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Southeast Asia

on a shoestring

big trips on small budgets

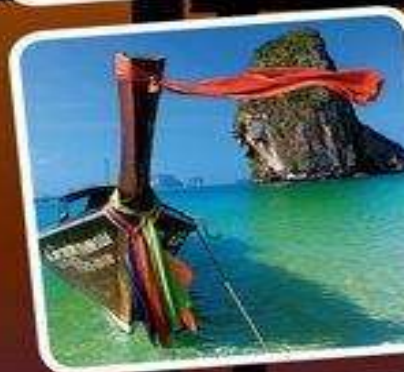


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welcome to Southeast Asia

Exotic and tropical, friendly and hospitable, historic and devout, Southeast Asia offers a warm embrace, from its sun-kissed beaches and steamy jungles to its bustling modern cities and sleepy villages.



Buddhist monks travelling by motorcycle taxi, Siem Reap, Cambodia. BERNARD NAPHINE/LONELY PLANET IMAGES

Elemental Forces

The life-giving force of water has sculpted many Southeast Asian landscapes. The jungle-topped islands of the Malay peninsula are cradled by coral reefs that tame the ocean into azure pools. The languorous Vietnamese coastline greets the South China Sea from tip to tail, while inland there are karst mountains – evidence of long-vanished oceans. And the muddy Mekong River lopes through tightly knit mountains to flat rice baskets. The traditional ‘highways’ of Borneo are tannin-stained rivers that slice through the wilderness. And the volcanoes of Indonesia and the Philippines provide a glimpse into the earth’s blacksmithing core.

Spiritual Spaces

Southeast Asia bathes in spirituality. With the dawn, pots of rice come to a boil and religious supplications waft from earth to sky. Barefoot monks silently move through dull-lit streets collecting food alms from the faithful; prayers bellow from needle-tipped mosques calling the devotees to bend to earth in submission; family altars are tended like thirsty houseplants. And the region’s great monuments have been built for the divine, from Angkor’s heaven incarnate to Bagan’s infinity-bending temple expanse. This is a region in close communication with the divine. Visitors can join in on the conversation on meditation retreats or by hiking into the mist belt to visit a golden-spired temple or sacred mountain.



Rice paddies in northern Vietnam
STU SMUCKER/LONELY PLANET IMAGES

A Marriage of Old & New

Southeast Asian cities grabbed on to the future long before it became the present. Bangkok’s mass transit zip between shopping malls aboard sky-suspended trains. Affluent Singapore shows off its multicultural heritage like a fashion show and Ho Chi Minh City is in a race to the top of the

commercial heap. In between these modern marvels are rickety wooden villages filled with yawning dogs and napping grannies, where the agricultural clock measures out the rice planting and harvest seasons. These rural landscapes are best visited via human power: by cycling past sandal-clad villagers and curious children or trekking through high-altitude hill-tribe villages.

A Bountiful Harvest

In the absence of winter, the earth here is always pregnant with ambrosial fruits, spices once as prized as gold, and the staple, rice, which is concocted into three square meals and dessert. Grazing is Southeast Asian art, cultivated in the hawker centres of Penang and Singapore or by itinerant vendors in Thailand and Vietnam. The cuisines – Indian curries, Chinese dim sum – reflect historic migration and the flavours flirt with the climate, balancing spicy, sweet, salty and sour.

TOP Experiences

Bali (Indonesia)

1 Indonesia's 17,000 islands may offer myriad cultural and exploration adventures, but the one island not to miss is Bali ([Click here](#)). The original backpackers' haven, you can surf epic breaks by day and rub shoulders with supermodels at legendary clubs by night. With one of Southeast Asia's richest cultures, Bali also offers a chance to escape party glitz and stay in a family homestay in and around the arts centre of Ubud, where the sounds of traditional dance and music echo over the rice fields at night.



Hindu ceremony on Kuta beach.
TOM COCKREM / LONELY PLANET IMAGES

Temples of Angkor (Cambodia)

2 One of the world's most magnificent sights, the temples of Angkor ([Click here](#)) are so much better than the superlatives. Angkor Wat is the world's largest religious building; Bayon is the world's weirdest spiritual monument with its immense four-sided stone faces; and at Ta Prohm nature has run amok. Siem Reap is the base to explore this collection of temples and is a buzzing destination with superb restaurants and bars. Beyond the temples are cultural attractions, such as floating villages and cooking classes.



ANDERS BLOMQUIST / LONELY PLANET IMAGES

Bangkok (Thailand)

3 Southeast Asia's superstar city ([Click here](#)) has it all in supersized proportions: food, shopping, fun and then some... It might be a pressure cooker for new arrivals but it will be a needed dose of civilisation after weeks of dusty back roads. Build in plenty of time to load up on souvenirs, refresh your wardrobe, be plucked and kneaded and recount tall tales over a sweaty bottle of beer. Don't forget a sunset river ferry ride, an evening noodle tour of Chinatown and one final round of tempura spotting.



Ko Tao (Thailand)

4 The divemaster's island, Ko Tao ([Click here](#)) is the cheapest and easiest spot to learn how to strap on a tank and dive into the deep. The water is warm and gentle and the underwater spectacles are not to be missed. Just offshore are rocky coves and coral reefs frequented by all manner of fish, providing a snorkelling aperitif. Its small size means that the island is something of a diving 'university', with a lively social scene after class.



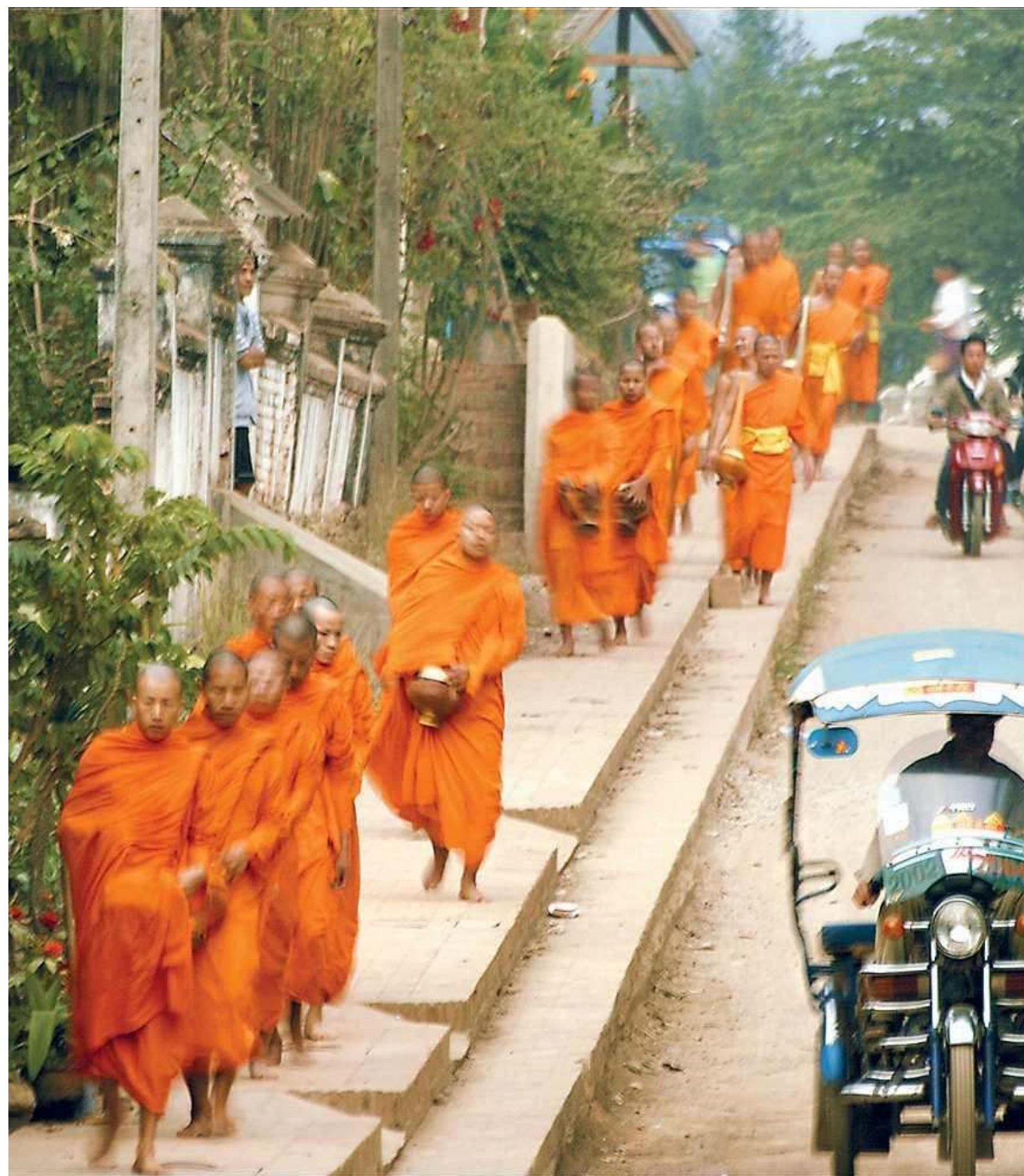
Halong Bay (Vietnam)

5 More than 3000 limestone-peaked islands sheltered by shimmering seas make Halong Bay ([Click here](#)) one of Vietnam's top tourist draws as well as a Unesco World Heritage Site. An overnight cruise allows you to adore the scenery through the day's dramatic changes of light: rise early for an ethereal misty morn, kayak into the tidal-carved grottoes and lagoons and track the pastel parade of the sinking sun. If you're still hankering for more karst action, move on to less touristed Lan Ha Bay.



Luang Prabang (Laos)

6 Hemmed in by the Mekong and Nam Khan rivers, this ancient city boasts history, religious devotion, and natural beauty. Once a royal capital, Luang Prabang ([Click here](#)) is populated by temples and Buddhist monks, best seen on their morning alms routes. In between are forested river views and world-class French cuisine. Hire a bike and explore the backstreets, take a cooking workshop, elephant trek, or just ease back with a restful massage at one of a dozen affordable spas. Prepare to adjust your timetable and stay a little longer than planned.



JERRY ALEXANDER / LONELY PLANET IMAGES

Chiang Mai (Thailand)

7 Bestowed with mountains of charm, Chiang Mai ([Click here](#)) is a cultural and artistic magnet for Thais and tourists alike. The old city is framed by a time-preserving moat and chock-a-block with antique teak temples displaying northern Thailand's distinctive art and architecture. It is a studious place where visitors come to study language, massage, meditation or just chat with a monk for a bit. Guarding the city is Doi Suthep (below), a sacred peak bejewelled with a sacred temple, and beyond the city limits are high-altitude valleys, hill-tribe treks and mountain vistas.



Hoi An (Vietnam)

8 Antique Hoi An ([Click here](#)) was once Vietnam's most cosmopolitan port, as evidenced by the genteel shophouses that survive today. These have been repurposed into modern-day businesses: gourmet restaurants, hip bars and cafes, quirky boutiques and expert tailors. This is a sightseeing circuit offering historical wanderings through the warrens of the Old Town, religious exultation in grandiose pagodas, and markets and cooking courses to transform you into a knowledgeable chef. Wash off the hot day at nearby An Bang beach.



Delivering wares to Hoi An market
PETER STUCKINGS / LONELY PLANET IMAGES

Hanoi (Vietnam)

9 It is something of a sport to get decidedly lost in the Old Quarter of Hanoi ([Click here](#)), a frantic commercial labyrinth where echoes of the past are filtered and framed by 21st-century energy. Eating and people-watching are other Hanoi-tailored pursuits. Enjoy the city's signature dishes – *pho* (beef noodle soup), *bun cha* (barbecued pork) and *banh cuon* (rice crepes) – while perched on a tiny high chair claiming a small piece of the footpath. Later at night, join the socialising throngs enjoying refreshingly crisp *bia hoi* (draught beer) at makeshift street corner bars.



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