

ASIA UNLIMITED

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COVER STORY, HERALD-SUN TRAVEL SECTION

What's on the itinerary for the best tour of Asia? Diverse cultures, divine dining and every kind of adventure known to man. No passport required for this virtual tour, but see your travel agent for the real thing!

Bangkok

It all begins in Bangkok. We picked Bangkok as the starting point for our tour for the total immersion in culture, sights and taste. No other city in Asia can be compared to Bangkok; the insane tuk tuk drivers, magnificent temples and tongue twisting Thai language. Bangkok is an ancient city with a modern face. It's brand new airport a shining invitation to the world to come and join the distinct flavours downtown and live it up all night.

www.bangkok-city.com

What to see: Wat Po and The Royal Palace make for a spectacular day-out, and a day trip up the Chao Praya River to the ancient capital of Ayutthaya is a must.

Where to eat: Every night the streets of Bangkok turn into endless rows of cheap and cheerful dining.

Where to stay: Backpackers love the scene along Khao San rd while those looking for room with a view should head down the river to the Mandarin Oriental Bangkok.

Where to shop: Take the skytrain to Mochit station and gaze in wonder out the window as you approach 5-square-kilometres of silk, crafts and homewares at Chatuchak weekend market.

What's cheap: A taxi from downtown to your hotel will cost less than \$4, so where the skytrain train or klong ferries don't go you can get a taxi by the meter.

Krabi

The sandy beaches and clear tropical waters of Krabi are some of Thailand's best. Snorkelling and diving are high on the list of activities during the day, and Ao Nang beach is the perfect place to stay and play between snorkelling excursions around Phang Nga Bay. For the more adventurous, the rock climbing scene at Railay Beach is world famous for its sharp rising cliffs surrounded by jade-blue waters.

www.yourkrabi.com

What to see: Phang Nga Bay is a playground for snorkelling and diving. Get on a speed boat for around \$75 and spend the day on and in the water.

Where to eat: There's no such thing as bad Thai food, but for a taste of adventure the night markets in Krabi Town comes alive when the sun goes down.

Where to stay: For privileged access to the best beaches get a boat across to Railay Beach and pick from one of the modest resorts that watch the sunset every night.

Where to shop: Ao Nang caters for every travellers needs, including an abundant supply of stalls and shops selling pottery, buddha images and sarongs.

What's cheap: If you have ever wanted to learn to dive then this is the place to do it. The water is warm, the diving schools are experienced and for under \$200 you can spend a whole day learning scuba-basics and then heading out into open water.

Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia is a nation of diverse cultural mix, ease of travelling and inexpensive air-fares. The blend of Islamic and modern architectural influences is evident all over Kuala Lumpur and at KLCC the Petronas Towers are even more impressive up close than from a distance. Chinatown and Little India remind travellers of the ethnic influences that blend with the Malay in this unique city.

www.tourism.gov.my

What to see: A day trip to nearby Putrajaya is a must. Ten years ago it was decided to build a new city to accommodate government and business, and the result is architectural and landscape design on a scale not seen since the pyramids were built.

Where to eat: Starhill Gallery is the hot ticket in town for fine dining, offering restaurants for every style of Asian cuisine in the most salubrious of settings. Take the monorail to Bintang Walk and head downstairs at Starhill for the Feast Village.

Where to stay: It is worth paying a little extra for luxury in Kuala Lumpur, and the Shangri-La Hotel on Jalan Sultan Ismail is close to everything when you need it and divinely private when you don't.

Where to shop: Sungei Wang Plaza offers the best electronics shopping in Asia. Digital cameras and laptop computers are just the beginning.

What's cheap: You can't get cheaper than free, and a trip to the Skybridge at the Petronas Towers will cost you absolutely nothing. Arrive early in the morning to queue for your ticket and bring your camera to capture the moment as you walk on air between the two towers.

Sabah

A short flight south of Kuala Lumpur and you arrive in Borneo, the "land below the wind", and the Malaysian Borneo province of Sabah. Kota Kinabalu is a modest city that serves as a gateway for travellers heading further inland in search of jungles, trekking and Orang-utans. Continuing south-east the tiny island of Sipadan is a world famous divers paradise; just metres off the shore a near-vertical drop plunges over 500m into the murky depths of the ocean, where turtles and sharks playfully swim along the edge.

www.sabahtourism.com

What to see: Climbing the peak at Mt Kinabalu requires considerable determination and very warm gloves. The final climb to the summit goes from 3000m to a little over 4000m, a journey which begins at 2:30am in the hope of beating the sunrise.

Where to eat: On the hill above Sandakan is the former governors mansion is now the English Tea House, where waiters in white-suits greet you with a cold towellette and you can play croquet on the lawns while sipping Pimms No.1. The menu is a refined fusion of modern and Asian.

Where to stay: Turtle lovers can stay on a marine park island near Sandakan and watch these majestic creatures arrive during the night to lay their eggs.

Where to shop: Every Sunday the busy street of Jalan Gaya closes down to make room for an open-air market

What's cheap: For less than \$5 you can buy a jar of tiger-balm, which when rubbed inside our socks will help stop leeches from eating you alive on your next jungle walk.



Angkor

Nothing can prepare you for the incredible scale and beauty of Angkor. Ancient cities emerge out of the jungle, and occasionally the jungle invades deep into the temples themselves. For centuries the civilised kingdoms of Khmer people have built ever larger cities of stone from which to rule. The most famous of these ruins is Angkor Wat, but there are over 40 others within a 200 square kilometre area to visit – a 3 day pass is a must.

www.theangkorguide.com

What to see: Located in the exact geographical centre of Angkor Thom, The Bayon is a 13th century Buddhist temple crowned by over 50 towers carved with the “Smile of Angkor”.

Where to eat: Khmer Kitchen is located near the old market and offers the best mix of Khmer cuisine with English menus. It's locally owned and locally delicious.

Where to stay: Visitors to Angkor will be staying in Siam Reap, once a modest regional town with more hotels than Angkor has temples. For a touch of luxury the Grand Hotel d'Angkor has plenty of history and that famous Raffles service.

Where to shop: You don't go shopping at Angkor, the shops come to you. Before you can even get off the bus a team of young children will be waving their silks and trinkets through the window and shouting the price in US dollars.

What's cheap: Give the illegal copies of Angkor guide books a miss and spend your money on a few lotus flowers at a temple. A single dollar will get you something suitably symbolic, and maybe a little kind karma will return your way.

Hanoi

The streets of Vietnam's northern city are filled with bicycles and baskets laden with fruit, flowers and fashion. It's a city small enough to get around on foot, but large enough to spend days relaxing and exploring. The influence of the French is still evident in the colonial architecture, tree lined avenues and delicious coffee – but the ubiquitous use of the pointy hat gives a distinct Vietnamese feel to every scene.

www.hanoitourist-travel.com

What to see: The Temple of Literature is a magnificent garden in the heart of Hanoi where stone tablets have been used to preserve religious scripts for nearly 1000 years.

Where to eat: Little Hanoi is the leader of the pack, located near Beer St, offering great service and the most enticing Vietnamese menu. The catfish rice-paper rolls are unequalled.

Where to stay: Hotels are numerous inside the old-quarter of Hanoi, but go a block further south and the quality steps up a notch.

Where to shop: The entire old quarter is a monument to the good taste of Hanoi traders, with handicrafts, artwork and lacquer ware filling every shop window. Pho Nha Tho is the pick of the streets, with the gentle vines of a banyan tree blocking one lane, opposite yet another small temple hidden behind a modest gateway.

What's cheap: Hanoi's Water Puppet Theatre is a cultural show unlike any other. All the action takes place on a water-filled stage and features hilarious characters, ingenious animation and fire-breathing dragons. Tickets to the show start at \$2.

Hong Kong

Besides having the best visitors centre in the history of mankind, Hong Kong sports stunning harbour views, an effective public transport network and is the home of Dim Sum – the Asian alternative to a tapas bar. Shopping is a major tourist attraction in Hong Kong also, and the western blend to Chinese traditions makes this an easy place to spend your money. Tram rides to The Peak and their very own Disneyland are just a few of the Family attractions.

www.discoverhongkong.com

What to see: Every night at 8pm the harbour and skyline are lit-up with a light show. Lasers and neon fill the sky in every direction. Head for the star ferry terminal at Kowloon and take a seat along the esplanade.

Where to eat: Ming Court at Langham Place is the gold standard for Dim Sum lunch. You won't see surly grandmothers pushing dumpling trolleys here, just excellent service and the preparation of Dim Sum made into an art-form.

Where to stay: The age-old dilemma for travellers is whether to stay on Hong Kong Island or Kowloon, Shangri-La hotels offer one of each to ensure you won't be disappointed.

Where to shop: Cat Street and Hollywood Road offer the most enticing examples of jade, antiques and tea pots anywhere in Asia. Don't get up too early; nothing really opens in Hong Kong before 11am anyway.

What's cheap: For less than \$1 you can ride the star ferry across the harbour, take as many photos of the scenery as you like, and then ride it back again.

Guilin

Gentle rivers carve a path through limestone hills as bamboo rafts punt up and down carrying cormorants, farm produce and tourists. Bullocks plough rice fields along the valley floors while early morning hot-air balloons drift overhead. Nothing happens quickly in Guilin. An hour's drive from the city is the town of Yangshuo, a place where travellers can enjoy cheap accommodation, friendly bicycle tours and the best apple crumble in China.

www.glvisit.com

What to see: A cruise down the river to Xiping takes you past the most scenic stretches of the Lijiang River, including the very same scene pictured on China's 20 yuan note.

Where to eat: Pam and her lovely ladies at Yangshuo cooking school not only teach you how to cook a feast but you'll enjoy the bounty of your labour by dining amongst pomelo trees.

Where to stay: Get out of the city and enjoy the relaxed style of Yangshuo. The Magnolia Hotel offers boutique accommodation in the best location.

Where to shop: Head down the river to Fuli Town and not only do they sell ornate hand-painted fans, they make them too.

What's cheap: For \$10 you can have a custom work of calligraphy painted on a scroll – easy to pack and lovely to hang when you get home.

Shanghai

China's most modern city combines a touch of elegance with the mystique of the orient. At one extreme it's a race to build to the highest skyscrapers, while an hour outside the city the Ming dynasty water towns rest calmly on the Grand Canal with old men punting up and down the waterways. Shanghai is a gateway between cultures, but has managed to keep her own. For travellers this is the place to experience the best of everything China has to offer, old and new.

lyw.sh.gov.cn/en

What to see: A day trip out of town by tourist bus gets you over the Grand Canal and into charming little water towns like Wuzhen and Xitang; centuries old character built from timber and stone.

Where to eat: Grandmother Restaurant offers a superb Shanghainese menu with most items in English (unlike their business card).

Where to stay: The newly built tower at Pudong Shangri-La is not just great for filming Hollywood movie stunts, but offers the most spacious suites in Shanghai, stunning views of The Bund and the best hot-stones massage in town.

Where to shop: A few blocks west of Old Shanghai is the antique market, a few narrow streets filled with Mao-morabilia, grasshopper cages and groovy trinkets.

What's cheap: Keep an eye out on the streets for bamboo steamers cooking up “xiao long bao”. These crab and pork dumplings cost \$2 for ten, but careful with the first bite as the steaming-hot soup escapes into your mouth.