

# east

Travel inspiration from the  
**Southeast Asia** and **Japan** experts

INSIDE  **Japan** INSIDE  **Asia**

EXCLUSIVE  
INTERVIEW WITH  
**JAY  
RAYNER**  
ON P.28

## MEKONG MOMENTS: Tales from the river

+ City breaks in  
Southeast Asia



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## Welcome to issue 9

Hello and welcome to the 9th issue of *east*.

Like many homes in the 1970s, my parents' living room side-table was adorned with an illuminated, plastic, spinning globe. For 11-year-old me this represented a confusing patchwork puzzle of very faraway, impossible to visit places. I was not very good at geography (other than colouring in maps), had no idea how to use a compass and had not enjoyed my brief brush with foreign languages one little bit – all things

which in my mind were essential skills for any global explorer to possess.

But none of this mattered. I LOVED that globe. I spent hours 'playing' with it, running my finger over its contoured surface, feeling the terrain of distant lands. I filled scrapbooks with the wonders of the world: Poor quality news clippings of the Great Wall of China, and a hazy sunset over Wat Arun and flame-red orangutan from Sarawak carefully cut from my parents' new encyclopaedia (sorry Mum).

Skip forward some 40 years, and after what could only be described as an unconventional career (ballet dancer, tech entrepreneur, ad agency manager) I've landed my dream job here at InsideAsia Tours, lifting those scrapbook clippings off the page and into real holidays.

So what's new? Well, for the last five years we've got to the heart of Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar. But there's a whole continent out there to uncover and having asked our customers "where next?", it was apparent it's not just me with itchy feet and more than a touch of wanderlust.

After much passionate debate here in the office to narrow down the options, I'm delighted to reveal that in 2020 - our 20th anniversary year - we will be launching six new destinations. All will be revealed in the next issue of *east* – which just like this one will be crammed to the gunnels with inspiration from our journeys on the road and opportunities to get to the heart of Asia. Happy travels and watch this space.



Julie

**Julie Butterworth**

Head of InsideAsia Tours Brand

## JUST BACK

After inspiration for your next adventure? Our team have a suitcase full of travel tales...



**Grant Ekelund**

Grant travelled to Vietnam, Cambodia and Hong Kong to

learn about culture, history and the region's best food.

**Memorable moment:** Sailing on the Mekong River was so relaxing (p.16), and cycling in Hoi An really left an impression on me.



**Amy Tadehara**

Amy, our newly crowned Condé Nast Traveler Top Travel Specialist, hit

the road to explore Japan's Tohoku coastline, travelling from Sendai to Sanriku Fukko National Park.

**Memorable moment:** Learning about the aftermath of the tsunami at the Hioryama Park in Ishinomaki.



**Julia Anukam**

Julia joined our Japan Unmasked Small Group Tour, criss-crossing

the country from Tokyo all the way to Hiroshima.

**Memorable moment:** Seeing Miyajima's breath-taking landscape and trying lots of delicious vegan food!



**Paul O'Brien**

Paul took a luxury cruise through Laos, stopping to explore riverside

villages along the way.

**Memorable moment:** The whole journey was stunning, but I loved walking through sleepy villages and meeting local people.



# INSIDESCOOP

## SCRAMBLE SELFIE

WANT TO BE THE FIRST TO FIND OUT ABOUT OUR NEW DESTINATIONS?

Drop us a line at [insiders@insideasiatours.com](mailto:insiders@insideasiatours.com)



### JAPAN

Tokyo's not short of tourist attractions, but the 'Shibuya Scramble' remains a firm favourite amongst first-time visitors - turns out watching crowds swarm over a zebra crossing is more fascinating than it sounds. The best views are from above, and now with the observation deck at Magnet by

Shibuya 109 you can capture the action, along with the ultimate bird's-eye view selfie, by connecting your phone to an overhead camera.

**DO IT:** 1 minute from JR Shibuya Station, Mag's Park viewing platform open 10am-9pm, entrance 300 yen (£2).

### JAPAN

## KITKAT CRAZE ALIVE IN OSAKA

Having launched hundreds of flavours - including cherry blossom, sweet potato, and adzuki bean - we thought there wasn't much more Japan could do with a KitKat. We thought wrong. At a dedicated shop in Osaka, a city aptly known as 'Japan's Kitchen', you can create your own weird and wonderful combination. Choose between five different types of chocolate, pile up an assortment of toppings and watch the steady-handed

chocolatiers get to work. Like something from a sci-fi film, the masterpiece is then set using swirling liquid nitrogen. With prices starting at £5 for a single bar, this isn't your average mid-morning treat from the newsagents.

**DO IT:** British Airways are launching a direct route from London to Osaka in 2019; contact our team of Japan experts on 0117 244 3463 to find out more.

### Formula 1 heads to Hanoi

Vietnam might be known for streets heaving with motorbikes, but in April 2020 the capital city of Hanoi will host the Formula 1 for the first time, seeing off a sluggish sea of two-wheelers in favour of racers reaching speeds of up to 208mph.







## CAMBODIA

### EXPLORE ANGKOR WITH AN EXPERT

As the largest religious monument in the world, the Angkor temples have been written about, mused upon and explored by thousands of visitors to Cambodia every year. For a new perspective, join Dr Damien Evans to discover the secrets of this magnificent site. As well as being one of the world's leading

academics on the temples' archaeology and reconstruction, he was part of the ground-breaking team that uncovered the lost Khmer city of Mahendraparvata.

**DO IT:** Visit [insideasiatours.com](http://insideasiatours.com) or call our Cambodia experts on 0117 244 3464 to find out more.

## JAPAN



### Manga at the British Museum

Fans of manga rejoice: the largest manga exhibition ever held outside Japan is coming to the British Museum. Trace the evolution of this Japanese form of storytelling from a humble collection of sketches, to a global cultural phenomenon that influenced a range of pop culture, including anime, gaming and cosplay.

**DO IT:** The exhibition takes place from 23 May – 26 August 2019. For tickets and more information, visit [Britishmuseum.org](http://Britishmuseum.org)



## JAPAN

### Island hopping for art

While it hasn't been quite the same agonising wait as the Rugby World Cup, the triennial Setouchi Art Festival has felt like a long time coming. Scattered across a collection of islands on the Seto Inland Sea, the setting for this ground-breaking festival is

as impressive as the world-class contemporary artwork on display.

**DO IT:** With sittings in spring, summer and autumn, there's plenty of opportunity to see the festival in 2019. Call our Japan experts on 0117 244 3463 to book tickets.



## LAOS

### EAT LIKE A ROYAL IN LUANG PRABANG

Chefs Bee Satongun and Jason Bailey, owners of the Michelin-starred Paste restaurant in Bangkok, are giving Lao cuisine a long overdue spell in the spotlight at The Apsara hotel in Luang Prabang. Heavily influenced by the recipes of Phia Sing (chef for the Lao royal family in the

mid-20th century) each Paste at The Apsara dish is a delicious slice of history.

**DO IT:** We can include a Paste at The Apsara reservation on any of our tailor-made itineraries; call our Laos experts on 0117 244 3464 to find out more.





## VIETNAM

### IN SAFE HANDS

Complete with a provincial French village, fairy-tale castle, cable car, fantasy theme park and 89-ft Buddha, the Ba Na Hills near Danang is one of Vietnam's more unusual day trips. Just when you thought they couldn't add much more to this former colonial retreat, along came

a 150m-long golden bridge held aloft by the giant stone hands of a mountain god. Whatever next?

**DO IT:** Visit [insideasiatours.com](http://insideasiatours.com) or call our Southeast Asia experts on 0117 244 3464 to find out more about exploring Danang.



## CAMBODIA

### HAPPY CAMPERS IN CAMBODIA

Forget leaky tarpaulin, staying under canvas has never been swisher. In fact, the new collection of tented accommodation in Cambodia makes even the fanciest hotels

seem pedestrian. Wake to sunrise over Angkor temples at The Beige; share your surroundings with endangered species at the Cardamom Tented Camp; or get a taste of the high life with a

helicopter transfer to your plush hideaway at the Shinta Mani Wild.

**DO IT:** Visit [insideasiatours.com](http://insideasiatours.com) or call our Cambodia experts on 0117 244 3464 to find out more.

## VIETNAM



### From bean to brew in Saigon

Do you prefer kicking off the day with a drip filtered short black or slowly sipping an indulgent condensed milk creation? Either way, getting coffee right is serious business in Vietnam. Meet an expert at an 80-year-old coffee shop in the heart of Ho Chi Minh City to learn brewing techniques, mingle with local people and find your favourite cup.

**DO IT:** Visit the Experiences page on [insideasiatours.com](http://insideasiatours.com) or call our Vietnam experts on 0117 244 3464 to find out more.



## 2019: YEAR OF THE RUGBY WORLD CUP

It may officially be the 'Year of the Pig', but we can't help thinking our porcine friend has been upstaged by a certain oval-shaped ball... Having arrived in Japan after 20 years bouncing back and forth between Europe, Australia and

New Zealand, 2019 is most definitely the 'Year of the Rugby World Cup'. We tailor trips around the tickets, so all you have to worry about is remembering your flag and keeping your fingers crossed!

**DO IT:** If you've secured tickets but need a little help planning, head to [Japanrugbytravel.com](http://Japanrugbytravel.com), or call our team of rugby travel experts on **0117 992 7068** to find out more.



## JAPAN

### CELEBRATE THE SEASONS IN BRISTOL

Don't miss the chance to see original woodblock prints dating from the 1760s - 1930s at *Masters of Japanese Prints*, an extraordinary series we couldn't be prouder to sponsor at Bristol Museum and Art Gallery. The latest exhibition explores each of Japan's seasons with *hanami* parties under the cherry

blossom, spirited summer festivals, autumn leaf peeping and snowy scenes. Highlights include Hiroshige's depictions of the harvest moon and Hokusai's iconic *Great Wave off Kanagawa*.

**DO IT:** For more information, visit [bristolmuseums.org.uk](http://bristolmuseums.org.uk)

## JAPAN



### Go for a spin in style

Dream car: Aston Martin, McLaren, Porsche, Ferrari or Lamborghini? Take your pick and take to the streets of Tokyo. Drive between Ginza's towering skyscrapers and neon signs, see the lights sparkle over the waters of Tokyo Bay in Odaiba and glide down the slick streets around Roppongi Hills. Spoilt for choice? With pit-stops along the way, you can swap luxury rides part way through. The hardest part is giving the keys back at the end...

**DO IT:** Visit the Experiences page on [insidejapantours.com](http://insidejapantours.com) or call our Japan experts on **0117 244 3463** to find out more.

## JAPAN

### Nordic dreams in Japan

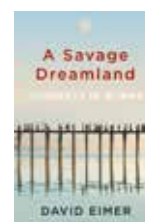
No one can say exactly what a Moomin is, but after waddling on to television sets in 1969, these hippo-like characters from faraway Finland made a name for themselves in Japan. 60 years later, Moominvalley

Park, filled with iconic Moomin memorabilia, has opened just an hour and a half from Tokyo. That's not all, Metsä Village, a series of Nordic restaurants, shops and cafés on the banks of Lake Miyazawa, has also been

unveiled and is free of charge to visit.

**DO IT:** We can include tickets to [Moominvalley.com](http://Moominvalley.com) any of our tailor-made itineraries; call our Japan experts on **0117 244 3463** to find out more.

## MYANMAR



### New book: Journeys in Burma

Travelling the length and breadth of Myanmar, David Eimer speaks to a wide range of characters, including film stars and former political exiles, as he chronicles the country's return to the global stage.

*A Savage Dreamland: Journeys in Burma* (Bloomsbury Publishing), will be available in all good bookshops from June 2019.



Venice of the East  
Bird's-eye view  
of Bangkok



# SEE MORE ON A STOPOVER

Dread indirect flights? Spare a few days and make the journey the destination with a stopover in one of Asia's most exciting cities.



An aerial photograph of Bangkok, Thailand, showing a dense urban skyline with numerous skyscrapers and modern buildings. In the foreground, a large, lush green park with a winding lake is visible, providing a stark contrast to the city's concrete jungle. The sky is a vibrant blue with scattered white clouds, suggesting a clear, sunny day.

## ✈ THAILAND

### Bangkok

Bangkok manages to be everything you expected and nothing like you imagined, all at once. Chaotic streets choke with heaving traffic, insistent hawkers noisily flaunt their wares and eye-popping neon advertises the city's notorious nightlife. In covered bazaars you'll find floor-to-ceiling displays of everything you never knew you needed: from incomprehensible slogan t-shirts to enormous gilded ceramic pots. To avoid being swept away in the thrum of Bangkok's

confusion, you can always step off solid ground for the city's waterways and some welcome breathing space.

Believe it or not, Bangkok was once known as 'Venice of the East'. For a blast from this exalted past, take a leisurely longtail boat ride on the network of *khlongs* (canals) that stream from the Chao Phraya River. Amble down the waterways and stop off to see waterside communities and small temples before grabbing a bite to eat (think mouth-watering pad thai, hot green curries and spicy papaya salads).

Take a day trip to Kanchanaburi to learn about the region's history at the River Kwai bridge and the Railway Museum. Moving displays tell the story of Thailand's involvement in World War II and the construction of the infamous bridge and 'Death Railway' by Allied Prisoners of War. While the main streets might feel uncomfortably modern, Bangkok is home to some impressive cultural treasures – don't miss the beautiful Wat Pho temple (home to a huge gilded reclining Buddha) and the ornate Grand Palace.



## Singapore

In Singapore, you'll step onto sparkling streets and look up to gardens in the sky. This island city state is impressive, yet understated, and more restrained than most metropolises in Southeast Asia. Like many ports, it has spent years drawing influence from across the world, and these days cultural quarters representing different communities stand side by side. Lose yourself amongst the rainbow of brightly-painted shops in Little India, walk under Chinatown's swinging lanterns and stop to admire the glowing dome of the Sultan Mosque

in Arab Street, before making your way to the smart colonial district.

Here an impressive array of architecture harks back to the time before British independence, but the undeniable jewel in the crown is the Raffles Hotel. This iconic building dates back to 1887 and has stories hiding behind every crisp white column and sparkling chandelier. Visitors flock here for a delicious taste of history; now a go-to choice on cocktail menus the world over, the Singapore Sling was first shaken here in 1915, and is served now as it was then - with a generous handful of monkey nuts. Seemingly at odds with Singapore's litter-free streets,

it's customary to leave the shells on the floor.

In recent years, Singapore has made headlines with the creation of a green dream, Gardens by the Bay. This ambitious 101-hectare nature park defies expectations with an indoor cloud forest; the world's largest indoor waterfall; and magical "Supertrees" with 50m vertical gardens joined by elevated walkways. But that's not all for nature lovers: there are rolling lawns and primeval forest at the UNESCO World Heritage Botanic Gardens, and the 35-hectare Night Safari has 130 species, including the Asian elephant and Malayan tiger.

## ✈ MALAYSIA

### Kuala Lumpur

With various nations putting their stamp on the city since its humble beginnings as a tin mining town in the 1800s, Kuala Lumpur's architecture reads like a history book. Map the journey through mock Tudor facades, rising minarets and elaborate Hindu temples. Spot Moorish flourishes, like those of the Sultan Abdul Samad Building; Malay-inspired shapes, such as the Istana Budaya theatre resembling a traditional headdress; and modern glassy skyscrapers, the most spectacular of all being the Petronas Towers. Standing at nearly 452m, these towers were the tallest building in the world until 2004 and mark another chapter in the city's development. The best views can be found at the 170m Skybridge and Observation Deck, but to see the towers themselves, head across the road and pull up a chair at Vertigo, a rooftop bar in the Banyan Tree hotel opposite. For a tranquil start

to the day, make a beeline for the lush 92-hectare Perdana Botanical Gardens. You can easily spend a whole morning visiting the orchid house; admiring the hibiscus garden; and making friends with locals at the bird, deer and butterfly parks. Don't miss the Tugu Negara, a national monument to commemorate the plight for independence, and walk to nearby Merdeka Square where the world's largest flagpole marks the spot where independence was declared in 1957.

There are plenty of places to snap up souvenirs in the city. Back in 1929, the Central Market was the go-to place to pick up fresh produce, but these days you'll find all manner of local handicrafts behind the pale blue art deco entrance. For the best bargains, put your haggling skills to the test on the busy streets of Chinatown, or for something a little more upmarket, take a trip around the Bukit Bintang district's shiny shopping malls. Once your suitcase

can't take any more trinkets, you're not far from the Jalan Alor area - with rows of open-air restaurants selling the city's best street food, it's the tastiest place to fill up.

Once you've had enough of the city proper, take the 12km journey north of the city to the Batu Caves. Here, you can climb 272 multicoloured steps to join visitors worshipping at the country's holiest Hindu temple and shrine, passing the 42-metre high statue of Lord Murugan on the way.







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## ✈ CHINA

### Hong Kong

Hong Kong may be the proud owner of the most skyscrapers in the world, but you don't have to go far to see a slower side of the metropolis. Beyond the crowded skyline, 70% of the city is made up of mountains, woodland and lush parks - enough wide-open spaces for even the most city-averse tourists to feel at home. Energetic types can swap dense downtown air for dusty trails high above the skyline, but even in the city proper, early birds can find calm amongst the commotion with sunrise tai chi.

To get orientated, take a ride on the city's 130-year-old funicular railway to the top of Victoria Peak;

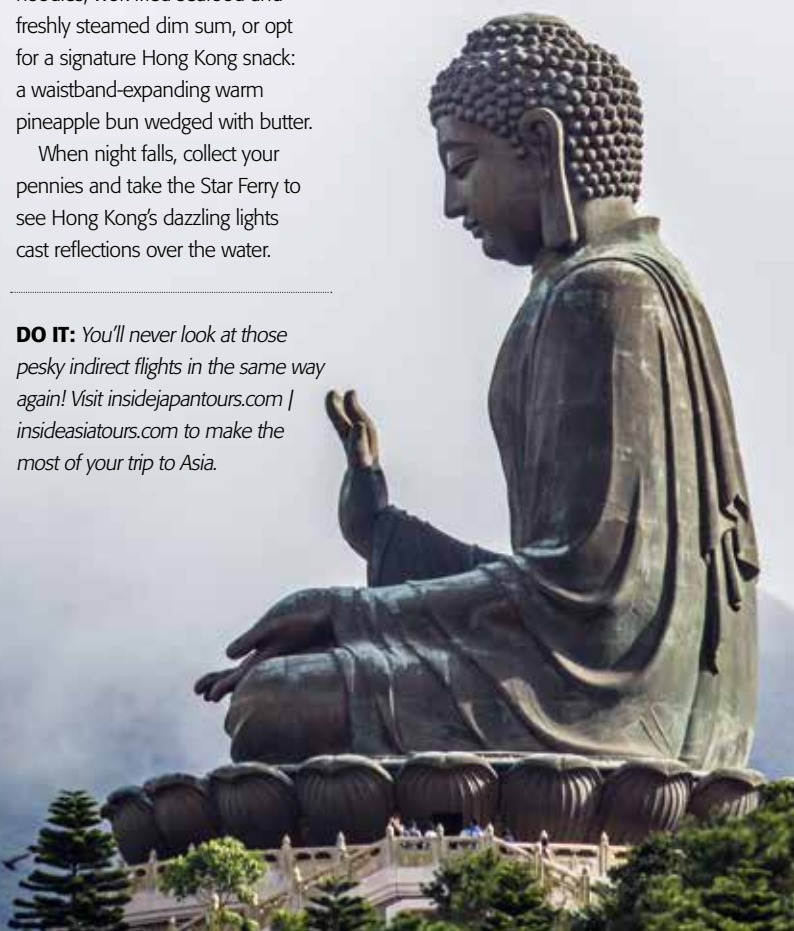
at 554m it's the highest point on Hong Kong Island with views across the skyline and over the blue of bay. Just across the water, Lantau Island brings together old and new with Disneyland, an airport and the Tung Chung shopping complex, along with stilted fishing villages, stretches of empty beaches and the giant bronze Tian Tan Buddha seated atop a jungle-clad mountain.

With so much to see, you'll soon work up an appetite for Hong Kong's famous foodie scene. Those with a taste for the finer things can enjoy the city's Michelin starred restaurants, but for something a little more low-key, pull up a chair at the Temple Street Night Market in Kowloon.

Follow your nose to bowls of wonton noodles, wok-fried seafood and freshly steamed dim sum, or opt for a signature Hong Kong snack: a waistband-expanding warm pineapple bun wedged with butter.

When night falls, collect your pennies and take the Star Ferry to see Hong Kong's dazzling lights cast reflections over the water.

**DO IT:** You'll never look at those pesky indirect flights in the same way again! Visit [insidejapantours.com](http://insidejapantours.com) / [insideasiatours.com](http://insideasiatours.com) to make the most of your trip to Asia.





# Japan *in* SUMMER



*Let the sunshine in*



Pastel pink cherry blossom captures the collective imagination in spring, burnt orange leaves paint the landscape in autumn, magical powder snow dusts the slopes in winter... but come 2020, all eyes will be on summer in Tokyo. Here are just a few of our favourite ways to make the most of those long, hot days.

## Festivals and fireworks

In *matsuri* (festival) season, the whole country goes giddy for a jam-packed calendar of events. Wherever you are, you won't be far from a festival: in the small port city of Aomori, huge floats depicting haunting mythical scenes illuminate the night sky; down in Shikoku, dance troupes take to the streets in elaborate costumes for the three-day Awa Odori Festival; and in the mountains of Naeba in Niigata Prefecture, Fuji Rock draws some of the world's biggest artists for a three-day music festival (with a hot spring bath to rest dancing feet, it's got one up on Glastonbury).

Then there's the fireworks in July and August - the 20,000 bursting over the Sumida River in Tokyo are just the beginning: huge displays can also be found in Lake Kawaguchiko (Mount Fuji providing an impressive backdrop), behind the picturesque *torii* gate on Miyajima Island, and over Lake Toya in Hokkaido.



Top tips from our travel consultants:



LUCY PENDLEBURY, UK

During her two years living in Shikoku, Lucy wasted no time joining an Awa Odori dance troupe: "Don't miss Awa Odori! It's the beating heart of Tokushima in summer. Public spaces come to life as dance groups and musicians excitedly gear up for the festival"



THOMAS LEWIS, AU

Thomas misses calling sun-soaked Okinawa home: "Leave the mainland cities for a more leisurely pace on the brilliant white sand beaches of Okinawa – it's known as one of the happiest places in the world for a reason"



## Blissful beaches

The Maldives it isn't, but as a collection of islands, Japan has its fair share of lovely beaches. As well as the chance to swim and sunbathe on the Izu Peninsula or surf on the Shonan Coast, both just an hour or two from Tokyo, it's worth venturing further afield. Make a trip down to Japan's southernmost islands to watch baby loggerhead turtles make their way back to the water on Yakushima, stand up paddle board on Ishigaki and catch a buffalo ride across the sand on Iriomote.





MICHAEL TROMBOLD, US

Keen foodie Michael Trombold still yearns for his favourite Japanese dishes:

"Zaru soba is the perfect meal for a hot summer day. After slurping these chilled buckwheat noodles, order *soba*-flavoured soft serve ice cream for dessert - don't knock it 'til you try it!"



NATALIE COLLAR, US

With eight marathons under her belt, Natalie always had one eye on her next outdoor adventure while living in Japan:

"Summer is my favourite time to go hiking. For a refreshing escape from muggy Tokyo, head to higher altitudes in the Southern Alps (Kitadake, Shiomidake) or Yatsugatake Highlands"



TOBY GALLAGHER, UK

While living in Hokkaido Toby made the most of the island's natural beauty:

"To see the best of summer in Hokkaido, hire a car and drive to Furano's quiet rural landscapes, where you'll find fields filled with flowers"

## Food and drink

Steaming bowls of ramen might be the last thing you fancy in Japan's sticky summer heat, luckily there are plenty of delicious seasonal alternatives.

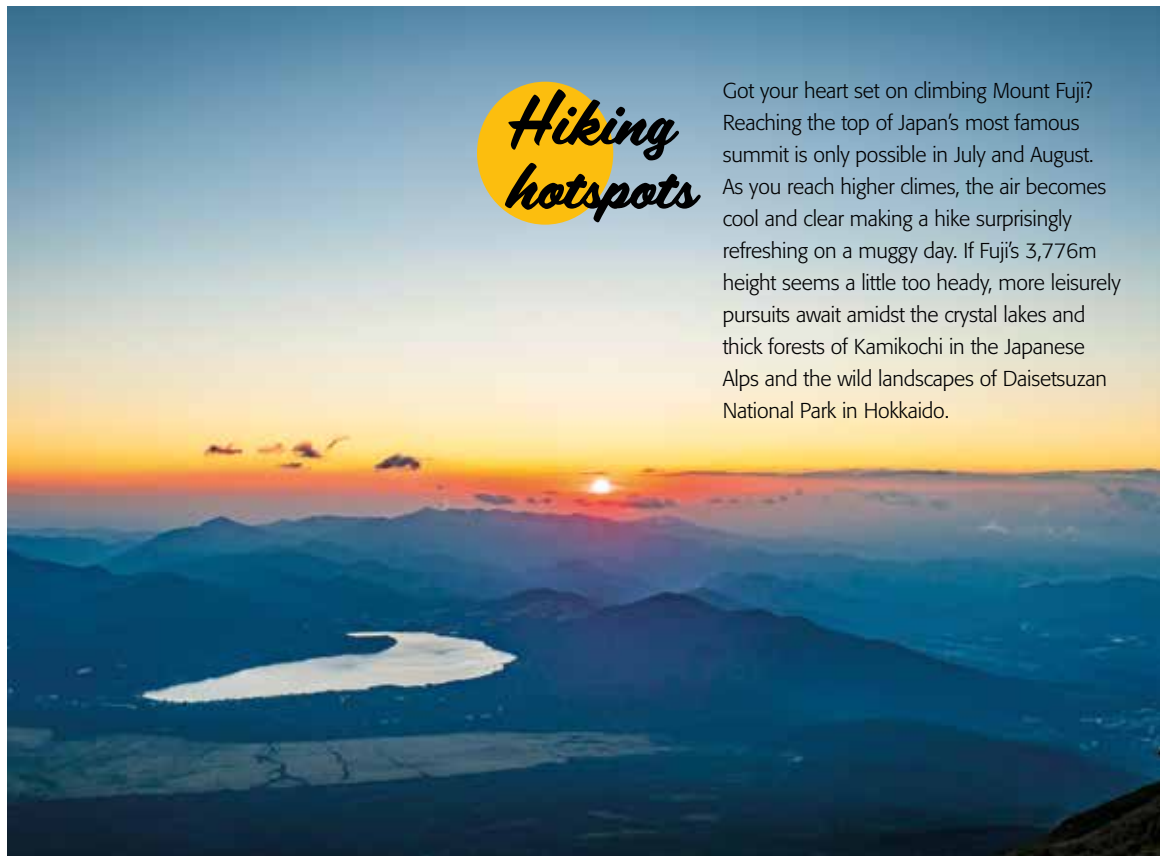
Cooling off with swirls of soft scoop ice cream is nothing new, but you'd be hard pushed to find the variety of weird and (mostly) wonderful flavours or fancy toppings found in Japan - yes, to a gold leaf garnish, no to miso-flavoured chunks. For something a little lighter, try *kakigori*, fluffy shaved ice drizzled with sweet syrup.

There's no end of stalls to pick up tasty food on the go, such as *yakitori* skewers and corn on the cob, but the most popular summer dish is *somen*; these cold noodles, served with a light dipping sauce, are just the ticket on a hot day. Wash the whole thing down with an icy beverage: *nomihodai*, all-you-can-eat-and-drink beer gardens, can be found across Japan. Up in Sapporo's Odori Koen Park, brewers set up stalls and outdoor seating for a whole month.



## Hiking hotspots

Got your heart set on climbing Mount Fuji? Reaching the top of Japan's most famous summit is only possible in July and August. As you reach higher climes, the air becomes cool and clear making a hike surprisingly refreshing on a muggy day. If Fuji's 3,776m height seems a little too heady, more leisurely pursuits await amidst the crystal lakes and thick forests of Kamikochi in the Japanese Alps and the wild landscapes of Daisetsuzan National Park in Hokkaido.







## Beautiful landscapes

Hemmed in by skyscrapers, Tokyo's summer heat is heavy (you have to feel for the salarymen still hurrying to work fully suited and booted). Away from the capital's soupy humidity though, there are no shortage of places to escape the heat, and even make the most of the weather. Japan's climate varies hugely, but generally, the further north you travel, the cooler it will be. Discover lesser visited corners such as Tohoku's mountaintop temple towns and the peaceful national parks on the northernmost island of Hokkaido.

**DO IT:** For more information about weather and events throughout the year, go to [insideasiatours.com/when-to-travel](https://insideasiatours.com/when-to-travel) or call one of our Japan travel experts on 0117 244 3464.



# MEKONG MOMENTS: TALES FROM THE RIVER

WORDS AND PICTURES BY **GRANT EKLUND**



Rather than taking to the skies to fly between Ho Chi Minh City and Phnom Penh, **Grant Eklund** travels slowly, following the Mekong River through floating markets and coconut candy workshops (lemongrass mojito in hand).

**Balancing act**  
Rush hour on the river



“...the only two items on my to-do list are relaxing and watching the tall buildings of Saigon slowly fade in the distance”

Lounging on the sundeck, the day's special cocktail at one elbow and my camera and book at the other, the only two items on my to-do list are relaxing and watching the tall buildings of Saigon slowly fade in the distance.

I'm on board the Mekong Princess - one of several river cruisers that ply the waters of the mighty Mekong River - for a journey between the big city of Saigon (also known as Ho Chi Minh City) in Vietnam, and Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia.

### Front row views

As this expansive river ebbs and flows, life unfolds before me: heavily-laden cargo ships ride so low the gunnels disappear below the waves, ferries fill with temporarily quiescent motorbikes and fishermen dodge between the traffic. My perch has the best views in the house and I sit contentedly on the deck for hours.

### Life is sweet

Blissful as this is, I discover there's more to cruising than relaxing and making the most of the (incredible) breakfast buffet. Twice a day, my fellow passengers and I step on to solid ground to explore beyond the banks.

On our first stop, mountains of coconut shells hint at an introduction to what must be the tastiest of all local industries: coconut candy. During a masterclass, the whole candy making process is revealed, from plucking fruit, to pounding melted coconut crème using the wood-fired mixer, to finally serving a hard-won plate of sticky sweets.





Village visits  
Mat weaving on  
the Mekong



As we sip tea, and work our way through fuchsia dragon fruit and spiky rambutan (in between 'just one more' coconut sweet), the villagers surprise us with a performance of folk songs.

After a hearty applause and our fill of candy, a donkey cart carries us down narrow back roads, passing schools, markets and people who stop and smile as they watch the unusual visitors pass. Swapping donkeys for a gaggle of small human-powered sampan boats, we roam through the close green waterways of the delta swamps; overhanging palms form a narrow tunnel, and everything is silent but for the gentle swish of oars propelling us forwards.



## Market days

After whiling away a few hours back on the boat, the city of Can Tho crawls into view. Sailing at the tail end of the green season, the Mekong is high, and as the ship pulls up to the dock, a huge spray floods the pier. Children squeal in delight at the chance to play ankle-deep in the spreading water, their parents less amused at the dampness of the situation.

In Southeast Asia, markets are some of the best places to see local life in action and pick up 'authentic' souvenirs. Can Tho is home to one of the few remaining floating markets in Vietnam, and though the streets are still wet from the short yet torrential rain shower, the night market remains a hive of activity. It is time to practice our bargaining skills, but dazzled by the array of 'best original copy' watches and t-shirts adorned with slogans in questionable English, we decide to give souvenir shopping a miss after all...

Night traders pack away their wares while we sleep, and by sunrise the floating markets are ready for the day ahead. Tall poles above each boat show what's being sold - a useful signpost for your morning shopping - and villagers from the whole delta

region balance precariously to hawk everything from fresh vegetables to local crafts. This display, along with buyers' smaller sampans dodging in and out of the assemblage, is a photographer's dream. After more snapping than buying, we sail up river towards the wet market which, contrary to its name, is back on dry land. Squeezing between stalls, we are surrounded by the smell of breakfast *pho* as we pass bouquets of flowers, piles of pomelo and grapefruit, and row upon row of baskets with silver fish and huge hunks of meat. Some of the goods are so fresh, they're still quacking!

## Over the border

Edging towards the border, a small village in a remote jungle holds the secret to one of Cambodia's most important products: the *krama* or Khmer scarf. Being shown around a workshop of looms by a family who have weaved for generations is magical, but it isn't just the moments learning about traditional trades that are special about these village visits. It isn't even trying coconut candy, although delicious. It's the human moments: watching a music





“...overhanging palms form a narrow tunnel, and everything is silent but for the gentle swish of oars propelling us forwards”

performance; waving to people as we bump past on donkey carts; and walking through flooded flower fields, chased by laughing schoolchildren gathering to wave us goodbye at the dock. During each stop, I'm struck by how welcoming people are.

### Taking it slowly

Flying between Ho Chi Minh City and Phnom Penh takes a mere 55 minutes: a flight so short you don't even have time for an episode of *The Great British Bake Off*, but we cover the same ground over five days. Losing hours taking tea with local people, learning about arts and crafts, sipping fresh coconuts at the market and marvelling at ancient temples may not have been the most efficient way to travel, but despite my best efforts with the lemongrass mojitos, it's an experience I'll never forget.

As we reluctantly reach the end of our trip, the crew assembles for a farewell Cambodian dance, inviting everyone on deck to “do the twist!” and we are rewarded with one final sunset. As the ball of orange disappears behind the horizon, the brilliance of Phnom Penh rises ahead. The start of another adventure.

Grant is a Senior Travel Consultant in our Boulder office.

*Take to Southeast Asia's mightiest river on our 12-day Mekong Explorer Fully Tailored Journey, from £3,395 per person, or add a shorter Mekong cruise to any of our tailored trips. Visit [insideasiatours.com](http://insideasiatours.com) or call our Southeast Asia experts on 0117 244 3464 to find out more.*

### Mekong Essentials

**GETTING THERE:** Grant's cruise started in Ho Chi Minh City and finished in Phnom Penh.

Flight times:

London to Ho Chi Minh City:

12h 30min+,

Phnom Penh to London: 16h+

**WHEN TO GO:** October to December is the optimum time to take a Mekong River cruise. For more information

about weather and events in Southeast

Asia visit

[insideasiatours.com/](http://insideasiatours.com/)

when-to-travel





# ALL IN IT TOGETHER

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Tables for one and solo karaoke booths may be popular in Japan, but having spent years living, working and travelling solo, our tour leaders think these experiences are better when shared.



MARK FUJISHIGE

## PLANT RICE, TOGARINOZAWA ONSEN

How often do you have the opportunity to roll up your trousers, wrap a towel around your head, and get down and (a little) dirty in a *tambo* (rice field)? Having played an important role throughout the country's history, rice is culturally significant in Japan, so travel beyond those smart city restaurants to see where it all began in a rural

alpine village. At the end of a busy afternoon, you'll reap the rewards with a plate of well-earned sushi.

**Small Group Tour:** Hands on Japan (May departures) from £3,950 (excl. intl. flights). Visit [insidejapantours.com](http://insidejapantours.com) or call our experts on 0117 244 3463 to find out more.







RICHARD FARMER

## EAT OKONOMIYAKI, HIROSHIMA

There's nowhere better to try Hiroshima's famous *okonomiyaki* (savoury pancakes) than Okonomimura. Each of the 24 restaurants has a maximum of 15 seats, so I book my favourite at least one month ahead of the tour - before I even receive my passenger list! The staff are always friendly, particularly the hilarious head chef who loves to play the 'guess which country everyone is from' game while he cooks on the hot plate in front of us (his cooking is much better than his guessing). You can bet the TV will be showing the latest Hiroshima Carps baseball game in case conversation runs dry, but it never does.

**Small Group Tour:** Hidden Japan, from £3,675 (excl. intl. flights). Visit [insidejapantours.com](http://insidejapantours.com) or call our Japan experts on 0117 244 3463 to find out more.



ROBERT KODAMA

## TAKE PART IN TAIKO, TOKYO

As a former *taiko* drummer, I'll always have a soft spot for these lively workshops. Forget that morning coffee, you'd be hard pushed to find anything more energising than the sound of thunderous *taiko* drums first thing in the morning. With expert teachers encouraging groups to unite in thrashing around, making lots of noise and

throwing enthusiastic shapes, learning about a hugely important cultural tradition has never been so much fun.

**Small Group Tour:** All-In Japan, from £4,975 (excl. intl. flights). Visit [insidejapantours.com](http://insidejapantours.com) or call our Japan experts on 0117 244 3463 to find out more.







STEVE PARKER

### GO ON A BIKE RIDE, KIBI PLAIN, OKAYAMA

Japan is famous for mountainous landscapes, but with flat, well-paved paths, a group bike ride through the charming Kibi Plains is a leisurely affair. The conditions are so good, you can even take the 17km route on the *mama chari* ("mama's bike"), a shopping bike with a bell and basket. Get an insight into traditional rural life by passing meandering streams; waving at local people threshing rice; and stumbling across Buddhist temples, Shinto shrines and burial mounds that date back to the 4th-century Kibi Kingdom.

**Small Group Tour:** Japan Unmasked, from £2,595 (excl. intl. flights). Visit [insidejapantours.com](http://insidejapantours.com) or call our Japan experts on 0117 244 3463 to find out more.



MARK RAWLINS

### MEET A MAIKO (TRAINEE GEISHA), KYOTO

With the scent of tatami, bittersweet taste of tea and colours of richly decorated kimono, watching a *maiko* perform is a real treat for the senses. These elegant performers are highly trained in ancient arts like playing the *shamisen* (three-stringed instrument), but few realise what good fun an afternoon in their company is; they're dab hands

at drinking games and have a great sense of humour, so there are always many laughs to be had!

**Small Group Tour:** Spring Elegance, from £3,875 (excl. intl. flights). Visit [insidejapantours.com](http://insidejapantours.com) or call our Japan experts on 0117 244 3463 to find out more.



**BRIAN BEATTY**

### GO HIKING, KAMIKOCHI

Few things bring people together like an energetic hike in the staggeringly beautiful area of Kamikochi in the Chubu Sangaku National Park. Summer in Japan's cities can be stifling, but at 1500m above sea level, the air in Kamikochi is cool and fresh, while in autumn the landscape is a patchwork of gold and red. As well as making friends on the tour, you'll encounter lots of local residents on the trails: look up to spot rare birds and monkeys swinging from tree to tree!

**Small Group Tour:** Classic Japan, from £3,595 (excl. intl. flights). Visit [insidejapantours.com](https://www.insidejapantours.com) or call our Japan experts on 0117 244 3463 to find out more.

**DO IT:** Find all of our Small Group Tours and tour leader profiles at [insidejapantours.com](https://www.insidejapantours.com)





# MAKE YOUR HOLIDAY *matter*

What does a fun night at the circus have to do with the Khmer Rouge regime? Or a craft workshop with rural community development? Some of our favourite experiences in Southeast Asia also play a part in tackling some of the region's biggest challenges.





From silkworm to scarf  
Visiting silk farms in Siem Reap



## PHARE CIRCUS, CAMBODIA

For a spirited medley of live music and high energy gymnastics (with a good dose of flame juggling thrown in for good measure), don't miss Phare Circus. Inspired by drawing classes at a camp on the Thai-Cambodia border, a group of returning Cambodian refugees launched a non-profit arts organisation to improve the lives of other young people bearing scars from the civil war and brutal Khmer Rouge regime. An educational programme followed, before the launch of a dedicated circus school where students weave difficult stories into the high octane performances. As well as being a family friendly fun night out, all profits support projects and outreach programmes for around 2,000 young people.

**DO IT:** *Phare Circus performances take place nightly in Siem Reap, and three times a week in Battambang. Watch one of their inspirational shows on our Indochina Encompassed Small Group Tour. Visit [insideasiatours.com](http://insideasiatours.com) or call our Cambodia experts on 0117 244 3464 to find out more.*

## ARTISANS ANGKOR, CAMBODIA

You only have to look at Angkor Wat's intricate bas-reliefs, or to the markets packed with silk paintings, silver jewellery and lacquered bowls to discover Cambodia's rich cultural traditions, but there was a time when these ancient skills were in danger of dying out. In the 1990s, social enterprise Artisans Angkor launched a training programme to revive Khmer arts while providing employment in rural areas and improving the lives of local people; there are now 800 artisans and 48 workshops crafting traditional

goods in an ethical working environment. As well as free guided tours of the workshops or the Silk Farm, you can make your own Khmer masterpiece (and unique souvenir) with the help of a local master.

**DO IT:** *Join a masterclass with Artisans Angkor on our Hands On Cambodia & Vietnam Small Group Tour. Visit [insideasiatours.com](http://insideasiatours.com) or call our Cambodia experts on 0117 244 3464 to find out more.*





## TREE ALLIANCE, SOUTHEAST ASIA

With innovative dishes featuring a range of Western and local ingredients – tarantula with black pepper lime sauce is more delicious than it sounds – the TREE Alliance restaurants in Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar have racked up streams of glowing 5-star reviews. Their restaurants aren't just a delicious pit-stop in between sightseeing though; behind the scenes, the organisation is making a massive difference to the lives of local young people, one meal at a time. As well as training staff with

the skills to succeed in hospitality, they provide social support for groups that would otherwise face barriers to securing work. If you find yourself struggling to choose from the extensive menus, why not give everything a go? It's for a good cause after all!

**DO IT:** Enjoy lunch at the Romdeng TREE Alliance restaurant in Phnom Penh on our Kingdom of Adventure Fully Tailored Journey. Visit [insideasiatours.com](http://insideasiatours.com) or call our Cambodia experts on **0117 244 3464** to find out more.

## BHO HOONG VILLAGE STAY, VIETNAM

First-time visitors to Vietnam flock to the pretty port town of Hoi An for unique architecture, quaint coffee shops and that magical lantern festival. But for a window into a different world, travel two and a half hours on the (slightly bumpy) road less travelled into the mountains of the Annamite Range. Here, you'll spend a day or two in Bho Hoong village, home of the Co Tu people (one of Vietnam's smallest ethnic minorities). Rather than passing through for a few photos before hurrying along to your next stop, you'll really

experience rural Vietnamese life, learning about centuries-old customs and traditions, and trying your hand at everything from local handicrafts to crossbow techniques. By working closely with the community, most notably Yi Kong, former king of the Co Tu people, there's no sign of the overtourism that has blighted minority villages in other Southeast Asian countries.

**DO IT:** Stay at Bho Hoong village on our Vietnam Discovery Fully Tailored Journey. Visit [insideasiatours.com](http://insideasiatours.com) or call our Vietnam experts on **0117 244 3464** to find out more.







© Mandalao Elephant Camp, TREE Alliance, InsideAsia Tours staff



## MANDALAO ELEPHANT SANCTUARY, **LAOS**

Often sold to zoos and circuses, worked to the bone in the logging industry or vulnerable to poachers, elephants are at risk throughout Southeast Asia. Sadly, even at 'sanctuaries' they are often expected to give rides or perform tricks. At the Mandalao Elephant Sanctuary in Laos though, things are different. After witnessing the dire situation for elephants, two American conservationists rescued seven gentle giants who are now expected to do nothing more than explore, play and forage in a 30-hectare forest. Mandalao is just 40 minutes from the UNESCO World Heritage Town of Luang Prabang, yet feels wonderfully remote. Spend a day giving the elephants their morning bath (potentially a splashy affair), join them for a walk through the forest, and make friends forever with the gift of a banana or two.

**DO IT:** Walk with the elephants on our *Treetops, Mountains and Elephants Fully Tailored Journey*. Visit [insideasiatours.com](https://insideasiatours.com) or call our Laos experts on **0117 244 3464** to find out more.



east meets...

# JAY RAYNER

Using hand gestures to order at an izakaya, getting to grips with sumo wrestling, eating far too many Mont Blancs... the journalist, author and esteemed food critic shares his recent experiences of Japanese food and culture.

**So, this was a family trip, but you were also researching your new book, weren't you?**

Yes, there's a whole chapter in my new book about a dessert called the Mont Blanc, which funnily enough the Japanese are quite obsessed with. I think it's the chestnuts they're particularly taken by. After finding out that the Mandarin Oriental sits pretty much on top of the flagship store, I wondered in and found myself standing in their food hall.

It is the most remarkable shiny, glossy, jewel-like emporia, and there were more Mont Blancs on sale there than you could shake a stick at, so I kept buying them from these ridiculously over engineered cool boxes. Every moment was a little bit like that scene in *Love, Actually* when Rowan Atkinson ties up the piece of jewellery Alan Rickman is buying for his mistress – you can't believe how long it's taking and then it feels sacrilege to get the thing open.

**They take so much pride in food in Japan! Mont Blancs aside, how did you choose where to eat?**

This sounds like I'm very in touch with what I do for a living, but I think the best thing we did was use the concierge service to arrange our restaurant bookings before we left. You get very fast access to what it's like to be among the locals if you get your restaurant choices right.

On our last night, we stayed at the Park Hyatt and I tootled along to the concierge to say "it's our last night and we want something laidback. We don't want anything fancy". They had a sheet with all the local restaurants marked in an area very close by and sent us to exactly the perfect place: a

mad 24-hour izakaya [Japanese pub] where all the ordering was by iPad. It was absolutely great. So, my one tip would be to think carefully about your restaurant bookings before you go.

**With the chef's suggestions of the day and the chance to mix with local salarymen, izakaya are so much fun. Did the kids enjoy it as well?**

They enjoyed it very much indeed, they really did. Our favourite meal of the whole trip was at an izakaya where no-one spoke any English, but we found a way and it was very friendly and an awful lot of fun. We had no idea what was coming, but all of it was a delight.

Although I think it's fair to say that the pizza break was a bit of a relief as well. They were extremely good pizzas! That's the other thing. That attention to detail and method means that when they do pizza in Japan, they are going to do it better than in Rome.

**Did you find big differences between Japanese food in the UK and in Japan?**

There is one key difference - Japanese restaurants tend to be very specific about what they do. So, you have one restaurant for tempura, and one restaurant for eel, and so forth. Whereas the generic Japanese restaurants in the UK may have a variety of all these things.

But in the big cities, I think the quality of Japanese food in Britain has risen to an enormous degree, so I would be lying if I said it was unfamiliar.

**How was it getting around in Japan?**

It's all extremely efficient – we had no problems whatsoever. The only thing I would say is "do not

underestimate it when people tell you it's hot in the summer!" Everyone had mentioned it and I shrugged at it, but I don't think I'd really anticipated how hot 'hot' is in August.

Our *machiya* in Kyoto was a refuge in a way. In the same way when it's freezing cold in winter outside and you come into a warm house and you feel like you're looked after? It was that in reverse.

**How did you find living in a refurbished traditional house?**

It was lovely. Very comfortable and perfect for us, I would recommend it. On the one hand, a plush hotel is a lovely thing and I do adore a hotel experience. However, they can be quite "international", and they'll present everything in a way that's very familiar. Whereas a *machiya* does have an element that's set in the past. It makes you feel like you are genuinely living a different kind of life.

**...and you experienced the sumo, it doesn't get more Japanese than that...**

Any person who has travelled a lot knows the quiet smugness of going somewhere almost no other tourists are. We were very clearly on our own there and it was absolutely fascinating. Funnily enough, in some ways it sums up a certain thing about Japanese culture - an awful lot of ritual leading to nine seconds of action.

**DO IT:** Eat your way around Japan on our 13-night Gastronomic Adventure self-guided trip, from £2,690. Visit [insidejapantours.com](http://insidejapantours.com) or call our Japan experts on 0117 244 3463 to find out more.



Insider's guide to...

# TOP 5 JAPANESE PHRASES

Don't let complicated kanji characters put you off learning Japanese; even the simplest phrases are appreciated in Japan.

1

**Hello**  
**Konnichiwa**  
(Kon-nee-chee-wah)

Hotel receptionist, taxi driver, random person on the street... give this one a go as soon as you touch down.



2

**Thank you**  
**Arigatou gozaimasu**  
(Ah-ree-gah-toe goh-zye-mass)

Whether receiving the world's best ramen or showing appreciation for directions you didn't understand, don't forget your manners.



3

**Excuse me**  
**Sumimasen**  
(Soo-mee-mah-sen)



Useful for everything from bumping into someone on the bullet train to asking for help finding an acclaimed izakaya.

4

**I don't understand**  
**Wakarimasen**  
(Wa-ka-ree-mass-en)

Happens to the best of us. If in doubt, honesty is always the best policy.



5

**Goodbye**  
**Sayonara**  
(Sye-onn-ara)

When it's time for your reluctant return home...



**DO IT:** Did you know that our travel consultants speak Japanese? For a little more help navigating the language barrier and planning your trip, give them a call on 0117 244 3463.



# ART IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

**A**fter receiving a grant to learn about the folk art and culture of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, artist and teacher Tina Banks spent four and a half weeks exploring the region.

## Travelling solo

Travelling across the globe by yourself can be scary, but it really forced me out of my comfort zone. When else would you ask a stranger if they would like to share a meal? Coming from the United States, I was a little uneasy about my country's history, but everyone was so welcoming and loved to tell me their stories. I met so many wonderful people, but an afternoon with Mr. Vo Trung Khuyen, owner of the Hoi An Art Gallery, really stands out. A simple question about a piece of art led to a wonderful conversation over tea. As we talked, I sketched the kettle and cups and another solo traveller joined us; she'd heard about a scenic route across the bridge out of the town but didn't have a bike. Mr. Vo Trung Khuyen let us borrow his so we could take the journey together, and I gave him my drawings as a small gift for his kindness.

## Traditional folk art and culture

As well as teaching my students to be good citizens, I share artwork from around the world to encourage them to appreciate other cultures. In the tiny village of Nong Bueng outside Champasak in Laos, I met a man proudly adding the last details to a carving that had taken a week to complete; a trade he had learned from his father. Travelling with guides gave me

**"Travelling across the globe by yourself can be scary, but it really forced me out of my comfort zone"**

access to rural places where I could take knowledge about these skills, passed down from one family artist to another, back to my students.

## Village stays

Staying in Bho Hoong Village in Vietnam was my favourite experience of all. There are 54

minority groups in Vietnam, and 94-year-old Yi Kong is the leader and representative of the Co Tu Tribe. After lunch at his home, he gave me a tour of his workshop, showing me everything from a beautiful shrine to honour his ancestors to a python snake (which I found myself holding!), before an impromptu performance on a traditional musical instrument. Waking up to the sound of roosters, rising to eat pineapple and sugar cane, and giving traditional weaving processes a go was an amazing experience.

Having experienced village life in Bho Hoong; learnt about the turmoil of war in The Bao Tang My Thuat Vietnam Fine Arts Museum; explored the 5th-century Wat Phou temple in Laos; and made friends from all over the world, I haven't returned short of tales to tell my students!

**DO IT:** As well as art trips like Tina's, we've tailored all kinds of specialist journeys, including cycling in the Mekong Delta and ancestry tracing in Myanmar. Get in touch with our Southeast Asia travel experts on 0117 244 3466 to find out more.





# east COMPETITION



Thank you to everyone who entered the last **east** competition. We loved all your photos, but **Ian and Teresa's** image of Muang Neua from their 5-week trip in Southeast Asia left us dreaming of Laos. The **£250 voucher from Sherpa clothing** should keep them kitted out for the next adventure!



## Runner-up: east makes it to the mountains

**David** flicking through **east** at the Picasso Museum in Hakone was a close runner-up, snapping up a backpack and toiletry bag courtesy of our friends at Sherpa.

## Asia Expert crossword

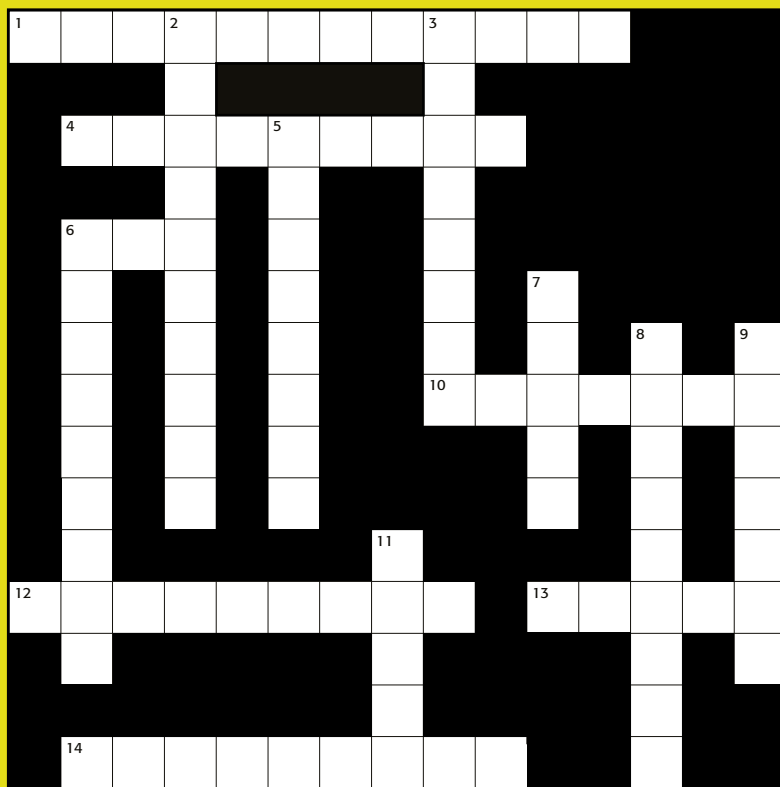
Answers to even the most curious clues can be found between the pages of this issue of **east**...

### ACROSS

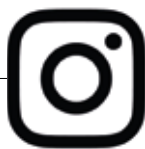
- 1 Highest point on Hong Kong island (12)
- 4 Laos is known as 'The land of a million...' (9)
- 6 Popular Vietnamese breakfast dish made with noodles (3)
- 10 Busiest crossing in Tokyo (7)
- 12 Largest religious monument in the world (9)
- 13 Nightly circus held Siem Reap (5)
- 14 Chestnut dessert, popular in Japan (9)

### DOWN

- 2 Finnish series with its own theme park in Japan (10)
- 3 Twin towers in Malaysia (8)
- 5 Japan's northernmost island (8)
- 6 Capital of Cambodia (9)
- 7 Apprentice geisha (5)
- 8 Japanese word for 'Excuse me' (9)
- 9 Colonial hotel where the Singapore Sling was created (7)
- 11 Japanese comics and graphic novels (5)







Travelled with us? We love seeing your holiday snaps! Tag your photos on Instagram with **#InsideAsia** or **#InsideJapan** and we'll share our favourites.



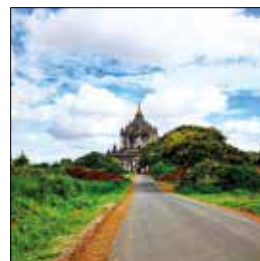
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Order a brochure, call the travel experts or visit our websites to start planning your holiday.



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