we could appreciate

the beautiful, natural scenery around us, gaining a real insight into Tibet's culture and food as we went. It's a culture so very different from my own in bustling Xian – and it was wonderful to see the western tourists learn about the daily life of those living there.

For natural scenery – it's difficult to know where to start. I know that the big cities often spring to mind first when people think of China – and even though they're great, there's so much to see past these. My personal favourite province is Sichuan; the Nine Villages Valley to be more precise – the bright blue pools and scenery is so dramatic!

Why should China be next on someone's travel-list?

There is so much to see and do in China – many of my clients are surprised with just quite how much – so much so that they often tell me they're going to come back and see more, for me, that means I've done a great job. If you'd like to experience unique culture from place to place, try different foods and view beautiful scenery, I would recommend a visit to China.



Potala Palace, Lhasa



Nine Villages Valley

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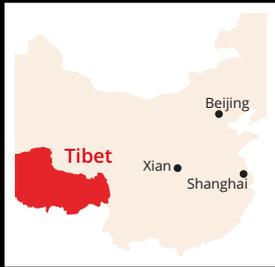
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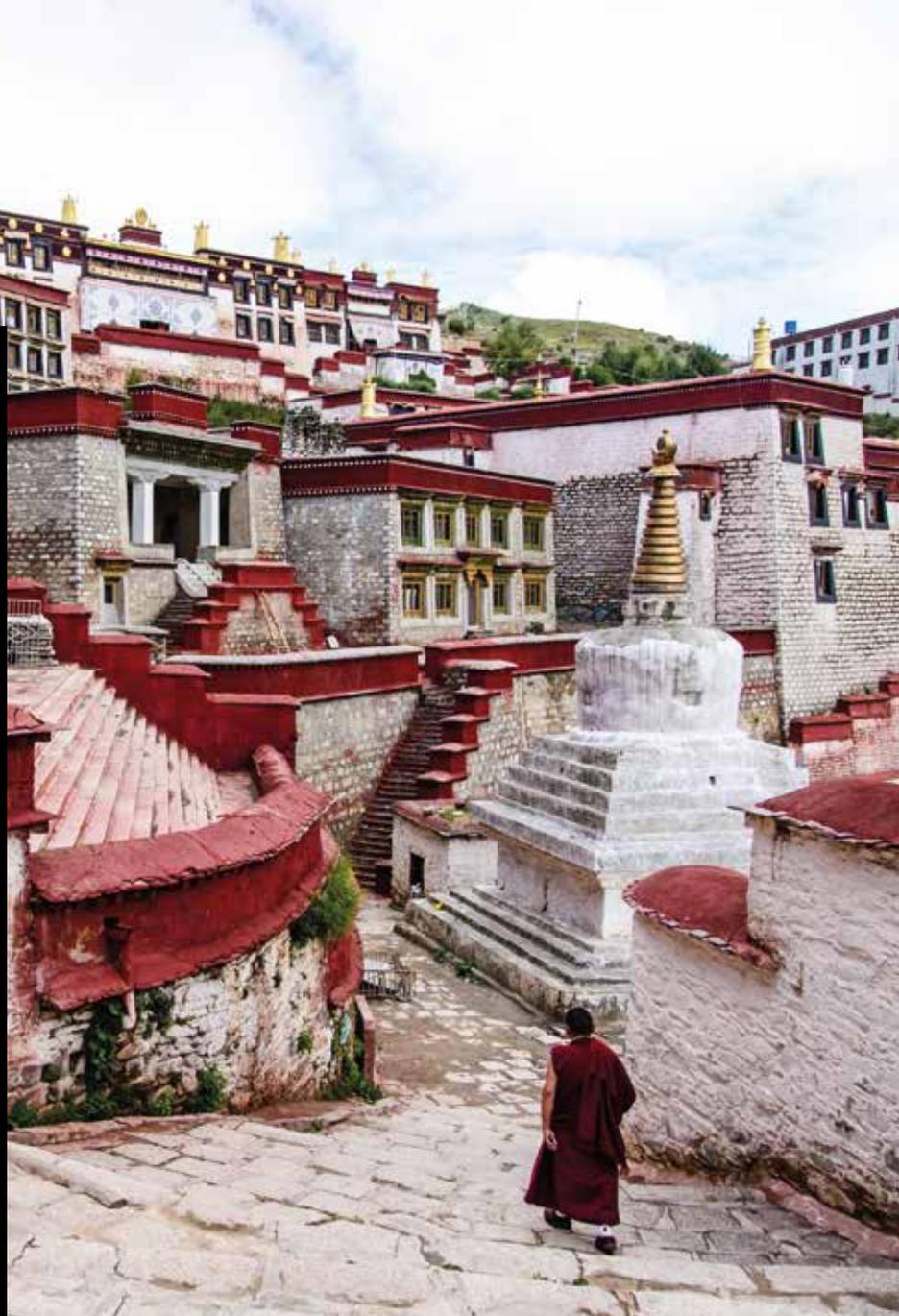
UNDISCOVERED CHINA

TIBET

Sat high on a stark plateau and guarded by the colossal peaks of the Himalaya, Tibet is a mountain kingdom



shrouded in mystery. This is a place that has long intrigued travellers, interweaved as it is with myth and legend, and we're here to tell you that it is every bit as magical as the stories tell. With a strong spirituality, robust culture, shaggy yaks, colourful prayer flags and truly epic landscapes that include the sky-scraping Mount Everest, Tibet is one of the most awe-inspiring destinations on the planet.



People

As much as Tibet develops and modernises, its culture remains alive through its people. Many Tibetans still live a subsistence lifestyle, as nomads roaming the vast plains, or in simple wooden homesteads, their (mostly) Buddhist beliefs grown to suit the elemental nature of the plateau. Warm, spiritual and hospitable people, Tibetans have beautiful, open faces and are always ready to break into a toothy grin! The best way to interact with them is at temples and monasteries, where many make regular pilgrimages. The 1,300-year-old Jokhang Temple in Lhasa is the very heart of Tibet's spirituality and the best place to spot locals from all over the country. Strolling the temple's pilgrimage circuit, the Barkhor, with the pilgrims and their twirling handheld prayer wheels before cramming yourself into the thick, yak-butter candle lit interior of the temple is a humbling experience.



Did you know?

Tibet is the source of all of Asia's major rivers, which provide water for over one billion people! The Indus, Brahmaputra, Salween, Mekong, Irrawaddy, Yangtze and Yellow rivers all flow from sources on the Tibetan plateau.

Landscapes

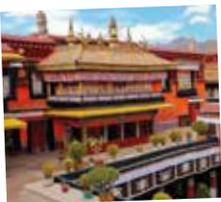
It goes without saying that Tibet's landscapes are on an epic scale, set as it is amongst the towering peaks of the Himalaya, but they really need to be seen to be believed. Lakes of the brightest azure, great green plains, grazed by yaks and frequented by nomads rolling endlessly into the distance, lush valleys plunging between mountains, high passes bright with coloured prayer flags, and of course those great snowy peaks always on the horizon. For the more intrepid adventurer, Everest base camp is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Passing through some of the world's most starkly beautiful and extreme landscapes, you can stand under the gaze of Everest's north face – the views are unsurpassed.

History

The tale of the kingdom of Tibet begins with Nyatri Tsenpo, a man descended from a one-footed creature called Theurang, who was exiled to the plateau for his terrifying appearance. He set himself up as Tibet's first king, and the rest, they say, is history. And what a rich history it is – a tapestry made up of myth and legend, the hardships of the terrain, Buddhism and both past, and more recent upheaval. Monuments to the past are found everywhere, in the monasteries of Shigatse, Gyantse and Lhasa, Gangpo Ri, the 'birthplace of the Tibetan people' and Yumbulhakang Palace, said to be Tibet's first building! The most famous and symbolic sight in Tibet though is the Potala Palace, the seat of the Tibetan Government and winter palace of the Dalai Lama. Empty since the Dalai Lama fled in 1959, this architectural wonder, filled with old treasures, watches protectively over the city from its hilltop perch.



TIBET TOP EXPERIENCES



Joining the line of pilgrims filing through the Jokhang Temple.



Uninterrupted views of Mount Everest from base camp.



Gazing on the incredible blue of the sacred Yamdrok Lake.



Exploring the labyrinthine Potala Palace.

TAKE ME THERE

TIBETAN WONDERS

Travel through Yunnan province and up onto the Tibetan Plateau where you can admire old monasteries and Himalayan vistas including the ultimate view of Everest.

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48 HOURS IN... LUANG PRABANG



Easily one of Southeast Asia's most captivating cities, Luang Prabang is a destination that has stolen the heart of many of its visitors. It is the classic image of Laos, where brightly-robed monks stroll timeless streets lined with French colonial shophouses, golden-pinnacled wats and vibrant bougainvillea. Nestled at the confluence of the mighty Mekong and Nam Khan rivers, Luang Prabang was a kingdom of its own for over 1,000 years, and remains the heart of Laos culture, religion and heritage.

HERE'S HOW TO SPEND THE PERFECT 48 HOURS...

Day One

MORNING

Start the day delving into the collection of the Royal Palace Museum, where you can admire all the trimmings of the former Laos monarchy and some other cultural bits and bobs – from traditional musical instruments to classic cars! The museum is also home to Laos' most sacred Buddha image, the Phra Bang. Wander through the pretty, relaxed streets of Luang Prabang's World Heritage-listed old town – there are plenty of cafes to stop off in if you need sustenance. This area is home to many of Luang Prabang's red-and-golden-roofed wats, all of which are open for you to explore. The one that mustn't be missed though is Wat Xieng Thong – built in 1560, this is the oldest and most magnificent wat in Luang Prabang, with exuberant decorations throughout!

AFTERNOON

Pop into the Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre to learn more about Laos' ethnic minority groups – the displays of traditional clothing and artefacts perfectly highlights the country's rich diversity. The museum sits at the foot of Phousi Hill, so ascending to the golden spire of That Chomsi at its peak is your next move. Located in the heart of the city, you'll get fantastic views over Luang Prabang, the rivers and mountains beyond.

AFTER DARK

From about 5pm, the nightly market sets up in the centre of town and offers a vibrant way to spend the evening. Peruse the stalls of hill-tribe traders

which sell all sorts of handicrafts such as clothing, blankets, lamps and scarfs, to name just a few. Whilst you're here, you might as well grab a bite to eat - there is a big and delicious range of food on offer, from noodles and barbequed meats, to sandwiches and sweet coconut rice balls.

Day Two

MORNING

Rise with the sun to witness tak bat, a traditional Buddhist ceremony performed every morning at dawn. Watch the city's monks walk through the streets collecting alms offerings of food from kneeling locals – the uninterrupted line of saffron-robed monks is a timeless sight.

DAY

Travel about 50 minutes out of Luang Prabang to visit the beautiful Kuang Si Waterfalls. Wander through the picturesque jungle setting, admiring the brilliant blue of the pools of this multi-level waterfall and even swimming in them if you fancy. There are plenty of picturesque spots to enjoy a picnic lunch or simply relax close to the water. The Kuang Si Butterfly Park and Tat Kuang Si Bear Rescue Centre, a sanctuary for rescued Asiatic black bears (or moon bears), which are both close by, are also a lovely visit.

EVENING

This evening, enjoy dinner in one of Luang Prabang's riverside restaurants. Dine on something deliciously and traditionally Laotian and pair it with a Beer Lao as you enjoy the peace of the river bank.



TOP LUANG PRABANG EXPERIENCES



Wat Xieng Thong



Kuang Si Waterfall



Night Market



Tak Bat

TAKE ME THERE

HIGHLIGHTS OF LAOS

Explore the untouched landscapes and rich culture of Laos, Southeast Asia's undiscovered destination.

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A MESSAGE FROM OUR PARTNERS

REFLECTIONS ON THE CHINDWIN

BY PANDAW FOUNDER
PAUL STRACHAN

'The Chindwin is the loveliest of rivers...' so wrote my late friend Alister McCrae of his 1930s trip up the great tributary as a young assistant of the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company. And so it remains. I have been up a few rivers in my time and the Chindwin without a doubt remains the loveliest of them all. The Laos Mekong, with its gorges and rocks the size of apartment blocks is on a grander, almost intimidating, scale. The Irrawaddy is a magnificent beast as it expands and contracts through a series of vast shimmering water filled plain and tight defiles. Nothing could beat the Brahmaputra for bird and wildlife and nothing could beat the great Mekong Delta for human life.

I returned this year to the Chindwin to find it little changed in a world of great change. Timeless, soulful, the river meanders through range upon range of forested hills, through rocky narrows and great open spaces. You are up against towering bluffs to one side and shimmering seas of elephant grass on the other. Our course is punctuated by pristine villages that have not visibly changed in a millennia. On the Chindwin, you will find the real Burma: a quietly prosperous riverine economy, self-sufficient and at one with its self.

“ Everyone was up for an adventure and had many a tale to tell of past expeditions. ”

I first explored the Chindwin in 1986 when I travelled up river in a small motorboat. I was twenty-five then and I fell in love with the river and marvelled at the art treasures that awaited in long forgotten wood carved monasteries, one of which at Mingkin I believe to be the oldest in Burma.

The Chindwin is the Irrawaddy's greatest tributary flowing down 700 miles from the Patkai Hills in North-East India, said to be the wettest place in the world, which accounts for a monsoon rise of water levels of 100ft and sometimes the river can rise thirty feet in a night. In the low water season from mid-October onwards, the water level drops to three feet or less and is navigable only by vessels with the shallowest of drafts. The river is navigable from its confluence with the Irrawaddy as far as Homalin which is 400 miles.

This year I took my family on our Kalay Pandaw, the five cabin so called 'Pandaw Owner's Yacht'; not that we get to go in it very much as it is usually fully booked. The Kalay followed the nine cabin ship, Zawgyi. In December the weather is just perfect, the temperature ranges from 15C at night to 25C by day. No one used the air conditioners and most meals were taken outside, though jackets are a must at breakfast time.

On both the Pandaw Zawgyi and Kalay every single guest, bar one couple, had cruised with Pandaw before, many several times. Everyone was up for an adventure and had many a tale to tell of past expeditions. Both these ships draw just under three feet and being small can manoeuvre tight bends.

It was with a heavy heart that we disembarked at Mingkin leaving our guests to continue to Mawlaik. We drove back to Pagan in just seven hours along a freshly cut mountain road, unthinkable a few years ago when the river was the only form of communication.



TAKE ME THERE

SPECIAL OFFER - A number of sailings with No Single Supplement on all Pandaw rivers from now until 2019.

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