

Destination unknown

Asia has a lot to offer intrepid travellers, from beach holidays to adventure trips and even wine tasting. Six of *Time Out's* regular contributors offer their suggestions for destinations you might not have considered, but definitely should

*If you like
yoga in Koh
Samui, try
Sri Lanka*



Sporting trips

By Cynthia Rosenfeld

This teardrop shaped island, appearing to hang off the southern tip of India, has long lured foreigners. Cleopatra and Sinbad are said to have coveted its sparkling gemstones, the ancient Greeks came here in search of the Garden of Eden while the Portuguese, Dutch and British furthered their imperial ambitions on these palm dappled shores. Since the civil war ended in 2009, wellness seekers the world over have begun alighting on the isle in earnest, seeking its ancient healing wisdoms, including Ayurveda and yoga. These twinned philosophies, both imports from India, are actively practiced by globetrotting yogis willing to forgo electricity in search of their inner light at Ulpotha (ulpotha.com) a red rice growing village and wellness retreat outside Kandy in the nation's lush upcountry interior. Intense, twice daily yoga sessions are led

by some of the international yoga scene's most sought after instructors, who come from London, the United States, Australia and India for short visiting tenures. For those who prefer to take their downward dogs with Ceylonese tea, Ashtanga Lanka (ashtangalanka.com) offers Mysore-style morning practice, daily meditations and Thai massage among 98 acres of tea bushes at Ashburnham Estate, a working tea plantation at the foothills of the Knuckles Mountain range. Head south for gentle morning yoga at Amangalla (amanresorts.com) within the massive stone ramparts of the 400-year-old Dutch colonial Galle Fort, a Unesco World Heritage Site, or by the sea at Talalla Yoga (talallaretreat.com) where daily hatha, ashtanga and flow classes held at 7.30am and 4.30pm are open to the public.



The latest craze is for beachfront villas along Sri Lanka's southern shores, though many complain about the lack of amenities among these sprawling beach retreats. That changes this summer with the opening of Ani Villas (*from \$17,443 exc tax for a four-bedroom villa; anivillas.com*), a 15 suite resort-equipped single estate designed by Parisian architect Reda Amalou, of The Nam Hai fame.



Cathay Pacific (cathaypacific.com) fly direct to the main international airport outside the capital city of Colombo from \$7,104 return (inc taxes). A spiffy new highway has drastically cut drive times to the south, making Ani Villas a smooth two-hour car ride, however, plan on at least three hours along winding roads up to Ulpotha.



If you like the vineyards of Bordeaux, try Yamanashi Prefecture



Wine tasting

By Eddie McDougall

If you're a fan of winery tours and seeing where your grapes are grown, here is an opportunity to do so without having to travel eight hours plus on a plane. The region I speak of is only a few hours flight from Hong Kong and is home to well over a century of traditional grape winemaking.

Japan's Yamanashi Prefecture is approximately 127km west of Tokyo, on the foothills of Mount Fuji. It's famous for its beautiful farmlands, hot springs, its regional dish of sashimi or tartar horsemeat and, last but not least, its wine production from the indigenous grape varietal, koshu. So, if you're up for a short getaway, I recommend checking out the following two wineries.

Chateau Mercian (chateaumercian.com) has excellent winemaking facilities, a well-stocked wine museum and wonderful architecture. The wine quality is consistent and a great place to learn about the region, its wine styles and varietal offerings. Meals are available in the Cellar Door restaurant along with a classy tasting room and retail outlet.

Grace Wine (grace-wine.com) is a boutique family vineyard with more than 100 years of winemaking history. Famous for its koshu white wine, this producer is most certainly at the forefront of Japanese winemaking. A small and intimate tasting room at the vineyard is a cosy place to hang out and sample the winery's finest drops.



Fuji Lake Hotel (fujilake.co.jp) comes with a private hot spring bath, open-air baths and excellent access to the sites of Lake Kawaguchi. Kukuna (\$2,775 per night; kukuna.jp) is a classy location for those with the intention to splash out. It offers classic Mount Fuji views, hot spring baths, resort-like atmosphere and exceptional service. And finally, Kagetsu Ryokan (shousenkaku-kagetsu.com), which is an excellent example of traditional Japanese accommodation and intimate service, with authentic in-house cuisine.



Hong Kong Express (hkexpress.com) flies to Tokyo from \$1,801 return (inc tax). From Tokyo, it is a 2.5-hour bus journey (\$180 single; transportation.fujikyuu.co.jp) or just over two hours by train (*Super Azusa high speed to Otsuki, then the limited express to Kawaguchiko* from \$280 one way; jprail.com).



City break

By Kate Whitehead

Dalat, in the southern part of Vietnam's central highlands, is known as the 'City of Eternal Spring' because year-round the lowest temperature is 15 degrees Celsius and the highest is 24. The French discovered the delights of Dalat in the 1920s. Originally drawn to the scenic beauty of this mountain retreat, it has the advantage of being cooler than the rest of the country in the baking summers.

The broad boulevards, charming villas and Swiss-style chalets built by the French remain today. Sitting alongside this European sensibility is the chaos that you get on most Vietnamese streets, but unlike the now almost cosmopolitan capital, Dalat has an innocence reminiscent of Hanoi 20 years ago.

The city has long drawn the tourists, but what's on offer and the type of tourist attracted has evolved. In the 1950s, Dalat was a famous hunting ground and visitors would come to shoot wild boar, deer, roe and even panthers and tigers. Hunters were so passionate about their sport they shot the game to extinction.

Today, the big draw of Dalat is the fresh mountain air and breath-taking scenery, making it an ideal place for outdoor activities, such as golf and hiking, and, for the more adventurous, white-water rafting, kayaking and paragliding. And while Dalat has long been popular with locals – and a favourite spot for honeymooners – of the Western tourist market, it has largely attracted backpackers. It's only recently that an effort is being made to rebrand the city and attract the upmarket traveller. Now is the time to go, before the prices shoot up.

If you like the charming chaos of Hanoi, try Dalat



The French built the Hotel du Lang Bian in 1922 and drew the high society from Saigon. Slightly elevated and looking out over a large lake with landscaped gardens, it was the largest building in the area and the city grew up around it. Today called the Dalat Palace Luxury Hotel (*from \$1,635 per night inc tax; dalatresorts.com*), the 43 rooms and suites have high ceilings, claw-footed bathtubs and shuttered windows looking out on to the lake.



Vietnam Airlines (vietnamairlines.com) flies to Dalat, via Ho Chi Minh City, from \$2,291 return (inc tax). Though depending on flight schedules it may be faster to fly to Hanoi and get a connection from there.



If you like the verdant landscape of Maui, try Batanes



Nature

By Jenette Del Mundo

Just less than two hours flight from Manila, Batanes is a nature sanctuary, renowned for its pristine landscape and crime-free environs. This northernmost province of the Philippines is endowed with stunning views of the Pacific Ocean spilling over the South China Sea, framed by lush rolling hills, mountain ranges and an active volcano. It is an idyllic respite from the hustle of city life, punctuated by gentle hikes across panoramic vistas of the romantic Basco lighthouse and the town's very own Marlboro country, Racuñ, a Payaman. Another highlight is a tour to the province's southern island of Sabtang.

It is not by accident that the country's oldest man lives in Batanes. The secret? "Being close to nature, with a diet of fish, vegetables and... coconuts," says 108-year-old Marcello Hostallero. The island's Honesty Cafe (*National Road, Ivana*) is a novel concept store that takes visitors by surprise. The shop operates on customer honesty, with all the goods – snacks, drinks and knick-knacks – laid out openly. Visitors simply pay in to the box with what they owe and help themselves to the change.

A trip is best planned during the dry season, between October and May, as, being the northernmost part of the country, Batanes gets the full force of any typhoon passing through the region. The solid stone foundations of the local houses are built to withstand harsh weather conditions.



Fundacion Pacita Nature Lodge

(from \$1,350 per night; fundacionpacita.ph) is arguably the best on the island. The rooms feature exposed wooden beams, with artwork from local artists on the walls and exquisite views out over the hills and the sea. The newly built Bernardo's Hotel (from \$380 per night; bit.ly/bernadosbatanes) provides decent amenities and easy access to town, while Amboy's Hometel (from \$253 per night; amboyhometel.com) offers larger rooms that can cater to groups.



Philippine Airlines

(philippineairlines.com) fly to Manila from \$1,408 return (inc tax) and from Manila to Bosco in Batanes from \$2,785 return (inc tax). Flights are daily.

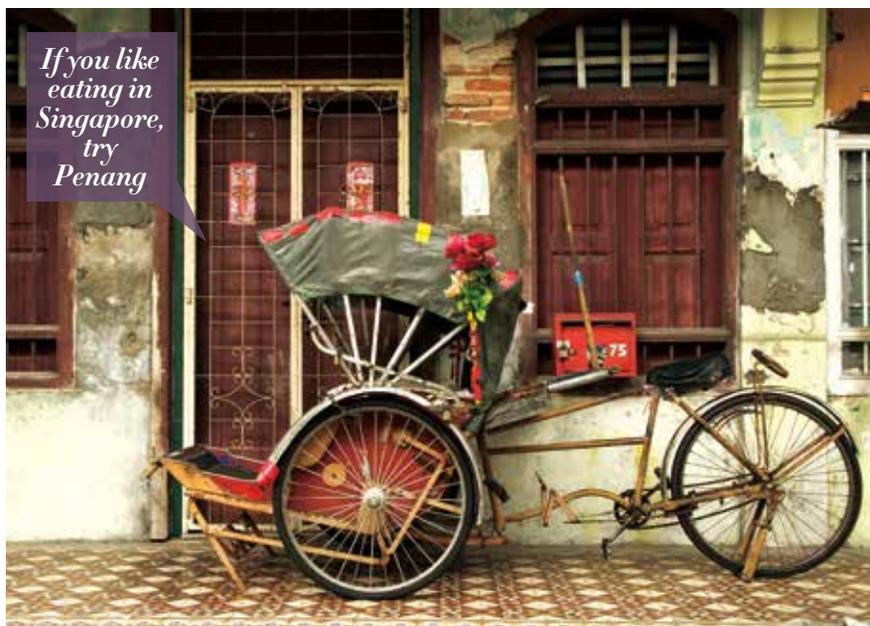


Foodie

By Cynthia Rosenfeld

A safe haven along the Straits of Malacca for travelling foreigners since the 16th century, multicultural Penang is in the throes of a 21st century renaissance. At the centre of this revival is the Unesco World Heritage Site of George Town, a pedestrian friendly enclave of indie boutiques and art galleries nestled between Hindu shrines, Chinese clan houses and mosques. Mornings call for Indian cuisine, like an apom fermented rice pancake filled with butter and cheese at food stalls along Queen Street, or settle in for the car tire-size dosas at Ananda Bhavan at the junction of China and Market Streets. Wash that down with the signature mango lassi then burn calories exploring until stomachs rumble for lunch at China House, a 16,000sq ft compound of retail, art spaces, drinking and dining venues where lunch offers a veritable round the world selection of Japanese noodles, Thai chicken salad or chicken and mushroom pie. Don't overdo your midday meal as dinner at Seven Terraces is Penang's gourmet apex. Perennially top ranked Thai food chef David Thompson, of Bangkok's Nahm, trained the culinary team at George Town's heritage hotel and it shows in every dish served on the hotel's Chinese blue and white porcelain. Standouts include the otak otak sea bass in a light, flaky pastry and luscious prawn geng curry.

If you like eating in Singapore, try Penang



Australian transplant Narelle McMurtrie turned a handful of historic George Town shop houses along Armenian Street into one of Penang's most colourful sites (chinahouse.com.my). Straits Collection (straitscollection.com.my) offers well-priced independent lofts that confer the feeling of

actually living among the charms of this pedestrian friendly heritage district.



Malaysia Airlines fly direct to Penang from \$3,021 return (operated by Dragonair, inc tax). Flight time from Hong Kong is three hours, 40 minutes.



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Adventure

By Adrian Bottomley

In the far eastern corner of Nepal, tucked up against the Tibetan border, is a pioneering trekking route through protected, pristine national park that connects the world's most easterly 8,000m peaks – Kangchenjunga and Makalu. If you can hear the call of the mountains but are loath to share them with the crowds that inhabit the well-trodden trails to Everest or Annapurna, then this remote section of the Great Himalaya Trail could be just the ticket.

Long used by the mosaic of indigenous peoples that inhabit the area, the Lumba Sumba trek offers a wild and spectacular way

to traverse the beautiful Tamor and Arun river valleys by crossing the 5,200m Lumba Sumba La. Home to red pandas and snow leopards, these lands include not just high alpine environments but uncut primordial forest, a riot of rhododendrons, lush lower hills and secluded 400-year-old Tibetan monasteries, adorned with ancient thangkas. For those that love Nepal, and would like to see it get back on its feet after the recent earthquake, there's no better way to help than to visit this stunning (and largely unaffected) wilderness. Contribute to the local economy and experience what this Himalayan land felt like 20 years ago – before Gore-Tex and CamelBaks.



In April 2016, Hong Kong-based trekking specialist, Whistling Arrow (whistlingarrow.com) is organising a 17-day trip open to experienced trekkers and adventure-junkies alike. Accommodation mainly involves camping in tents with the occasional stay in a rustic teahouse in the villages of the lower valleys. The trip begins and ends in Kathmandu, where the group stays for two nights in a small lodge in Bodnath, a heavily Tibetan neighbourhood unaffected by the quake. For more information contact adrian@whistlingarrow.com.



Dragonair (dragonair.com) fly direct to Kathmandu from \$5,761 return (inc tax) three times a week.

If you like the Annapurna, try the eastern Himalayas



If you like the clear waters of Krabi, try Koh Kradan



Beach holidays

By Simon Ostheimer

Unlike the famous isles found just over the horizon – Lanta, Phi Phi and Phuket – the islands of Trang, a sleepy province in southwest Thailand, remain under the radar. Yet they are just as magical as their more famous contemporaries, with crystal-clear waters, inspiring scenery and are one of the kingdom’s last refuges of the dugong – the province’s state icon. Perhaps the most famous of all the Trang islands is Koh Kradan, heralded as the next slice of paradise. Already a slew of resorts occupy the east coast of this slender island, drawn to Kradan by the white sand and coral reef brimming with fish. Take a day trip to explore nearby Koh Ngai (pronounced ‘hai’), which is the wildest of

the island archipelago, with roving monitor lizards, monkeys and black tip sharks offshore. It’s around here that you’ll also find the small outcrops of Koh Maa, Koh Chueak and Koh Wan. You can’t go ashore on these karst islets jutting out of the sea, but you’ll find the best snorkelling in the waters surrounding them. Longtail boats can be hired from Koh Kradan for around \$697 for a half-day trip, lunch and snorkelling equipment included. Also make the time for a visit to neighbouring Koh Mook’s Emerald Cave. Accessible only at low tide, this is a 20m-long sea cave that you swim through in pitch-black darkness, before emerging into an idyllic hidden beach cove that was once a secret hideaway for pirates.



Of the slew of resorts that occupy the east coast our favourites are The Sevensseas Resort (*from \$868 per night inc tax; sevenseasresorts.com*), with its boutique Robinson Crusoe charm; and the Anantara Si Kao (*from \$1,057 inc tax; sikao.anantara.com*), which, although on the mainland, has a luxurious private beach club on Koh Kradan exclusively for its guests.



Bangkok Airways (*bangkokair.com*) fly to Krabi airport, via Bangkok from \$3,345 return (inc tax). Alternatively there are daily direct flights to Phuket International Airport on Hong Kong Express (*hkexpress.com*), from \$3,104 return (inc tax). From Phuket, it’s a four-hour drive to Pak Meng Pier on the Trang mainland, and then a 90-minute journey by longtail.

About our contributors



Simon Ostheimer

Raised in Hong Kong and now based in Phuket, Thailand, Simon travels Asia in search of the next place to call home.



Kate Whitehead

Kate Whitehead is a Hongkonger and has made the city her home since she was eight. She writes for CNN, *Time*, *SCMP* and BBC Travel.



Cynthia Rosenfeld

From bases on three continents, Cynthia covers decadent destinations around the globe for several leading luxury publications.



Jenette Del Mundo

Jenette combines her passion for travel with her work as a cabin crew. She likes her travels fun, active and exotic.



Adrian Bottomley

Owner of Whistling Arrow, Adrian is passionate about new adventures and the wilder, hidden corners of Asia.



Eddie McDougall

Eddie is an award-winning winemaker, wine judge, columnist and host of the TV series *The Flying Winemaker* on TLC.