# Destination Southeast Asia

NEIL SETCHFIELD

Grab a túk-túk and rush headlong into Southeast Asian life in Vientiane (p351), Laos

Southeast Asia sticks to you. The tropical climate is so humid that the air becomes something akin to goo. The red dust of Cambodia steals through the open bus windows and settles into the fibres of your clothes. The joss sticks lit for the household shrines in Thailand impart a sweet perfume to the thick air. The pungent stench of a durian orchard in Sumatra follows you for days. And without noticing, you'll begin to shuffle between shady patches, as the locals do, rather than marching through the sun.

This is a spiritual place infused with the gods of past and present: the ancient spirits of the land and the family, the deities of Buddhism and the rules of Islam. In a parched corner of Cambodia is Angkor, one of the world's greatest monuments to heaven on earth. The Angkor temple trail extends into Thailand, but sacred spaces are everywhere, from the sagging ruins of other bygone kingdoms to the slumbering volcanoes of the island nations.

It is on the sublime coastlines where most travellers will find an earthly paradise: the coral-protected bays of the Malay peninsula, Indonesia's bulwark of beaches, and the languorous Vietnamese coastline. Each spit of sand has its own personality – from rave scene to stargazing retreat – and there's a constant flow of travellers looking for their own idyll.

Strangely though, the journey can be more moving than the destination. Beyond the bus window, the rolling landscape is fed by the monsoon rains, which impart the kind of fertility that occurs only in the absence of winter. But the soothing agricultural rhythms of Southeast Asia – where a season of hard work is rewarded with bounty and rest – are morphing into an urban tempo. Farmers are becoming factory workers, roads are replacing ditches and shopping malls are shoving out open-air markets. Your visit is well timed to catch a region in flux as an old way of life belatedly yields to the 21st century.

# ITINERARIES

## TAKING THE BEACH CURE

From **Bangkok** (p688), bus south to a string of beach-bumming islands in the Gulf of Thailand: resorty **Ko Samui** (p772), hammock-friendly **Ko Pha-Ngan** (p777) or dive-crazy **Ko Tao** (p771). All of these islands are reached from the mainland town of **Surat Thani** (p769). High step across the peninsula to the Andaman beaches: upscale **Phuket** (p791), magnificent **Ko Phi Phi** (p797), rock-climbing haven **Krabi** (p798) and navel-gazing retreat **Ko Lanta** (p801). Need more sand to yourself? Plant yourself on the underdeveloped beaches of **Ko Tarutao National Marine Park** (p802).

Jump the Thailand–Malaysia border by boat from **Satun** (p803) and head to the wide beaches of family-friendly **Pulau Langkawi** (p453). Next continue by boat to **Georgetown** (p444), an old spice-era port city on Pulau Penang. Take a bus from **Butterworth** (p444) to **Kota Bharu** (p468), the jumping-off point for the jungle islands of **Pulau Perhentian** (p466). Then chase the coastline south to **Mersing** (p457) and the villagelike beaches of **Pulau Tioman** (p457) before returning to civilization in **Singapore** (p655).

Fly across the Strait of Melaka to **Banda Aceh** (p263) for the brief boat ride to the underwater canyons and coral of **Pulau Weh** (p265) – it's how Thailand's beaches were 20 years ago. Hop on a flight to the sun-worship temple that is **Bali** (p209), and learn how to surf, dance and be trouble free.

Check out the uninterrupted R and R on **Lombok** (p270), then ferry to the deservedly celebrated **Gili Islands** (p276) for translucent water and Technicolor reefs, or to **Sumbawa** (p285) for surfable swells and a dramatic deserted coastline. Fly from **Jakarta** (p166) to **Manado** (p321) on Sulawesi to access the **Togean Islands** (p320), where you can dive beneath the ocean's rippling skin into the heart of pristine coral canyons.

The trip between Singapore and **Manila** (p592) in the Philippines might seem like a long haul, but the island of **Palawan** (p636) is a self-contained paradise hardly marred by modernity. Explore hidden coves, paddle through limestone caves and dive for WWII-era wrecks.

**HOW LONG?**
1-2 months

**WHEN TO GO?**
Malaysia, Indonesia, & Thailand: roughly May-Oct

Philippines: Oct-May

**BUDGET?**
US$25-30 per day



**Become a beach connoisseur: first nibbling on the busy beaches of Thailand and Malaysia, then chewing on the known and unknown islands of Indonesia and the Philippines. Don't forget to pay proper homage to Bali.**

## THE REGIONAL RUNDOWN

Start in shopaholic **Bangkok** (p688), then fly to **Siem Reap** (p81) to see Angkor's magnificent temples. Bus to Cambodia's once genteel capital, **Phnom Penh** (p65), and on to capitalist-crazy **Ho Chi Minh City** (Saigon; p881). Work your way north to the leafy boulevards of **Hanoi** (p823), and then be air-lifted out of Vietnam's intensity to laid-back **Luang Prabang** (p368), Laos' World Heritage–listed city of temples and river scenery. Hop over to Thailand's cool enclave of **Chiang Mai** (p688), then return to Bangkok and head on to **Yangon** (Rangoon; p528), located in the cloistered country of Myanmar (Burma). Stops along the Burma trail include the ruins of **Bagan** (Pagan; p562); **Inle Lake** (p547), with its floating gardens and island monasteries; and the ancient capital of **Mandalay** (p552).

From Bangkok fly to multiethnic **Kuala Lumpur** (p422), and bus to the tranquil hill station of **Tanah Rata** (p439) in the Cameron Highlands. Bus south to the historic port town of **Melaka** (p434), and on to **Jerantut**

**HOW LONG?**
3-6 months

**WHEN TO GO?**
High season: Dec-Feb (Philippines & mainland Southeast Asia), May-Sep (Indonesia & East Timor)

Low season: May-Oct (Philippines & mainland Southeast Asia), Nov-Feb (Indonesia & East Timor)

**BUDGET?**
US$20-30 per day



**Think visiting the whole region is out of the question? Thanks to the budget airlines, you can country-hop in a matter of hours. Now enjoy the Southeast Asian buffet.**

(p471), where longtail boats dive into the rainforests of **Taman Negara** (p472). Return to Kuala Lumpur and fly to Borneo through **Bandar Seri Begawan** (p44), the capital of Brunei. On the Malaysian side of Borneo is **Kota Kinabalu** (p477) and towering **Mt Kinabalu** (p484), where you can almost tickle the clouds.

Travel to sophisticated **Singapore** (p655) before touching down in the mayhem of **Jakarta** (p166). Soak up Javanese culture in **Yogyakarta** (p190) and witness the giant stupa of **Borobudur** (p197), then bus to **Gunung Bromo** (p207), an active volcano.

Hop on a flight to the city of **Medan** (p259), then bus to the orang-utan outpost in **Bukit Lawang** (p262) and swim in the volcanic crater of **Danau Toba** (p253).

Or, skip Sumatra entirely and leapfrog to **Denpasar** (p212), in blessed Bali, and on to **Kuta** (p214) for sun and fun. Then dive into Balinese culture in **Ubud** (p222).

Pad over to **Padangbai** (p229) for ferries to **Lembar** (p272), in Lombok, and pay homage to the sacred volcano of **Gunung Rinjani** (p282). Backtrack to Denpasar to hop on a plane to the stunning landscape of **Flores** (p288), then charter a tour to **Komodo** (p287), the stomping ground of the island's prehistoric namesake dragons.

Return to Denpasar and hop up to Sulawesi's capital of **Makassar** (p312), then travel on to **Tana Toraja** (p315) to view the Torajans' fantastical funeral ceremonies. Or descend into **Dili** (p136), in the pioneering destination of East Timor, and sneak into Australia with a flight to Darwin.

From Makassar sling over to Singapore and catch a cheap flight to the Philippines' Clark Special Economic Zone airport, a budget-airline terminal two hours from the manic capital of **Manila** (p592). Then jump on a bus and head north to the lush and toothy Cordillera region, with stops in **Baguio** (p607), the hand-hewn rice terraces near **Bontoc** (p609) and **Banaue** (p609). Catch a flight from Manila to **Caticlan** (p620) for boats to **Boracay** (p618), where you can rest and recreate on the town's postcard-perfect beach.

## MAINLAND SOUTHEAST ASIA

**HOW LONG?**
2-6 months

**WHEN TO GO?**
High season: Dec-Feb

Low season: May-Oct

**BUDGET?**
US$20-25 per day

Starting from the backpacker mecca of **Bangkok** (p688), fly to Vietnam's bustling capital of **Hanoi** (p823), then shuffle up to the hill-tribe town of **Sapa** (p849) and down to the limestone mountains jutting out of the jewel-coloured waters of **Halong Bay** (p842). Continue to the former imperial capital of **Hué** (p852), now Unesco World Heritage listed, and explore its beautiful, crumbling Citadel and decaying imperial tombs. Then detour into the hills of **Bach Ma National Park** (p859) for the opportunity to trek through stunning forests to sparkling waterfalls. Stroll the antique streets of **Hoi An** (p862), cool off like the American GIs did in **Nha Trang** (p867) or enjoy eternal spring in the hill station of **Dalat** (p875). Relax on the beach at **Mui Ne** (p873) before descending into the chaos of modern-day Saigon, **Ho Chi Minh City** (p881). Pad around the Mekong Delta, starting at **My Tho** (p896), then kick back on undeveloped **Phu Quoc Island** (p901).

Cross the Vietnam–Cambodia border at **Vinh Xuong** (p900), heading to **Phnom Penh** (p65) to gain modern-day insight into the Khmer Rouge era, and on to **Siem Reap** (p81), the base town for visits to the renowned temples of **Angkor** (p90). Continue your temple-viewing voyage into the backwaters of **Preah Vihear province** (p102). Call in at **Kratie** (p114), home to the Irrawaddy dolphin, then poke around the mountains of



remote **Ratanakiri province** (p116) before crossing into Laos from **Stung Treng** (p115).

Relax amidst the river islands of Laos' **Si Phan Don** (Four Thousand Islands; p400) – simply enjoy the stunning river scenery, or get active and take a trip to view rare Irrawaddy dolphins. Visit the imposing Khmer sanctuary in **Champasak** (p399) and explore the waterfalls of the **Bolaven Plateau** (p398). Save time by hopping a flight from **Pakse** (p395) to Laos' unassuming capital of **Vientiane** (p351), then board a bus to bewitching **Luang Prabang** (p368).

Travel along the Mekong River to the Laos–Thailand border crossing at **Chiang Khong** (p744) and **Huay Xai** (p389). Drop into **Chiang Rai** (p742), then hightail it to bohemian **Chiang Mai** (p727) for great food, ancient temples and a plethora of courses in cooking, language, massage and meditation. Take trekking detours in **Pai** (p737) and **Mae Hong Son** (p739), then shoot over to the ancient capital of **Sukhothai** (p722) before going waterfall-spotting in **Khao Yai National Park** (p751). Finally, take a deep breath and return to Bangkok.


**These are the celebrities of the region, enjoying lots of patronage by guidebook-toting travellers. Look for small-town detours to get off the beaten trail, and allow for lots of time on the road in Laos and Cambodia.**

## ECOTOURING & VOLUNTEERING

**HOW LONG?**
1-2 months

**WHEN TO GO?**
High season: Dec-Feb

Low season: May-Oct

**BUDGET?**
US$20-25 per day

From **Bangkok** (p688) drop south to Phuket, home to the **Phuket Gibbon Rehabilitation Centre** (p795), where volunteers and visitor donations help reintroduce captive gibbons into the wild. Head to **Kuala Lumpur** (p422) and catch a flight to Kuching in Malaysian Borneo for the **Rainforest World Music Festival** (p496), which celebrates traditional Borneo culture. Or fly to **Medan** (p259) and bump up to the jungle village of **Bukit Lawang** (p262), where red-haired orang-utans live among the trees.

If you're committed to mainland Southeast Asia, fly to **Vientiane** (p351) from Bangkok and stop by Vang Vieng, where the **Phoudindaeng Organic Farm** (p365) uses extra hands for community development. Then head north to **Luang Nam Tha** (p385) and **Muang Sing** (p387), the base camps for trekking programmes that follow ecosustainable practices.

While touring Cambodia, you can eat, drink and get a massage all in the name of charity. **Phnom Penh** (p76) and **Siem Reap** (p87) both have restaurants and bars that support good causes. Break up a sunbathing session in Sihanoukville by making a donation to **Sala Santepheap** (p106), a goodwill project run by the Starfish Project.

While in Nha Trang, spend your beer dong at **Crazy Kim Bar** (p872), which uses its proceeds to fund an English-language classroom for street kids. Near the former demilitarized zone, Quang Tri province is home to **PeaceTrees** (p853), an NGO working to remove unexploded ordinances from the countryside; it maintains a mines-education museum and has planted trees in areas where mines have been cleared.

**Weave a few simple do-gooder deeds into a tour of the region: visit a wildlife rehabilitation centre, undertake a volunteering stint, or support a charitable business. These are some ideas along the trail.**




# GETTING STARTED

## WHEN TO GO

Southeast Asia is always hot and humid. The mainland countries (Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam) tend to share similar weather patterns, enjoying a 'cool' season from roughly December to February (peak months for tourism) and a 'hot' season from March to May. The monsoons last from June to October, bringing sudden torrential downpours for an hour or two every day, which are followed just as suddenly by sunshine. In Cambodia and Laos, travel can be disrupted by flooded roads during the monsoon season, but otherwise the rains bring a predictable relief from the heat.

See p916 for more climate information.

Along the Malay peninsula, two monsoons strike: from November to February, the east coast gets all the action; from May to October, the west coast gets soaked. Alternating between the coasts will relieve the drawbacks of inclement weather. The duration of monsoon season varies from year to year.

Indonesia also gets two monsoons; the best time to visit is from May to September. The rains start in September in Sumatra and head east, arriving in East Timor around November or December. April to June is the best time to visit East Timor.

The wet and dry seasons vary within the Philippines but, by and large, January and February are dry months. Typhoons can hit both the Philippines and Vietnam between June and October.

There are, of course, regional variations within each country; these are detailed in the respective country chapters' Climate sections.

Large festivals are also factors in plotting an arrival date. Check Festivals & Events in the country chapters for upcoming events that might attract or impede a visit. Businesses tend to close during Muslim Ramadan and Chinese New Year, and everyone goes water-gun crazy during the Thai, Lao and Cambodian New Year in April.

## COSTS & MONEY

**HOW MUCH?**
Bottle of beer US$1.50-3
Bottled water US$1
Bus ticket US$5-12
Food-stall meal US$1-2
Guesthouse bed US$5-12
Internet access US$1-2
Restaurant meal US$5-12
Taxi ride US$3.50-8

Western currencies enjoy a favourable exchange rate with many of the Southeast Asian currencies. If you travel and eat like a local, your daily budget might be a positively emaciated US$20 to US$30 a day.

Even if you are strapped for cash, remember to keep prices in perspective. Compared to the average worker in Southeast Asia, your pathetic bank account is the equivalent of a robber baron's. Many of the locals have never left their hometowns, much less travelled to a foreign country. Granted, the 'walking ATM' (everyone wants a withdrawal) treatment is frustrating and offensive, but there is no quicker route to a bad time than to get paranoid about being ripped off. Be a smart shopper, but realise that even in developing countries US$1 doesn't buy everything.

For more information on local currency and exchange rates, see p920 or Money in the individual country directories.

## LIFE ON THE ROAD

Southeast Asia is loud, no doubt about it. The roosters have been crowing all night, the screaming motorcycles have been doing circles around your bed and the guttural call to prayers seems to emanate from next door.

It isn't even noon yet and the temperature has already reached boiling point. You climb off the rock-hard mattress and head down to the shared toilet at the end of the hall. The mirror is too short, the sink is too low

**SOUTHEAST ASIA PLANNING CHECKLIST**

### Where to Start

Try the internet for inspiration and information.

**Central Intelligence Agency – The World Factbook** (https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html) Know the basic stats by searching the CIA world factbook.

**Lonely Planet** (http://lonelyplanet.mytripjournal.com) Set up your trip blog.

### What to Take

Here's a challenge: reduce the size of your pack to fit in an aircraft overhead locker. The reward: the less junk in your trunk, the less of a target you are for touts and con artists.

**Cash and credit cards** Some small US dollar bills will be useful in places where ATM access is limited. Make sure the bills are crisp and clean as some banks, especially in Indonesia, can be fickle. Take both a Visa and a MasterCard credit card in case merchants only accept one brand.

**Clothes** Bring lightweight, light-coloured, breathable clothes; leave the denim at home. Pack silk long johns and a fleece for cool climates, and remember your rain gear. Line your pack with a plastic bag to keep the contents dry.

**Earplugs** An indispensable friend for sleeping through your neighbours' drunken fight or the zealous rooster's predawn alert.

**Medicine** A first-aid kit and any speciality medicines from home. Most large cities have pharmacies and clinics with English-speaking staff. See p935 for advice on stocking a first-aid kit.

**Odds and ends** Sewing kit, candles, padlock, Swiss army knife, money belt, safety pins, toilet paper, universal sink plug, small torch (flashlight), travel adaptor.

**Photocopies of important documents** Definitely photocopy your passport, tickets, travellers-cheque serial numbers, and credit and ATM cards, and pack the copies separately from the originals. Leave a copy at home with a friend, just in case.

**Repellent** A heavy-duty number is good for sweet-tasting travellers.

**Speciality gear** If you plan to do serious (not occasional) camping, trekking or climbing, you should bring the equipment with you from home. Otherwise you can hire items of mediocre quality at your destination.

**USB drive** Allows you to store photos and files. By storing a portable web browser on the drive, you can protect your password at public machines.

### What to Get There

In the large cities, you can buy every imaginable Western product, as well as medicines and the following useful products:

**Mosquito coils** These coils are lit and placed at your feet to discourage a mossie feast; available at markets.

**Talcum Powder** Does wonders for heat rash and keeps you and your clothes smelling pretty; available at markets and pharmacies.

**Sarong** Can be used as a towel, mosquito net, sheet, head gear and general backpacker fashion; available at markets.

**Surgical masks** These masks prevent the region's dust- and pollution-induced smoker's cough; available at various shops.

**Tiger balm** This all-purpose salve relieves headaches, soothes mosquito bites and acts as a bug repellent; available at pharmacies.

and the whole room needs to be sprayed down with bleach. Now it's time for a shower (cold water for this penny-pincher), a powdering (keeps you cool and sweet smelling) and a desperate search for clean clothes.

Today is the day you pack up and move to the next town. Arriving at the destination station, the bus is flanked by touts all thirsty for your business. You haggle the price, which is always inflated due to an informal 'I'm new in town' tax. The first guesthouse you visit has a shady yard with chickens scratching around in the dirt but the room is dank and noisy, so you thank the testy desk clerk and set off down the road. You use your budget senses to sniff out the best score in town, and in a



**TOP 10 TIPS TO STAY ON A BUDGET**

- Always ask the price before agreeing to any services.
- Buy souvenirs from craft villages rather than from tourist shops.
- Eat and drink at food stalls and markets.
- Go outside the tourist district to buy odds and ends.
- If travelling solo, team up with a fellow traveller to save on room costs.
- Keep a daily diary of expenses.
- Leave expensive electronics and jewellery at home, so you aren't advertising deep pockets.
- Pack light so you can walk into town from the train or bus station.
- Travel in the low season.
- Take overnight buses to save on room costs.

few hours you're camped out in the shade with a steamy bowl of noodles and a sweaty bottle of beer. Beats the wage-slave life.

The empty seat beside you is soon filled by a curious local who wants to practice his English. He asks you all the usual Southeast Asia interrogation questions: where do you come from? How old are you? Are you married? With those formalities out of the way, this stranger and you are now the dearest of friends, according to local conventions, and you might pose for a picture with him before either parting ways or joining him for a night of karaoke. Yes, Southeast Asia is loud – but it's friendly.

## CONDUCT

You have an extraordinary responsibility upon arriving in Southeast Asia: you're an ambassador for your own country, as well as for the whole Western world. You can either charm the flip-flops off the locals, which is easy to do in these laid-back cultures, or you can leave behind a sour taste.

So few travellers make an effort to speak the local language or adhere to social customs that the smallest attempts are usually rewarded with genuine appreciation and kindness. Learn how to say 'thank you', 'hello' and 'delicious' in every country you visit. Remember to smile – it expresses tons of emotions.

Dress modestly, covering yourself from the shoulders to the knees; this is the number-one way to communicate genuine gratitude to your host country. But it's so hot, you might whine. What's funny about this argument is that walking in the shade is a better sun deflector than showing your belly. Women who dare to wear more will help promote a healthier image of all Western women abroad; topless sunbathing is also a no-no. For men, resist the inexplicable urge to strut around without a shirt.

In Southeast Asia, the feet are the cesspool of the body and the head is the temple. Treat the rules of proper foot etiquette like an exotic dance without a partner. Feet for the most part should stay on the ground, not on chairs, tables or bags. Showing someone the bottom of your foot expresses the same insult as flipping them your middle finger. Remove your shoes when entering a home. Don't point your feet towards sacred images or people, and follow the locals' lead in sitting in a temple or mosque.

Women aren't allowed to come into contact with monks; this means women can't sit or stand next to them on the bus, pass anything directly to them or touch their belongings. Most mosques have rules about where women can be and how they should be dressed.

**WHOOPS!**
***China Williams***

I've mastered walking and talking and even chewing gum at the same time, but walking and checking maps is another matter. With my nose in a map, I've bruised both my body and my pride. I've fallen into holes in the footpath and tripped over stray metal pipes, causing a passing motorcyclist to laugh and point.

**TOP 10 WAYS TO LOOK LIKE A SOUTHEAST ASIAN VETERAN**

- Never bump your head climbing into and out of local transport trucks.
- Sniff out an internet connection in the remotest town.
- Use mosquito repellent as deodorant.
- Forsake proper English grammar for local pidgin.
- Walk through a pack of stray dogs without flinching.
- Sleep through all-night karaoke parties.
- Squat bomber style on Western toilets.
- Sit down to a banana pancake breakfast and reach for the fish sauce.
- Be able to recount more than one 'I almost died' story.
- Pose for group photos with complete strangers.

For more guidance on how to avoid being a sore-thumb tourist, see p4 and the Culture in country chapters throughout this guidebook.

Some dos and don'ts to remember:

- Ask before taking someone's photograph.
- Bring a gift when visiting someone's home.
- Remove your shoes before entering a home or religious building.
- Don't engage in public displays of affection.
- Don't touch people on the head; this is considered rude in Buddhist countries.
- Don't use your left hand for eating or shaking hands; in many Asian countries, the left hand is used for toilet business.

# Snapshots

## CURRENT EVENTS

Southeast Asia has played a quieter role on the world stage since its tragic appearance in international headlines after the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami. But the regional news has been full of high drama.

Elections and the lack thereof were a running theme in the region. After 29 years of guerrilla war, the Indonesian province of Aceh and the central government in Jakarta forged a peace agreement that resulted in a provincial gubernatorial election in 2006, marking an unprecedented level of provincial sovereignty in the country's federalist system.

Fewer people were killed in the Philippines' most recent election than in years past, but observers note that the relative peace is hardly a sign that democracy has been released from Mafia-style attacks on opposition leaders.

Vietnam has made ceremonial gestures towards democracy by allowing 'independent' candidates (hand-picked by the Communist Party) to run for vacant National Assembly seats. The communist country continues to dismantle the curtain of isolation; in early 2007 it became the 150th country to join the World Trade Organization.

*Asia Times* (www.atimes.com) has informative news essays and reporting that covers the region.

Meanwhile, Thailand's military kicked out its democratically elected government in 2006 after months of street protests against the prime minister; this was followed by the dissolution of the Parliament, and hastily arranged and later aborted elections. It's been a whirlwind political year for the kingdom, which is now run by a military-appointed government. In August 2007, the Thai public voted to adopt a new constitution.

The military junta in Myanmar (Burma) has built its wall of isolation ever higher by quietly moving the national capital to a purpose-built city located some 390km away from the scrutiny of international diplomats in Yangon (Rangoon). The government is also collaborating with Russia to design a nuclear facility, and it continues to attack ethnic minorities, creating a humanitarian crisis that looks like ethnic cleansing.

The birth of East Timor as a nation in 2002 was difficult, and the ensuing years have been full of growing pains. Various factions are manoeuvring for power in the nascent democracy, leading to widespread riots in 2006 and internal population displacement. However, national elections in 2007 were more peaceful than most observers could have hoped.

In Cambodia, courts have been hammering out the details of a tribunal that will prosecute 10 surviving leaders of the Khmer Rouge. It is widely believed that the trials have been delayed in part because members of the current government had ties to the Khmer Rouge.

Outbreaks of avian influenza (bird flu) have continued to affect commercially raised flocks, and humans in close contact with infected birds throughout Southeast Asia. The World Health Organization is concerned that the virus will mutate in such a way as to be spread from one human to another, creating a pandemic. At present, experts believe that the greatest danger of a pandemic resides in Indonesia, where there is concern that the low compensation for culling an infected flock acts as a disincentive to reporting. See p937 for more information on bird flu.

The region, especially the sleepier corners, is changing fast – and the bringer of modernity is China, not the Western nations. Chinese-funded highways (see boxed text, above), and hydroelectric dams in Laos and

### SOUTHEAST ASIA'S AUTOBAHN

Say goodbye to the bumpy and sweaty overland journey through Southeast Asia. Backed primarily by China and Japan, two regional highways – currently in various states of completion – will fuse interior areas of mainland Southeast Asia with the Pacific Ocean, facilitating trade with East Asia and the emergence of a modern intraregional transport system through areas that once were frontiers or were used by guerrilla armies and smugglers. The first route to be completed in this asphalt revolution is an east–west corridor that links Da Nang (Vietnam) to Savannakhet (Laos) and crosses the Mekong River to Mukdahan (Thailand). The road will eventually continue on to Mawlamyine in southern Myanmar. The north–south corridor will run from Kunming, China, through Laos and on to Bangkok, and is expected to boost expanding Chinese influence and trade in the region.

Cambodia are transforming these dusty outposts into energy producers and commercial crossroads. What will former Indochina look like with the commercial backing of China? You'll have to come back in five years to see.

## HISTORY

### Early Kingdoms

The mainland Southeast Asia countries owe much of their early historical happenings to the more dominant kingdoms in China and India. As early as 150 BC, China and India interacted with the scattered Southeast Asian communities for trade and tribute. Vietnam, within short reach of China, was a subject, student and reluctant offspring of its more powerful neighbour for over 1000 years. India, on the other hand, conquered through the heart, spreading Hinduism, Buddhism and later Islam across the region, and influencing art and architecture.

An easily digestible survey, *A History of South-East Asia* by DGE Hall sketches the early and not-so-distant history of Southeast Asia.

Several highly organised states emerged in the region as a result of contact with India. During the 7th to 9th centuries AD, the Srivijaya empire controlled all shipping through the Java Sea from its capital at Palembang in southeast Sumatra. The Srivijaya capital was also a religious centre for Mahayana Buddhism (Greater Vehicle Buddhism; see p38) and attracted scholars as well as merchants.

But the region's most famous fallen empire emerged in the interior of present-day Cambodia. The Khmer empire ruled the land for four centuries, consuming territory and labour to build unparalleled and enduring Hindu-Buddhist monuments to its god-kings. Eventually the Khmer empire included most of what is now Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. Its economy was based on agriculture, and a sophisticated irrigation system cultivated vast tracts of land around Tonlé Sap (Great Lake). Attacks from emerging city-states in the Thai frontier contributed to the decline of the empire and the abandonment of the Angkor capital.

## TIMELINE

**2800BC:** Ancestors of modern Southeast Asians begin to migrate south from China

**1025:** Srivijaya empire is toppled by the Chola kingdom of South India

**1565:** Spain establishes Cebu and later invades Manila

**1819:** Singapore is founded by British official Thomas Stamford Raffles

**1862:** France occupies Vietnam

**1946:** The Philippines wins independence

**1949:** Indonesia wins independence

2800BC | 0 AD | 700 | 850 | 900 | 1025 | 1400 | 1500 | 1565 | 1600 | 1650 AD | 1700 | 1750 | 1820 | 1860 | 1898 | 1914 | 1920 | 1930 | 1940 | 1945 | 1946 | 1948 | 1949

**Beginning Of Time:**

**AD 700:** Srivijaya empire emerges in present-day Malaysia and Indonesia, and later prospers from the India–China shipping trade

**AD 802–50:** King Jayavarman consolidates the Khmer empire in present-day Cambodia and Thailand

**1511:** Melaka falls to the Portuguese

**1824:** Britain invades Myanmar (Burma), capturing the capital, Yangon (Rangoon)

**1898:** The USA annexes the Philippines in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War

**1939–45:** WWII; Japan occupies much of Southeast Asia

**1948:** Myanmar wins independence



### The Classical Period, Arrival of Europeans & Imperialism

As the larger powers withered, Southeast Asia entered an age of cultural definition and international influence. Regional kingdoms created distinctive works of art and literature, and joined the international sphere as important ports. The Thais, with their capital first in Sukhothai (1219) and later in Ayuthaya (1350), expanded into the realm of the dying Khmer empire and exerted control over parts of Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar. Starting around 1331, the Hindu kingdom of Majapahit united the Indonesian archipelago from Sumatra to New Guinea and dominated the age-old trade routes between India and China. The kingdom's reign continued until the advent of Islamic kingdoms and the emergence of the port town of Melaka on the Malay peninsula in 1402. Melaka's prosperity soon attracted European interest, and it fell first to the Portuguese in 1511, then the Dutch and finally the English.

Comprehensive and thoughtful, *The Emergence of Modern Southeast Asia: A New History*, by Norman Owen et al, examines colonialism and globalisation in recent times.

At first the European nations were only interested in controlling shipping in the region, usually brokering agreements and alliances with local authorities. Centred on Java and Sumatra, the Dutch monopolised European commerce with Asia for 200 years. The Spanish, French and later the English had 'civilisation' and proselytizing on their minds. Spain occupied the loosely related tribes of the Philippine archipelago. Britain steadily rolled through India, Myanmar and the Malay peninsula. The Dutch grasped Indonesia to cement a presence in the region. And France, with a foothold in Vietnam, usurped Cambodia and Laos, formerly territories of the Thai kingdom, to form Indochina.

Although its sphere of influence was diminished, Thailand was the only Southeast Asian nation to remain independent. One reason for this was that England and France agreed to leave Thailand as a 'buffer' between their two colonies. Credit is also frequently given to the Thai kings who Westernised the country and played competing European powers against each other.

### Independence & the Modern Day

The 20th century and WWII signalled an end to European domination in Southeast Asia. As European power receded to its own shores during the war, the Japanese expanded their control throughout the region, invading Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia. After the war, the power vacuums in formerly colonised countries provided leverage for a regionwide independence movement. Vietnam and Indonesia clamoured most violently for freedom, resulting in long-term wars with their respective colonial powers. For the latter half of the 20th century, Vietnam fought almost uninterrupted conflicts against foreign powers. After the French were defeated by communist nationals, Vietnam faced another enemy, the USA, which hoped to 'contain' the spread of communism within the region. Cambodia's civil war ended in one of the worst nightmares of modern times, with the ascension of the Khmer

Edward Gargan, a former draft dodger, visits the former battlefield countries some 30 years later in his book *The River's Tale: A Year on the Mekong*.

### PIRATES OF THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

Pirates still sail the high seas – and not just in children's books or movie franchises. In the shipping corridor of the Strait of Melaka, the gateway to the South China Sea, the sabres and cutlasses of yore have been replaced with machine guns but the unsavoury hijacking of booty and even vessels remains true to the old tales. Modern-day pirates, many of whom are Indonesian, use speedboats to sneak up on hulking container ships and oil tankers en route to and from Singapore or Hong Kong. Armed robbery in the South China Sea spiked after the Asian currency crisis in 1997, but 10 years of increased policing of the waters, as well as the emergence of more-legitimate economic opportunities has seen the number of piracy incidents decrease in the last few years.

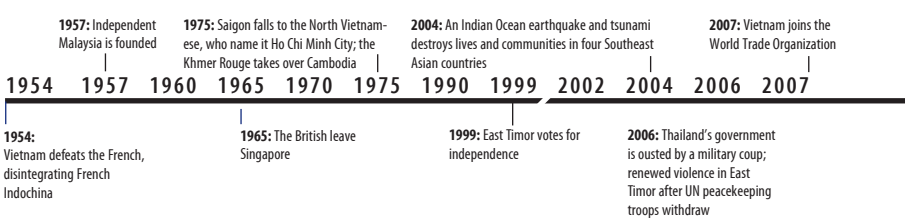
Rouge. The revolutionary army evacuated the cities, separated families into labour camps and closed the country off from the rest of the world. An estimated 1.7 million people were killed by the regime during its brief four-year term (1975–79).

Many of the newly liberated countries struggled to unite a land mass that shared only a colonial legacy. Dictatorships in Myanmar, Indonesia and the Philippines thwarted the populace's hopes for representative governments and civil liberties. Civilian rioters, minority insurgents and communist guerrillas further provoked the unstable governments, and the internal chaos was usually agitated by the major superpowers: China, the Soviet Union and the USA.

Brunei has no income tax but provides free health care to its citizens.

With the thawing of the Cold War, several raging national economies in the 1990s, and the onset of the new millennium, Southeast Asia enjoyed renewed stability and vitality. Singapore has become the shining star of the region, while Thailand and Malaysia boast decades of stable governments and an affluent, educated middle class. Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia have opened themselves to foreign trade, regional cooperation and tourism. Vietnam is racing through the milestones of development with almost unprecedented speed, boosted by a new generation of young people flush with disposable income and untouched by the war with the USA. Laos and Cambodia are plodding more slowly; infrastructure is improving gradually, but feudal divisions and corruption are thwarting the proliferation of a middle class. Only Myanmar remains cloistered today. Indonesia and the Philippines rode the first wave of postcolonial development, but have since stalled with the attendant industrialized problems of unemployment and urban pollution.

Democratically elected governments continue to experience yo-yo status, but armed conflicts appeared trivial after the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami that claimed lives and livelihoods. With the help of international aid, the region proved its tenacity by almost completely rebuilding and recovering in just three years.






## THE CULTURE

The most remarkable and unifying aspect of the diverse Southeast Asian societies is the importance placed on acting in a group rather than following the Western ideal of independence and self-determination. Social harmony is ensured by the concept of 'face' – that is, avoiding embarrassing yourself or others. This is translated into everyday life by not showing anger or frustration and by avoiding serious debates that could cause offence. When the bus breaks down, the passengers calmly file out into the sun and wait for the repairs without causing a scene – in this way an undercurrent of peace is brought to a chaotic situation.

Thais celebrate three New Year's festivals.

See the Culture sections in country chapters in this book for notes on each country's culture and lifestyle.

### Lifestyle

The setting may vary vastly – from the hulking megacities of Bangkok and Jakarta to rural villages in Laos – but Southeast Asia moves through time with the underlying architecture of an agricultural village, no matter how big or small the town or how distant the rice fields. Families tend to stick together, pitching in to run the family noodle shop or helping Grandma do her market shopping. Because of the tropical temperature, most family life spreads out into the public space, replacing a sense of privacy with community. Babies get lots of group mothering, neighbours do lots of gossiping and possessions are often shared or pooled, depending on the affluence of the community. In addition to blood, religion binds the society and the family with daily obligations of prayers in Muslim communities or spirit offerings in Buddhist countries.

In the villages, life revolves around the harvest, a calendar set by the rains, the sun and the moon. In these old-fashioned corners, the food markets and the mosque or temple are the 'happening' parts of town.

More and more, the trappings of a modern and decidedly Western world are moving in and replacing the open-air markets and providing the new middle class with new things to consume. In the cities of Thailand, Vietnam and Malaysia, the young dare to be different to their parents by adopting the latest fashions, texting their friends and scooting around town till all hours of the night. These countries are becoming transient, with the young people leaving the villages for a job in the city. Their children may grow up separated from the rhythms of an agrarian society, feeling more comfortable in a shopping mall than a rice field. Comfortably entrenched in a middle-class world, Singaporeans often 'visit' the village, yearning to reconnect with a romantic version of the past.

One of the most diverse nations on the planet, Indonesia comprises approximately 300 ethnic groups that speak some 365 languages and dialects.

### Population

Each country in Southeast Asia has a dominant ruling class, typically the national ethnicity. It is believed that many of the mainland Southeast Asian peoples are descendants of Austronesian, Tai and Mon-Khmer peoples who migrated south from China. Countries with a high percentage of homogeneity include Vietnam, Cambodia, Brunei, Thailand and Singapore. More demographically diverse countries include Myanmar, the Philippines, Indonesia and East Timor, which doesn't have a majority ethnicity.

Many of the Southeast Asian countries share varying percentages of minority groups in isolated pockets or cultural islands. Regarded as the Jews of Asia, ethnic Chinese filtered into the region as merchants and labourers, establishing distinct neighbourhoods within their host communities. Every small town has a Chinatown, typically in the business district. In places such as Malaysia and Singapore, the Chinese diaspora

**TENDER TOURISM**

Tourism provides much-needed income to the region but it is an economic machine that should operate with delicacy and empathy to preserve and respect the host country's culture and integrity.

**Customs & Culture**

Become a cultural chameleon, not just a travelling consumer. Learn, appreciate and adopt, if possible, the local ways, etiquette and values.

**Tourist Economy**

Independent travel empowers family-run businesses. Carry on the 'backpacker' tradition by staying in guesthouses or locally owned hotels, eating at food stalls and travelling on local transport.

**Charitable Acts**

The disparity between rich and poor in Southeast Asia often ignites a charitable spirit that might have been dormant in your home country. But sharing your wealth and privilege in a constructive way can be tricky. Throughout this book, we recommend organisations that are lending a helping hand to struggling communities. In many cases, all you need to give is your time, a small donation or commercial patronage.

has morphed into a distinct entity, frequently termed Straits Chinese, which has merged Chinese and Malay customs, most notably in the kitchen and in conversation. While most countries derive cultural and commercial strength from Chinese immigrants, in times of economic hardship, ethnic Chinese are frequently targets of abuse because of their prosperity; this is especially the case in Malaysia and Indonesia. Ethnic Indians from the southern provinces of Tamil Nadu have also settled along the Malay peninsula and remain a distinct group.

High up in the mountains that run through Myanmar, Laos, northern Thailand and Vietnam, a diverse mix of minority groups, collectively referred to as hill tribes, maintain prehistoric traditions and wear elaborate tribal costumes. Believed to have migrated from the Himalayas or southern China, hill-tribe communities such as the Akha, Karen and Mon, thanks to the geography, have been relatively isolated from foreign influences. They were considered a nuisance by lowland governments until hill-tribe trekking became a widespread tourist attraction. Myanmar represents the largest concentration of hill tribes. In the outer areas of Indonesia, such as Kalimantan, Papua, Sulawesi and Sumba, indigenous people practise customs that have entered the global imagination through the pages of *National Geographic*.

## Food

*Hot Sour Salty Sweet: A Culinary Journey Through Southeast Asia* by Jeffrey Alford samples the four pillars of the cuisine of the Mekong area.

Southeast Asia's tropical climate creates a year-round bounty. Rice and fish are the primary staples in the region, and are often revered in various harvest festivals and local legends. A penchant for chillies is another Southeast Asian hallmark, with almost every cultural cuisine claiming a variation on a chilli condiment, including *sambal* in Indonesia and Malaysia, and *naam phrik* in Thailand.

Traces of Southeast Asia's cultural parents – India and China – can be detected in the individual nations' cuisines. Myanmar is the best example of this marriage; many of its Indian-inspired curries are more like stews, and some are even served over egg noodles, a Chinese invention, rather than the common staple of rice. Thai, Indonesian and Malay curries have been adapted from that of their Indian predecessor with regional flourishes, while Malaysia has incorporated roti, an Indian flat bread, into its cuisine. The Chinese donated noodle soups, which have assumed various



aliases: laksa in Malaysia and Singapore, *pho* in Vietnam or *kŭaytĭaw* in Thailand. Noodle soups are the quintessential comfort food, eaten in the morning, after a night carousing or at midday when pressed for time. In most Southeast Asian countries, chopsticks are used only for this dish. Culinary imports also came from the French, who imparted a taste for crusty baguettes and thick coffees in former Indochina.

Vietnam has perfected the cuisine of its culinary professor. Where Chinese food can be bland and oily, Vietnamese dishes are light and refreshing. A quintessential Vietnamese dish is the spring rolls stuffed with shrimp, mint, basil leaves and cucumbers that are sold at roadside stands.

Eat your way through these Southeast Asian foodie blogs: Real Thai (http://realthai.blogspot.com), Phnomenon (www.phnomenon.com), Babe in the City - KL (http://babeinthecitykl.blogspot.com) and Sticky Rice (http://stickyrice.typepad.com) .

Thailand and Laos share many common dishes, often competing for the honour of spiciest cuisine. Green papaya salad is a mainstay of the two – the Thais like theirs with peanuts and dried shrimp; the Lao version uses fermented fish sauce and inland crab. In Laos and in neighbouring Thai provinces, the local people eat 'sticky rice' (a shorter grain than the standard fluffy white rice), which is eaten with the hands and usually rolled into balls and dipped into spicy sauces.

As dictated by the strictures of Islam, Muslim communities in Malaysia and Indonesia don't eat pork. Indonesians traditionally eat with their fingers – hence the rice is a little stickier than in mainland Southeast Asia. Perfecting the delicate shovelling motion is a true traveller accomplishment.

Filipino cooking is a mixture of Malay, Spanish and Chinese influences blended with typical Filipino exuberance. *Adobo,* a Spanish-inspired stew with local modifications, has come to symbolise Filipino cuisine.

In a postcolonial age, Singapore displays its position as a cosmopolitan crossroads with its development of Pacific Rim fusion cuisine.

## Art

Southeast Asia's most notable artistic endeavours are religious in nature, and distinctively depict the deities of Hinduism and Buddhism.

Bangkok, Singapore and Jakarta all host international film festivals that also allow local directors to showcase their cinematic creations.

Both an artistic and architectural wonder, the temples of Angkor in Cambodia defined much of the region's artistic interpretation of these religions. Hindu temples include elaborate sculptured murals that pay homage to the Hindu gods Brahma (represented as a four-headed, four-armed figure) and Shiva (styled either in an embrace with his consort or as an ascetic), while also recording historical events and creation myths. Many of the temples were later altered to include images of Buddha after the kingdom converted to Buddhism.

Statues of Buddha reflect the individual countries' artistic interpretations of an art form governed by highly symbolic strictures. Across mainland Southeast Asia, the Buddha is depicted sitting, standing and reclining – all representations of moments in his life that act as visual parables or sermons. In Vietnam, representations of the Buddha are more reminiscent of Chinese religious art. *Naga* (mythical serpent-beings) are found decorating many temple railings in the region; they represent the life-giving power of water.

In Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines, Islamic art and architecture intermingle with Hindu and animist traditions. Every town in Malaysia has a grand fortressed mosque with an Arabic minaret and Moorish tile work. Indonesia is also home to Borobudur, a Buddhist monument that complements the temples of Angkor in religious splendour.

The literary epic of the Ramayana serves as cultural fodder for traditional art, dance and shadow puppetry throughout the region. In this fantastic tale, Prince Rama (an incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu) falls in love with beautiful Sita and wins her hand in marriage by completing the challenge of stringing a magic bow. Before the couple can live in peace, Rama is banished

from his kingdom and his wife is kidnapped by Ravana. With the help of the monkey king, Hanuman, Sita is rescued, but a great battle ensues. Rama and his allies defeat Ravana and restore peace and goodness to the land.

# ENVIRONMENT

## The Land

Diverse and fertile, this tropical landmass spans the easternmost range of the Himalayas, which reaches through northern Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam; the rich flood plains of the mighty Mekong River; and the scattered archipelagos of Indonesia and the Philippines, made by crashing tectonic plates and exploding volcanoes.

Singapore contains a patch of primary rainforest in its urban core.

Indonesia and the Philippines, the world's largest island chains, together contain more than 20,000 islands, some of them uninhabited. The Philippines has 11 active volcanoes; Indonesia has at least 120. While the fiery exhausts destroy homes and forests, the ashen remains of the earth's inner core creates fertile farmland.

More regulative than the seasonal temperature is the seasonal deposit of rain. When the rains come, the rivers transform from smooth mirrors to watery bulldozers sweeping towards the sea. In the rainy season, the dry deciduous forests that occupy central mainland Southeast Asia spring to life. The tropical rainforests of the Malay peninsula, Sumatra and Borneo get two monsoon seasons, and like sponges they soak up the moisture to feed their dense canopy and limblike tendrils.

Monsoon forests occur in regions with a dry season of at least three months; most trees are deciduous, shedding their leaves in an attempt to conserve water. Rainforests occur in areas where rain falls more than nine months a year.

Living as a parasite in the thick jungles, the leafless plant rafflesia sprouts what looks like a cabbage head, which opens some nine months later to reveal one of the world's largest flowers – and an unrivalled putrid scent. Other plant species include a huge variety of bamboo and orchids. One of the region's most famous exports, teak, grows in the monsoon forests of Myanmar.

Much of the landmass of Southeast Asia is covered with a thick layer of limestone, the erosion of which yields distinctive limestone towers known as karsts. Fine examples can be found in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam.

Coastal areas of Southeast Asia are famous around the world for their blonde sandy beaches and protective barriers of coral reefs. Part of the region's coastline is protected by the Gulf of Thailand, a shallow body of water taming the hulking mass of the greater ocean. But the real power of the sea can be felt in Indonesia, where the Indian Ocean hammers at the landmass, creating barrel waves and destructive walls of water. The land's primary defence against ocean invasions is the mangrove forest or dune forests, which grow along the high-tide line, and consist of palms, hibiscus, casuarinas and other tree varieties that can withstand high winds and waves.

## Wildlife

Tigers, elephants, monkeys, and Sumatran and Javan rhinoceroses once reigned over the region's forests. Today, these animals are facing extinction due to habitat loss and poaching. Of the 'celebrity' species, monkeys and, to a lesser extent, elephants are the forest dwellers visitors are most likely to meet, although most encounters are in domesticated settings. Found in Sumatra and Kalimantan, the orang-utan is the only great ape species outside of Africa.

There are numerous bird species in Southeast Asia: Indonesia's Papua alone has more than 600 species; Thailand has more than 1000, making up an estimated 10% of the world's total. Parts of Southeast Asia are flyover zones for migratory species, and their arrival often heralds the approach of the monsoons. The Borneo rainforests boast a stunning array of birdlife, from the turkey-sized hornbill, represented in local mythology and art, to ground-dwelling pheasants, prized by ancient Chinese traders for their plumage. Many parts of the Indonesian jungle are so thick and remote that scientists have yet to explore and catalogue the resident flora and fauna.

Some species of tropical reptiles have successfully adapted to living in the human environment. The ubiquitous geckos have adopted human habitats as their hunting grounds; they are frequently spotted catching bugs around fluorescent lights. The shy tookay is more frequently heard than seen: in rural areas the lizard croaks its name again and again, and the number of recitations has prophetic significance to the local people. Perhaps the star of the Southeast Asian animal theatre is the Komodo dragon, the world's largest lizard, which is found only on the Indonesian island of Komodo and a few neighbouring islands. The monitor lizard, a smaller cousin of the Komodo dragon, hangs out in the cool shade of the Malaysian jungles.

## National Parks

In recent years there has been a huge increase in the amount of land set aside across Southeast Asia as national parks and wildlife sanctuaries, but these protected areas are often undermined by commercial logging interests and inadequate funding for conservation enforcement.

Thailand leads the way with an astonishing 13% of land and sea under protection, one of the world's highest ratios (compare this figure with France at 4.2% and the USA at 10.5%). Indonesia and Malaysia also boast fairly extensive national park systems. Laos remains one of the most environmentally undisturbed countries in the region, in part because of its lack of development and resource extraction, and low population density.

Southeast Asia's national parks play an ever increasing role in the region's tourism industry. Some parks are relatively undisturbed with little infrastructure, but in parks such as Thailand's marine islands, development and profit outstrip environmental protection.

## Environmental Issues

Environmental degradation is immediately tangible in Southeast Asia: smoke fills the air as the forests are cleared for more beach bungalows or small-scale farms; major cities are choked with smog and pollution; the waterways are clogged with plastic bags and soft-drink cans; and raw sewage is dumped into turquoise waters. Southeast Asia also faces huge challenges from its growing population and increased energy consumption; projections estimate that, at the current pace, Southeast Asia's total carbon-dioxide emissions will increase fourfold by 2030.

More shipping passes through the Strait of Melaka than the Panama Canal and Suez Canal combined.

### LAND

The last half of the 20th century saw massive deforestation in Southeast Asia through logging and slash-and-burn agriculture. Indonesia, which contains 10% of the world's remaining tropical forests, is estimated to be losing up to 3 million hectares of forest per year. Forests in all of the Southeast Asian countries are disappearing at similarly alarming rates, earning the region the dubious title of a 'hot spot' for deforestation.

Habitat loss and poaching take a huge toll on Southeast Asia's biodiversity. As in other parts of the world, large mammals – including tigers, elephants and orang-utans – are the most visible and often the most critically endangered species. The number of plant species lost is probably higher, but precise figures are unavailable because science has yet to catalogue all that the forests have to offer.

lonelyplanet.com



### WATER

Southeast Asia's coral reefs are regarded as the world's most diverse, holding more than 600 species of coral. However, increased coastal activity and global temperature changes mean scientists are concerned that the majority of the region's reefs are in danger of extinction.

The major culprits include runoff from rampant coastal development, dumping of untreated sewage, damage by fishing nets and anchors, and dynamite and cyanide fishing. Careless divers are also fingered for stepping on, and in turn destroying, coral formations. In recent years, some of the governments of Southeast Asia have made efforts to preserve their reefs by establishing marine parks and other protected zones; however, enforcement is spotty at best.

Mangrove forests along the coasts have also suffered. Countries such as the Philippines, Thailand and Cambodia have each been losing approximately 2000 sq km of mangrove forest per year. Much of this forest is being cleared for prawn farming and tourism development, but pollution also plays a role.

As the region continues to urbanize, the pressures on the environment will grow – indeed, the pace of building commercial enterprises often exceeds municipal infrastructure such as sewage treatment and garbage removal.

## RELIGION

The dominant religions of Southeast Asia have absorbed many of the traditional animistic beliefs of spirits, ancestor worship and the power of the celestial planets in bringing about good fortune. Southeast Asia's spiritual connection to the realm of magic and miracles commands more respect, even among intellectual circles, than the remnants of paganism in Western Christianity: Thais erect spirit houses in front of their homes, ethnic Chinese set out daily offerings to their ancestors, and Indonesians offer prayers to the volcano spirits.

Master storyteller VS Naipaul profiles the devout of Malaysia and Indonesia in *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions among the Converted Peoples.*

### Buddhism

The sedate smile of the Buddhist statues decorating the landscapes and temples reflects the nature of the religion in Southeast Asia. Religious devotion within the Buddhist countries is highly individualistic, omnipresent and nonaggressive, with many daily rituals rooted in the indigenous religions of ancestor worship.

Buddhism begins with the story of an Indian prince named Siddhartha Gautama in the 6th century BC, who left his life of privilege at the age of 29 on a quest to find the truth. After years of experimentation and ascetic practices, he meditated under a Bodhi Tree for 49 days, reaching final emancipation and breaking the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. He returned as Buddha, the 'Awakened One', to teach the 'middle way' between extremes. Passion, desire, love and hate are regarded as extremes in Asia, so Buddhism counsels that constant patience, detachment, and renouncing desire for worldly pleasures and expectations brings peace and liberation from suffering.

Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar practise Theravada Buddhism (Teaching of the Elders), which travelled to the region via Sri Lanka. Vietnam adopted Mahayana (Greater Vehicle) Buddhism, which is also found in Tibet, China and Japan. One of the major theological differences between the two types of Buddhism lies in the outcome of a devout life. In Theravada, followers strive to obtain nirvana (release from the cycle of existence), which is accomplished over the course of many reincarnations, the final one of which is as a member of the monastic order. In Mahayana, a layperson can become a bodhisattva (one who has almost reached nirvana but renounces it in order to help others attain it) within a single lifetime. The artistic expressions of temple architecture and sculpture create the greatest cultural differences between the Theravada Buddhist countries; similarly, religious art and temples in Vietnam favour Chinese influences over those of its Theravada neighbours.

### Islam

Islam in Southeast Asia bears much of the region's hallmark passivity, lacking the fervour that results from religious persecution. Trade played an important role in the introduction of the religion to the region, with Southeast Asians converting to Islam to join a brotherhood of spice traders and to escape the inflexible caste system of the previous Hindu empires. The mystical Sufi sect of Islam also played an important role in spreading Islamic belief through Malaysia, Indonesia, parts of the Philippines and southern Thailand.

Revealed by the Prophet Mohammed in the 7th century, and meaning 'Submission' in Arabic, Islam states the duty of every Muslim is to submit to Allah (God). This profession of faith is the first of the five pillars of Islam; the other four are to pray five times a day, give alms to the poor, fast during Ramadan and make the pilgrimage to Mecca.

A type of Sharia'a (Islamic law) is in effect in the Indonesian province of Aceh, and in some areas of Java and Sulawesi. It is also in effect in Malaysia, but it is only enforced for Muslim Malays. Traditionally, Southeast Asian Muslim women were never cloistered, but headscarves have proliferated in recent years. While the traditional Muslim cultures retain many animistic beliefs and practices, there are periodic attempts to purge Islam of its pagan past, especially in Indonesia.

More recommended reading: *What the Buddha Taught* by Walpola Rahula, and *Living Faith: Inside the Muslim World of Southeast Asia* by Steve Raymer.

Muslim independence movements affecting southern Thailand and the southern Philippines are considered to be more economic than jihadist; typically the movements are in the poorest parts of the respective countries, virtually ignored by the majority government.

### Christianity

Catholicism was introduced to Vietnam by the French, to the Philippines by the Spanish and to East Timor by the Portuguese. The Philippines adeptly juggle Spanish, American and Chinese traditions in Catholic festivals; at Christmas, for example, Chinese red lanterns decorate homes, families attend midnight Mass and carollers go from house to house. Parts of Indonesia are also Christian due to the efforts of Western missionary groups.

### Hinduism

Hinduism ruled the spiritual lives of Southeast Asians more than 1500 years ago, and the great Hindu empires of Angkor and Srivijaya built grand monuments to their pantheon of gods. The primary representations of the multiple faces of the one omnipresent god are Brahma, the creator; Vishnu, the preserver; and Shiva, the destroyer or reproducer. All three gods are usually shown with four arms, but Brahma has the added advantage of four heads to represent his all-seeing presence. Although Buddhism and Islam have filtered across the continent, Hinduism has managed to survive on the island of Bali. Within the last 100 years, the influx of Indian labourers to Southeast Asia has bolstered the religion's followers.

# The Authors

## CHINA WILLIAMS — Coordinating Author

Southeast Asia is an odoriferous place to find out you're pregnant, but after a decade of companionship with the region, China was glad that her son-to-be had a connection to this place. China's name propelled her to this continent, and the kinship of the climate with that of her hometown in South Carolina (US) sealed the deal. China has studied (and forgotten) philosophy in college, taught English in Thailand, matured into a liberal in San Francisco and written numerous Lonely Planet titles on Southeast Asia. Now she lives in Takoma Park, Maryland (US), with her son, Felix, and husband, Matt.

## GREG BLOOM — Philippines

Manila's gritty charms take a while to grow on you, and so it was for Greg. But grow on him they did, and as he enters his fourth year living in the Philippines he claims – with a straight face – to love living in Manila. When not writing about his country of residence (and favourite travel destination), Greg might be found snouting around the former Soviet Union for Lonely Planet or running around Asia's ultimate Frisbee fields with the Philippine national team.

## CELESTE BRASH — Malaysia

After attending Chiang Mai University in Thailand for a semester, Celeste made her first foray into Malaysia and quickly fell in love with the country's food, ease of travel and cultural treats. She's visited several times since on long-haul trips through Southeast Asia. For this book she introduced her husband and two kids to the Malay peninsula, where they played with giant insects, tried every variation of *roti canai* (Indian-style flaky flat bread) and discovered the joys of leeches. When not desensitising her taste buds with *sambal* (relish), she lives with her family in Tahiti.

## MUHAMMAD COHEN — Indonesia

Native New Yorker Muhammad Cohen first travelled to Southeast Asia in 1992, returning as a backpacking reporter in 1994, and moving to Hong Kong a year later. Once a diplomat in Tanzania, Muhammad first stopped in Indonesia to visit a neighbour from his time in Dar es Salaam. He's been going back for over a dozen years, picking up the language and a taste for *ikan bakar lalapan* (grilled fish with aromatic leaves and *sambal*). Muhammad is also the author of *Hong Kong on Air*, a novel about the 1997 handover.

## DAN ELDRIDGE — Thailand

Dan began his journalism career at the age of 17, when a pen-pal relationship with the editor of a punk-rock magazine led to a music-reviewing gig. After graduating from university and bulking up his CV with an impressive range of odd jobs (dishwasher, taxi driver, telemarketer), he launched *Young Pioneers,* an independent travel magazine. His first visit to Thailand happened during the SARS epidemic, when airfares to Asia reached (understandably) historic lows. Like Andy Warhol and Christina Aguilera, Dan hails from Pittsburgh, although he's currently based in Philadelphia.

## JOSH KRIST — Vietnam

Josh has backpacked around Thailand, Vietnam and Egypt; spent a month on a sailing boat in the Caribbean; lived in a kibbutz in the north of Israel; and worked as a cook at a hostel in Jerusalem. He's also lived and worked in Paris and Kyoto. He loves to swap crazy stories, eat good food, drink pastis, bask in warm weather and scuba dive – Vietnam suits him just fine.

## MAT OAKLEY — Singapore

Mat was born in the kind of English town David Brent would have lived in had Slough not existed. After stints living in Laos, Thailand, Australia and Fiji, he has spent the last three years in Singapore with his wife and a couple of badly behaved Fijian cats (who are banned from entering New Zealand for being undemocratic). The author of the Lonely Planet *Singapore* city guide, Mat was happy to be forced back onto the streets to find more excuses to stuff his face during the research for this book.

## NICK RAY — Cambodia

Nick comes from Watford, the sort of town that makes you want to travel. He has been cavorting around Southeast Asia for a more than a decade now, first as a traveller, later leading people astray as a tour leader, and more recently as a location scout. Nick lives in Phnom Penh and has written several editions of the *Cambodia* guidebook, as well as coauthoring *Vietnam* and *Cycling Vietnam, Laos & Cambodia*. He has covered almost every corner of Southeast Asia, and includes Angkor, Bagan, Hoi An, Luang Prabang and the Gili islands in his top 10.

## CHRIS ROWTHORN — Brunei Darussalam & Malaysia

Chris was born in England and raised in the US, but has lived in Kyoto, Japan, since 1992. After working as a regional correspondent for the *Japan Times*, he joined Lonely Planet in 1996 and has written books about Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines and Australia. He's a keen hiker, diver and snorkeller, and considers Borneo to be the greatest adventure-travel destination in Southeast Asia. When he's not on the road, he conducts private tours of Japan.

## ADAM SKOLNICK — Indonesia

Adam Skolnick was diagnosed with travel obsession while working as an environmental activist in the mid-'90s. As a result he has travelled to nearly 40 countries (Indonesia's his favourite) on six continents: he's been lost in the Amazon, scaled Kilimanjaro, backpacked through Mexico and Central America, toured baseball stadiums in Cuba, meditated with Hindu priests in Bali and Buddhist monks in Myanmar, and hiked through the rainforest with devout Muslim farmers in Sumatra. As a freelance journalist he writes about travel, culture, health and the environment, and between adventures he writes movies.



## IAIN STEWART — Indonesia

Iain first travelled through Indonesia in 1992, journeying from Sumatra to Timor by Pelni ferries and too many bemo (three-wheeled pick-up trucks). He's returned several times since to dive the reefs of Pulau Bunaken and the Gilis, haggle over handicrafts in Sumba and coauthor Lonely Planet's *Indonesia* and *Bali & Lombok* guides. On this trip Iain discovered that Jakarta just might be the best night out in Asia, and that even 40 year olds can learn to surf (well, stand up on a board). Iain's written numerous guidebooks, mainly devoted to Ibiza and Central America.

## RYAN VER BERKMOES — East Timor

Years of travel across the Indonesian archipelago in no way prepared Ryan for East Timor. The mix of Asian and European cultures is like that of no where else, and the country's beauty gave him a major pain in the jaw from all the dropping. More importantly, despite his experience as an international journalist, which taught him to never take headlines at face value, Ryan was amazed at how the reality of the country never matched the pervasive reports of doom. Within the myriad challenges are a multitude of rewards for the traveller ready for adventure.

## RICHARD WATERS — Laos

Richard's first of taste of travel was as a 21 year old, driving around Central America in an old jalopy; it took him through Guatemala's civil war and gave him his first taste of wanderlust. He's been travelling across Southeast Asia, Europe, the US and North Africa ever since. His first visit to Laos in '99 brought the Hmong guerrillas to his attention, and in 2002 he was among the first to creep into the Special Zone in search of their story. He lives with his son and girlfriend in Brighton, England.

## CONTRIBUTING AUTHOR

**Dr Trish Batchelor** is a general practitioner and travel medicine specialist who works at the CIWEC Clinic in Kathmandu, Nepal, as well as being a Medical Advisor to the Travel Doctor New Zealand clinics. Trish teaches travel medicine through the University of Otago, and is interested in underwater and high-altitude medicine, and in the impact of tourism on host countries. She wrote the Health chapter.

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