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Asia^{AWAY}Away

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LISTINGS (86 21) 5116 2126, whatson@asiaandaway.com

FREE CALL HOTLINE 800 718 7118 (within China)

图书在版编目(CIP)数据

永恒之美/上海市旅游管理委员会《旅游》编委会编.

上海: 中国福利会出版社, 2006. 4

ISBN 7-5072-1179-7

I. 永... II. 上... III. ①旅游指南-中国-英文 ②旅游指南-亚洲-英文

IV. ①K928.9 ②K930.9

中国版本图书馆CIP数据核字(2006)第019305号

出版 中国福利会出版社

版次 2006年4月第1版

印次 2006年4月第1次印刷

开本 16

印张 5

标准书号 ISBN 7-5072-1179-7/K.10

Price RMB 35 (HKD 35 USD 6)

定价 35元

印刷 上海腾飞照相制版有限公司

Asia and Away magazine is available on select international and domestic flights of Hainan Airlines, Xiamen Airlines, Virgin Atlantic and Garuda Indonesia, and in VIP lounges of Cathay Pacific Airways and United Airlines



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ON THE COVER

China opens its doors to the world.

PHOTOGRAPHY:

PANORAMA STOCK



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UNARMED AND DANGEROUS

To celebrate our second wedding anniversary last month, my husband booked a 'surprise' weekend away in Qingdao. As it turned out, it was very surprising indeed. The hotel we stayed in was home to at least one rat, there were big cracks in two of the room's walls and the 'en-suite bathroom' featured a toilet that didn't flush. During one of my (many) excursions from the hotel, I came across *Asia and Away* and was particularly drawn to the seven-page boutique hotel spread. Rest assured that my husband has been forced to read this section and our 'weekend away' has been rescheduled. Thanks for arming me with the necessary information.

Stephanie Davies
Beijing

CONFUSED

I am a student at Yunnan Normal University. Last month, by chance, I found a copy of a magazine called *Voyage* and liked it very much, even if I didn't understand every word. Afterwards I went online and discovered that the web address led to a different magazine, *Asia and Away*, which – I think – is who I am writing to now. Anyway, I like the magazine very much and not only want to subscribe, but also get some of the past issues I have missed.

Wang Xiaodong,
Kunming

Curiously enough, an Asia and Away staffer also unearthed a few rogue copies of Voyage still lurking on Yunnanese shelves during a press trip recently. To explain, Voyage and Asia and Away are one in the same. We renamed the magazine last September, though the content, style and quality have – we hope – remained consistent throughout.

You can subscribe and order back-issues by writing to distribution@asiaandaway.com – Ed.

INTERESTING FEATURES

Having recently enjoyed a short break away from Shanghai, I feel compelled to share some advice that may help anyone choosing the same route. The trip was an excellent walking weekend in Huangshan. As readers may know, it's possible to take the sleeper train out of Shanghai on Friday evening and return overnight on Sunday. The trains are so well timed that, assuming you don't mind heading directly to the office, you need only be an hour or so late for work on Monday morning. All of which is fine, aside from the fact that clambering up and down mountains can tend to make one sweat. If returning to work without showering doesn't appeal, dig out one of Huangshan city's many bathhouses. For RMB 20 or so, it's possible to shower, bathe, take a sauna and have your feet tickled while

you wait in comfort for the train to depart. I implore other overseas tourists to do the same, if only to help condition Huangshan locals to the sight of naked 'foreigners'. It's bad enough being stared at while fully clothed, let alone while sitting in one's birthday suit in a tub-full of curious Chinamen.

Pete Drury,
Shanghai

For more on the pleasures and perils of a trip to Huangshan, see page 16 – Ed.

MARCHING ON

I just wanted to say how much I enjoyed your new-look March issue. The magazine goes from strength to strength – keep up the good work.

Patricia Schultz
Hong Kong



COMPETITION WINNER

Alexandre Gruss has won a four-night stay at the Le Meridien Kota Kinabalu in Borneo, Malaysia after providing us with the correct answer for our 'Where on Earth?' competition in the March issue.

The answer was Tongli, Zhejiang province.

YOU LOVED IT, YOU HATED IT, YOU DISCOVERED IT. NOW DON'T KEEP IT A SECRET. SEND YOUR NEWS AND VIEWS TO ASIA AND AWAY BEFORE APRIL 15, 2006.

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Letters may be edited for length and clarity.
This month **Pete Drury** wins a RMB 1,000 voucher toward any travel package from Saigontour Travel, Vietnam's premier travel company with 31 years of experience. Valid 6 months from publication date (+86 (0) 21 6247 3367; info@saigontourist.com.cn).

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PHOTOGRAPHY: PANORAMA STOCK, FUCHUN RESORT



London-based travel writer **Adrian Bridge** made a beeline for the ancient Japanese capital of Kyoto ahead of the release of the film *Memoirs of a Geisha*. There he sought out the city's most elusive – and alluring – inhabitants, and learned a few new party tricks along the way. When not being entertained by exquisite-looking women, Adrian helps to edit and commission the Travel section of the UK's *Daily Telegraph*. In a previous incarnation, he was a foreign correspondent for *The Independent*, based in Berlin and Budapest.



After five years of living and working in Shanghai, **Henri Fruchet** and his wife **Rossana Colombo** decided to trade the big city for the Italian countryside; but they planned to take the long way home. Having graduated in Chinese and Central Asian history, they chose to travel overland from Shanghai to Venice through western China, central Asia, Iran, Turkey and eastern Europe. It was the trip of a lifetime, with the Uzbek cities of Bukhara and Samarkand two of the absolute highlights.




Graham Bond likes to be beside the seaside. He was born in that approximate position – on a cliff in southern England – and has remained close ever since. After a short career in news journalism, he left Britain's shores and now finds himself in Shanghai, working as deputy editor for *Asia and Away*. Remembering one of the more bizarre aspects of his trip to Shandong's northern coastline – described in detail on page 30 – he says: "I have only ever found one karaoke parlour in China where it's possible to sing *Rape Me* by Nirvana. It's located on a beach in Penglai."



Originally from Canada, **Peter MacIntosh** has made Kyoto, Japan his home for over a decade. Coordinating and interpreting for the international media and film industry has gained him a reputation as a 'geisha expert'. Spending most of his time among the geisha with either a camera (he is also a photographer) or cup of *sake* in hand gave him the idea to combine all of his passions and open *Kyoto Sights and Nights* (www.kyotosightsandnights.com) as well as a geisha-themed bar (www.hanagumo.com).


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- Managing Lodging Properties in the Provincial Cities
- Hotel Investment Expo 2006-Deals in China
- Insights from within China
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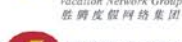
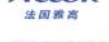
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MONGOLIAN ADVENTURE

Q I am getting greatly excited by the prospect of a trip though Mongolia. The plan began as a straightforward train holiday but – thanks to a little background reading – now includes horseriding, 4x4 adventures and an attempt to retrace the steps of Genghis Khan. Did I say 'plan'? Actually, I have no idea how to do any of this. Help!

Marie Cantelmi
Hong Kong

A Mongolia's roads are hardly its greatest asset – however, this only enhances the possibilities for potential adventure. Whilst galloping across grasslands may seem a little difficult to organise, there are tour companies who – for a small fee – can put these plans into action. Mongolia Travel (www.mongoliatravel.mn) and 4th World Adventure (www.4thworldadventure.com) both have a selection of package tours which feature spades of hiking, trekking and other rugged pursuits. They can also tailor a trip for you. A real treat would be to coincide your visit with the Eriin Gurvan Naadam sporting extravaganza (see page 28) which takes place between July 11-13.

HIGH EXPECTATIONS

In an attempt to get my children involved with family decision-making I let them choose our spring vacation destination. This appears to have been a mistake as my ten year old – who is going through a 'hardy explorer' stage – now has his heart set on visiting Everest. My husband and I were rather hoping he was going to suggest Japan. What's your best advice for appeasing both parties?

Jane Bewley
Guangzhou

A Thanks to Japan's location at the meeting point of three tectonic plates, its landscape is mostly mountainous so it would be quite possible to steer the family around from the wilds of Everest. How about a stay at the mountain resort of Karuizawa? An hour away from Tokyo on the fittingly named Romantic Road, the area is a favourite escape for Japan's A-listers. There are scores of half and one-day treks across stunning mountainous paths – almost as scenic as Everest's but infinitely safer if you hope to bring a family along for the climb. As an added bonus, April is still very much cherry blossom season, so expect to see the landscape dressed up in a lovely shade of pink.



Send your travel questions to 'Need to Know' at *Asia and Away*.
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MIDDLE EAST - EUROPE**



ALEENTA, PHUKET

Aleenta, one of Thailand's boutique pioneers, unveils its second major project this month. Determined that guests be able to 'reconnect with their loved ones,' TVs have been stripped from this beachside resort and replaced by a library of well-thumbed paperbacks and full-frontal views of the Andaman Sea. Accommodation ranges from 'no tan lines' private villas to chic ocean lofts with glass walls opening out onto private sun decks. Each unit comes equipped with Aleenta's signature products; the Egyptian cotton bed linen is a particular highlight. Cleopatra-esque levels of luxury are also on offer at the spa where treatment options include a rose petal, almond oil, milk and honey bath.

(+66 (0)2 508 5333; www.aleenta.com; Ocean View Lofts from USD 163, until May 31)



RENAISSANCE RESORT AND SPA, KOH SAMUI

Renaissance has made a dazzling entrance into Thailand with the rebranding of the Buriraya to the Renaissance Koh Samui Resort and Spa. Overlooking the Gulf of Siam, this romantic boutique resort is modelled on a traditional Thai village with thatched-roof villas, perfumed tropical gardens and songbirds in colourful wooden cages hanging along the pathways. Each of the 43 deluxe rooms features a whirlpool tub on the terrace, but the ones to book are the gargantuan villas by the beach with four-poster beds, polished teak floors and their own walled courtyard and infinity plunge pool. You can take a mountain bike and explore nearby Lamai fishing village or go diving in the surrounding coves, although with several excellent dining options, a Quan Spa and private white sand beach, you might just want to stay in.

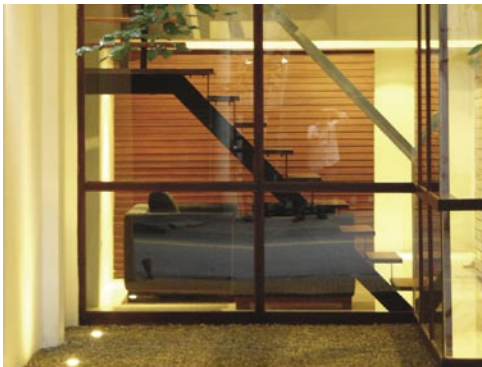
(+66 (0)77 429 300; renaissancehotels.com/usmbr; deluxe rooms from USD 225, villas from USD 480)



BLUE, SYDNEY

After a bit of corporate shuffling, the hotel-formerly-known-as-W has re-opened under a similarly slimline moniker. Blue is the first foray into Australia for Indian luxury hotel chain Taj. Given the slew of awards for the old hotel – *Conde Naste Traveller* reckoned it was one of the top three hotels in the South Pacific, *Wallpaper** magazine said it had one of the top five bars in the world – Taj has sensibly left the main features of the W intact. The 100-room property is located in a former warehouse on the Finger Wharf in swanky Woollahooloo, close to the Opera House, Botanical Gardens and central shopping districts.

(+61 (0)2 9331 9000; www.tajhotels.com; Wharf King rooms from AUD 575)



LUXX, BANGKOK

As a home to the 'young, hip and trendy traveller', LUXX Bangkok offers a dose of urban-chic to budget-minded visitors. Tucked away on Decho Road but close to the shopping and nightlife hub around the Silom intersection, the hotel boasts neat lines, graceful curves and a cool, minimalist ambience. The design makes innovative use of glass walls giving the 13 compact rooms an airy feel. The novel bathrooms use this transparency particularly well, allowing great views from the wooden bathtub. Given the inexpensive price, free wi-fi internet access throughout the hotel is a particularly nice touch.

(+66 (0)2 635 8800; www.staywithluxx.com; Luxx Compact rooms from USD 60)



RICHWOOD GARDEN HOTEL, DONGGUAN

Nominated for China's prestigious Luban Award – the highest architectural accolade in the land – the new Richwood Garden Hotel in Dongguan was built with visions of Bali very much in mind. Given its lush, tropical Guangdong location, perhaps this is no surprise. Located next to the scenic Hengzhen Reservoir, the 370-room hotel has an uncluttered, low-rise appeal and offers guests an extravagant menu of wining and dining choices with nine separate restaurants, a delightful teahouse, nightclub and cigar club. All rooms have broadband access, plasma TVs and separate showers and bathtubs.

(+86 (0)769 570 8888; www.worldhotels.com; superior rooms from RMB 980_)



GROWING UP

China's already crowded skies are set to get even busier. The people tasked with overseeing the fastest growing aviation market in the world say they want to bring in 100 new airliners and 1,000 new pilots every year for the next five years to accommodate rising demand. Despite the fact that there are currently 5,000 daily flights – or 11,000 take-offs and landings – it's estimated that only about one per cent of the population has ever sat on a plane, indicating there's plenty of room for market expansion. China's air regulator, CAAC, has also said it will be permitting red eye flights, departing as late as 2am, for the first time in four years. Tickets for these flights are likely to be 20 per cent cheaper than standard fares.



THE MOUSE IS READY

This time, Disneyland Hong Kong is taking no chances. After the New Year ticketing debacle which saw thousands of angry ticket-holders turned away at the gate, the park has announced it will set aside 11 extra days in April and May when entry will be restricted to visitors with special tickets. The problems in February were the result of a new policy that led to the park being flooded with guests using Flexi Tickets they had purchased days or weeks earlier. To avoid a repeat of the mayhem, Disney has announced that visitors arriving over Easter (April 14-21) or the May Golden Week (April 30-May 6) must have designated Special Day Tickets. The usual Regular Day Tickets and Peak Day Tickets will be valid on all other days during these months.



IT'S APRIL! YOU SHOULD BE IN... CHIANG MAI

If you like peace and quiet, Bangkok is for once a choice destination: Thailand's New Year Songkran celebrations leave the capital bereft of its massive migrant population. Thrill-seekers should head north to the hills of Chiang Mai, where between April 11-15 flamboyant carnival parades, glamorous beauty contests and vicious water fights are the norm. Songkran equals getting soaked, and as April is Thailand's hottest month, few complain. The fun ranges from receiving a courteous sprinkle from a stranger to getting on the wrong side of a full-on guerilla water gun assault. Songkran is also a time for people to renew family ties and reflect on acts of kindness, making it a great opportunity to feel both the warmth of Thai hospitality and the cool of its water reserves.

Approval has been given for work to start on China's long-awaited second Magnetic Levitation line. The new route will whisk passengers between Shanghai and Zhejiang's capital Hangzhou in just 26 minutes and, like Shanghai's existing Pudong Airport-Luoyang Station 'Maglev', will allow for speeds of up to 430 kmph. The first stage of development is expected to link Pudong Airport with Shanghai's other main air transport terminal at Hongqiao.

HOLIDAY PICK



YUNNAN TAMED

Like neighbouring Tibet, Yunnan was once the preserve of adventurous backpackers. How things change. In the same year that sees the launch of a luxurious Orient Express-style train journey to the roof of the world, travel operator L in-Style promises to transform the way tourists get around China's most ethnically diverse province. Basing its tailor-

made programmes around luxury, style, design, art and comfort, the Kunming-based team will organise trips for groups of between two and eight people, attending to guests' every whim and eliminating the challenges of independent travel in this underdeveloped and beautiful part of the country. Tours will emphasise human contact throughout and feature a chance to meet a range of local scholars, musicians and architects.

(+86 (0)871 311 6685; www.l-instyle.com; nine-night tours from RMB 10,400 per person)

TABLOID TALES



Aussie – OY!

Offensive slang or Great Aussie Adjective? Tourism Australia's latest ad campaign has been both celebrated and castigated thanks to its use of the English language's most common swear word. "We've poured you a beer... we've shampooed the camel... we've saved you a spot on the beach," say a series of 'real' Australians in a variety of appealing locales. "So where the bloody hell are you?" The fact that the risqué punchline is delivered by a bikini-clad young woman probably only adds to the ire of those

who accuse the creators of dumbing down Australian culture. However, the USD 133 million campaign received backing from Prime Minister John Howard, who told Melbourne's Southern Cross Radio that the word 'bloody' had become "part of the vernacular" and wasn't offensive. The ad will be shown in China, Japan and South Korea over coming weeks, though Queensland Premier Peter Beattie worries the message may not translate. "I just think a lot of people will think, 'What the bloody hell does that mean?'" he told the Australian Associated Press.

(www.wherethebloodyhellareyou.com)

LATE DEPARTURES



Tiger Trail

Singapore's Tiger Airways is launching a service to Shenzhen (starting April 15), Haikou (April 26) and Guangzhou (April 27), flying four times a week from Singapore to Haikou and three times a week to Guangzhou/Shenzhen. Promotional fares from SGD 49.98 one way. (+65 6580 7630; www.tigerairways.com)

Passage to India **hot**

Fly with Emirates from Shanghai to Kolkata for just RMB 4,880 return (tax excluded) before May 31. (+86 (0)21 3222 9999; www.emirates.com)

Eastern Promise

Fly Beijing to Tokyo/Nagoya with Northwest Airlines for only RMB 2,560 return (e-ticket). Return within one month. Valid until April 19. (eLong toll free 400 810 0123; +86 (0)10 6432 9999; www.elong.com/flights)

Say G'day **hot**

Fly to Sydney/Melbourne with Air China, departing from Shanghai (RMB 4,470 return) or Beijing (RMB 4,840 return). Stay two weeks to six months. Purchase at least 14 days in advance. Valid until May 31, excluding April 27-May 3. (+86 21 6422 7406; www.51flyto.com)

Maybe Manila

Return flights from Hong Kong to Manila with Cathay Pacific cost just RMB 1,580. Only applicable for China mainland passport-holders or foreigners with a mainland work/residence permit. Valid until July 14, excluding April 29-May 2. (eLong toll free 400 810 0123; www.elong.com/flights)

FRESH FLIGHTS



SHANGHAI TO DOHA

Qatar Airways has stepped up frequency on its Doha-Shanghai route with the introduction of a fourth weekly service. (www.qatarairways.com)

BEIJING TO ULAAN BAATAR

From March 25, Air China flies daily between Beijing and Ulaan Baatar. (toll free 800 810 1111; www.airchina.com.cn)

SINGAPORE TO ABU DHABI

Singapore Airlines has launched a thrice weekly service to Abu Dhabi, becoming the only airline to operate the route between Singapore and the UAE capital. (www.singaporeair.com)

DENPASAR TO SEOUL

After a two-year lay off, Indonesian flag-carrier Garuda has recommenced direct Denpasar-Seoul flights under a codeshare agreement with Korean Air. Garuda will fly the route four times a week, with Korean Air taking up the reins on the other three days. (www.garuda-indonesia.com)

ABU DHABI TO JAKARTA/MUSCAT

The UAE's national carrier, Etihad Airways, has started a four-times-a-week, non-stop flight between Abu Dhabi and Jakarta. Etihad will also be launching a daily service to the neighbouring capital city of Muscat on March 26. (www.etihadairways.com)

By Graham Bond

LAND OF HOPE AND BEAUTY

"Daniel J Groshong's *Timor-Leste Land of Discovery* is a testament to life and liberty in the world's newest nation," writes Timor's Foreign Affairs Minister in an afterword to this glorious coffee-table tome. With similarly weighty comments from the likes of Bill Clinton and Kofi Annan sprinkled throughout, *Land of Discovery* reminds readers that the 192 pages of mesmerising photography – full of warmth, vitality and fun – must be seen against the story of a nation's struggle for freedom. The result is a book that is not only profoundly beautiful but also deeply moving.

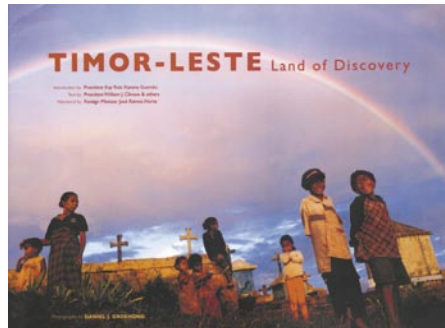
Timor-Leste's abiding allure is a miracle in itself. Having survived centuries of exploitation by Portuguese colonisers, the island endured a devastating three-year stay by Japanese troops during the second world war. It was annexed by a belligerent Indonesia in the 1970s, leading in turn to a brutal and bloody occupation that only came to an end in 2001. These historical facts are recorded in brief at the back of this book, and it's where they belong. For this is a book that documents the true joy of the land that has survived.

Land of Discovery is no seductive slice of travel mystique. Authenticity abounds on each and every page, from the shot of a man boiling water for coffee in an abandoned mountain chapel, to images of villagers clutching their prize cock-fighters shortly before a bout. With separate sections on the Urban, Sea, Coastal, Inland and Mountain landscapes, Groshong treats us to the best of the island's human and geographic attractions without creating a holiday brochure slideshow. Staring out from the pages are faces

scarred by struggle, eyes filled with hope and expressions of enduring determination.

That the book feels like a documentary study is no great surprise. In his 20-year photographic career, Groshong has spent time documenting conflict – Somalia and Afghanistan included – as well as environmental issues for Greenpeace. But though journalistic in tone, there's an artistic richness. *Land of Discovery* is a genuine treasure, a visually gorgeous book that pays tribute to the beauty of the natural world and the indomitable spirit of the Timorese.

Photographs by Daniel J Groshong, available for USD 40 from www.tayophotogroup.com



WOO-HOO

Space Tourism moved a step closer when US company Space Adventures announced it had won permission to build a commercial spaceport in the UAE. The USD 250 million project will include a launch pad for the company's moon orbits, expected to begin by 2010.

Too cool for the customs queue? Private jet charter provider **Bombardier Skyjet International** and **Island Shangri-La Hong Kong** have teamed up to offer tailor-made travel packages for high-flyers. The ultimate in customised travel luxury, packages include flights in a private jet, airport transfers in the Shangri-La's new royal blue Rolls Royce Phantom and five-star accommodation with all the perks. Prices start from USD 41,025 for two.

This month, **Rough Guides** and **Lonely Planet** will both begin printing warnings in their guidebooks about the environmental impact of flying. Concerned that travellers are becoming too casual about jetting around the world, the publishers say they want to encourage a 'fly less and stay longer' ethos.

BOO

Malaysian budget carrier **Air Asia** has done the unthinkable – and to many, unforgivable – by painting one of its new Airbus A320s the colours of the Manchester United football club. The world's first 'footy livery' features images of players who, presumably, the company hopes aren't sold before the end of the season.

The management authority of the **Juyongguan** section of the **Great Wall** has been forced to tear down its gimmicky 'Love Wall'. For a short time, visitors could pay RMB 999 to etch a romantic message onto the replica 'fake' wall, located immediately next to the real thing. Sadly, it seems that somebody forgot to ask Beijing's Cultural Heritage Bureau for building permission. The four couples that took part will, apparently, be getting a refund.



GADGETS FOR GIRLS

Whether you're on the move, in the pool or lying in bed, these four gadgets promise to make life that little bit sexier

Play iBoxer Solid Boxer

How better to have fun with your iPod than by sticking it down your pants? This sporty pair of undies has a snug little kangaroo-style pouch that will comfortably accommodate an iPod, or any MP3 player or mobile. Made from a silky cotton and spandex blend, it comes in a variety of fresh, confident colours. The best part: buy two pairs and you'll receive three free iTunes.

www.freshpair.com



Aroma Waker

Tired of that piercing alarm call at the crack of dawn? Disappointed by the lingering smell of the morning's fry-up on your return from work? The Aroma Waker promises a less rude awakening and a more aromatic return. By connecting an alarm clock with two heat sinks that can be set to vaporise oil at certain times of the day, this ingenious device will have you recalling dreams of sea breezes or favourite foods, long after you've woken up.

www.abiogenesisdesign.com



Sticky Wristwatch

A sticky watch for sticky situations. When wearing the Rolex becomes a burden, why not slap on this self-gumming 'timeflex' device? The wafer-thin display can be bent or rolled like paper and will attach itself to skin or clothing. The menu is accessed by touchscreen technology and power is supplied by super small batteries hidden in a thin layer of the watch. When you're finished, peel it off and toss it in the rubbish bin.

www.yankodesign.com



Sony Bean Walkman

Boasting a phenomenal 1GB of built-in memory, this bean-shaped – and sized – walkman can store some 695 songs, with a bonus FM tuner in case you get bored. With a battery life of 50 hours, power pit stops are few and far between, though a super quick battery charge system means that a three minute plug-in will get you around three hours of playback. A single-line display and a built-in USB connector complete the list of attractions that make this little bean a truly magical one.

www.sonystyle.com



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4190205203002 05 EYES WIDE OPEN

After a few false dawns, the biometrics revolution finally seems to be gathering pace. From passport swipes to iris scans, Kristi Lanier explains what it all means for travellers

Ever since early man made his first hand print in prehistoric clay, humankind has been dabbling in biometrics. The difference between then and now is that caveman Og didn't need permission to travel from one cave to the next.

Biometrics is the science and technology of measuring biological data – fingerprints, facial patterns, iris colour – for the purpose of verifying a person's identity. We've all seen movies where the super-spy hero fools the retinal scanner to save the world. But the reality is far more mundane. Simply put, when the mud Og stuck his fingers into petrified, he left a unique physical identifier. So, when a company or country uses biometrics for identification, they're determining who we are based on biological features unique to each of us.

"After October 26, 2006, if a visa-waiver country doesn't have biometric passports, it's to the back of the visa line you go."

The first recorded use of biometrics occurred in 14th-century China. A European explorer recorded how merchants stamped the hands and feet of children using ink and paper as a means of distinguishing between them. For the most part, the technology stalled with fingerprinting until the 20th century when the industry broke open. Now there are more than ten biometric identifiers, including physical as well as behavioural ones like voice and written signature.

At the heart of biometrics is security. Having to match your identity to a detailed facial map as you pass through customs makes tracking and apprehending mischief-makers a lot easier. The post-9/11 security hysteria brought the biometrics discussion into the realm of travel documentation. In 2002 the United States government passed legislation requiring the use of biometric identifiers in all US visas. The same bill required that all visa-waiver programme partners – countries whose citizens can travel to the US without a visa – present biometric-enabled passports in compliance with international standards by 2004 or they too would have to apply for a visa.

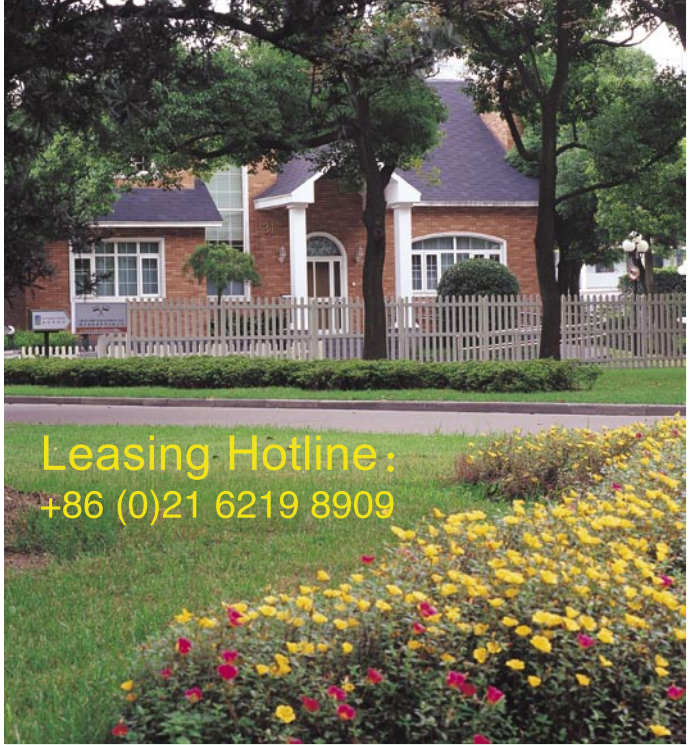
Pressured in part by the US law, the global conversion to biometric passports has turned into a sprint among these 27 visa-waiver partners. However, the considerable logistical and technical challenges of converting entire passport systems made the 2004 deadline impossible. Currently, the deadline for visa-waiver countries has been extended to October 26, 2006. After that date, if a visa-waiver country doesn't have biometric passports, it's to the back of the visa line you go.

Canada and Australia have already introduced biometric passports, as have several European Union countries with Belgium being the first in 2004. The US itself started rolling out biometric or 'e-passports' in December 2005 and the UK says its embassy in Beijing will begin issuing biometric passports next month.

The biggest puzzle for travellers though is what biometrics in their passports mean. In 2003, the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) established global standards for biometric travel documents. The agency selected facial recognition as the preferred identifier followed by irises and fingerprints.

The face has long been used to confirm identity with photo IDs. Facial

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recognition technology takes it a step further, mapping various features on the face like the distances between eyes, nose, mouth and ears. The measurements are then digitally coded and stored on a tiny computer chip. To the passport holder, it means little, as facial biometrics can be derived from a good quality passport photo. At airport immigrations the process might look like this: You hand over your passport, it's scanned through a chip reader, a digital camera snaps an image of you and a computer compares that image with what's on the chip.

As one US spokesperson says, the ICAO standards are a blueprint and countries will interpret them differently. The British biometric passports will have a chip with the holder's facial biometric. Other European countries are including both face and fingerprint identifiers. The US e-passports store information from the passport's printed data page and a digital image of the passport photograph for use with facial recognition technology. Ireland, on the other hand, has scrapped their biometric passport plans for the moment.

"Amid the biometric hubbub, international travellers can look forward to one unexpected bonus: the official word is that biometrics will speed airport immigration lines."

Most travellers won't even notice the switch to biometrics though they should be aware that new regulations exist. And there are some potential hiccups between the US and its visa-waiver programme partners as a result of the former's strict travel documentation requirements.


In short, for US entry all passports issued before October 2005 must be machine-readable (a bar code at the bottom of the data page enables personal details to be called up on a computer screen) and all passports issued between October 2005 and 2006 must have either a digital photograph or integrated chip with information from the data page. Finally, all passports issued after October 26, 2006 must be biometric.

The US has made the visa-application process biometric as well. Travellers applying for visas have their digital photo taken and two index fingers electronically scanned.

The security advantages of biometrics are indisputable. But whenever there's a technology aimed at preventing crime there's a criminal trying to crack it. So it goes with biometrics. In the general biometrics debate, privacy activists say storing such information is an intrusion and also voice concern that good intentions can backfire – biometrics could be used as a tool to reinforce a 'surveillance society', they say.

For travellers, the main concerns revolve around the protection of personal information and the passport chip's immunity to 'skimming', 'eavesdropping', or alteration of data. Skimming is the act of obtaining data from an unknowing end user – like peeking while someone enters their PIN into an ATM. Eavesdropping is the interception of data as it moves electronically between the chip and the chip reader. In each case, security measures like Public Key Infrastructure (PKI) have been implemented to make such intrusions nigh on impossible.

The simple fact remains that a bad guy can use his own face and fingerprints and still be a bad guy. In the case of last year's bombings in London, biometrics wouldn't have caught a thing. Every one of the perpetrators' identification papers were in order.

Amid the biometric hubbub, international travellers can look forward to one unexpected bonus: the official word is that biometrics will speed airport immigration lines. Now that's truly a wonder. 



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FEELING YELLOW?

Shanghai: a manic metropolis seemingly on the brink of anarchy yet safer than many provincial western towns. I was smitten for a while, but it was not to last. The very things about the city that once made me feel alive began to test my patience. Friends said Shanghai and I had a good thing going on but we'd spent too much time together. I felt a little time apart was needed.

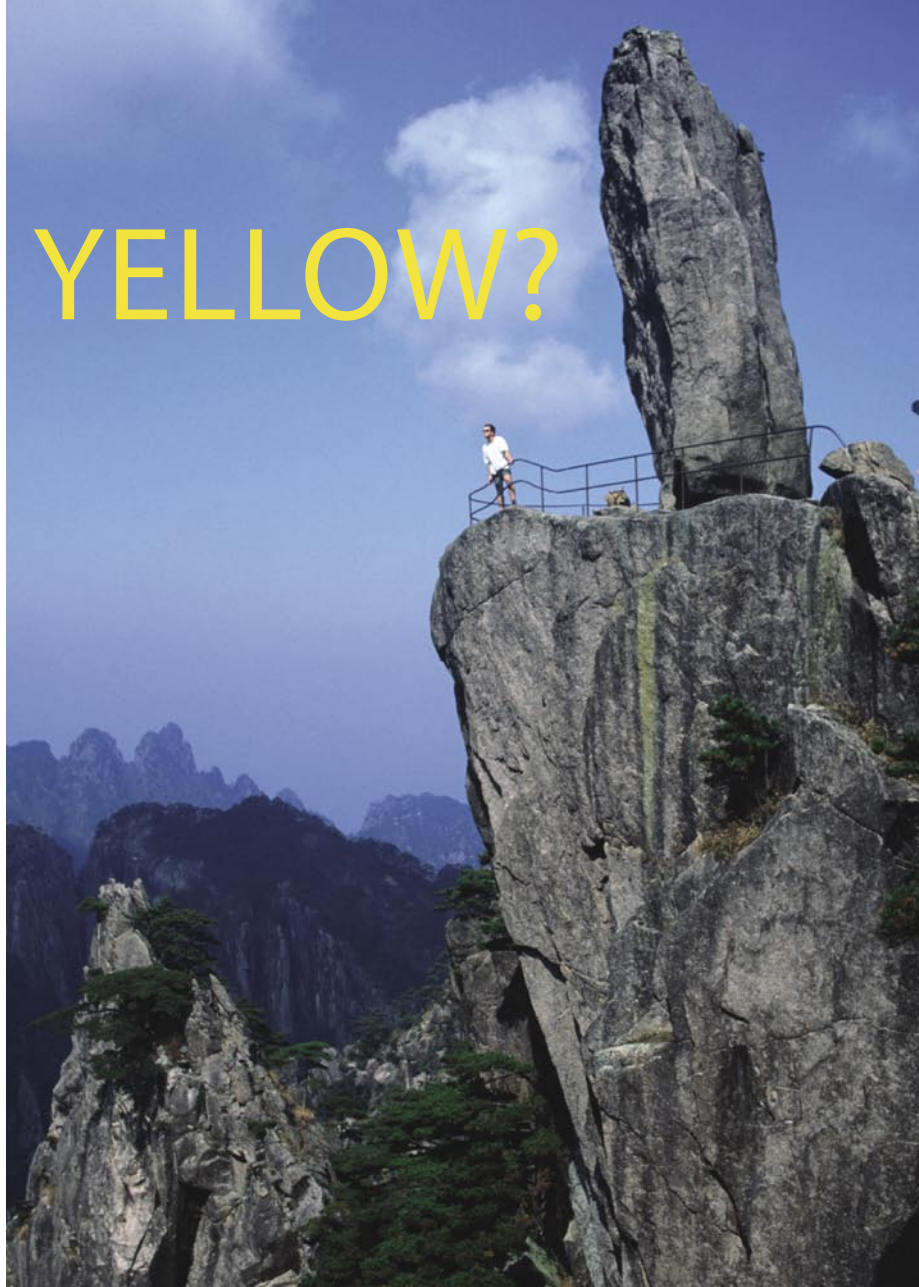
A weekend in Huangshan was the obvious choice. It didn't disappoint. From virtually any angle, the stunning Yellow Mountain (as it is otherwise known) knocks that showy metropolis into a cocked hat. Shanghai may have iconic edifices like Jin Mao and the Pearl Tower, but she is no match for the grand architectural designs of nature. Besides, Huangshan's 72 towering peaks are not symbols of a *nouveau riche* renaissance. They are elements of a Chinese zeitgeist more than 1,200 years old – evident in the work of Chinese painters and poets since before the birth of Christ. There's virtually no view that's a bad one, and some, like the look out from Heavenly Capital Peak, are pure class.

To get the best out of a visit requires planning; there are many routes to follow. Desk jockeys whose idea of exercise is a walk to the water cooler will have to pace themselves too. Though tamed by cable cars and laid paths, this is wild country, complete with leg-burning climbs and descents on scarily narrow, steep stone staircases.

It's best, though not essential, to base yourself on the mountain and visit over two days. Xihai (West Sea) and Beihai (North Sea) hotels are ideal. Both provide the only realistic way to experience the cinematic splendour of a sunrise over Huangshan from the vantage point at Refreshing Terrace, a five-minute walk from Beihai Hotel.

If a 4am start seems a little ambitious, opt for the sunset over Xihai instead. The evening vista may deny you that most Huangshan of scenes a sea of mist coursing through the valley below like an ethereal ocean but it's a perfect way to round off day one.

To make the sunset, start the day by taking the Cloud Valley Temple cable car to the summit. After checking into your hotel, spend the remainder of the morning ambling along



“Lovers gather to SWALP – the act of sealing a union with a loving padlock by attaching it to chain railings.”


the relatively flat paths of the Beihai area. Stone Monkey Gazing over the Sea and Beginning to Believe Peak are moderate diversions. Mid-afternoon, head for the Cloud Dispelling Temple to witness the fabulous view over Xihai Gorge. Here, lovers gather to SWALP – the act of sealing a union with a loving padlock by attaching it to chain railings. Locks are available from all good mountain gift shops, priced at RMB 20-40. The best views of sundown are (thankfully) away from romantic gestures and crowds – a 15-minute walk west toward the Taiping cable car.

Day two. If you are planning to leave the park by nightfall, a 15-kilometre traversal of the Western

Steps via Heavenly Capital Peak is a testing jaunt amid many of Huangshan's signature sights.

First, head to the high point of Bright Summit Peak for a 360-degree panorama of virtually all of Huangshan. From there, follow the path to Jade Terrace of the West Sea, past Lotus Peak (currently closed), and on to Heavenly Capital Peak (open, though not for those fearful of heights). Admire the views, marvel at just how friendly many of the park's wild animals are and join in with fellow visitors for a rowdy 'shout out' – the echo potential of Huangshan's many vantage points is an amusing distraction.

Make sure you make it to the nearby Jade Screen Peak Cable Car by 4 pm or you could be facing your first lovers' tiff. I didn't. Having missed the last car, I cursed my new beau all the way down a nine-kilometre, knee-crippling staircase to the carpark above the hot springs area.

Say what you like about Shanghai, at least she has elevators, and they run all night. Huangshan may be a stunner, but she was trouble in the end. I might have guessed. 

essentials

✈️ GO BY...

Air China flies from Beijing, Shanghai Airlines and China Eastern Airlines fly from Shanghai and China Southern Airlines flies from Guangzhou to Huangshan City (Tunzi). Be warned: flights can be cancelled if there are insufficient passengers. Overnight sleeper trains from Shanghai to Huangshan take approximately 11 hours and cost RMB 175-264 (hard-soft sleeper).

🏠 STAY AT...

Beihai Hotel

The best location for seeing the sunrise. A comfortable, reasonably modern three-star hotel with excellent bathrooms and heating/air-con in the rooms.

(Behai Binguan; +86 (0)559 558 2555; www.beihaihotel.com)

Xihai Hotel

Swedish designed: read minimalist and box shaped. Small but mercifully cosy rooms. Likely to be the home of tour groups, so expect to be woken at dawn by megaphone-wielding guides.

(Xihai Fandian; +86 (0)559 558 8888; www.xihaihotel.cn)

🍴 EAT AT...

Hotels on the mountain offer a range of local dishes. There are small, though exorbitantly priced, convenience stores along the main routes selling snacks, batteries and mountain essentials such as drinks, chocolate and lovers' padlocks.

🏞️ GO IN...

Avoid public holidays and high summer because of the crowds. Mid-winter is a no-go too as many of the paths will be closed for safety. Late autumn and early spring are best, both in terms of climate and because they offer a fair chance of momentary solitude.

👁️ PS...

Aside from checking the cable car times, best advice is to warm up and warm down properly after each day's exertion. Don't over do it on the first day or you'll be walking with the composure of a newborn giraffe for days after. Failing that you could opt for the decadence of a sedan chair, available throughout the park. Between March and November, entrance costs a whopping RMB 200



ROCKY ROMANCE: (opposite page) Flying Rock, a half-hour walk from the Beihai Hotel; (above) Lovers' padlocks on Heavenly Capital Peak

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STYLE FILE

By Graham Bond

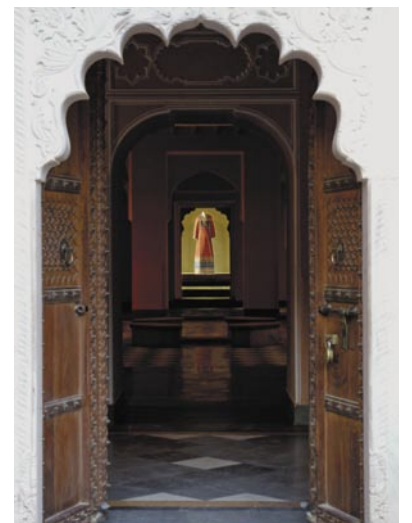


TRADITIONAL CHIC

Using the simplest of methods, Anokhi has managed to build both a worldwide fashion brand and revive fading folk traditions in northwest India. From its base on a Jaipur farm, the company produces vibrantly patterned textiles created with traditional hand-carved wooden blocks and natural vegetable dyes. The process starts in the studio where director Rachel Bracken-Singh oversees the development of a wide range of hypnotic designs. Then the fabrics, dyes and blocks go to more than 1,000 village-based artisans who use age-old hand-printing techniques to bring them to life. The result: a colourful selection of products including Indian, Asian and Western garments, home textiles, sarongs and accessories available in shops across India's main cities and select outlets across the world. With classic Indian *kurtas*, Nepali blouses and Chinese long-neck shirts, the forms vary. However, the style is consistent – rich, repetitious patterns printed on muslin, silk and cotton. Anokhi's determination to protect this historic Rajasthan art was emphasised in the recent unveiling of its Museum of Hand Block Printing in Jaipur, which takes visitors through the craft's colourful history.

www.anokhi.com

FEELING CHIPPER: (above) Anokhi's printing blocks are made from Burmese teak. Each colour has its own block, with the blocks fitting together to print the finished cloth; (left) Different intensities of blue are created by dipping the cloth into an 'indigo vat' multiple times; (below) The main entrance to the new Anokhi Museum of Hand Block Printing in the small town of Amer, just outside Jaipur



SPA AFFAIR

Looking to be lavished with gemstones, chocolate, roses, caressing hands? Quit waiting for the perfect man and seek out the perfect spa treatment instead. Massages, facials, body baths, scrubs and wraps are becoming increasingly indulgent, combining ancient healing rituals and philosophies, advanced technology and – occasionally – some kinky food fantasies. There's no end to the fun you can have in the name of wellbeing. Try these honeys on for size:

At CHI in the **Shangri-La Pudong**, slip into something more comfortable, like a soft-as-can-be chenille robe, and have your feet bathed in rose-petal water before being led to the bed in your own private spa suite for the signature Aquamarine Crystal Energising Facial. Nourishing aquamarine cream is massaged into the skin using crystal wands which work as conductors of positive energy to stimulate healing. Ninety minutes later, as well as refined pores and a healthy sheen, you are left with a sense of deep harmony which you can

contemplate over a cup of organic lemongrass tea. (+86 (0)21 6882 8888 ext 460; www.shangri-la.com)

New on the menu at the **Ritz Carlton Hong Kong**, the Chocolate Facial promises 50 minutes of pure choc-indulgence and not a calorie to show for it (unless you let your tongue wander). Cocoa butter mixed with orange essential oil and vanilla cocoa nectar is slathered on the face helping to ward off the effects of pollutants and stress and give sensitive or dehydrated complexions a silky smooth glow. (+852 2877 6666 ext 8001; www.ritz-carlton-hk.com)

For something a little fruitier, The Spa in the **Four Seasons Hong Kong** has a two-hour Pure Indulgence treatment, with a mango theme. Start with a jojoba pearl body polish and an organic buttermilk bath in preparation for the mango butter, honey and sweet orange oil massage and warm oil hair and scalp treatment, capped off with a splash of orange blossom water and a mango

smoothie. (+852 3196 8888; www.fourseasons.com/hongkong)

It's all access-all-areas intimacy with the **Hilton Shanghai Spa's** Essentially Feminine massage. Specially created to warm the emotions and release pent-up tensions, this intimate 75-minute massage focuses on the back, buttocks, stomach and breasts using a blend of mood-enhancing ylang ylang, geranium, lavender and petitgrain aromatherapy oils. (+86 (0)21 6248 0000; www.shanghai.hilton.com)

As a further tease, at **Angkor Century's** Cambodian-themed The Century Spa (+855 (0)63 963 777; www.angkorcentury.com), the Khmer Foot Therapy treatment employs a small teak phallic-shaped *leung cheu*. And **Banyan Tree Bangkok** (+66 (0)2679 1052; www.banyantreespa.com) will keep you in a state of orgasmic bliss with their mind-blowing seven hour long package involving a body scrub, conditioner, massage, facial and hand and foot treatments.

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www.dragonfly.net.cn

SHANGHAI SECRET ADDRESS

Start with a perfectly-mixed cocktail in the warmly lit bar, as jazz standards and unadorned colonial charm provide a soothing escape from the city streets. Welcome to Le Garçon Chinois, an eclectic ode to bygone times which is back after a fire nearly destroyed it several months ago. The restaurant has been restored to its original state, beautiful but austere, with cream walls and low lights, French windows and hardwood floors. But this time around, owner Takashi Miyataka has decided to serve traditional Spanish food on the first floor and Vietnamese on the second. A young, bearded Basque chef cooks homestyle dishes like squid in squid ink sauce served with crusty bread, and a garlicky tapas platter that pairs perfectly with one of their affordable bottles. Upstairs, a chef from Hanoi serves what is hands down the best Vietnamese food in town, including a sweet mango and chicken salad with a splash of fish sauce, piquant hot and sour fish soup, and wonderful spring rolls. Le Garçon, hidden down a quiet lane in an unmarked villa, isn't easy to find. But its subtle charms are worth searching for.

Le Garçon Chinois: No 3, Lane 9 Hengshan Lu, near Dongping Lu (+86 (0)21 6445 7970) Daily 6pm-1am



/ DISH IT UP

FLAVOUR OF THE MONTH... BLUEFIN TUNA SASHIMI

New Japanese restaurant Tian Jia glorifies sweet, buttery *toro*, the most prized cut from the belly of the bluefin tuna. Their tasting menu begins with thick slices of sashimi, both the marbled *otoro* and slightly leaner *chutoro*, and from there serves a miraculously tender *toro* hotpot, steamed crab legs, and a filling bowl of perfectly steamed sushi rice with minced fish, seaweed and sesame. Tian Jia is



operated by a large Japanese seafood exporter, assuring that the tuna is of the highest quality and every last bit of this remarkable stuff is worth savouring. The simple meal of perhaps the ocean's most prized piece of fish comes perfectly unadorned – *toro* is transcendent with nothing but a dab of wasabi and a splash of soy.

Tian Jia: 1520 Huashan Lu, Shanghai (+86 (0)21 6281 4918) Daily 11.30am-2.30pm, 6-11pm

/ ON THE SIDE

LONELY STOMACHS

The escort business has gone respectable at the Shangri-La Dubai. Banking on the assumption that solo business travellers tire of braving restaurants alone or ordering room service, the hotel has launched 'Interactions' – a dinner escort service where guests dine with an expatriate member of hotel management. They stress it's not a dating service, but a form of relaxed networking that allows up to ten guests a choice of company and comestibles at one of the hotel's four restaurants: French-Vietnamese, modern Moroccan, Euro-fusion seafood or Cantonese. AED 150 per person buys a three-course meal, a glass of *vino* and, hopefully, a good old natter.



BEIJING ABSOLUTE MONGO

Meat lovers, extroverts and cultural gluttons rejoice – Beijing's newest Mongolian restaurant is serving up a real feast for the senses. Tucked away in Sanlitun, Modern Nomads is more than a restaurant – it's an entertainment hub. Instruments are plucked and voices wail to Mongolian ditties as waitresses in traditional costume parade the yurt-like dining room, eager to pose for photos and rouse diners into slamming back shots of heady Mongolian vodka. Like the entertainment, the food here is the real deal, thanks to a kitchen of chefs fresh off the train from Ulaan Baatar. Aromas of roasting lamb and spicy soup waft from heavily laden tables, and adventurous eaters can try the Ulaan Baatar assorts – a mix of beef, beef heart, lamb kidney and ox tongue, lightened up with a side salad. Otherwise, sit back, sip your vodka and contemplate the restaurant slogan: 'Absolute Mongo – Absolute Entertainment!'

Modern Nomads: 4 Gongti Beilu, Sanlitun, Chaoyang district (+86 (0)10 6586 7757) Daily 11am-2am

BANGKOK WE KNOW VINO

Marco Zanotti has become Bangkok's first western celebrity chef thanks to his robust Italian food and the energy that permeates his dining rooms. From the pizza-and-pasta joint Limoncello to his eponymous flagship, he has demonstrated a casual flair in the kitchen which is again in evidence at his third outlet, VINO. Housed in an old '70s bungalow, there's a retro feel in VINO's brown leathers and daffodil yellow walls. What began as a dedicated wine bar has morphed into a fully-fledged, if mellow, restaurant; it's like Zanotti, just without the fuss or white tablecloths. One can eat at high tables near the jazz band or by the wood-burning oven in the garden. On offer is Roman-style street food like *arancini* and grilled lamb skewers, simple beef tenderloin *tagliata* with rocket and parmesan, and superb seafood grills. The wine list features more than 500 labels, mainly Italian, including well-aged *barolo* and *amarone*, lesser-known white wines from the Veneto, reds from Sicily, and a fine grappa selection.

Vino di Zanotti: Soi Yommarat, Soi Saladaeng, Silom, Bangrak (+66 (0)2 636 3811) Mon-Sat 3pm-midnight



/ OUT AND ABOUT

SHANGHAI

Settle in at Citizen and an afternoon cappuccino and slice of cake can easily lead to glasses of chardonnay with bite-sized vegetable samosas or salt and pepper squid late into the evening. Near the infamous Kade Club, this cosy-chic bar and cafe with its free wi-fi, simple but select menu, great soundtrack, plenty of comfy lounge seating and upstairs dining room and terrace shines in all departments. It's perfect for those nights when a glass of wine, soft lights, velvet sofas and long leisurely chats are in order. And you'll probably find yourself back for brunch the following morning too.

Citizen: 222 Jinxian Lu, by Shaanxi Lu (+86 (0)21 6258 1620) Mon-Fri 11am-midnight, Sat-Sun 10am-midnight



BEIJING

Browns may bear no relation to the London club but it's certainly doing its part to elevate Beijing's scene to international standards. Tasteful decoration and polished floorboards are all well and good, but the real attraction is the bar, serving up a whopping eight beers on tap including Kilkenny and Hoegaarden, and no less than 500 shooters. The energetic



Hong Kong owner has plans to turn adjacent loft spaces into three additional bars: an ice bar to sip vodka in sub-zero temperatures; an upstairs lounge to sup *sake* and seduce; and a Mexican bar where you can slam tequila from a dentist chair. So much fun in such a small space.

Browns: Off Sanlitun Nan Lu, above The Loft, Chaoyang district (+86 (0)10 6591 2717) Daily midday-late

JAKARTA

Dragonfly is the latest evidence of Jakarta's progressive dining scene. The restaurant occupies a cavernous space that takes inspiration from elemental themes and Indochine culture. The walls are inlaid with vintage teak woods, one of which is decorated in leaf-shaped patterns that glow like burning embers. Seating is a bit of a hodge-podge, a mix of black leather ottomans, low-slung tables, bucket seats and high



marble tables. In the kitchen, Malay, Thai and Chinese cooks battle it out for supremacy with dishes like crispy soon hock with ginger spring onion and Thai curry prawn with egg white. However, the moneyed crowd seems more interested in the martini menu.

Dragonfly: Graha BIP, Jl Jend Gatot Subroto 23 (+62 (0)21 520 6789; www.the-dragonfly.com) Mon, Tue, Thu, Sun 6pm-midnight, Wed, Fri, Sat 6pm-end

HOT HOTELS

By Nuo Wen



Amango's toss from the iconic, neon-addled Night Bazaar, D2 is located in the heart of Chiang Mai amid the hum of *tuktuks* and pick-up trucks on Chang Klan Road. The building looks like it would be more at home in 1960's Miami with an exterior the colour of orange sherbert and British-style taxi cabs parked outside.

Chiang Mai has long been a favourite cultural destination for those in search of mountain retreats, teak temples and indigenous art, but D2 is the first to take a truly urbane approach to the art of hospitality. The city is changing as young painters, graphic designers, and rock musicians who used to make tracks for Bangkok are now hanging around to soak up a mellower lifestyle. In the last two to three years, the northern capital has even developed a design district (Nimmanhaemin) and a satellite weekend town for music and coffee (Pai).

D2 is a testament to this local creativity, at once expressive of Thai roots and a well-balanced love of the global village. Monk's robe saffron is the signature colour and it pops up repeatedly in raw silks and hand-woven carpets throughout the sprawling lobby and public spaces. Staff wear dark grey, black or white outfits by top designer Greyhound, and the women behind the curvaceous check-in desk sport earrings from local markets. The lobby sweeps through a 50-seat bar, Mix, which is wrapped in glowing frosted glass and lit by raindrop-shaped lamps. The design is clearly about making a point; offering traditional Thai

flavours for a modernist palate with a fun dose of vintage flair thrown into the bargain.

The rooms express as much with exotic materials, like loungers made of woven rattan, daybeds strewn with ball-shaped pillows, and a lush mix of dark oak and bleached teak woods, neutral brown hemp and ecru linens. Soaps are scented with mulberry or turmeric. Moxie, the all-day dining room, is a breezy-chic affair where local artists and writers, Thai-speaking expatriates, Bangkok high society and khaki-panted foreign tourists buzz over watermelon mojitos and penne pasta tossed with Thai anchovies and fried holy basil. There's an excellent upscale version of *pad thai* with crisp wonton skins tossed with bean sprouts, lime, peanuts, and slivered tofu and Esarn-style steak made with your choice of Thai sirloin or Australian black angus.

Bracketing sensual indulgence and health are an ultra-contemporary fitness centre and spa, Devarana, where stone, glass, cement and rattan anchor a series of treatment rooms that offer a distinctly Zen ambiance. If D2's pursuit of pleasure gets to be too confining, there are flower markets, the chestnut-coloured Ping River and open-air music bars all within a ten-minute walk. In the new Chiang Mai, convenience, culture and contemporary spoils are never far apart. **A**

D2 Hotel: 100 Chang Klan Road (+66 (0)53 999 999; www.d2hotels.com)



CUTTING EDGE: (opposite page) The striking design of the D2 incorporates natural materials and textures in a high-tech, functional environment; (this page, from left) Sleek leather armchairs, rich fabrics and bold carpets make the lobby bar, Mix, a fabulous place to see and be seen; Each super chic room features a flat-screen TV and high-speed internet access

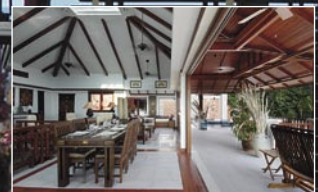
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24 HOURS IN

By Edward Genochio



7am – Tuck in to a hearty breakfast buffet at the Tamarind Village. You're about to take the plunge into Chiang Mai's early-morning rush hour (which lasts until about 10pm), so enjoy the calm and quiet of your hotel while you fill up.

8.30am – Take a *tuktuk* up to Wat Jet Yot on the city's northwestern rim. Chiang Mai is said to be home to 300 *wats*, so to do the place in 24 hours we're going to have to be a little selective. This temple's seven graceful spires represent the seven weeks Buddha spent in Bodhgaya after he attained enlightenment. Though photogenic in the early morning light, modern-day nirvana-seekers might find the noise from the adjacent 'superhighway' a little distracting.

9.45am – Rumble five minutes south to the second of this morning's *wat*-stops. The gleaming white spires of the 14th-century Wat Suandok look particularly fine against a clear blue sky. These spires, or *chedi*, enshrine the remains of Chiang Mai's royal family – though they no longer rest in peace, lying as they do directly under the flight path of Chiang Mai airport and the adjacent Royal Thai Air Force base.

CHIANG MAI

Standing at the crossroads of ancient trade routes linking Thailand, Burma, Laos and China, Chiang Mai has been welcoming foreign visitors for around seven centuries. In recent years, this friendly, temple-studded mountain city has also become a hotbed for art, design and style

10.45am – Peace at last at the day's final *wat*. Hidden away in the forested foothills of Suthep Mountain, U Mong is surely Chiang Mai's most secluded temple. Despite the relative isolation, 14th-century monk Thera Jan had a network of tunnels dug into the hillside to better retreat from worldly distractions. The tunnels are still open to visitors, but mind your head. Stroll around the forest paths, reading as you go the little bits of Buddhist wisdom nailed to the trees. The place oozes calm, a rare Chiang Mai commodity, and is a welcome retreat from the heat of the day.

12pm – Keep your *tuktuk* on standby at Wat U Mong because you'll need it to haul you up to lunch at the Palaad Tawanron restaurant, situated right next to the waterfall of the same name. Choose from one of Chiang Mai's newest (and most extensive) menus as you gaze down over the city and the Ping Valley. The views are so good that even the loos have balconies.



WAT A MELANGE: (opposite page, clockwise from top right) The hand-crafted umbrellas of Chiang Mai are popular with locals and tourists alike; Fabric for sale at the night market; Chiang Mai is home to some 300 Buddhist wats; (this page, from top) Contemporary art from across Southeast Asia on display at La Luna Gallery; Spicy barbecued northern Thai sausages at a Chiang Mai street stall

STOP THE CLOCK!

Lamphun

Hire a bicycle for the day and make your way south to the ancient town of Lamphun for a taste of what Chiang Mai might have been if the tourists had never found it. You're best off winging it on the little back lanes to the west of the main road. Just keep heading south and you'll find a way, but don't worry too much if you never quite get there – it's still a beautiful ride through villages, orchards and watery meadows.

Bo Sang Umbrella Village

For some good souvenir hunting, hop on a *songthaew* (pick-up truck) to Bo Sang village, where umbrellas made from mulberry paper and other traditional craft items are made and sold. There's plenty of tack, of course, but some nice stuff too.

essentials

➔ Go by...

Thai Airways has daily flights from Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Hong Kong to Chiang Mai, via Bangkok. Direct flights from China to Chiang Mai leave Kunming on Thursdays and Sundays on Thai Airways (www.thaiair.com) or from Jinghong (Yunnan) on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays on Bangkok Airways (www.bangkokair.com).

➔ Stay at...

Tamarind Village
(50/1 Rajdamnoen Road, Sri Phom, Muang; +66 (0)53 418 896; www.tamarindvillage.com)

☺☺ Eat and Drink At...

Palaad Tawanron Restaurant
(Suthep Road, behind Chiang Mai University; +66 (0)53 216 039; www.palaadtawanron.com)

The Riverside Bar and Restaurant
(9-11 Charoenrat Road; +66 (0)53 243 239; www.theriversidechiangmai.com)

The Gallery Art Gallery and Restaurant
(25-29 Charoenrat Road; +66 (0)53 248 601)

☺ Play at...

Spa de Siam
(62/3 Charoen-Prathet Road, Tambol Changklan, Muang; +66 (0)53 820 312; www.spa-de-siam.com)

☑ Go in...

Anytime. October-February is peak travel season. March and April are hot and dry but there are plenty of opportunities to cool down during the fun-filled five-day water fight of Songkran (April 11-15). The rains come around May turning everything green and lush.

2.30pm – Art time. The recently-opened La Luna gallery (www.lalunagallery.com), across the Ping River, is a showcase for exciting contemporary art from across Southeast Asia, including many local Chiang Mai artists. The focus is on work that addresses current social and cultural issues. There are posters and prints for sale, as well as the originals.

4pm – Ok, let's take a break. Chiang Mai is a renowned centre for traditional Thai massage. Every other shop in town seems to offer spa treatments of some sort, but call Spa de Siam and they'll whisk you down Charoenprathet Road for 90 minutes of pick-me-up Royal Thai Herbal Massage. Aaaaah....

6pm – Wander through the stalls north of the Night Bazaar. It's a feast for the eyes as well as the palate (but try to restrict yourself to one street-snack starter – dinner is just around the corner). If the fried locusts don't appeal, try a barbecued Chiang Mai spicy sausage.

7pm – Waltz across the footbridge to the Riverside, a long-time Chiang Mai favourite that draws large crowds of locals and visitors every night. The real steal here is the dinner cruise. Be aboard the long-tailed riverboat by 7.15pm to enjoy candlelit dining afloat, as you chug gently along Chiang Mai's only thoroughfare which doesn't have a traffic problem.

9.30pm – Back on *terra firma*, you're free to shuttle the evening away between the Riverside's two live music stages, which feature upwards of 20 musicians each evening (the beat gets heavier as the night goes on). Or sample the live jazz and blues just up the road at another riverfront venue, The Gallery, featuring a waterfront terrace at the back and an art gallery in front.

1am – Wherever you wind up tapping your toes, the Chiang Mai party closes at 1am: Prime Minister's orders. **Ⓜ**

GETTING PERSONAL

By Guy Longmore



GENERAL MACARTHUR



English sailor Dame Ellen MacArthur first came to the world's attention in 2001 after a commendable second-place finish in the Vendée Globe solo round-the-world yacht race. Though interviews and broadcasts of a video diary recorded during that incredible challenge revealed a woman with gutsy determination, it was her warmth and apparent vulnerability that won her many fans. She made another attempt at the round-the-world record in 2004 in a boat specifically designed for the task. Her 75-foot B&Q trimaran crossed the finishing line near the French coast on February 7, 2005, beating the previous record by more than a day. The 29-year-old is currently in Asia to set a series of benchmark times between Asian ports that can be challenged by other sailors in the future. (www.teamellen.com)

You have just returned from South Georgia Island, a visit inspired by the 'Save the Albatross' campaign. Why did you go and what was the highlight of the experience?

It started two years ago when I met with biologist and environmental campaigner Sally Poncet on a routine stopover in the Falkland Islands. We talked about the impact of long-line fishing on the birds and it was clear my involvement could help raise much-needed awareness for the cause. Bird Island is an amazing place, uninhabited by humans and a fantastic opportunity to see the albatross in its natural environment. While walking along a ridge, an albatross flew past, making the most amazing swooshing noise a couple of metres above my head. With its perfect feathers it looked like a polished sculpture in the powerful southern sun, almost motionless in the air. It was really amazing when it tilted its head sideways to see me, clearly trying to figure out who I was and what I was doing there. I was absolutely breathless. I felt like the luckiest person on Earth.

“[The boat] saw me through so many hard times, never faltering. The bottom line is I need to take care of her. If I do that then she takes care of me.”

I understand this will be the first time you have sailed in Chinese waters. What fresh challenges will the tour present?

This tour will be a huge cultural experience and we feel honoured to be able to visit these countries and share our project with them. Sailing is in its infancy in China, but there are some amazing young Asian sailors making their mark and they have the potential to be on the podium in the next Olympics. We are working closely with our main sponsor, B&Q, and we will be doing lots of events on the shore with them in Dalian, Qingdao, Shanghai, Taiwan and Hong Kong.

An international crew will man the boat, including Chinese sailor Shaun Weng. How will you all communicate at sea?

When you have mixed nationalities onboard you usually find a common language that you can all use. Sometimes you find yourself asking a question in one language and someone answering in another, usually a sort of ‘Franglish’ [French and English]. I know Shaun can speak English very well and he will play a massive part in the trip – as our translator on the water and in some of the ports.

Of course you are best known for solo round-the-world sailing. What’s it like sailing with a team after going it alone for so long?

Sailing with a crew is something I enjoy immensely. We’ll be able to push B&Q [her trimaran] to her full potential, and we’re looking forward to trying to beat the targets we have set ourselves. Sailing solo has its own rewards, but sailing with a crew brings a great dynamic to the boat and I really am looking forward to that.


We call your sport ‘sailing’ now because ‘yachting’ has elitist associations. Has this helped to shake off the image of sailing as being a sport of the rich?

In some ways yes, but there’s still a lot of misconceptions about the sport. Many people think that sailors own their boats, but that’s rarely the case. Success is dependent on sponsorship and without that many people wouldn’t be able to take part in the sport. The internet has made a massive difference to the way we follow these races; that in turn has opened up the sport to a new audience. The more it is seen by the general public, the better people’s perceptions of it will become.

You have talked about your relationship to boats in the past in very human terms. Can you describe your relationship with the B&Q, especially after you broke the solo round-the-world record with her?

It is hard to describe. She saw me through so many hard times, never faltering. The bottom line is I need to take care of her. If I do that then she takes care of me. It’s definitely a relationship of give and take, built on trust, and that kind of bond is not only hard to describe but also very hard to break.

What challenges remain for Ellen?

After nearly ten years of full-on professional sailing including, if you add it up, a year’s worth of racing solo, I wanted to use my time in South Georgia to think about what to do next. The conclusion of the sponsorship with B&Q later this year gives me an opportunity of working more closely with our team at OC Group. Me and Mark Turner, who held the reins while I was at sea, own the company. I think it is time for me to put my energy and experience into the ongoing success of the company and the development of the Offshore Challenges Sailing Team. My focus is to drive this new team forward, to support fresh talent and to help them realise their potential. I plan to take a step back from solo sailing, and will not compete in the Vendée Globe in 2008. 

1.3v JC mandarin

Singular Sports

Asia's top grandstand events may have escaped ESPN's attention, but what they lack in celebrity excitement, they more than make up for in crowds, colour and classic competitive rivalry. This month, *Asia and Away* blows the whistle on the continent's best sporting showdowns



ERIIN GURVAN NAADAM, MONGOLIA – JULY 11-13

Translated as the 'Three Manly Games', this annual event celebrates the disciplines that won Genghis Khan his empire 700 years ago. In those pre-precision bombing days, hand-to-hand combat was crucial and is replicated here on the wrestling field, where 512 hulks square off in knockout bouts. The archery competition sees competitors aiming arrows tipped with roughly-carved bones at their targets. Horseracing is perhaps the most photogenic event drawing thousands to the splendidly lush hills outside Ulaan Baatar. Many spectators arrive from the farthest corners of this nomadic nation. Suffice to say they don't let the rare chance for a party pass.



GREAT WALL MARATHON, TIANJIN – MAY 20

For spectators at least, marathon running is comparable to Formula One racing – it's tricky to fully appreciate the magnificence of the whole when you only get to see a tiny sliver of the action. The Great Wall Marathon, staged three hours east of Beijing, offers a solution in the form of spectacular natural surrounds with amphitheatre-like views over large swathes of the course. Some eight kilometres of the track – or 3,700 stone steps – takes place on the Wall itself and, inevitably, times are slower than average. For less steely participants, half-marathon, ten-kilometre and five-kilometre races also take place.

www.great-wall-marathon.com



CIRCUS CAPITAL STANLEY DRAGON BOAT FESTIVAL, HONG KONG – MAY 31

Commemorating the drowning of national hero Qu Yuan 2,000 years ago, dragon boat festivals take place across the Chinese-speaking world in May and June. The boat races re-enact events that took place after the ancient poet threw himself into the Yangtze in a pique of despair. In those desperate hours, villagers rushed out in boats, beating drums and throwing *zongzi* (pyramid-shaped rice parcels) into the water in the hope the fish wouldn't feast on their hero's body. There's still plenty of drum-bashing and *zongzi* feasting at this, Asia's most celebrated nod to Qu Yuan. However, with 160 teams battling it out in rowing races around Stanley Beach, hard-edged competition just about takes precedence over ritual.

www.dragonboat.org.hk



NAGOYA BASHO, JAPAN – JULY 9-23

To the uninitiated, sumo is easily dismissed as an artless tussle between two overweight men. Enthusiasts – of which Japan has millions – point out that there are more than 70 different throws, tips, forms and tricks at the wrestlers' disposal and that the combination of ceremony, strategy and passion create the most noble of duels. Whatever your perspective, experiencing one of the season highlights – *basho* – is a precious opportunity for cultural edification. Tickets for the Nagoya competition have just gone on sale. Given Japan's enthusiasm for their national sport, foreigners need to act fast to get front row seats, from where the sounds of slapping, grunting and grappling will be thrillingly audible.



LITHANG HORSERACING FESTIVAL, SICHUAN – AUGUST 1-7

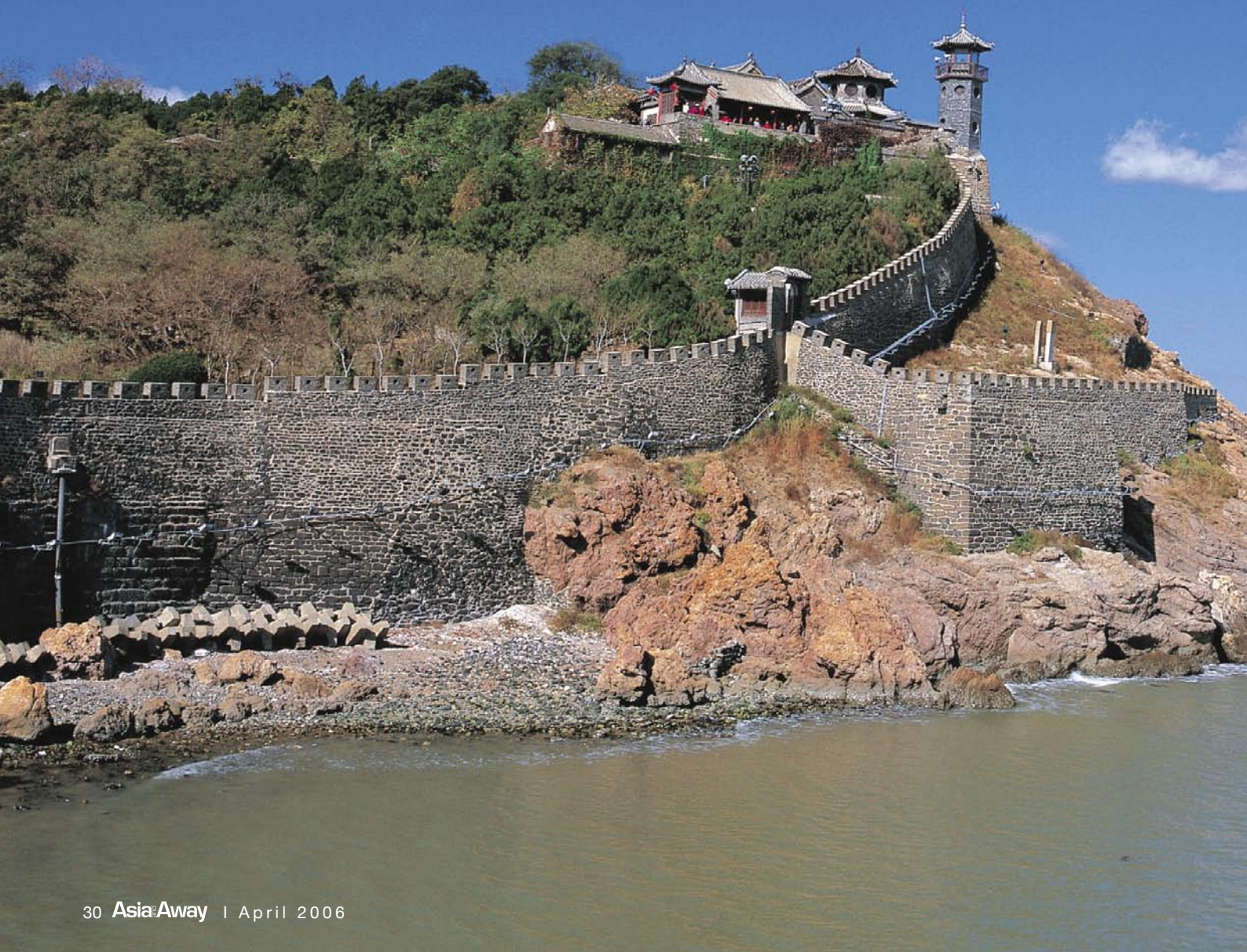
In pedigree, competitors in China's top equine event may not rival those in the Kentucky Derby or Grand National, but the setting has the measure of Lexington and Liverpool every time. The stunning grasslands of west Sichuan are the stage for the Lithang Horseracing Festival when around 10,000 Tibetan herders and farmers gather to witness displays of saddleback bravado, including shows of speed, archery on the gallop and the snatching of *khata* (a Tibetan scarf) from the ground at full-tilt. As at Royal Ascot, fashion is highly prized. Watch in awe as the plains around Lithang blaze with colourful costumes and dazzling moments of derring-do.



WORLD ELEPHANT POLO CHAMPIONSHIPS, NEPAL – NOVEMBER 26-DECEMBER 2

"Pound for pound, the biggest sporting event in the world," claims Chivas Regal, the sponsor of Elephant Polo's season-ending highlight. Celebrating its 25th anniversary this year, the World Elephant Polo Championships is one of the most surreal meetings of East and West, taking the genteel sensibilities of field polo but replacing dashing equines with lumbering Asian elephants. The action may not be exactly fast, but for charm, scenery and sporting rivalry, it's unbeatable. This year, as ever, the event takes place on the edge of Nepal's Chitwan National Park. After tasting glory in 2005, Scotland will be swinging for a repeat this year.

www.elephantpolo.com





SUN, SAND AND CAB SAV

Graham Bond investigates Yantai, the anti-Hainan, and is impressed by its colonial air, vineyards and bags of beer

PHOTOGRAPHY: PANORAMA STOCK

Around three years ago – thanks in no small part to 111 Miss World wannabes – the world woke up to the fact that China had beaches. Proper beaches. Suddenly it was fashionable and fun to be beside the Chinese seaside. Out with visions of litter-strewn tidal froth, in with images of buxom nubile playing beach volleyball in the name of world peace. From Beihai's Silver Beach to Hainan's Yalong Bay, southern China went down with a dose of the Californias.

About the same time, I happened upon a Chinese film called *Haixian* (*Seafood*). The unremarkable plot has long since faded from memory, but what stuck was the picture it painted of a very different kind of seaside haunt. Set in an out-of-season holiday town somewhere in northern China, *Haixian* was all piers and promenades, squawking seagulls and swarthy sea dogs. The protagonists' collars were invariably turned up against the cold as they stared out to a lonesome grey ocean. It was this memory – this nostalgic reminder of my homeland, England – that many months later led me to the Shandong city of Yantai.

This is an alternative tale of the Chinese seaside. It is a story of temperate sun, chilly seas and cabernet sauvignon. There are no surfboards or six-packs. It is a humble offering of buckets and spades, locally brewed beer and the mysterious aroma of fish and chips. If Hainan takes its lead from West Coast USA, Yantai's spiritual twin town is probably Skegness.

Actually, Yantai's connection to the seaside outposts of Europe is more than spiritual; imperial history has a lasting legacy here. Seized by the British as a spoil of the second opium war, Yantai – or Chefoo as it was then known – became a favourite retreat for the traders and top hats of Queen Victoria's foreign bandits, and much of their architecture remains. Britain's opium allies, the French, were astonished to discover that Shandong's soil matched that of their own Provence vineyards, launching a grape-growing tradition that continues to this day at the Changyu Winery. From German-controlled Qingdao, a short distance south, came brewing know-how that's now in the hands of the Asahi-owned Yantai Beer Company.

Given the well-established association between sun, sea, sand and sangria, it's perhaps appropriate that European influence in Yantai can be most clearly viewed at the bottom of a bottle. The budget airlines of northern Europe clink to the sound of duty-free and groan under the weight of bleary-eyed Brits returning from the Spanish *costas*. My own budget carrier, Shanghai's Spring



Airlines, seemed intent on holding up its end by staging a mid-air passenger lottery to win free bottles of red wine. Even as the green hills of the Shandong Peninsula came into view, cabin attendants were calling out winning names. Mine was last out of the hat.

Stepping from the terminal building, I wondered if Spring Airlines hadn't also added something to our water during the flight. Yantai Airport is surely one of the world's few structures whose designers looked to Soviet-era nuclear reactors for architectural inspiration. The sight of spaceman-silver cylinders with pea-green hoops is surely enough to make even a teetotaler's head spin. The smell of fried cod in batter that hung in the air as I headed downtown only added to the strangeness. These were the wishful pangs of a man who had spent the day in the pub. Only I hadn't yet touched a drop.

Nevertheless, booze is an integral part of the Yantai experience. On my first evening, I settled down at a hawker eatery within earshot of the ocean's gentle llop. All around the city's undulating streets I had earlier seen kegs standing on kerbsides. Now I understood. In Yantai, you don't need a 7-11 franchise to be in the off-licence game. Here, even *chao mian* vendors are likely to stock silver barrels of liquid gold. It flows freely, served either in thick, frosty pint glasses or – for takeaway customers – plastic bags. Half a litre will



“Yantai Airport is surely one of the world’s few structures whose designers looked to Soviet-era nuclear reactors for architectural inspiration.”



“Changyu's cellar atmosphere is worth the money, even if the wine isn't.”

set you back a princely RMB 1.5. So it was that I slurped fresh scallops and quaffed two pints of equally fresh lager under a starry Shandong sky and still managed to return to my sea-view room with change from an RMB 20 note, looking forward to a free bottle of *vin rouge*.

Alcohol, of course, isn't the only reason to visit Yantai. Just west of the imaginatively titled No 1 Beach, beyond the rock pool where children hunt crabs at low tide, stands the beautifully preserved Tsung Dijing Catholic Boys' School. Walk a little farther along the seafront to discover an even more astonishing complex of 19th- and early 20th-century buildings. Trading houses and tax offices reveal the extent of British entrepreneurialism in Shandong. Refreshingly, the entire area can be explored free of charge.

A Chinese city just wouldn't be Chinese without a giant public plaza. In Yantai, this historic oversight was remedied with a massive development project between 2002 and 2004. As well as restoration work on the colonial buildings, a huge concrete expanse was laid down, instantly providing a stage for China's oldest and newest outdoor crazes – kite flying and rollerblading. These days, it's also the scene of a peculiar musical duel that pits singers like Celine Dion, piped from discreet speakers, against classic Chinese opera, as well as the ocean's swell. With



SEASIDE TREATS: (opposite page, top) Overexploitation has hurt the once-bountiful fishing grounds off the north coast of the Shandong Peninsula. Seafood, in contrast, is rarely in short supply; (this page, top) Changyu's Wine Culture Museum boasts an industrial-sized, and delightfully cool, underground cellar where a number of varietals are left to mature in great oak barrels; (above) Volleyball at sunset on Yantai's No1 Beach, just next to the 25-floor Marina Hotel

these sounds ringing in your ears, stroll through the pretty network of lawns, tracing the path of the old trading houses, to emerge back at the sea, where fishermen cast out over the iron safety railings. From there it's only a few yards further to Changyu's Wine Culture Museum, where a tour and tasting costs RMB 40. The cellar atmosphere is worth the money, even if the wine isn't.

Yantai's proudest architectural boast is on the headland that ends this fascinating 2.5 kilometre stretch between its two landmark hotels, the Golden Gulf and the Marina. Yantai Hill Park comprises a series of former consulate buildings connected by beautiful wooded paths and tunnels of hedgerows that end only at the sea. Between 1861 and 1945 a total of 16 different nations kept consulates here, the British staking first claim and then opening up the port to others. The homes have been kept in superb shape, some converted into Chinese museums, others left to reveal the full extent of colonial decadence. In the centre of the park, a steep staircase leads up to a crenellated battlement that affords superb views back across the sweep of the bay. The area has all the maritime charm of Macao without the cost and hassle of the tropics.

The road just outside the park is itself a work of art. Tall buildings with bell roofs line the street, now inhabited by Chinese families who have left the facades intact but shown no



SEA SHELLS: (top) One of the restored British trading houses located just yards from the seafront. The facades remain intact but the interiors are generally empty; (bottom) The mammoth Korean seafood platter available at the Song Dao Sheng Yu Pian restaurant. Thanks to a direct ferry link with Incheon, Yantai is full of Korean flourishes



reverence to foreign traditions in the interiors. In the beautiful old post office I gorged on traditionally fat Shandong dumplings. Outside, that strange whiff of fish and chips continued to hang in the air.

Lovers of flashing lights and seaside arcades should head to the Tashan Scenic Area southeast of the city where gaming is available in a bizarre circus tent-styled building. As an alternative, visitors can take a cable car through an aromatic pine landscape to *Ta Shan's* eponymous mountain peak, where a pagoda offers spectacular views across the city and surrounding mountains. On my visit, the tallest peak of distant Zhifu Island appeared to float in the afternoon haze. In exalted tones, Gatekeeper Ding told me that Emperor Qin – the unifier of China – journeyed to that very spot in search of a rare herbal medicine. “Four times he came. Never found a thing,” he chuckled. “But I’ve found some.” Ding must have been at least 50 but his grin was that of a naughty schoolboy.

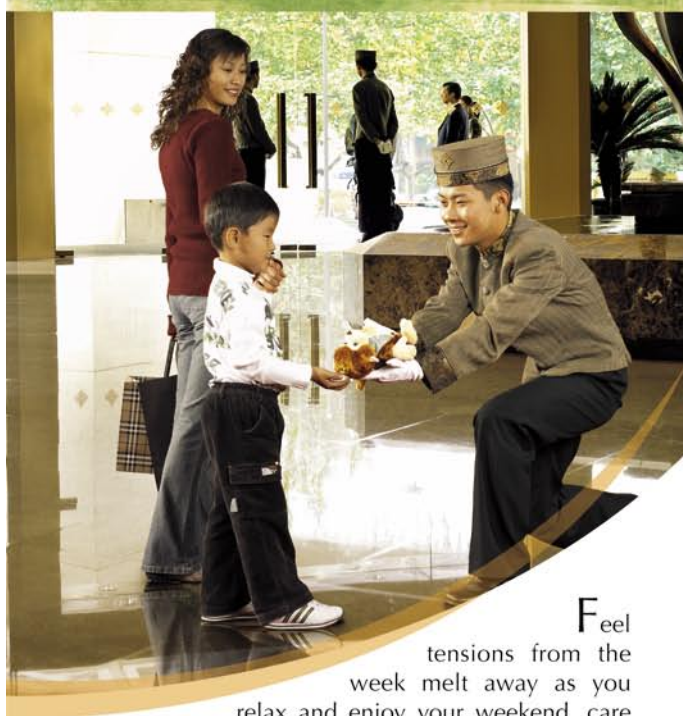
Outside Yantai there are several worthy day trips. An hour by bus to the west is Nanshan, home to a massive seated bronze Buddha atop a colossal stone staircase – a precursor to Hong Kong’s Giant Buddha. Sixty kilometres east of Yantai is the port of Weihai, site of China’s most humiliating naval defeat when Emperor Qing’s best ships were blown out of the water by the Japanese in 1895.

The pick of the daytrip options, however, is Penglai. The 80-minute ride from Yantai takes visitors out of the industrial belt and into the rolling hills of rural Shandong. Changyu’s vineyards, open to tourists, are just some of the many picturesque plantations that slide past the window.

PHOTOGRAPHY: GRAHAM BOND

Penglai's draw is not wine but a bizarre optical illusion. Every couple of years, locals claim that a cityscape mirage appears on the horizon, complete with buildings, bridges and vehicles. A video recording of some of the recent sightings plays on a loop at the Penglai Pavilion, a 1,000-year-old cliff-top castle that sits at the end of a delightful crescent-shaped bay. You'll have to decide for yourself if this is a natural phenomenon, extraterrestrial visitation or tourist gimmick. The former residence of 16th-century military hero Qi Jiguang and a palatial complex dedicated to the mythical Eight Immortals are the other main attractions. Though it's rough around the edges, Penglai is still a fascinating place to spend a day or two.

But nowhere along the north Shandong coastline has quite the same air of classic seaside fun as Yantai itself. If it's a bona fide beach resort experience you seek, head south to Hainan; in the glamour stakes, the Shandong Peninsula simply cannot compete. If, on the other hand, you appreciate atmosphere, honesty and value for money, Yantai is a great weekend away. Through architecture, alcohol and an unassuming ocean llop, I found my little England of the East – even if I never did discover the source of that strange smell of fish and chips. **Ⓜ**



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essentials

➔ GO BY...

Shandong Airlines operates a daily service from Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou to Yantai. Air China, China Eastern Airlines, Shanghai Airlines and China Southern Airlines also fly to Yantai.

🏠 STAY AT...

Yantai's two five-star seaside options each have their appeal. The **Marina Hotel** (128 Binhai Bei Lu; +86 (0)535 666 9999; www.ytmarinahotel.com) is right next to the golden sands of No 1 Beach and has a fantastic 25th-floor revolving restaurant with panoramic views. However, the interiors feel a little jaded. The **Golden Gulf Hotel** (34 Hai'an Lu; +86 (0)535 622 4491) at the opposite end of the bay, is adjacent to the splendid Yantai Hill Park, and feels much fresher. However, though the ocean is immediately outside the front door, it is still a 20-minute walk to the nearest slice of beach.

🍽️ EAT AT...

Yantai's seafood is fresh, delicious and great value for money. It's especially fun to slurp scallops at one of the simple seaside hawker joints along Binhai Lu, though those looking for a restaurant experience should head to the **Song Dao Sheng Yu Pian Jiu Dian** (155 Erma Lu; +86 (0)535 661 9746). Owned by Shang and Amy, a friendly Korean-American husband and wife team, the restaurant's excels in mammoth Korean-styled seafood platters.

🌤️ GO IN...

The Shandong Peninsula, like much of northern China, is very hot in summer and very cold in winter. Yantai's coastal location ensures the temperatures are never too fierce at either extreme and the city is generally held to be less humid than Qingdao. Spring and autumn are particularly pleasant.

🍴 PS...

Every part of China has its peculiar restaurant habits. In Shandong, bizarrely, bowls are not the norm. One is expected to eat from saucer-sized plates.

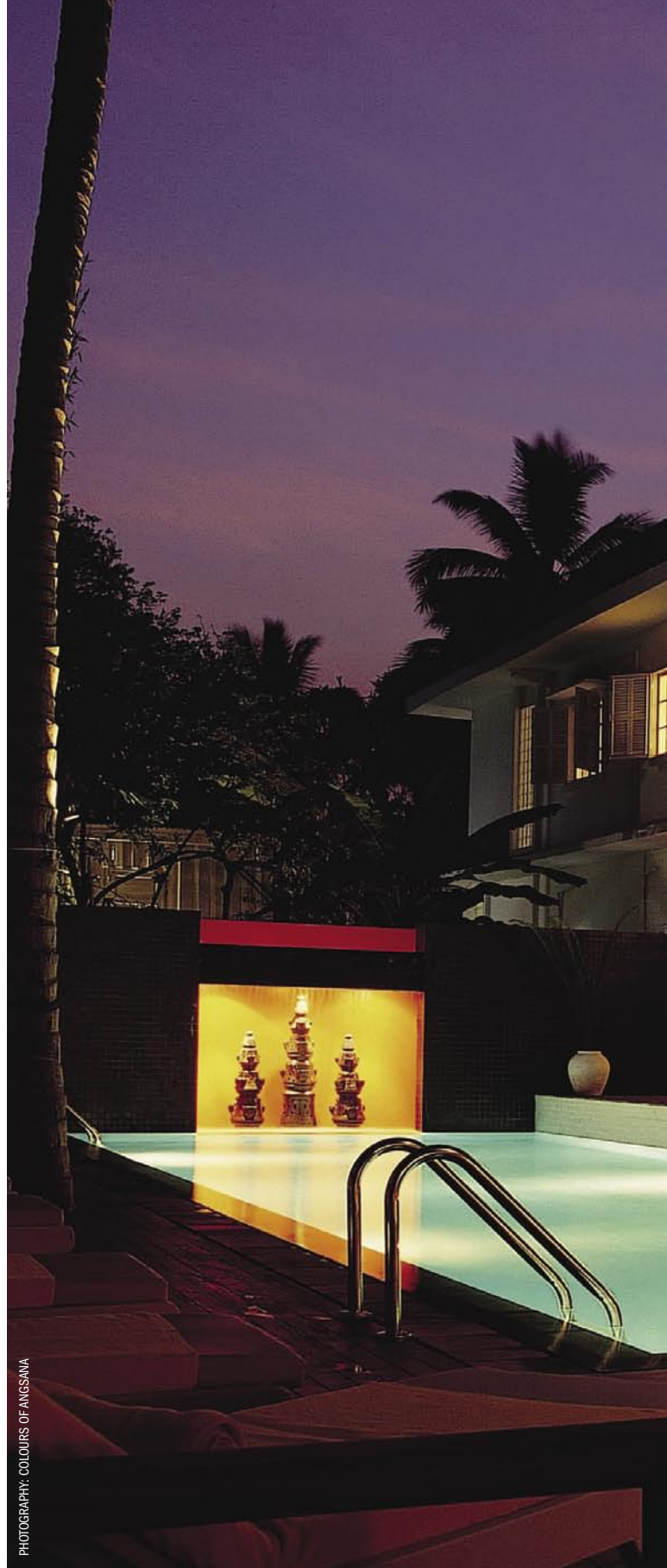
DON'T CALL ME BOUTIQUE

It may be heading up-market but Southeast Asia's latest 'darling destination' hasn't sold its soul, as Gary Bowerman discovers during a visit to sleepy Luang Prabang

Luang Prabang airport's tiny landing strip would fit inside many a mall parking lot. The terminal resembles a small municipal office built to process meaningless administrative documents rather than a rising volume of tourist passports. Inside, courteous staff wearing pressed green military uniforms sit behind carved-wood customs booths, directing operations with an unflappable assuredness unrecognisable to most international travellers. Above the visa desk, a small typed note apologetically informs me that I must pay a one dollar surcharge for arriving 'on a weekend or an official day off'. A fuzzy calmness seeps into me.

Less than 30 minutes later – following a taxi ride in the back of a covered Hyundai pick-up truck – I am sat in a wicker rocking chair on my hotel balcony, staring out across the mighty brown waters of the Mekong River. On the table, a dark muddied stain sits around the rim of a white porcelain cup of rich Lao coffee. Directly below me, a terracotta tiled terrace gives way to racks of rice cakes drying in the sun, a jumble of banana trees and moored boats, where local fisherman are inspecting their catch. Across the river, meandering forest-clad hilltops are dotted with white pagodas and small villages. Slightly downstream, a small dry-season islet in the river has been turned into a football pitch by schoolchildren playing in late-afternoon sun. I love this place already.

Auberge Le Calao, a small hotel whose arched second-floor balconies offer the best Mekong views in town, symbolises Luang Prabang's 21st-century tourism renaissance. UNESCO World Heritage-listed in 1995, this gloriously picturesque town is wedged into a corkscrew-shaped peninsula bordered by the Mekong and Nam Khan rivers and flanked by valleys and limestone cliffs. Largely traffic-free, its two mini rush hours occur early morning and late afternoon, when jeeps carry tourists to and from nearby







“For a small town, Luang Prabang punches well above its weight in style circles”

attractions: caves, whisky factories, whitewater rafting centres, elephant sanctuaries and indigenous tribal villages. For the rest of the day, visitors wander among its royal palaces, *wats* and markets stopping to photograph the saffron-robed monks and take lunch under the shady tree canopy of a riverside cafe.

Ten years ago, however, this city had no electricity, running water or roads to speak of. Emerging from the turbulent years of French colonial rule and destructive raids by neighbouring armies, Laos suffered a sustained and vicious US aerial bombardment; a nasty and largely secret side project to the Vietnam War. In 1975, the insular, inward-looking Lao People’s Democratic Republic was established with its capital in southern Vientiane. As the traditional seat of the Lao royal family, Luang Prabang – along with its historic temples, shrines, monasteries and colonial French villas – was left to decay.

In 1993, the century-old Portuguese-style riverfront mansion in the heart of old Luang Prabang was overgrown and derelict. Its signature arched balconies were crushed, the roof caved in. After two years of painstaking renovation, it opened in 1996, shortly after Luang Prabang received UNESCO protection. Today, Auberge Le Calao’s simple, yet comfortable, creme-washed rooms cost from USD 60 a night. Unfailingly polite, the staff are eager to practice English with the foreign visitors, many of whom book out the hotel months in advance.

To the left, right and rear of the hotel, I discovered scores of similarly historic villas, as well as beautiful Lao-style wooden homes in small *ban* neighbourhoods that pre-date French rule. That first afternoon, during a short stroll to the town’s main street, I experienced wild boar fricassee with Luang Prabang mushrooms

and roasted potatoes at L’Elephant, gorgeous silk garments and furnishings at the OckPopTok Gallery, natural soaps and cosmetics at Ban Lao and an avant-garde exhibition by a resident French photographer. I was offered a pre-happy hour mojito at an open-fronted sidestreet bar and picked up a copy of *Sayo Laos*, a local magazine stuffed with glossy articles, photos and adverts about upscale stores, hotels, eateries and spas.

For a small town, Luang Prabang punches well above its weight in style circles. It has two hotels – The Apsara and Satri House – featured in Herbert Ypma’s trendsetters’ bible: *HIP Hotels Orient*, the same number as China, Bhutan, Japan, Sri Lanka and Vietnam. Ypma himself describes Luang Prabang as “the traveller’s fantasy of a perfect town in the tropics of the Far East, an exemplary piece of unspoilt Southeast Asia.”

Even a cursory browse about town reveals several other small hotels that would meet the strict *HIP* standards, notably Maison Souvannaphoum, opened in 2005 by Banyan Tree’s affiliate brand, Colours of Angsana. Formerly home to a prince, the manicured grounds, whitewashed exterior and Angsana Spa retain a distinct royal grandeur and ambience of exclusivity.

Cast aside its pristine natural setting and historic charms, though, and a significant part of Luang Prabang’s magnetism lies in the

EASY ELEGANCE: (this page) With timber floors and breezy shutters, Maison Souvannaphoum retains an air of princely luxury; (opposite page, top) Funky Chinese lanterns, polished concrete floors and a divine Euro-Asian menu make The Apsara one of the hottest tables in town; (bottom) Wicker chairs and G&T’s – Luang Prabang oozes casual colonial charm



“This gloriously picturesque town is wedged into a corkscrew-shaped peninsula bordered by the Mekong and Nam Khan rivers and flanked by valleys and limestone cliffs”



BANK ON IT: (opposite page) Sunset over the mighty Mekong; HIP hotel, The Apsara, wins points for style, location and affordable rooms



absence of chains and branding. Though several of the town's hotels, restaurants and boutiques have the same owners, most are privately run as small enterprises and creativity is the watchword. Even the most hard-bitten traveller must smile at the innocence of handicraft boutiques that feature photos of Mick Jagger and Kylie Minogue during their visits, or a restaurant that counts British TV chef Jamie Oliver among its recent Lao cookery class students.


British-born Ivan Scholte is a prominent figure in 'new' Luang Prabang. Having lived in Asia for several years, he arrived in Laos in 2000, still harbouring a long-cherished dream to own a small hotel and restaurant. There were no direct flights, only a couple of decent hotels and one proper French restaurant in Luang Prabang back then. Backpackers venturing off the tried-and-trusted Southeast Asia trail comprised the town's clientele. Yet, he spotted an opportunity.

Scholte took over an old guesthouse on the banks of the Nam Khan river and hired a Bangkok-based interior designer. Between them, they created Luang Prabang's chicest address, The Apsara – named after the Cambodian maidens carved into the gallery walls at Angkor. Confident, sophisticated and elegant, the rooms blend hand-died natural fabrics with dark wood floors and furnishings. The trump card, however, is the restaurant, a cool melange of white walls, Chinese lanterns, Lao antiques and furniture and modern Euro-Asian cuisine. It would work equally well in New York's Soho or Cannes' La Croisette.

"Luang Prabang has changed quite considerably," says Scholte. "The roads have all been re-laid in the past four years and quite a few of the old buildings have been restored." The main change Scholte has noticed, however, is the increased spending power of visiting tourists. "Before, the backpacker crowd made up the majority of the visitors. Since Bangkok Airways started coming here, the change has been considerable," he says.

More visitors with more money is great news for Luang Prabang's tourism-fuelled economy. Yet, to the outsider, the town's physical makeover, 'darling destination' status in the glossy style monthlies and proliferation of fine restaurants and hotels looks dangerously like crossing the Rubicon from humble idyll to 'boutique' destination.

Certainly not, says Scholte. "It's a dreadful expression. I don't like it even for hotels. Even the airline flying from Bangkok to Luang Prabang is 'boutique', whatever that is supposed to mean."

Scholte believes that Luang Prabang's endless fascination is that, unlike some UNESCO World Heritage sights, it is a living, working town. "There's always something to do and see, from the monks seeking alms at dawn, to bargaining at the open air Hmong markets to watching women embroidering and weaving," he says. "Or you can just wander slowly along the side streets and through the temples." 

essentials

GO BY...

Bangkok Airways (www.bangkokair.com) flies to Luang Prabang daily from the Thai capital and offers several daily flights between Luang Prabang and Siem Reap. Book online for cheapest fares, and plan well in advance for travel during Chinese Golden Week holidays.

STAY AT...

The Apsara

Uber-hip hotel offering sophisticated rooms and the best restaurant in town.
(Kingkitsarath Street, Ban Wat Sene; www.theapsara.com)

Satri House

Owned and managed exclusively by women, this is one of Luang Prabang's most stylish stays.
(057 Phothisarath Road, Ban That Luang; www.satrihouse.com)

Maison Souvannaphoum

Dressed in palatial grandeur, this whitewashed gem is both beautiful and enchanting.
(Rue Chao Fa Ngum, Ban That Luang; www.coloursofangsana.com)

Auberge Le Calao

Small hotel in renovated riverside mansion. Second-floor balconies offer fabulous Mekong views.
(BP 230; www.calaoinn.laopdr.com)

EAT AT...

The Apsara

The hottest table in town. Excellent contemporary Euro-Asian cuisine and fine wine list.
(See 'Stay at')

L'Elephant

Exquisite modern French cuisine in elegant surroundings.
(www.elephant-restau.com)

Louis' Cafe

An *alfresco* Lao lunch on the banks of the Mekong is an unforgettable Luang Prabang experience.
(opposite Auberge Le Calao)

3 Nagas

Innovative Lao cuisine in a cosy dining room that fronts a small boutique hotel.
(Sakkaline Road, Ban Vat Nong; www.3nagas.com)

GO IN...

November-February is the most temperate period, with all rivers navigable and roads passable. March-May is dry, but around Lao New Year in April accommodation can be hard to find. Avoid the June-October rainy season. Book well in advance for Christmas, New Year and Chinese Golden Week holidays.

PS...

Several daily flights operate between Luang Prabang and the Lao capital, Vientiane. Though larger and less idyllic than Luang Prabang, Vientiane has considerable charm and historic interest – and is quite unlike other capital cities in the region. Well worth a two-day trip.

beyond SAMARKAND AND BUKHARA





MOSAICS OF PAST GLORY

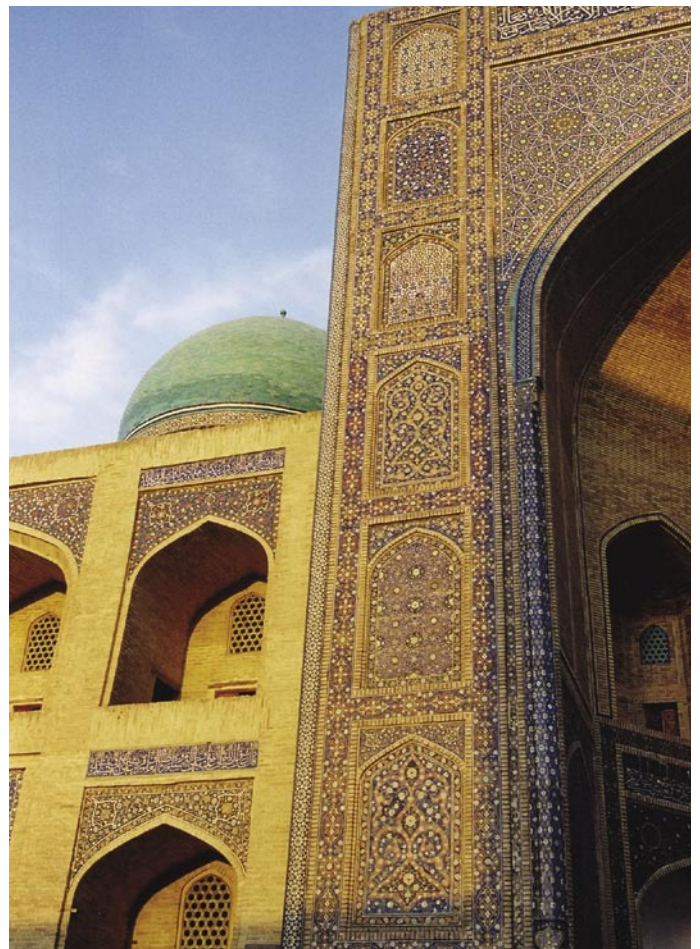
In the legendary central Asian cities of Samarkand and Bukhara, Henri Fruchet finds a triumph of Islamic architecture



The late afternoon sun shimmers off the blue mosaic facades and filters through the seemingly endless tile trellises of the legendary city of Samarkand, legacy of the last of the great Central Asian conquerors, Tamerlane. Known in times past as the Jewel of Islam, Samarkand has for over 2,000 years opened its arms to weary Silk Road travellers and caravans and was forcibly opened by the likes of Alexander the Great and the Soviet Army. None, however, had an impact as deep and powerful on the city as Tamerlane and his descendants in the 14th to 16th centuries. It is the spell of their monuments – considered among the finest ever built in the Islamic world – that to this day draws travellers to this lush green desert oasis in Uzbekistan.

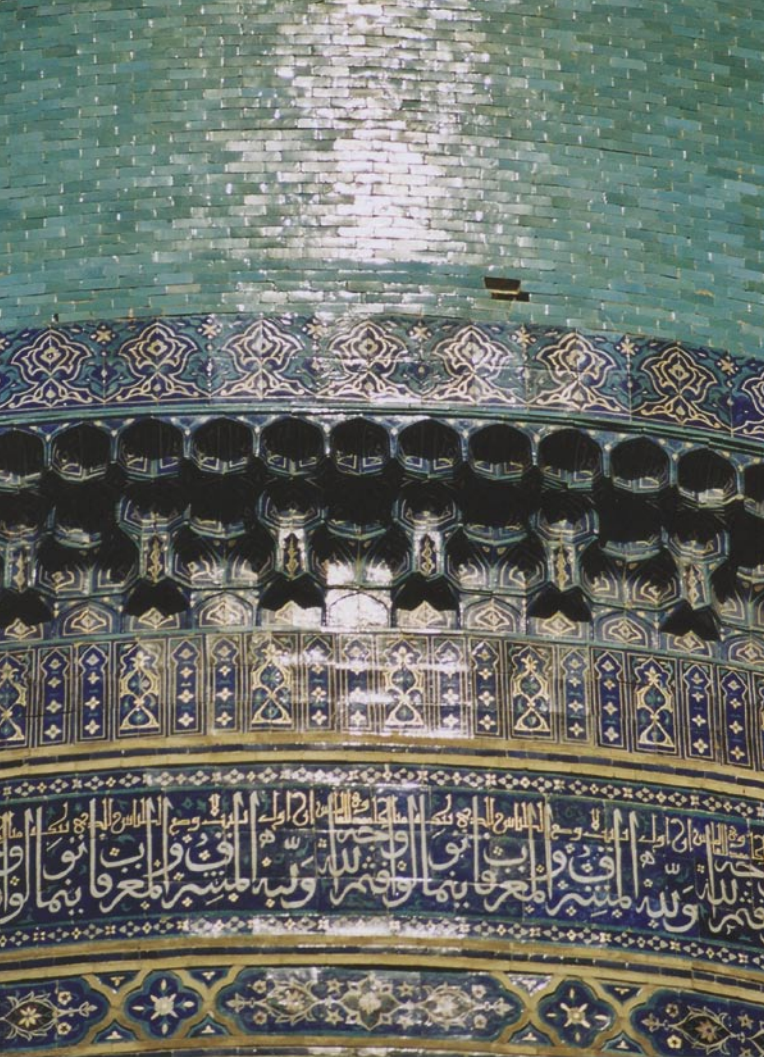
In his 40 years of nearly constant military campaigning, Tamerlane created an empire that stretched from Moscow to Syria to Delhi to the north-western borders of Ming-dynasty China. From these conquered lands he brought back the finest artisans, architects and builders to create a city fit for the ruler of the world. Today, monumental architectural works such as his tomb, the Gul Emir, the Bibi Khannum Mosque, the Shah-i-Zindah, and above all, the Registan, stand as a glorious and lasting testament to his power and ambition.

Lying at the heart of Samarkand is the Registan ensemble, a complex of three magnificently-decorated *madrasah* (Islamic



“Each resplendent in its own right, together the *madrasah* display an interplay of harmony, symmetry and elegance that few places in the world can equal.”





colleges) located around a central square. Each resplendent in its own right, together the *madrassah* display an interplay of harmony, symmetry and elegance that few places in the world can equal. Oldest of the three is that of Ulug Beg, named after the astronomer-philosopher king grandson of Tamerlane, with its star-encrusted mosaic portal, ornate arches and vaulted ceilings. Built in the early 15th century, it is the model from which the other two, the 17th-century Shir Dor and Tillya Kari, take their inspiration.

It is worth taking hours to view it all at leisure, ideally at different times of the day so as to appreciate the effect of the sunshine on the intricate mosaics. Visitors may also get offered a chance to climb to the top of one of the minarets by a resident police guard. For a small negotiable fee and a leg workout that may be regretted the following day, enjoy spectacular vistas of the complex and the Pamir Alai mountains in the distance. Time your climb well and it's a great spot to view a sublime sunset.

“Samarkand is more than just a museum of monuments though. It is an evolving city in a young republic where one can see the roots of religious revival after years of Soviet repression.”

The Bibi Khanum mosque (according to legend, built on the command of Tamerlane's Chinese princess bride) and the Gur-Emir were famous throughout the ancient world for their onion-shaped domes topped by azure-blue mosaic tiles. While the ruins and faded interiors of the Bibi Khanum mosque have visitors envisioning past splendour, the Gur Emir, with its golden inlaid tilework of singular beauty, leaves little need for imagination, especially when the guides sing traditional central Asian prayers and hymns which echo off the walls and cupola. The tombs of Tamerlane and Ulug Beg give a sense of the luxury in which they lived.

Samarkand is more than just a museum of monuments though. It is an evolving city in a young republic where one can see the roots of religious revival after years of Soviet repression. Experience the seldom visited but incredibly charming Khodja Abdi Darun *madrassah*, with its central reflecting pool and thousand-year-old chinor trees; shop for some of the finest carpets and ceramics in the world; or relax at a *chaikhana* (teahouse) and enjoy some legendary Uzbek hospitality while observing the quiet rhythms of life unfold in the bazaar and the surrounding streets.

A four-hour drive west of Samarkand, Bukhara also boasts an incredible wealth of architectural monuments. But unlike its more famous neighbour, these are almost all to be found within an intact, living old town – the *shakhristan* – and therefore many travellers find the city more charming and rewarding.

As with many places Genghis Khan dropped in on during his 13th-century romp around the world, very little in Bukhara remained intact after his visit. One of the buildings that he did leave standing, the 850-year-old Kalon minaret, makes a great place to begin your tour. The attached Kalon mosque and the neighbouring Mir-i-Arab *madrassah* embody the distinct beauty and understated elegance of Islamic architecture. It's easy to spend



THE BEAUTIFUL AND BAZAAR: (opposite page, top) The dome of the Bibi Khannum mosque in Samarkand; (bottom) The mosque of the philosopher-astronomer king Ulug Beg in Samarkand; (this page) *Samsa* sellers in the Samarkand bazaar

a few hours alone and almost undisturbed in the central courtyard watching the shadows dance under the portals and arches as the sun crosses the crystal blue sky and imagine the city as it must have been 150 years ago when the muezzin's chant from the top of the minaret would empty the bazaars and fill the square for daily prayers.

The spectacular Mir-i-Arab *madrasah*, one of only two allowed to remain open during Soviet times, has been a centre of Islamic learning for hundreds of years. Although it is not open to the public today, visitors can gaze at its marvellous pishtak portal and into the interior courtyard where earnest young students train to become teachers in the mosques that are slowly re-opening across Uzbekistan after years of repression.

While the main sites of the city have been largely taken over for commercial purposes, there is a timelessness about Bukhara that is best discovered by cutting into the warren of small lanes leading off from the Lyab-i-Hauz and spending a couple of hours exploring its oddities. Whether it is a group of cats playing in the ruins of an old home, a faded mosaic in a rundown and abandoned *caravanserai* or an aged coppersmith toiling away in a small roadside workshop, the *shakhristan* oozes old world charm.

At the end of a long day of walking, visitors can join the locals for a deep soak and a massage at one of the public *hamman* bathhouses, or settle for a candlelit dinner under the stars at one of the myriad of small B&Bs that have popped up in the courtyard houses of the old city. It's a beautiful way to end a day in this most beautiful of places. ☺

essentials

✈️ 🚗 GO BY...

Uzbekistan Airways flies twice a week between Beijing and Tashkent, and operates daily flights from Tashkent to Samarkand and Bukhara. Alternatively, it's a four-hour drive from Tashkent to Samarkand; private taxis can be hired at the Tashkent Bus Station. Expect to pay around USD 20.

Bukhara is another three to four-hour drive from Samarkand.

🏠 STAY AT...

In Samarkand

Legend Guesthouse

Charming rooms in a renovated courtyard house near the Registan in the old part of the city.

(+998 (0)66 233 7481; www.legendm7.intal.uz)

In Bukhara

Hovli-Poyon B&B

Another lovingly-converted courtyard home with comfortable rooms and great views from the rooftop terrace.

(+998 (0)65 224 1865; www.dreambukhara.org)

🍽️ EAT AT...

The bazaar in Samarkand, with over 10 different kinds of piping fresh naan bread, tonnes of shashlik grilled kebabs and killer Korean kimchi.

Avoid the restaurants near the Lyab-i-hauz in Bukhara. For a truly authentic experience, give **Bakshilo** a bell. This Uzbek man cooks for small groups and sometimes individuals in his home. He makes a perfect *plov* (pilaf) and will even share some of his culinary secrets. (+998 (0)65 224 5638).

🍷 DRINK AT...

Samarkand has a thriving backpacker scene, with many overland travellers eager to swap tales over a bottle of vodka at the **Bahodir B&B**. For a glimpse of the well-heeled local life, try **Cafe Blues** at 66 Amir Temur St.


Your best bet in Bukhara is the wine tasting centre just off the main Lyah-i-hauz square. For a few dollars you get seven glasses of local wine and commentary by the affable Djamal Akhrrarov – in Russian. By the seventh glass it's informative and fun even if you don't understand a word.

☀️ GO IN...

May-June or September-November when it is sunny and mild. Spring also brings peaches, and autumn the watermelons and honeydew. Winter (December-March) is bitterly cold and summer is baking hot.

📖 PS...

The bazaar held on Sundays and Thursdays at the village of Urgut in the hills outside Samarkand is said to be the biggest in the region. Pick up some fabulous souvenirs, join the locals drinking tea at the *chaikhanas* and take in the Chor Chinar mosque.



art KYOTO

GEISHA GAME

Armed with a few questions and an undeniable curiosity, Adrian Bridge finds himself adrift in the floating world of Kyoto's small geisha community



PHOTOGRAPHY: © FRANK CARTER, LONELY PLANET IMAGES

There are many games you can play with a geisha. One of the most popular currently doing the rounds in Kyoto involves a variation on that old favourite 'scissors, paper, stone'. In this version, the geisha and her guest have to adopt one of three guises: a tiger, an old woman with a cane or a samurai warrior with a spear. The participants prepare for their roles on either side of a partition and, at the designated moment, emerge in one of the poses. The tiger eats the old lady and the samurai kills the tiger; but the old lady wins against the warrior because she is his mother. It's fast, it's fun and it's fanciful. And someone always ends up having to pay a penalty.

As this is my first visit to a geisha teahouse, I have been introduced to a somewhat simpler game. This one involves a small upturned dish and a flat surface (in this case a counter). When the dish is on the counter the two players take turns to tap it with the palm of the hand. At any point one of them can remove the dish, after which the other should touch the flat surface with a clenched fist. When the dish is returned (it can be withheld for up to three rounds), the next player has to tap it with the palm of the hand. The longer the game goes on, the faster it gets.

I make a poor fist of it, but Miehina, the apprentice geisha who has taken me under her kimonoed wing, is patient. She smiles encouragingly as I almost trick her into a false move and gives a little cry of delight as her dexterity with the dish fools me completely. Then, delicately readjusting her position, she pours a glass of beer and signals for me to drink. It's the price I have to pay, and I do so willingly. But I tell her that the next time we play, I'll get the better of her.



Here I pinch myself, and not for the first time on this extraordinary evening in the strange and mysterious 'floating world' of the geisha. It has been a long time since I've played such a childish game but I'm finding it compelling. I'm laughing like a teenager; I feel totally relaxed. And for the next hour or so I have the undivided attention of an exquisite-looking 17-year-old who will sing for me, dance for me and serve food and drink for me. What's more she seems to find my every word a pearl of wit and wisdom, my every expression a joy to behold. I could get used to this.

Of course I am only here for the purposes of research. The release of *Memoirs of a Geisha*, a film based on the bestselling novel by Arthur Golden, has triggered a renewed surge of interest in this deeply secretive and alluring aspect of traditional Japanese life and, more broadly, in the exotic beauty of the country as a whole.

The novel chronicles the life of Sayuri, a poor fisherman's daughter who becomes one of the most celebrated geisha of her generation. Along the way there's hardship, rivalry, warmth and love; there's seediness and splendour, desire and denial, all played out against the magnificent backdrop of Kyoto – the former imperial capital – during the geisha heyday of the 1930s and the decline that came with the onset of the second world war.

What, if anything, remains of that world today? What can a visitor to Kyoto encounter of it? Is it something that self-respecting visitors should be seeking to experience at all? For all the emphasis on the mastery of calligraphy, classical dance and the playing of instruments, aren't geisha (literally translated as 'persons of art') simply high-class ladies of the night? And surely only losers pay such vast sums of money to be entertained by them?

For answers to these tricky questions, I turn to Peter MacIntosh, a Canadian expat who has lived in Kyoto for 12 years. He is married to a former geisha and prides himself on being a member of teahouses in all five of the Kyoto districts in which geisha are to be found (though his wife is slightly less enamoured of this arrangement). Peter is upbeat about what he perceives to be a revival of geisha culture, pointing out that when he first came to Kyoto in 1993 there were just 55 apprentice geisha (*maiko*) whereas today there are 80. Moreover, unlike Sayuri, young girls are no longer sold into the profession but enter voluntarily, with their parents' consent and the freedom to

break away during the years of training if they really feel it is not for them.

And why do they do it? "For some women, becoming a geisha is a kind of rebellion against modern ideas of equality and the sexual revolution," says Peter. "It's a domain in which they can be completely feminine. There's a huge 'wow' factor. Successful geisha are highly sought after. People pay a lot of money just to be in their company. That's quite an ego boost."

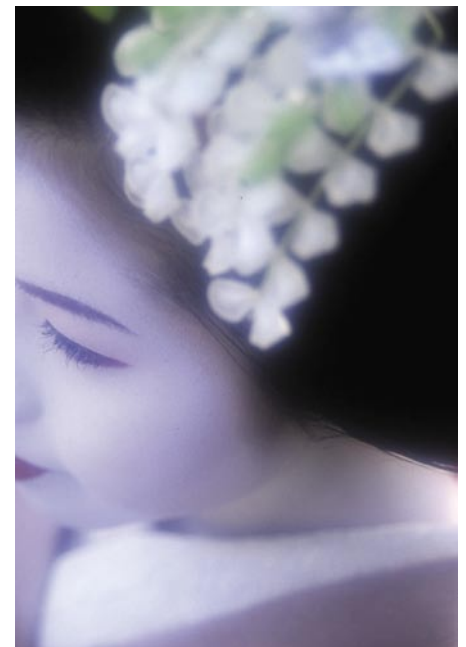
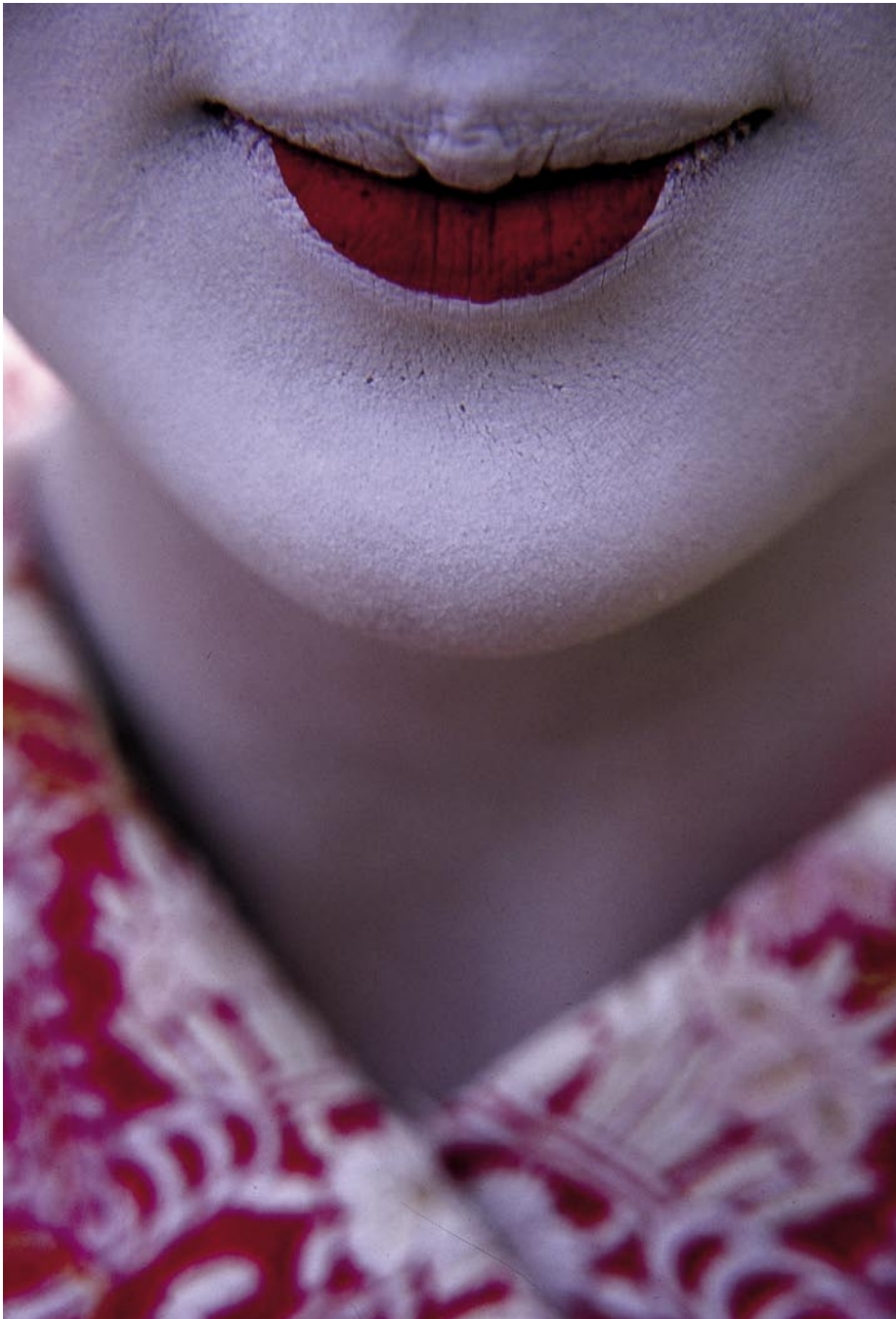
If there is a revival, it is modest. In the decade before the war there were as many as 80,000 geisha in Japan. Today there are roughly 1,500. In Kyoto, the heartland of geishadom, there are fewer than 300.

But they are still there. I've just seen one walking, or rather tottering along on those extraordinary platform shoes. I almost gasp. This is just how you imagine it. We're in the heart of Gion, the atmospheric Kyoto district that was the setting for much of the action of the book (and painstakingly recreated in California for the film). Peter knows her – he seems to know all of them – and waves a greeting. She flashes a smile and delivers a most ungeishalike peace sign but races on, possibly to an early assignment.

Later in another of Gion's characterful streets, full of old buildings with their blinds still drawn and simple but intriguing teahouses adorned with welcoming lanterns, we see two more apprentice geisha. We stop at the school where they are instructed in dance, calligraphy and playing the *shamisen* (a classical three-stringed instrument) and imagine how Sayuri must have felt when she arrived on her first day. We see the theatre where she first emerged as a superstar. We stop at another, Gion's Corner, where members of the public can watch *maiko* perform classical dance and song and tea ceremonies. We rest at the bridge over the canal where, in the book, the young Sayuri first met the Chairman,

A BEAUTIFUL ART: (anti-clockwise from opposite page, top) Deference is as important an art as dancing or singing in the Geisha world; Kyoto's Gion district was the setting for Arthur Golden's best-selling novel *Memoirs of a Geisha* and remains one of Japan's last geisha strongholds; A geisha apprentice performing a dance; Wooden sandals are commonly worn outside but geisha will normally go barefoot indoors; A paper lantern in Kyoto's Gion district; A geisha's success is in the detail – even chopstick positioning mustn't be overlooked





“Getting dressed up as a geisha is big business in Kyoto these days and there are several makeover studios that provide the service.”

the man who became the love of her life.

Gion is not the only place where you can find geisha. During a quick pitstop in a nearby Starbucks I spot another one demurely sitting in the window. She seems absorbed, happy to watch the world go by. The back of her kimono dips, revealing a three-pronged fork-shaped area of bare flesh on the nape of the neck surrounded by the thick white make-up that is the trademark of the apprentice geisha. Japanese men find that sexy, much more so than the rather more

obvious displays of female flesh that have become the norm in the West.

And then there are the fake geisha. Heading up to the Kiyomizu-dera temple (one of Kyoto’s many Buddhist and Shinto shrines), we pass along Ninen-zaka Street, with its mouth-watering rice cracker shops, incense stalls and fan displays, only to be stopped in our tracks by the sight of three girls in full geisha regalia standing in a sidestreet, giggling and inviting male tourists (particularly of the tall, blonde variety) to come and pose for pictures

LIP SERVICE: (clockwise from left) A geisha's bright red lipstick is made from safflower extract and worn only in the centre of the lips to emphasise delicacy and femininity; When applying foundation, geishas usually leave a line of bare skin around the hairline to create the impression they are wearing a mask



MAIKOVER: (above) Apprentice geishas (*maiko*) must wear a flowery hair ornament in the first year of their training; A geisha's wooden platform clogs only enhance the sense of feminine delicacy but, like much else in the geisha world, require skill to use

“For the next hour or so I have the undivided attention of an exquisite-looking 17-year-old who will sing for me, dance for me and serve food and drink for me.”

with them. Clearly they are enjoying the sensation of turning heads. “We do it for the experience, it’s lovely,” one of them says.

Getting dressed up as a geisha is big business in Kyoto these days and there are several makeover studios that provide the service. For most women, it offers the best chance of getting a sense of what it might feel like to be a geisha, and of how others would respond to you as such. One woman in our group confessed, only half in jest, that adopting the geisha mode of behaviour might help her secure a boyfriend.

She might be right, for there is something quite special about this accentuation of the feminine, this exquisite combination of the graceful and the playful – and you don’t need to be an ageing Japanese businessman to appreciate it. But in the end, the question foremost in everybody’s mind remains: what exactly does go on behind those bamboo blinds in the hallowed teahouses? Is it really just an innocent exchange of sophisticated pleasantries and ego-massaging, or is there more to it?

Despite the expense, curiosity gets the better of me, and through Peter I gain an introduction to the Harutomi *ochaya* (teahouse) in Gion, which we visit together.

He briefs me. “Never, ever touch a geisha’s kimono: some of them are worth more than 50,000 dollars. So no posing for pictures with your arms around them. If you want to appear cultured, comment on one of the drawings or on the quality of the dancing. Joke and flirt as much as you like, but never get vulgar. Enjoy yourself; this is meant to be fun. But there are boundaries: geisha do not ‘offer the pillow’. There are other places for that.”

As I wait for Peter outside Kyoto’s largest *kabuki* theatre, I confess I am nervous. Will my small talk be up to it? Will my appreciation of the arts prove wanting? Will I spill or slurp my drinks or make the sort of inappropriate remarks that could only come from a *gaijin* (foreigner)?

As in all such situations, beer helps. And Michina, attired in a wonderful green kimono and sporting fabulous red lips

(thick at the bottom, provocatively slight at the top) does pour it beautifully. She’s very good at making me feel comfortable. With Peter translating, I ask her about her life as a *maiko*. She’s very excited: just two weeks ago she completed her first year and thus no longer has to wear the flowery hair ornament that dangled in front of her face. Her headwear remains extraordinary though, a fascinating collection of ornaments and lucky charms. I compliment her and ask what she enjoys about this life. Meeting interesting people, she says. I ask her what she likes doing on her two days off a month. Going to see films. I ask her about the future. She will inherit the *ochaya*.

Then she dances, slow elegant movements on tatami mats to the accompaniment of a *shamisen* played by the mother of the house, a former geisha with an all-knowing, no-nonsense look about her. The *shamisen* is an acquired taste, but I enjoy the spectacle and sheer strangeness of it all. And of course, the novelty of a private performance.

Michina dances and then sings. Mother scolds her for getting some notes wrong.



FAN OUT: (left) A traditional stone lantern in the Gion District of Kyoto; (bottom) A maiko fan dance at Kyoto's Ebisu Shrine

Then Peter joins in (he's not bad). This is good geisha action, he says, very good. You're doing well.

There are more bottles of beer. Michina spills some and looks contrite. Almost pitiable. I suddenly feel terribly sorry for her, terribly protective. But then the games commence. Clenched fist, outstretched hand, clenched fist, outstretched hand; now you see the dish, now you don't, now you do, now you don't. Michina is triumphant though not at all triumphalist, and pours another beer. Not a drop spilled this time and just the right head. "Magnificently done. It's impossible to improve upon such perfection," I say.

"That is the kindest thing anyone has ever said to me," she says, in a manner that is so heartfelt I almost believe her. Michina is playing her part; I am playing mine. It's all a game. The geisha game. 📺

essentials

✈️ GO BY...

ANA and Japan Airlines have daily flights from China's main cities to Osaka, from where you can take a 15-minute JR Tokaido Shinkansen bullet train ride from Shin-Osaka station or the cheaper services on the JR Kyoto line (25 minutes) from Osaka Station to Kyoto.

👥 GO WITH...

Kyoto Sights and Nights

Peter MacIntosh offers visitors the chance to experience the real Kyoto geisha culture, cuisine, arts, temples, gardens and nightlife through the eyes of an insider. See www.kyotosightsandnights.com for more information.

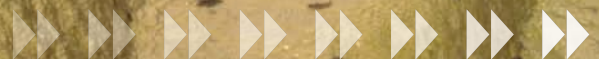
🌤️ GO IN...

April-June or October-November when the weather is warm, rainfall low and foliage as colourful as the geisha.

WHERE ON EARTH?

The region where this crystalline marvel can be found was made internationally famous by a Hilton – one of the first to come to China, way back in the 1930s. Its local renown is far more ancient, and considerably less controversial. Known as the birthplace of one of China's most remarkable minority groups, this geological oddity created over many millions of years is now a pilgrimage site in the second month of the lunar calendar when a song and dance spectacular takes place at the base of the limestone pool terraces. The villages that surround the site are, however, populated by a multitude of minorities, Bai and Yi included, though this is not so surprising when you consider it's located in the country's most ethnically diverse province. Though similar in style and size, it should not be confused with the more famous terraces of Huanglong – according to legend, these 'paddy fields' were 'created by the fairies', making them one of a kind.

Name this famous limestone terrace formation for a chance to win the prize overleaf...





Name the destination
overleaf to win . . .

FOUR NIGHTS IN
LUANG PRABANG

LAOS

To enter the competition simply email the name of the destination overleaf to info@asiaandaway.com by April 15, 2006, marking your entry 'Where on Earth?'. The winner will be chosen at random from the correct entries and informed by email.

Regal yet relaxing, sleepy yet startling, Luang Prabang is one of Southeast Asia's most attractive urban jewels (see page 36). Lying between mountain and Mekong, the former royal capital of Laos boasts both monuments to a grandiose past and pointers to a fabulous future. Win this month's 'Where on Earth?' competition and you will be able to enjoy it all – temples, tropical weather and top-notch restaurants – from the comfort of one of the most luxurious lodgings in town.



With a hilltop location and lush garden surrounds, **La Residence Phou Vao** marries spectacular views with superb accommodation. You will spend four nights in a Deluxe Room, dressed in sumptuous wood, cotton and silk and featuring a private balcony overlooking the adjacent monastery-studded jungle.

A bottle of French wine will greet you on arrival, though the indulgences won't end there: our lucky winner will also be treated to a traditional Lao dinner *a deux* and an hour-long massage and lemongrass steam bath at the Phou Vao Spa by Ytsara. Inspired by the concept of a typical Lao village, this brand new complex has cosy cottages set around a lilypond and represents just one more reason to linger long in this beautiful, beguiling city.

La Residence Phou Vao
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www.pansea.com; laos@pansea.com

Conditions:

1. Prize includes four nights in a Deluxe Room with daily breakfast for two; two-way airport transfer, one-hour massage for two with a private lemongrass Lao steam bath; a traditional Lao dinner for two; a bottle of red or white Bordeaux wine and a floral bed arrangement on arrival.
2. Flights not included.
3. Prize is not transferable or redeemable for cash.

THE DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKER

"Could you just do that once more? And this time really feel the anger," says Joel.

Joel is a documentary filmmaker currently working on a project about the Indonesian punk scene. Only he's just found out there isn't really much of a scene.

The word in Joel's hometown of Hong Kong was that Jakarta was practically exploding with young men, punctured with metal and seething with anti-establishment emotions. But, on arrival, Joel could only find two people who looked even faintly like Sid Vicious. And one of them was 83.

Not that he lets small problems like that stop him from getting his film made. He's a guerrilla filmmaker and that means ripping up the rule book. Soon he's striding through the local market – flack jacket flapping and unnecessary vintage cameras clacking – gathering up the meanest, angriest sons of bitches he can find. If there isn't a punk scene, he thinks, he'll create one. And make a film about that.

His cameraman, Kev, is a little uneasy about

this somewhat unconventional approach and suggests it isn't actually documenting reality but distorting it. Joel looks hurt and disappointed. "But what happens if a tree falls in the wood, Kev, and there's nobody there to hear it?" Kevin nods – having no idea what Joel is going on about – and returns to filming 'the punks' again, who have now got quite into the idea of starring in a music video and are performing an a cappella version of 'All You Need is Love' by the Beatles.

This display of distinctly non-punk attitude throws Joel into a panic. He tells the two nearest singers that if they don't shut up he'll have their septums pierced and an iron bolt shoved through them, like he did to the 'lead guitarist' earlier this morning.

That does it. The rest of the role players have had enough. They grab hold of the instruments they've been lent and start to smash up the bar they're filming in.

"Brilliant," screams Joel, pushing Kev out into the affray as he ducks under the nearest table. **a**



ILLUSTRATION: NICK BONNER

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play SHANGRI-LA





TSAMPA DANCING

This month, bike hero Edward Genochio drinks tea with Tibetans and offers some tips on culinary etiquette – plus he does not die

Zhongdian used to be the end of the road – the made-it destination for the hardcore traveller. But then came the tart-up and the tourist-friendly rebranding. Shangri-La, they call it now. Time, I think, to move on.

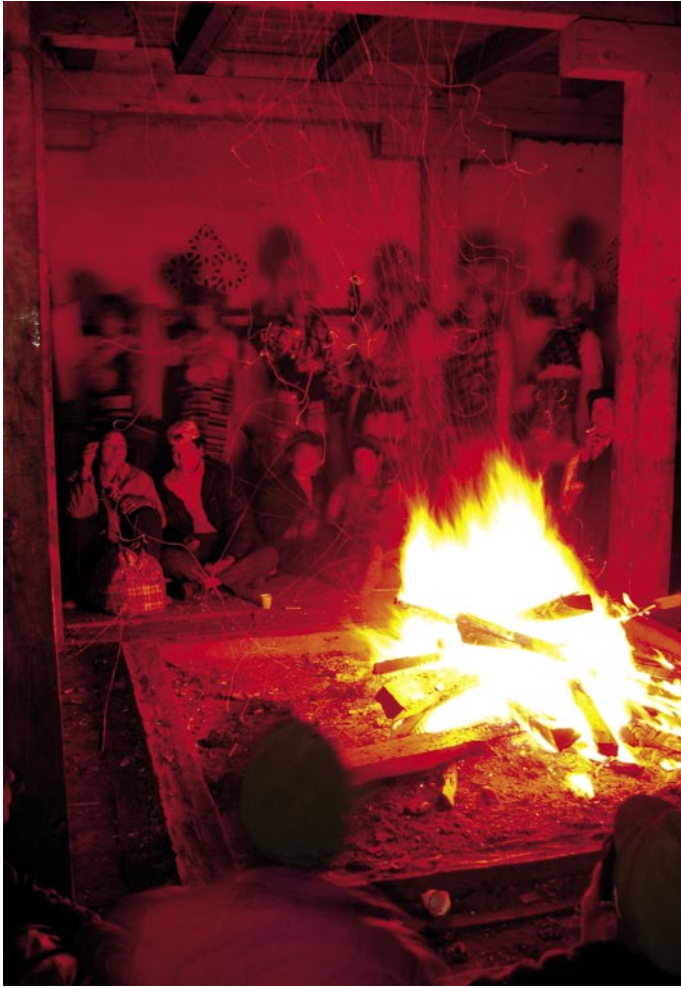
But not so fast: I arrived on the eve of the lunar New Year and the town's shopkeepers and restaurateurs had pulled down the shutters for the duration. My appetite progressed thus: day one – peckish. Day two – hungry. Day three – ravenous. Late on day four a corner shop showed signs of opening, and I was in and out clutching a packet of biscuits before the door had bounced on its hinges.

Retreating to my hotel to munch my prize, like a leopard dragging prey up a tree, I ran into the cheerful *laoban*, dandy as ever, beslippered and sporting a crumpled three-piece suit. He was in high spirits and

unlocked my room with an improvised aria on the theme of my room number. “*Er-si-wu*,” he warbled merrily and at length.

Next day, food pannier replenished, I cycled uphill through scents of wild herbs and higher into sweet pine, then dropped 1,500 metres from the heights of Shangri-La down to the Yangtze valley and the Jinshajiang, the River of Golden Sands. Here it was inviting, turquoise and calm; around the bend cascading, foaming white and angry.

The village of Waka lies on the river's Sichuan shore. There you will find the Yangla Fandian, a modest rural inn run by Joma and Atse, an entertaining pair of Tibetans from across the border in Yunnan. Though officially still closed for the holiday, they agreed that I could stay, on the condition that I joined the evening's dance



party. Dancing is not something that I ordinarily do, but if that is the cost of a night's lodging then I am prepared to make exceptions (as long as I am in a suitably remote location). Things kicked off early when the local teens piled in and began Mando-bopping to a karaoke disc, but when The Man With Long Hair turned up, the party really began.

The Man With Long Hair was one of those guys who don't just *got* music, they *are* the music. Though the wrong side of 45, he was the local schoolgirl hero. Before long the TV was turned off, the crowd formed a circle, guys on one side, girls on the other, and the singing began. Girls first, a nasal chant that started ever so softly, then crescendoed, echoingly beautiful, before diminishing to almost nothing when it was the boys' turn to take over the melody.

The dance looked straightforward enough.

The Man With Long Hair hauled me into the circle, which gyred slowly around the room. It was basically an eight-step, and after 90 minutes I had seven-eighths got the hang of it. But there was always one step wrong, a different step each time. My leg was straight when it should have been bent; up when it should have been down; in when it should have been out; left when it should have been right. And then suddenly, to yelps of "Wusi! Wusi! Wusi!", the tempo doubled and I was stranded, every part of me in the wrong place at the wrong time. When the pace doubled again minutes later it was time for me to retire, not altogether gracefully.

In the morning I avenged my humiliation by beating the girls

at street badminton, in the process sending Atse head first into a bucket of cinders as she leapt for a stray shuttlecock. Honours more or less even, we headed up the hill to the village *chorten*, or Tibetan-Buddhist shrine, where we burnt juniper branches sprinkled with rice and spent a happy half-hour circumnavigating the bonfire in ritual clockwise *kora*. Atse chanted her way through the first couple of dozen laps, then whipped out her mobile and continued orbiting while chatting to her boyfriend.

North of Waka, the Jinshajiang squeezes through an impossibly high and steep gorge. In Da La village, where a tributary stream empties into the river, a dozen houses perch on what space they can find.

Here, Lurong – short, smiling, in a well-worn beige woolen sweater, a string of wooden beads around his neck – flagged me down as I passed.

"*Jatong!*" he called,

Tibetan for "Drink tea." I say this not to boast of my Tibetan language skills; it's just a phrase you get to hear rather a lot in these parts.

So I followed him upstairs to his wonderful rooftop terrace, where we sat and *jatong*-ed, warm in the afternoon sun. His cowboy-hatted brother Ason was full of stories from the days he used to drive lorries over the high road to Lhasa. Two monks from a monastery near Deqin were also visiting, and together we watched the sun slip lower and the rocks of the Jinshajiang gorge turn from white to orange to pink to grey. Not for the last time in the villages along the valley, an invitation to *jatong* turned into dinner and a bed for the night as well.

"Though officially still closed for the holiday, they agreed that I could stay, on the condition that I joined the evening's dance party."



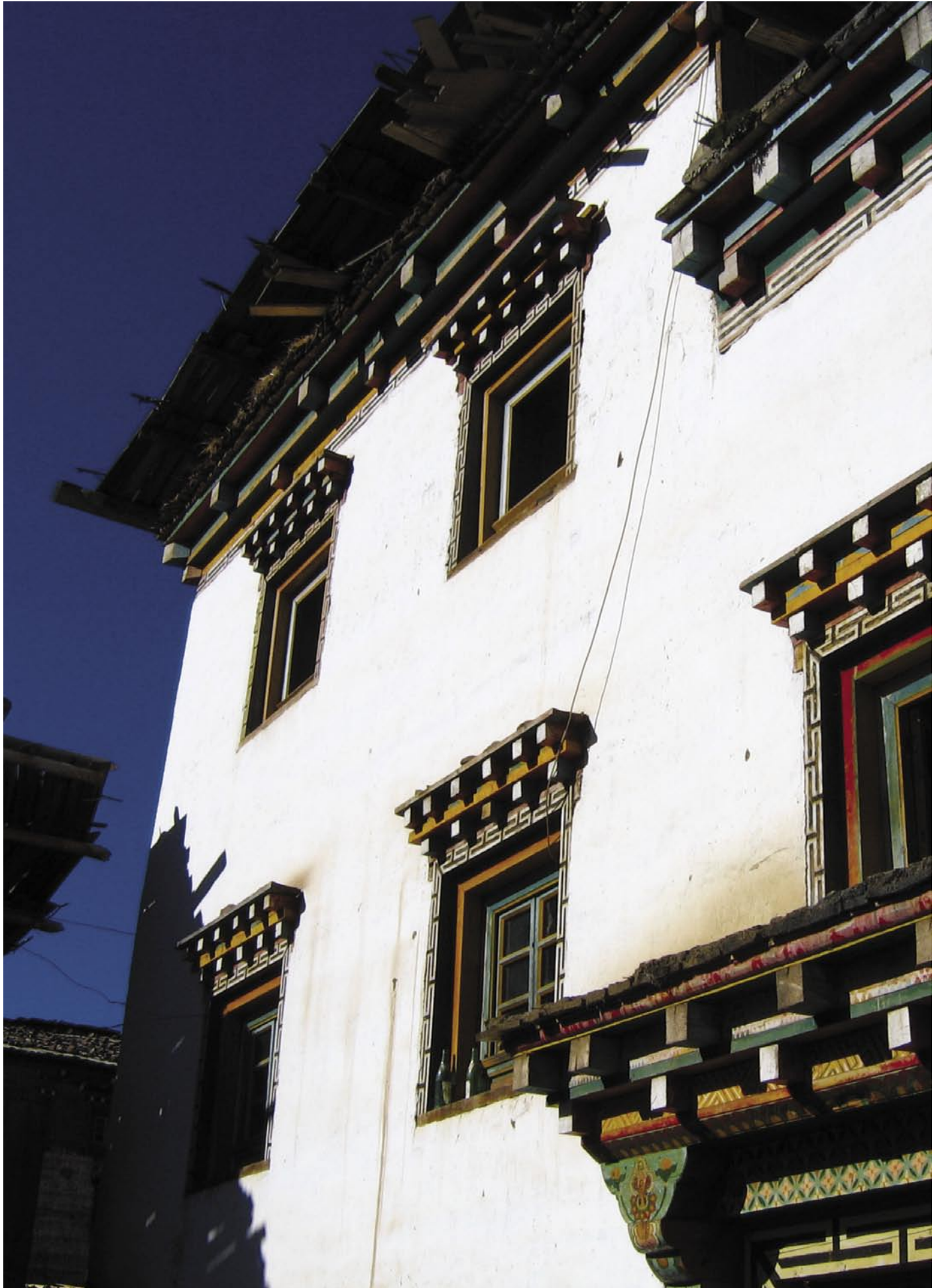
ELEMENTAL ATTRACTIONS: (opposite page, left) A chain of dancers gyre around the outside of a group of spectators at a New Year celebration in the village of Waka; (right) Heading down into the Jinshajiang gorge; (this page, from top) A typical Tibetan home in Nanren village with an open hearth in the middle of the living room, teapot at the ready and *tsampa* bowl on the floor; Colourful gates on the road north of Waka

Ason had a friend, Gizon, in the next village down the road and suggested I call in on the way through. Gizon was excited to see me: news of a bicycling foreigner had preceded me upriver. And I discovered, in mid-*jatong*, not only that Atse from the dancing inn at Waka was his niece but also that his brother lived in the village around the next bend and so I had to pay him a visit.

But first some serious instruction on the proper technique for eating *tsampa*, the roasted flour made from barley or maize or whatever grain is locally grown. *Tsampa* was once a Tibetan staple but now that rice is more widely available it has been relegated to a snack to go with your tea. That is Tibetan-style tea, of course, served churned with salt and yak butter, your cup constantly refilled after each sip to keep it hot, since the butterfat starts to congeal if the temperature drops below piping.

The correct procedure goes like this: first heap a little bit (or a lot, for the brave, the experienced or the foolish) of *tsampa* from the lacquered wooden bowl onto the communal spoon. Then raise spoon and contents gingerly towards mouth. Open said orifice as wide as it will go. And next, the tricky bit: with a deft flick of the wrist, send spoonful of *tsampa* flying through the air to land somewhere near the back of your tongue. Don't let the spoon come into contact with your lips or mouth – that is very bad form. And definitely don't inhale. That way lies a choking fit.

If all has gone to plan, your mouth should now be full of dry powder, though a few stray specks on chin or beard are acceptable for beginners. At this point somebody will probably ask you a question, or, failing that, you will be seized by the urge to recite poetry. At all costs, remain silent. *Do not open your mouth unless you want to spray your audience.* The only safe way to down your *tsampa* is to take a





COLORFUL CUSTOMS: (opposite page) The whitewashed exteriors of Tibetan homes and temples stand in contrast to the intricately painted window frames and doorways; (this page, above) Striking landscape outside Zhongdian; (left) Thanks to high altitude, regular blue skies and ethnic diversity, Yunnan is one of China's most colourful provinces. Here, the dancing attire of a Waka villager

sip of tea, which, with a bit of elegant sloshing, will combine with the flour to make a swallowable doughy paste.

Manage all of the above without making a mess and you will win great admiration from your hosts, who will probably then encourage you to graduate to the next level: Tibetan snuff-snorting. But we'll leave that for another time.


A footnote: my extended Tibetan new year took me off my plotted path, and away from the internet for a couple of weeks. When I finally logged on I was more than a little surprised to read that my death had been reported on my own website. A Norwegian cyclist who had been following my journey online concluded there was only one explanation for my extended absence: that I had been swept away by an avalanche. Or possibly eaten by wolves. Or both.



MANMADE PEAKS: (left) A Tibetan stupa above the town of Zhongdian

“Not for the last time in the villages along the valley, an invitation to *jatong* turned into dinner and a bed for the night as well.”

He took the trouble to post this information on the site, leading to the story being picked up by my local newspaper in England – which rang my Dear Old Mum to ask for her “reaction to my death”.

I was forced to issue a public denial. To borrow from Mark Twain, reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated. Ah, the perils of the internet. 

COMING UP

Edward's progress this month has been slowed by bad roads and good tsampa. He is currently holed up in Batang on the Tibet-Sichuan border, while a nasty snowstorm rages up the valley. When the storm abates, he plans to ride north to Dege before heading over into Qinghai province towards Golmud.

essentials

GO BY...

You can fly as far as Zhongdian, but beyond that it's roads only – and some pretty rough roads at that. China Eastern (www.ce-air.com) flies from Shanghai to Kunming and has daily flights connecting Kunming with Zhongdian (whose airport is called Shangri-La or Xianggelila). Sleeper buses also run the much-improved Kunming-Zhongdian road route.

STAY AT...

There is now top-class accommodation available in Zhongdian, including the **Tianjie Shenchuan Hotel**, with rooms from RMB 580 (+86 (0)887 822 8008).

Some of the villages have very basic hostels where you will pay around RMB 10 for a bed. Solo travellers may be invited to stay with locals, but do not count on this.

EAT AT...

You won't go hungry in Zhongdian (unless you arrive during the New Year holiday) but further afield facilities are few. Not every village on your map will have an eatery, or even a shop, but Waka and Dala villages both have a couple of simple restaurants. Pack some biscuits if you plan to wander.

GO WITH...

If you're not on a bike, your best bet is to contact a local agency to set up travel arrangements and get latest details on road conditions. **Khampa Caravan** in Zhongdian is a good bet (+86 (0)887 828 8648; www.khampacaravan.com). If your Chinese (or Tibetan) is up to it, you could strike a deal with a local taxi or minivan driver. Infrequent public buses do serve some of the remote roads, but you will probably need the help of a local to work out which one goes where.

GO IN...

The high altitudes in the region are balanced by southerly latitudes so winter visits, though chilly, are not out of the question. Skies are at their bluest but hills are at their brownest since winter is the dry season. From April onwards, temperatures rise but so do the chances of rainfall (and snow at higher altitudes). The wetter months bring a greater risk of landslides and washed-out roads.

PS...

If you're planning to go high you should be aware of the risks of altitude sickness. Most people reach Zhongdian without symptoms, but be aware that this potentially lethal condition can strike even below 3,000 metres. Acclimatisation is the key. See www.traveldoctor.co.uk/altitude.htm for detailed advice.

Backpack

Packed full of practical travel essentials, BACKPACK is not just the way to go, it's where to go, what to do and what to avoid in China and beyond



PHOTOGRAPHY: © PAUL BEINSEN, LONELY PLANET IMAGES

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* TRAVEL DIARY 2006 is now online. Featuring over 250 festivals, the region's best event planner is available exclusively at www.asiaandaway.com/travel_diary



MAY 7

KERALA, INDIA

If the sight of dozens of elephants isn't enough, then drape them in gold and parade them to the sounds of massive fireworks. It's a miracle **Thrissur Pooram** doesn't devolve into an annual stampede. *Pooram* literally means 'meeting' and the festival at Vadakunnathan temple is actually an assemblage of deities from neighbouring temples who come to pay homage to Lord Siva. Introduced two centuries ago, the festival is set apart in that people of all castes and religions celebrate together. The 36 hours of revelry feature music, fireworks, a street parade, and *kudamattam*, a competition in the swift rhythmic changing of dazzling parasols.

(www.keralatourism.org)

APRIL/MAY



APRIL 12~15

GUIZHOU, CHINA

Maybe it's just the smell of spring, but romance grips the Shidong area's Miao youth during April's **Sister's Meal Festival**. Neighbouring villages gather to enjoy the festival's namesake – sisters' rice – a snack dyed with berries and wildflowers; and the young women dress in elaborate costumes and pounds of silver jewellery. Who needs flowers and chocolate? (www.china.org.cn. For tours to the festival see www.wildchina.com)

CHIANG MAI, THAILAND

Traditionally a festival to honour both Buddha and elders, **Songkran** has evolved into a nationwide water fight. Residents of Chiang Mai take their soaking responsibilities the most seriously, with organised water-hosing drive-bys and water gun-armed gangs targeting the dry. A drenching good time. (www.discoverythailand.com)



APRIL 20~26

XI'AN, CHINA

Considered one of the highest forms of Chinese art, the **Chang'an Annual International Calligraphy Meeting** celebrates this ancient aesthetic. Highlights include inscriptions made on a 100-metre scroll and a chance to ponder the art's 'four treasures': writing brush, ink slab, ink stick and paper. (www.chinaforgroups.com)

MAY 5

HONG KONG, CHINA

The Bun Festival is a little misleading. Its purpose isn't bread worship but celebrating the Taoist God of the Sea with a chaotic, evil spirit-scaring procession of floats and children balanced on poles. The highlight is a 60-foot climbing tower covered in sweet buns. (www.discoverhongkong.com)



MAY 6~7

NIMBIN, AUSTRALIA

The Nimbin Hemp Embassy's annual **Mardi Grass** festival aims to bring attention to the 'miserable failure of prohibition laws' while serving as a forum for issues like industrial hemp and medicinal cannabis use. Serious stuff. Outside the seminar rooms, it's peaceful anarchy in this farming community turned hippie colony. The festivities include the HEMP Olympix, where celebrants compete in events like joint rolling, bong throwing and the best pot-themed tattoos. For those who define 'weed' as a garden menace, avoid the area. (www.nimbinmardigrass.com)

MAY 10~12

YASOTHORN PROVINCE, THAILAND

Ancient Thai legend holds that the rain god Vassakan loved to be worshipped with fire. So to ensure the god's pleasure and plentiful rain for their rice-growing season, farmers would shoot off *bang fai* (rockets). While the traditional beliefs have waned, local enthusiasm for explosives hasn't. During **Bun Bang Fai**, farmers parade rockets averaging nine metres in height and packed with 25 kilograms of gunpowder to the launch site accompanied by a procession of dancing and traditional costumes. Then, cover your ears and watch out. (www.thailandgrandfestival.com)

MAY 14~15

PULILAN, PHILIPPINES

It's not always clear how the animals feel about it, but water buffalo get their own day during the **Pulilan Carabao Festival**. As part of a celebration of San Isidro Labrador, the patron saint of farmers, families scrub, shave and rub their buffalo down with aromatic oils, finally decorating them with crowns of frangipani and hibiscus. Then they parade them to the church in a procession of fruit and vegetable-decorated floats where the priests bless them, ensuring their good health for the coming year. (www.wowphilippines.com)

COMING UP...

JUNE 11

BODH GAYA, INDIA

Vesak Day, the most significant in the Buddhist calendar, celebrates the birth, enlightenment, and passing of Buddha over 2,500 years ago. In countries with a deep Buddhist tradition the entire month can be taken up in circumambulations, prayers and offerings. Temples and towns are draped in garlands and stories of Buddha's life are portrayed. The most spectacular ceremonies may be the ones held at the site itself, Bodh Gaya and the Mahabodhi Temple, where believers make offerings of robes, lamps, and flowers. (www.buddhanet.net)

By Guy Longmore

Water Berths

What better way to explore the region's most remote coastal hideaways than by water transport. Here are four fantastic sailing itineraries to whet the appetite



SEA KAYAKING AROUND THE WHITSUNDAYS

The tropical Whitsunday islands are arguably Australia's best paddling, sailing and diving waters. Once the preserve of Aboriginal communities and early explorers, they are now rich plunder for the adventure traveller. A sea kayak is an environmentally sound way to see the Whitsunday's many coves and reef-fringed shores and, given such stealthy locomotion, it guarantees a communion with nature – humpback whales included. Aussie Kayak's six-day touring itinerary among Whitehaven Beach, Hill Inlet, Denman and South Molle Islands includes snorkeling, fishing, scuba diving, beach combing, swimming, hiking, spectacular photo opportunities and overnight beachside camping. According to former customer Richard Charles, the Whitsundays are "absolute paradise defined – a place where workday fantasies are fulfilled." The tour starts and ends in Shute Harbour. Paddling stints are approximately three to four hours in duration.

(Aussie Sea Kayak Experience: +61 (0)7 5477 5335; www.aussekayak.com.au)

Days: 6

Highlights: Nature, camping under the stars, exercise

Cost: AUD 1,195

SAILING CHARTER IN THE MERGUI ARCHIPELAGO

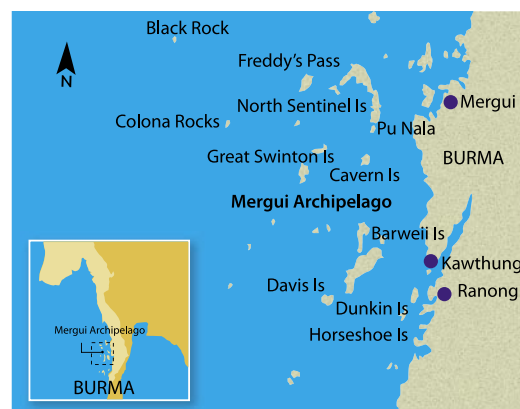
The Mergui Archipelago, off the Myanmar coast, consists of around 900 mostly uninhabited islands scattered over an area of 31,000 square kilometres. Closed to foreigners before 1997, the area is true virgin territory and features lush rainforests, pristine beaches and diving on reefs teeming with sharks and rays. Given the small number of tour companies now granted access, the only other humans you are likely to encounter are Moken sea gypsies who roam the area in small boats as their ancestors have done for centuries. Faraway Expeditions have five yachts fully equipped for charters and their tours offer diving, kayaking and exploration ashore. Boutique luxury is available aboard the 194-foot classic sailboat SY Silonona, while their other vessels are more modestly appointed. Charters are fully customisable and cater for four to 14 persons.

(Faraway Sail and Dive Expeditions: +66 (0)76 280 701; www.far-away.net)

Days: 5-8

Highlights: Seclusion, world-class diving, sea gypsies, kayaking

Cost: USD 1,300 per day for 4-8 person catamaran charter; USD 13,500 per day for 14 person SY Silonona





CANOEING IN WESTERN MONGOLIA

The Tsagaan Us river of western Mongolia winds through a rich landscape of alpine lakes, ancient stone monuments, larch forests, valleys strewn with wildflowers and snow-dusted mountains. The long rapids, powerful, irregular currents and boiling eddies require skill to manoeuvre but are fine for adventurous first-timers. This two-week canoe tour begins in earnest in Ulgii, a Kazakh stronghold and the only Muslim province in Mongolia. A 250-kilometre drive from there to Khoton Nuur on the Tsagaan Us river represents the last motorised transport you'll see for a week, given the trip back to Ulgii is by paddle power. Encounters with class IV and V rapids, deep gullies shouldered by magnificent cliffs, endless mountain scenery and glacial lakes are on offer along the way. Arranged on spec.

(Nomads Tours and Expeditions: www.nomadstours.com)

Days: 14

Highlights: Scenery, challenging canoeing, incredible night skies

Cost: USD 2,205 (9+ persons)

BALI TO LOMBOK IN STYLE

There is only one pace at which to explore Indonesia. That's easy. Taking the strain out of island hopping between Bali and Komodo, Bali Cruises' sea safari is a sedate seven-day sail interspersed by island visits and encounters with near-prehistoric reptiles. Day one is for the sea legs with meals taken on board in full view of Bali's Agung volcano. The sunset can be viewed while bobbing in waters off Lombok's Gili Islands. Day two sees the first landfall on Moyo, a small island off the north coast of Sumbawa, for a spot of snorkeling, heading onto the uninhabited island of Satonda for supper. Banta is day three's breakfast stopover for a trek amid the island's wonderfully unspoilt natural habitat, followed by a full day and a half on Komodo in search of the island's eponymous giant lizards. A leisurely three-day sail takes you back to Bali via Bima and Lombok.

(Bali Cruises: +62 (0)361 703 060; www.balicruises.com)

Days: 7

Highlights: Diving, island exploring, brushes with nature, Komodo dragons
Cost: USD 1,699 per person (based on twin sharing)



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BACKPACK / WISH YOU WERE THERE?

Yes I know said I wasn't going to traipse around the predictable sights of China like all the other tourist lemmings, but c'mon. You can argue with my logic but not with a view like this. Huangshan is spectacular. Half the scroll paintings you see in markets up and down the country depict these mountains. Artists and poets have traversed these peaks for centuries, drawing inspiration from the majestic scenery. And just because Huangshan is an overnight train ride from Shanghai doesn't mean it's always mobbed. If you go in late winter or early spring – the best time many say – there are fewer people spread about the park's 154 square kilometres. This classic image is of sunrise over the peaks of Xihai (west sea), so called because if you manage to get up early enough (err... no surprises, I didn't) the rolling mists around Xihai resemble the shifting tides of an ocean. Ok, I know it's a cliché but such things become popular for a reason. Trust me, you cannot remain cynical for long in a place like this.



PHOTOGRAPHY: PANORAMA STOCK



GOOD NIGHT SHOTS

Steve Davey is a professional writer and photographer, and author of the BBC Books' bestseller, *Unforgettable Places to See Before You Die*

Most cities come alive at night. Twinkling lights, streaming traffic and neon signs make them look their most vibrant and exciting. Night photography is also very forgiving of bad weather: If you are rained out during the day, you can still shoot in the evening.

Night photographs work much better when there is still some light in the sky. This balances the lights from buildings and gives a lot more colour to the image.

The light drops very quickly though, so you really only get a short window when it's possible to take pictures. Planning is essential. Choose your angle in advance and don't try to do more than one set up if you want the light to be perfect.

Although many digital cameras have a high sensitivity setting, you will get much better pictures if you use a long exposure and put the camera on a tripod. If you have a simple point and shoot camera then switching off the flash will force the camera to use a long exposure.

If you are using long exposures, then a cable or remote release will help to avoid camera shake. If you don't have one of these then using the self timer on your camera will do the same job albeit slower.

If you shoot with a long exposure then anything moving in the frame will be blurred. This works especially well with crowds of people and moving traffic, where the head and tail lights will show up as long sweeps of light. Time your shot to maximise this movement.

Working out the exposure is difficult when photographing at night. One way to avoid over or under exposure is to take a number of pictures at slightly different exposures, to make sure that you get one that is correct. This is called bracketing.

Finally, just because you are shooting at night, don't overlook finding a new angle. Getting up high works well for all night photographs. Hotels and bars often have great views, and if you can organise it, rooftops are also great places to shoot from.

NARROW ESCAPE

Torrid tales on the road in Asia

The bus was supposed to arrive at 7am. It was early – five hours early. My girlfriend and I were dropped off bleary-eyed, several kilometres outside Probolinggo, a small town on the eastern tip of Java. There were no cars, no hotels, no street lights. There was, rather conveniently, a tourist information office and, despite the fact that it was 2am, it was open. Inside a man offered advice on how to get to Mount Bromo – the nearby volcano we intended to climb. The advice was this: A couple of my mates will drive you there and charge you ten times the going rate for doing so. We laughed and tried to haggle him down, but he started to get aggressive, insisting that in this remote location (and at this god-awful hour) we had no choice. We refused to pay and went outside into the pitch black to wait for the next bus.

Then things started to get nasty.

Rocks and stones started to rain down on us from the direction of the tourist office where four or five men had been hanging around smoking cigarettes and looking shifty. One of them whipped out a bloody big rice knife and started pacing up and down, waving the blade in front of us. Then the lights in the tourist office went off. As my eyes started to adjust to the blackness, I could make out the other men starting to put on balaclavas.

It was one of those brown trouser moments. I had experienced it once before in London when I had gone for a late night wee in a dark alley and bumped into an irate and very tall football supporter who accused me of trying “to cop a look at his tackle” and threatened “to pull my bladder out through the end of my own penis.” That time I beat a hasty, if slightly damp, retreat. This time I had a backpack and a girlfriend to worry about.

We started walking slowly away, waiting for a knife in the ribs, or an extra large rock on the head. Not for the last time on my travels, I became religious. As if in answer to my prayers, out of the darkness a *becak* (pedal-powered taxi) appeared. We flagged it down, threw ourselves and our backpacks on board and waved money at the driver. “Get us out of here fast!” we implored him. We didn’t move. On closer inspection our saviour turned out to be a dwarf. Brilliant. Here we were, about to get carved up, and our getaway driver could barely reach the pedals.

I got out and gave him a push start and somehow the little man got us to the safety of the all-night bus depot in town. Relief – we had escaped.

It was then that I realised my treasured Nikon, which had been slung around my neck, was missing.

Excerpt from Travellers Tales from Heaven and Hell, published by Eye Books (www.eye-books.com)



PAGES 72-73 PHOTOGRAPHY: STEVE DAVEY, PANORAMA STOCK, LUXE CITY GUIDES

NEW GUIDEBOOK RELEASES FOR APRIL 2006

Star Release:

LUXE China Travel Set LUXE City Guides, 1st Edition

LUXE's first edition China Travel Set contains the latest sassy pocket-sized city guides to Hong Kong, Beijing and Shanghai 'cuddled up and cosy' in a handy, black matt-laminated flip-top pack. Also featured in the new range are Travel Sets for Thailand (Bangkok, Phuket and Chiang Mai), Vietnam (Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City) and Australia (Melbourne and Sydney).

HKD 175/USD 22.50; www.luxecityguides.com



Main Releases:

NORTHEAST ASIA

Trans-Siberian Railway

Lonely Planet, 2nd Edition

The epic train journey across Russia, Mongolia, and China made easier with new trip-planning chapters, 65 maps, and extended food glossaries to conquer the Siberian outback without starving.

USD 19.99; www.amazon.com

Frommer's China, 2nd Edition

What's worth seeing in the Middle Kingdom – and what's not – according to current and former resident writers, along with language, culture and menu guides.

USD 24.99; www.amazon.com

LUXE Tokyo

LUXE City Guides, 4th Edition

Tokyo is dedicated to the art of shopping and dining. So is LUXE, and it cuts to the best with a compass to the clothes, sushi, art and design worth your time.

USD 9; www.luxecityguides.com

MIDDLE EAST

Middle East

Lonely Planet, 5th Edition

Travel behind the headlines into a world where ancient civilisations, deserts and seas compete for your imagination. Up-to-the-minute views on Beirut nightlife, hot Istanbul restaurants, and wi-fi centres.

USD 27.99; www.lonelyplanet.com

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LUXE City Guides, 2nd Edition

Find the best of the Arabian Gulf's Cinderella with LUXE's handpicked leads on Omani silver and Arabic antiques, ballooning over the desert or an afternoon at a hideaway beach.

USD 9; www.luxecityguides.com

AUSTRALIA

Frommer's Australia from \$60 a Day, 14th Edition

Snorkel the Great Barrier Reef, spot kangaroos and koalas, or take in the Sydney Opera without staying in backpacker dives or eating grubs. Loads of affordable listings.

USD 22.99; www.amazon.com

THE DEALS / HOTEL PROMOTIONS

These prices may not include tax and service charges

ASIA

Meritus Rewardus

Meritus Hotels & Resorts' 'Weekends at Meritus' campaign for 2006 tempts guests with best available rates, daily breakfast for two, late check-out at 3pm and 15% off all food and beverages. Example prices include Meritus Mandarin Haikou from RMB 400, Pelangi Beach & Spa Resort Langkawi from MYR 490 and Meritus Mandarin Singapore from SGD 220. Valid at hotels in Singapore, China and Malaysia, subject to availability. (www.meritus-hotels.com)

CHINA

BEIJING

Hydro Happy

Novotel Oasis Beijing's SPA OASIS Super Spa & Room Package promises to soothe your body and mind. The deal includes one night's accommodation in a Superior Suite along with a delightful Detox Hydrotherapy treatment. The cost: RMB 450 for single occupancy and RMB 600 for double. Valid until April 30. (+86 (0)10 6159 2299; sales@novoteloasisbj.com)

hot

Weekend Swingers

Spend a swinging weekend in Beijing with a stay at the **Shangri-La Hotel, Beijing** and a round at Beijing Willow Golf Course. The two-day/one-night weekend package includes accommodation in a Deluxe Room, an American breakfast, 18 holes of golf and roundtrip transfer to the course, a 45-minute traditional Chinese body or foot massage, free welcome drink in Cloud Nine Bar, late check-out at 6pm (subject to availability) and 15% discount on airport limousine transfer. Priced at RMB 2,715 (single)/RMB 4,180 (double). Valid until June 30 for weekend stays only (Friday, Saturday, Sunday). Reservation is required at least one week prior to check-in. (+86 (0)10 6841 2211; reservations.slh@shangri-la.com; www.shangri-la.com/beijing)



HONG KONG

Full of Bite

Langham Hotel Hong Kong has a three-day/two-night package in celebration of the Year of the Dog. Priced at USD 590 (plus 13% tax and service), the package includes accommodation in a Langham Hotel Club Floor Room, one-way limousine transfer from airport to hotel and access to the Club Lounge. Valid until February 17, 2007. (+852 2375 1133; www.langhamhotels.com/langham/hongkong)

Kids For Free

Club Med's new 'Family Package' is tempting Hong Kong parents by offering free child

places this Easter. Renowned for its all-inclusive holidays complete with meals, drinks, entertainment and a host of organised activities, Club Med is offering the following packages between March 1-April 25: Club Med Ria Bintan from HKD 5,240 per person; Club Med Cherating Beach Malaysia from HKD 6,200 per person; and Club Med Bali from HKD 7,100 per person. All prices include airfares and four nights' accommodation. Only the airfare is payable for an accompanying child (age 4-11). (+852 3111 9388; www.clubmed.com.hk)

FUZHOU

The Fair Ways of Fuzhou

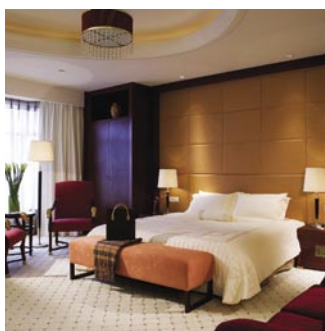
Enjoy **Shangri-La Hotel, Fuzhou's** hospitality and you'll be entitled to an equally enjoyable round of golf at Dengyun Golf Club or AMAL Golf Club. The RMB 1,280 'Golf Package' includes a Deluxe Room with buffet breakfast, a round of golf for one with green, caddie and insurance fee, limousine roundtrip transfer between hotel and golf club, free broadband internet access and late check-out at 5pm. A second golfer sharing the same room need only pay RMB 600. Minimum two days prior reservation is required. Through December 31. (+86 (0)591 8798 8288; www.shangri-la.com)



HANGZHOU

Perks Aplenty

Pamper yourself at the **Sofitel Westlake Hangzhou** with a 'Spa Retreat Package'. Benefits include a one-night stay in a Sofitel Superior Room, breakfast in the Lakeview Club Lounge, a 60-minute aromatherapy massage, free use of in-room broadband internet, 15% discount in the Chinese restaurant, late check-out at 2pm, and welcome fruit and drink. Single occupancy costs RMB 1,200, double for RMB 1,500. Pay an additional RMB 200 to upgrade to Club Floor rooms and benefits. Valid until December 31. (+86 (0)571 8707 5858; www.westlakeht.com)



DALIAN

Darling Dalian

Shangri-La Hotel, Dalian's 'Value Rate' of RMB 1,288 includes accommodation in a Deluxe Room with buffet breakfast, airport limousine transfers, free broadband internet access, unlimited laundry and dry-cleaning and late check-out at 6pm. Valid until June 30. (+86 (0)411 8252 5002; www.shangri-la.com)



SANYA

Up At Dawn

Yalong Bay Mangrove Tree Resort's healthy 'Yoga @ Beach Package' features a four night consecutive stay in a Garden or Lake View Room, buffet breakfast for two and daily yoga practice on the oceanfront lawn at sunrise. Other perks include one hour usage of the tennis court, free use of the gym and swimming pool, and free in-room broadband. The cost is RMB 3,388 net. For RMB 800 extra, customers can play a round of golf at Sun Valley Golf Course or Yalong Bay Golf Course. Valid from April 1-September 29. (www.mangrovetreeresort.com)

hot

Something for the Week?

Sanya Marriott Resort & Spa is offering long-stayers a particularly sunny deal. A seven-night stay in a Deluxe Ocean View Room with daily breakfast for two is available for RMB 8,050, including a food and beverage credit of RMB 350. Valid from April 1-June 30 (excluding April 30-May 5). (+86 (0)898 8856 8888; marriott.com/syxc)



SHANGHAI

Xing For Joy

An attractive 'Spring Hot Deal' is available at the **Radisson Plaza Xing Guo Shanghai**. A Superior Room with breakfast costs RMB 1,216 (weekdays) / 1,087 (weekends). All guests can enjoy complimentary high-speed in-room broadband access and use of the well-equipped Clark Hatch Fitness Centre. Valid until June 30. Reservations must be made in advance of arrival and rates are subject to room availability. (+86 (0)21 6211 1235; www.radisson.com/shanghai_cn_plaza)

Thinking Big?

Located in the heart of Shanghai's Hongqiao district, the **Sheraton Grand Tai Ping Yang** is offering Grand Deluxe Rooms for RMB 1,992 (single)/2,162 (double) until April 30, subject to availability. (+86 (0)21 6275 8888; www.sheratongrand-shanghai.com)



No Sweat for Labour Day

The **Shanghai Marriott Hongqiao** is offering special rates over the upcoming Labour Day Holiday. From April 28-May 7, a night in a Deluxe Room costs just USD 139. The same rate applies for weekend visitors checking in on Friday and Saturday. Advanced booking is required and subject to room availability. (+86 (0)21 6237 6000; reservation@shamariott.com; www.marriott.com/shaq)



Grand Luxe Promo

St. Regis Hotel, Shanghai's 'Grand Luxe Promotion' offers a 30% discount on the rack rate for its huge Grand Luxe Rooms. The RMB 2,905 cost includes unlimited ironing, free local calls, one 15-minute complimentary body massage at the St. Regis SPA, 24-hour butler service, and free use of the boardroom for two hours (subject to availability). Valid until August 31. (+86 (0)21 5050 4567; www.stregis.com/shanghai)



Weekend Off

Renaissance Yangtze Shanghai is offering cut-price weekend rates throughout April starting from RMB 1,000 for a Deluxe Room on Fridays and Saturdays, subject to 15% surcharge. (+86 (0)21 6275 0000 ext 2195)

Way Out Pampering

Until August 31, **Le Meridien She Shan** – an hour's drive from downtown Shanghai – has a 'Spa Package' on offer which includes two nights accommodation in a Superior Room with buffet breakfast, two hour-long spa treatments and 20% off additional treatments at Le Spa, a 10% food and beverage discount, and laundry and limousine services. Doubles cost RMB 3,090 (weekdays), RMB 3,590 (weekends) and RMB 3,340 (combination). (+86 (0)21 5779 9999; reservations@sheshan.lemeridien.com)



Studio from RMB 1,950, while the 'Getaway Package', starting at RMB 5,000, includes two nights' accommodation in a Superior Room with daily buffet breakfast, one dim sum lunch and one spa treatment/person per stay. Other room categories are also available. Best of all, stay two nights and get the third free. (+86 (0)21 6256 8888 ext 1501; reservations.shg@fourseasons.com)



Choices Galore

Until June 30, stay a minimum of two nights over the weekend at the **JW Marriott Shanghai** and enjoy some attractive bonus options. Opt for a weekend rate of RMB 1,680 per night in a Deluxe Room and receive a USD 100 'Bonus Bucks Marriott' cash coupon, valid for eight months, which can be redeemed for a future consecutive two-night paid stay at any of the Marriott or Renaissance hotels and resorts worldwide. Or splash out on the 'Weekend Getaway Package' at RMB

Night Three, Free



The **Four Seasons Shanghai** is celebrating the Easter and Labour Day holidays by gifting a complimentary third night with its 'Bed & Breakfast' and 'Getaway' packages from April 14-17 and May 1-8. The 'Bed & Breakfast Package' gets you accommodation in a Deluxe Room with buffet breakfast at Cafe

Contact : Daniel et Jutta
 58 Nguyen Dinh Chieu,
 Ward Ham Tien,
 62003 Phan Thiet,
 Vietnam

tel: (062) 847 111/2/3
 fax : (062) 847 115
 E-mail : paradise@cocobeach.net
 Website : www.cocobeach.net

1,840 in a Deluxe Room and have a personal chauffeur driven limousine ferry you around the city sites or to the nearby scenic towns of Zhujiajiao or Zhouzhuang. An extra RMB 400/600 (single/double) gets you an upgrade to a Studio Suite with access to Executive Floor benefits. (+86 (0)21 5359 4968; mhrs.shajw.reservations@marriott-hotels.com)



SUZHOU Park for the Night

The **Sheraton Suzhou Hotel & Towers** has a 'Sweet Weekend Package' starting from just RMB 688 (plus 15% surcharge) for a one night stay in a Deluxe Room and free car parking. Valid until December 31. Quote code: SW. (+86 (0)512 6510 3388; sheraton.suzhou@sheraton.com)

CAMBODIA

SIEM REAP

High Flying

The **Raffles Grand Hotel d'Angkor** is situated on the outskirts of Siem Reap, just eight kilometres from the Angkor temples. From April 1-September 30, the hotel's 'Mystical Angkor Package' costs USD 245/room per

now on sale around China

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HONG KONG:

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THE DEALS / HOTEL PROMOTIONS

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night (two night minimum) and includes roundtrip airport transfers, accommodation in a Superior State Room with daily breakfast, one dinner for two at Cafe d'Angkor, one-time complimentary cocktails at the Elephant Bar and one balloon ride for two over the magnificent temple ruins. USD 195 per additional night, including breakfast. (+855 (0)63 963 888; www.siemreap.affles.com)

INDONESIA

BALI

Seventh Heaven

Until June 30, **Villa Mai Naé** is offering seven nights in a private villa (maximum four people per villa) with daily breakfast, welcome dinner, three-days' car rental with driver (eight hours per day), one hour Balinese massage each and return airport transfers. Garden View Villa for USD 780 and Pool View Villa for USD 840, inclusive of tax and services. (+62 (0)361 742 0262; www.villa-mainae.com)

Bunnies at The Bale

The **Balé's** 'Easter Getaway Package' starts from USD 1,188, including a four-day/three-night stay in a Luxury Pavilion with private swimming pool, daily breakfast in your villa or at Faces Restaurant, a special Easter Dinner, a Zen Ritual spa treatment (120 min with a healthy meal, fresh juice and green tea), return airport transfers by private car, a 15-minute welcome massage, 24-hour butler service

and free return transfers within Nusa Dua and Tanjung Benoa areas. The package is for double occupancy and valid from April 11-17. (+62 (0)361 775 111; www.thebale.com)

THAILAND

BANGKOK

One Steamy Night in Bangkok

JW Marriott Bangkok's Romance Package' includes five-star accommodation for two, private limousine roundtrip airport transfers, daily breakfast for two in bed or in the Marriott Cafe or Executive Lounge, evening cocktails, first-night turn-down to turn you on, a bottle of sparkling wine, sensual bath oil, and a romantic dinner for two at Nami Japanese restaurant. Rates start from USD 290 for one night in an Executive Room. Valid until December 31. (+66 2656 7707; res.jwthailand@marriotthotels.com)

KOH SAMUI

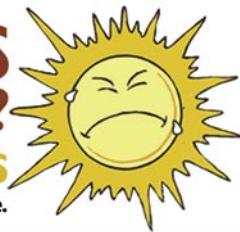
Island Dream

Breathtaking boutique resort **Renaissance Koh Samui Resort & Spa** is nestled in perfumed tropical gardens overlooking a secluded beach and the lovely Lamai Bay – the perfect base for all manner of isle and sea adventures. Starting from USD 1,080, their 'Island Hopper Package' (3-4 nights) includes luxurious accommodation

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with daily breakfast at the Banana Leaf restaurant, airport transfers and two one-day diving trips to Koh Tao and Koh Phangan islands with Blue Planet Tour Operator (includes transfers and diving equipment; need to show PADI diving certification). The 'Island Explorer Package' (3 nights) features accommodation for two with daily breakfast, airport transfers and a one-day tour of Koh Samui checking out the famous Big Buddha, crocodile farms and waterfalls. Rates start from USD 755; valid until April 30. (+66 (0)26 567 707; res.jwthailand@marriotthotels.com)

PHUKET

Silver Spoon

Stylish contemporary resort **Twinpalms Phuket** has a four-day/three-night package

for USD 480 including accommodation in a Deluxe Palm Room with daily buffet breakfast, roundtrip airport transfer and a seafood platter for two in the Oriental Spoon restaurant. Valid from April 1-30. (+66 (0)76 316 500; www.twinpalms-phuket.com)

Soak it Up

Fresh from its second expansion, **JW Marriott Phuket Resort & Spa** invites you to check out one of their 16 stunning double Spa Suites with the 'Spa Getaway Package' (2-5 nights). Soak it up with five-star accommodation for two, airport transfers by Mercedes Benz, full American buffet breakfast in the Marriott Cafe daily and a two-hour spa treatment. Rates start from USD 747 for two nights in a Deluxe Sala Garden View Room. Valid until April 30. (+66 (0)2 656 7707; res.jwthailand@marriotthotels.com)

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Avis

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HONG KONG

Fly Fu Car Hiring

Models include 4/7-seat Mercedes Benz, van and 20/43-seat coaches, among others. (Flat 3, 3/F Garden Vista, 11-13 On King Street, Sha Tin; 24-hr Hotline: +852 2649 2923/2649 3812)

Wise Enterprise Ltd

With experienced drivers and models including Mercedes Benz, 7/8-seat RV and buses, this rental company specialises in travel between Hong Kong and China. (4/F Overseas Building, 417-421 Hennessy Road, Wanchai; +852 2782 0672; wisehirecar@on-nets.com)

CRUISES

HONG KONG

Jubilee International Tour Centre

Experienced in organising recreational activities and group tours. Among many other vehicles available for hire are motorboats and Chinese junks. For more information, please visit the website. (Far East Consortium Bldg, Sheung Wan; +852 2530 0530; www.jubilee.com.hk/english; sales@jubilee.com.hk)

Pana Oceans

Services include Chinese and Western-style cruiser rental, short and long-term cruiser contract, subcontracting and much more. (Rm 1406, Kai Tak Coml Bldg, 317-321 Des Voeux Rd C, Sheung Wan; +852 2815 8235; www.yip.com.hk/panaoceans; oceans@netvigator.com)

Standard Boat Agency

Brand new luxury junks and cruisers for day or night, long or short term chartering. Catering services also available. Contact Carmen Lee. (Rm 221, 2/F, Seven Seas Coml Centre, 121 Kings Road, North Point; +852 2570 1792; stbtltd@netvigator.com)

DRIVERS

BEIJING

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HONG KONG

Chinese Arts & Crafts

With 30 years' experience in the arts and crafts business, this Hong Kong chain carries a wide selection of souvenirs and gifts, with everything from rosewood furniture to quality jade to silk dresses. (1/F, Star House, 3 Salisbury Road, Tsim Sha Tsui; +852 2735 4061; www.crcetail.com; hotline@ccrcetail.com)

Harry's Fashions

Harry's Fashions has years of experience and provides high quality at reasonable prices. Visit the shop or call for more information. (Shop 62, G/F, Houston Centre, 63 Mody Road, Tsim Sha Tsui East, Kowloon; +852 2721 7458)

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Wai Hing Furniture

Wholesale and retail shop with a wide range of Chinese antique furniture to excite both experienced collectors and novice buyers. (Unit 2406-2407, Hing Wai Centre, 7 Tin Wan Praya Road, Aberdeen; +852 2873 1826)

SHANGHAI

Anny's Antique Warehouse

Antique furniture on display in a 2,000 sqm showroom. (No 68, Lane 7611 Zhongchun Lu, Minhang district; +86 (0)21 6406 0242)

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Sanfo Outdoor Sports

Shops offering hiking equipment based in various Chinese cities. (Beijing: 1 Jianwai Da Jie A; +86 (0)10 6507 9298. Shanghai: 859 Tianyaoqiao Lu; +86 (0)21 5489 0385; club@sanfo.com.cn; www.sanfo.com)

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Queensway Golf

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RC Outfitters

Hong Kong retailer of hiking and camping equipment. Brands include Tatonka, Marmut and Raichle. (1/F, 134-136 Sai Yeung Choi Street South, Mongkok, Kowloon; +852 2390 0020; www.alink.com.hk; info@alink.com.hk)

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The most wonderful thing about travel is not the sunsets, the women with bodies like ripening corn (sadly always attached to men with necks like tree trunks), or the dinky welcome cocktails with small paper umbrellas that hotels like to serve their valued guests. Nor is it the 'free' use of the swimming pool, gym and lobby.

For me, the best thing about time on the road is sleep: that deep, ocean bottom, giant squid territory sort of sleep that only comes with the laboratory-like conditions of hotel rooms, deep pile carpets, large soft beds and light-banishing drapes.

Here, unfettered by kids, spouse or boss, the executive traveller is master of his destiny, an all-powerful Freedom Rider. He can reach for the phone and summon staff to attend to urgent business. "What do you mean the massage centre is closed? Is Ting working tonight? Not M-E-S-S-A-G-E you moron, M-A-S-S-A-G-E. Sorry, what number have I dialled? Ah, right, I'll dial 8 first and then call reception." With great freedom comes great responsibility. Always dial '8'.

And so it is on the road that the search for perfect rest transpires, on the ground and 30,000 feet aloft. Sleeping on an aeroplane is next to impossible, not even if you're a satisfied member of the Mile High Club. There's simply no space for a stretch. Not even a cuddle.

While passengers grind their teeth, pummel their pillows, pull out their hair, assault stewardesses and organise French-style riots trying to get some decent Zs, pilots routinely fall asleep in the cockpit. They have to fly the plane after all, and a rested captain is your best bet for getting back to *terra firma*. Though with all the gadgetry on board the plane could probably land perfectly well with an inflatable doll at the joystick. Inflatable dolls earn no wages, are never drunk, and will never say "no" to a hot date after a long transpacific flight. Think about it.

Not all is lost however. British Airways is so confident that Club World passengers using their specially contoured *yin-yang* seats will never wake up, that they actually offer business passengers

on certain routes a Sleep Well guarantee. If you didn't sleep, they'll upgrade you to First next time around. This confidence is routed in deep scientific study, the utter flatness of the 'bed' and the certain knowledge that passengers sleeping in these *yin-yang* seats (with each person's head smack next to their neighbour's toes) will be knocked out by a potent in-flight sleep remedy – smelly socks. To avail themselves of this offer by BA, passengers must enrol and fill out a small questionnaire after the flight, if they're awake.

Presumably, if you're flying First and still cannot sleep (as no aromatic socks are involved here), you could be upgraded to the cockpit where the best rest is always assured. Book your huggable inflatable doll in advance.

One of the best cures for jetlag is sunshine, and plenty of it, on the other end. Things seem to work better in the light. To begin with, you can see. Then you can pick up that hotel phone and languorously dial '8'. Then press '2' for English. Then press '7' for the menu followed by the hash key. After this simply press '3' for the submenu, and then again option '3' to talk to a human being. Listen to the Barry Manilow concert for five minutes and again press '3' to talk to a human being before throwing the phone into the flat-screen TV and smashing anything you can lay your hands on. Jetlag? What jetlag?

For sleep, your best friend is Melatonin, a natural substance produced by the pineal gland. If you can't get your fingers far enough up your nose to find the pineal gland and coax it into operation, try a Melatonin tablet. Tablets can be natural (bovine) or synthetic. Synthetics are favoured as natural Melatonin may come with potential viruses – mad cow springs to mind – and could provoke antibody responses.

The trick is to try and stay awake until the next natural 'night' and then pass out, with or without Melatonin, inflatable dolls, smelly socks and a large hardback on quadratic equations. The large hardback always works. Toss it up and ensure it lands on your head. The best thing about Melatonin is that, taken in high doses, it also doubles as a contraceptive. In short, it makes you sleepy, it's natural, and it may even act as useful protection. What more could you ask for in a tablet? Now get on the phone and find Ting the masseuse. But don't forget to dial '8' first. 