

The Best of Southeast Asia

To the Western visitor, Southeast Asia is an assault on the senses, an immersion into a way of life utterly unlike that to which we're accustomed. From bustling cities like Bangkok, Singapore, and Kuala Lumpur to tiny fishing villages and thatched rural hamlet, from the jungles of Malaysian Borneo to the deluxe resorts of Bali, from the temples of Luang Prabang in Laos to the bacchanal of Patpong in Thailand, Southeast Asia offers a glimpse of the extraordinary, an explosion of colors, sounds, smells, textures, and life that will send you home with a wider vision of the human experience. In this chapter, we share our picks of the region's unrivaled highlights.

1 The Most Unforgettable Travel Experiences

- **Making Merit (Thailand).** In Thailand, Buddhist monks do not earn income; they survive on gifts of food and necessary items given by devoted Buddhists in the lay community. But the tonsured monk in his gold-colored robes who walks from house to house each morning is not begging for food; instead, he is offering an opportunity for the giver to receive merit. In contributing to the monk's survival, the giver of food and gifts is supporting the *sangha*, the monkhood, and therefore gets closer to Buddhist ideals. If you are interested in making merit this way, talk to your hotel's concierge. You might be able to join kitchen staff as they head to a nearby monastery in the early morning or wait on the right byway to greet and feed a column of monks. See chapter 4.
- **Sailing the South China Sea (Vietnam).** With the sky above us a deep, red afterglow, we rounded a buoy marking the shipping lane off coastal Nha Trang and, with the wind now at our backs, settled the Hobie Cat into a perfect fan-tail, the mainsail and jib billowing on opposite sides as the rudders gave a low moan and the boat gained speed. Riding low swells, we sped toward a coast where twinkling lights might have belonged to a child's train set, and the sky continued its show, now in orange. Heavenly. Opportunities for watersports and sailing are many as you travel along Vietnam's coast. Most resorts have boats for rent, and Nha Trang is a good bet, as is the area off Mui Ne Beach near Phan Thiet, which is becoming a very popular wind- and kite-surfing spot. See chapter 6.
- **Staying in a Hill-Tribe Village near the China Border (Laos).** They're still asking visitors, "Why do you come here, anyway?" in villages along the NamHa River in northern Laos. Thanks to the folks who run the NamHa Project, these vast tracts of pristine jungle won't be overrun by tourists anytime soon, and the many ethnic minority groups who've lived

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here in isolation won't be turned into human zoo exhibits. It is heartening to know that the money you spend on a trek goes to support a model of sustainable eco-tour development in a fragile region. And it is good, hearty jungle trekking or river kayak that takes you through lush jungle terrain where you're likely to see monkeys and exotic birds. Arrive in villages where kayaks are still an oddity, and spend fun evenings around the fire communicating by charades or stick figures in a notebook. It's not about the villages being "pristine"; it's about the fact that your visit is part of a cultural exchange, not about disparate currency exchange rates. You can have a positive effect on people with your heart *and* your tourist dollars. See chapter 5.

- **Participating in a Baci Ceremony (Laos).** The Baci is a touching Lao ceremony used to say welcome or farewell and to honor achievements. Participants sit in a circle and receive group blessings, after which there is traditional dancing and *lao lao*, rice wine. It's a chance for the ultrafriendly Lao people to express their hospitality to you, their honored guest. See chapter 5.
- **Sipping a Singapore Sling in the Long Bar (Raffles Hotel, Singapore).** Ah, the Long Bar, home of the Singapore Sling. I like to come in the afternoons before the tourist rush. Sheltered by long timber shutters that close out the tropical sun, the air cooled by lazy punkahs (small fans that wave gently back and forth above), you can sit back in old rattan chairs and have your saronged waitress serve you sticky alcoholic creations while you toss back a few dainty crab cakes. Life can be so decadent. Okay, so the punkahs

are electric and, come to think of it, the place is air-conditioned (not to mention that it costs a small fortune), but it's fun to imagine the days when Somerset Maugham, Rudyard Kipling, or Charlie Chaplin would be sitting at the bar sipping Slings and spinning exotic tales of their world travels. Drink up, my friend; it's a lovely high. See chapter 8.

- **Walking the Streets of Georgetown (Penang, Malaysia).** Evidence of former British colonization and early Chinese, Indian, and Arab immigration is apparent in many major cities in Malaysia, but Penang has a special charm. In some ways, the city still operates the way it did half a century ago. The shop houses are filled with small businesses—bicycle-repair shops, hardware stores, Chinese medicine halls, and coffee shops. From upstairs windows, you can still see laundry hanging on bamboo poles. Life hums in these streets, and for anyone who has witnessed the homogenization of Singapore or the modernization of Kuala Lumpur, Penang is a charming reminder of what life might have been like in these old outposts. See chapter 9.
- **Observing Open-Air Public Cremations (Bali).** Hindus believe that cremation is the only way a soul can be freed of its earthly body and travel to its next incarnation (or to enlightenment), so cremations are joyous occasions, full of floats and fanfare that can resemble a Mardi Gras parade. Complicated towers hold the body, carried aloft by cheering men. At the burning ground, the body is placed in a receptacle resembling a winged lion, a bull, or some other fabulous creature, and is set on fire. It's beautiful and awesome, a marvelous show of

pageantry and faith, and yet a natural part of everyday life. Western visitors are welcomed. See chapter 10.

- **The Magic Hour at Angkor Wat (Cambodia).** You'll want to plan your day around it, and temple aficionados all have their favorite spots; but whether from a hillside overlooking a glowing temple facade or from the heights of the main temple itself with the horizon framed by the famed ancient

towers, be sure to see an Angkor sunset. Sunrise is equally worth the early morning ride. At the more popular viewing spots, like Bakeng Hill, you'll ooh and aah in concert with lots of other travelers. Nobody likes crowds, but there is a certain cool oneness here, and the odd didgeridoo player or cross-legged character in meditation is all a nice throwback to the old hippy-trail days in the region. See chapter 7.

2 The Best Towns & Villages

- **Chiang Saen (Thailand).** Crumbling 11th-century temples take you back to the birthplace of the Lanna Kingdom, one of Thailand's wealthiest and most influential. The nearby **Golden Triangle**, a notorious trade point for the international opium industry, has a new museum and riverside views of Laos, Thailand, and Burma. See chapter 4.
- **Hoi An (Vietnam).** The small size of Hoi An belies its importance to Vietnam; it was once a major trading port, with canals leading right up to merchants' quarters for easy delivery of goods. The canals are now peaceful streets, but little else has changed. Almost every building in central Hoi An is a historic Vietnamese-, Japanese-, and Chinese-influenced residence or meeting hall. See chapter 6.
- **Luang Prabang (Laos).** This town, sanctioned a World Heritage site by UNESCO for its glorious Buddhist temples, is also a charming retreat. Shady lanes are lined with French-style country homes that have been restored and converted to house cafes, galleries, shops, and some quaint guesthouses. The sunset over the lazy Mekong is the perfect end to a day

spent in Luang Prabang. See chapter 5.

- **Ubud (Bali).** This is the cultural heart of Bali, bursting with art and greenery and some of the best food on the island. Even though it's dependent on tourism and is far from a typical Bali village, you still get a sense of a real town, with real life going on around you. Ubud is the richest region in Bali for art production and, because of its central location, the town is the perfect base for exploring the rest of the island. See chapter 10.
- **Phnom Penh (Cambodia).** Few countries' capitals could be called quaint or fall under the category of a "town," and that's the very charm of this riverside burg. They say you either love it or hate it, that it's a place for expats and not tourists, but in a short stroll through the town center, you'll come across a unique mix. First you'll encounter a row of tourist cafes, streets buzzing with motorbikes and choked with dust, but turn the corner and find a quiet alley, a row of colonials, a lone kid kicking a soccer ball, and a grim-looking grandmother breaking into a smile as you walk by. There's something special here. See chapter 7.

3 The Best Beaches

- **Chaweng Beach (Koh Samui, Thailand).** Chaweng is real fun in the sun. The beach itself is gorgeous, with bungalows nestled in the trees just beyond the sand. Behind the beach lies a small town full of life, from wonderful Thai and seafood eateries to shopping and wild nightlife options. See chapter 4.
 - **Phan Thiet (Vietnam).** Just a few hours from Saigon, Phan Thiet is the latest getaway in Vietnam. Oceanside development is in full swing here, and there are some great boutique resorts along the stunning white sands of Mui Ne Beach. There's a golf course designed by Nick Faldo, and the town of Phan Thiet itself is an interesting little fishing port worth a wander. The seafood is good, and there are some great day trips to enormous remote dunes and smaller fishing villages. See chapter 6.
 - **Tanjung Rhu (Langkawi, Malaysia).** This huge secluded cove has one of the longest stretches of private beach I've ever
- seen. Wide with soft sand, the beach has cooling shady spots provided by palm trees overhead and beautiful deep blue waters for good swimming. Best of all, there's only one resort here (and the beach is kept picture perfect), so you won't have to elbow for space or suffer jet skis. See chapter 9.
- **Juara Bay (Tioman Island, Malaysia).** This beach is what they meant when they coined the word *isolated*. Be prepared to live like Robinson Crusoe—in tiny huts with cold-water showers and many with no electricity. But, oh, the beach! A wide crescent of palm-lined sand hugs the clearest blue water, with very few other people in sight. See chapter 9.
 - **Lombok (Indonesia).** The pure white-sand beaches of Lombok, with clear aqua-blue water lapping against them, are sometimes so private that you can have one all to yourself. And Lombok is just a short hop from neighboring Bali. See chapter 10.

4 The Best Outdoor Adventures

- **Phang-nga Bay (Thailand).** From the island of Phuket, sea canoe operators guide visitors through the caves hidden deep inside the craggy island-rocks of Phang-nga Bay. Outside, the islands thrust up to the sky, their jagged edges laced with scattered trees. Lie flat in your canoe to slip through the small cave openings, inside which you'll find magnificent chambers believed to have once hidden pirate operations. See chapter 4.
 - **Sea Kayaking in Halong Bay (Vietnam).** The more than 3,000
- arresting limestone karst formations rising out of Halong Bay's peaceful blue-green waters provide a natural obstacle course for paddling. Moving among them, you'll pass in and among intriguing grottos and caverns. Nights are spent camping out in natural parks or on the deck of a mother ship. See chapter 6.
- **Hill-Tribe Village Treks in Sapa (North Vietnam).** Dressed in elaborate costume of leggings, tunic, and headdress, Hmong and Yao people (among other groups) gather to sell their weavings, fine

dyed clothing, or crude but intricate metalwork in the central market. In fact, the town of Sapa is famed for an ephemeral “Love Market,” where people from surrounding villages converge to find that special someone. A trip to Sapa means that the hill tribes come to you, but don’t limit your trip to the town; be sure to get off into the countryside and trek in the shadow of Fansipan, the highest mountain in the region. Among lush terraced rice fields, you can visit many villages in even the shortest trek and experience different hill-tribe traditions and cultures. See chapter 6.

- **Caving and Kayaking in Vang Vieng (Laos).** Countless caves and caverns are hidden in the magnificent mountains surrounding Vang Vieng, a small village along the Nam Song River. Some of them are well known and some are barely on the map. Kayak tours on the Nam Song include some fun caves that you’ll swim into and can test your mettle on natural mud slides. Spend your days exploring and evenings talking about it over drinks in this laid-back little backpacker town. See chapter 5.
- **Jungle Trekking in Taman Negara (Malaysia).** With suitable options for all budgets, levels of

comfort, and desired adventure, Malaysia’s largest national park opens the wonders of primary rain forest and the creatures who dwell in it to everyone. From the canopy, walk high atop the forest to night watches for nocturnal life. This adventure is as stunning as it is informative. See chapter 9.

- **Hiking Gunung Agung (Bali).** Bali’s highest mountain/volcano, Gunung Agung (3,014m/9,886 ft. high), is sacred to the Balinese, whose traditions call it “the center of the world.” Climbing the steaming peak is a serious trek that calls for a guide and proper supplies. Most hotels can arrange for it, but you will have to start out in the middle of the night or very early in the morning to make the top by sunrise. Nearby **Gunung Batur** is a less strenuous and no less rewarding half-day climb. See chapter 10.
- **Born to Be Wild (Cambodia).** If you ride motorbikes, get your motor runnin’ and head out on the dirt-track back roads. Rural Cambodia is just opening up for exploration, and the pioneers here are leading the way to the back of beyond on dirt bikes (find a bike with the best suspension). It’s certainly a choice for the hearty and a great adventure. See chapter 7.

5 The Most Intriguing Temples, Shrines, Palaces & Archaeological Sites

- **The Grand Palace & Wat Phra Kaeo (Bangkok, Thailand).** These two places are number one on every travel itinerary to Bangkok, and rightly so. The palace is indeed grand, with mixtures of traditional Thai and European Victorian architecture. Wat Phra Kaeo, the royal temple that houses Thailand’s revered and mysterious Emerald Buddha, is a

small city in itself, with a dozen or more picturesque outer buildings and monuments that devour rolls of film. See chapter 4.

- **Ayutthaya (Thailand).** Before Bangkok, there was Ayutthaya. This was the thriving capital of Siam that the first Europeans saw when they visited amazing Thailand. Ruling a rich and powerful kingdom of over a million

- inhabitants, the monarchy supported the arts, especially literature. As the city grew, international trade was encouraged. All that remains are brick remnants of a grand palace and many temples that were sacked during the Burmese invasion. It's best to hire a guide who can walk you through and point out the significance of each site. See chapter 4.
- **The Cao Dai Holy See (Tay Ninh) (North of Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam).** This is the spiritual home base of the Cao Dai religion, a faith characterized by philosophical inclusion and influence gathered from all beliefs, including the world's great scientists and humanitarians. Its headquarters is like a fantasyland of colored mosaic and elaborate painting. Followers are dressed in white turbans during the picturesque daily procession. It's quite unique. See chapter 6.
 - **Tomb of Khai Dinh (Hue, Vietnam).** Khai Dinh was an egotistical, eccentric emperor who was bad for the people of Vietnam but great for the tomb he left behind. A gaudy mix of Gothic, baroque, and classical Chinese architecture, the exterior is remarkable. The stunning interior is completely covered with intricate glass and ceramic mosaic work. See chapter 6.
 - **Wat Xieng Thong (Luang Prabang, Laos).** The glittering Xieng Thong, built in 1560, sits grandly on a peninsula jutting out into the Mekong River. The facades of two of its buildings are covered by glittering glass mosaics; another building contains an ornate chariot with the heads of seven dragons and the remains of a king. About a dozen English-speaking monks roam the premises; all are excellent conversationalists. See chapter 5.
 - **Plain of Jars (Xieng Khouang, Laos).** How did hundreds of huge stone urns, some measuring 2.7m tall (9 ft.), come to be placed on a few meadows in northern Laos? No one really knows, and that's what's fun here. The most prevalent explanation is that the urns were made by prehistoric folk in the area about 2,000 years ago to be used as sarcophagi, but there's lots of room for conjecture. See chapter 5.
 - **Thian Hock Keng (Singapore).** One of Singapore's oldest Chinese temples, it is a fascinating testimony to Chinese Buddhism combined with traditional Confucian beliefs and natural Taoist principles. Equally fascinating is the modern world that carries on just outside the old temple's doors. See chapter 8.
 - **Jame Mosque (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia).** Built at the central point of the city, this is one of the oldest mosques in Kuala Lumpur. It is the heart of Malay Islam, as evidenced by the Muslim shops, eateries, and daily activities carried on in the streets surrounding it. See chapter 9.
 - **Jalan Tokong (Malacca, Malaysia).** This street, in the historical heart of the city, has a Malay mosque, a Chinese temple, and a Hindu temple living peacefully side by side—the perfect example of how the many foreign religions that came to Southeast Asia shaped its communities and learned to coexist in harmony. See chapter 9.
 - **Basakih Temple (Central Bali, Indonesia).** Built in homage of Gunung Agung, the island's feisty, smoke-belching creator, the Basakih Temple does justice to the awe and grandeur of the Balinese

creation myths surrounding the volcano. The spires of individual family shrines and temples are something like Chinese pagodas, and the place is always abuzz with local worshippers. You're likely to get pulled into a ceremony. See chapter 10.

- **Angkor Wat (Cambodia).** One of the world's man-made wonders, Angkor Wat is the Disneyland of temples in Asia. This ancient city

was known to the Western world only in myth until it was rediscovered and hacked free of jungle overgrowth in the late 1800s. The magnificent temples are arrayed over a 97-sq.-km (37-sq.-mile) compound that dates from the rise and fall of the mighty Angkor Civilization (A.D. 802–1295). A visit here is unforgettable. See chapter 7.

6 The Best Museums

- **National Museum (Bangkok, Thailand).** From prehistory to recent events, this museum—the former palace of the brother of King Rama I—answers many questions about Thai history and culture through the ages. Inside buildings that are themselves works of fine Thai design, you'll find Buddha images, ancient arts, royal paraphernalia, and fine arts. Rama's sister also lived here, and her house is decorated in the same style as it was in the late 1700s. See chapter 4.
- **Vietnam National Museum of Fine Arts (Hanoi, Vietnam).** Proper art museums are few and far between in the region, and this large colonial house is a nice collection of newer works and historical pieces. You'll find nothing too controversial or groundbreaking, but some good examples of lacquer and silk painting, woodblock, and folk and expressive work in oil. If you see anything you like, you're sure to find good copies in any of the city's many galleries. See chapter 6.
- **The Cham Museum (Danang, Vietnam).** This open-air colonial structure houses the largest collection of Cham sculpture in the world. Not only are relics of this ancient Hindu-inspired culture

rare, but the religious artwork itself—more than 300 pieces of sandstone—is voluptuous, captivating, and intense. See chapter 6.

- **Images of Singapore (Sentosa Island, Singapore).** No one has done a better job than this museum in chronicling for the public the horrors of the Pacific theater and Japanese occupation in Southeast Asia. Video and audio displays take you on a chronological journey through Singapore's World War II experience. The grand finale is the Surrender Chambers, life-size wax dioramas of the fateful events. There's also dioramas depicting historical figures throughout Singapore's early development, as well as depictions of traditional cultural festivals. See chapter 8.
- **National Museum (Phnom Penh, Cambodia).** Don't miss this repository for the statues and relief sculpture that have been recovered from the Angkor temples and other ancient sites throughout Cambodia. Organized in a convenient chronology, it's a short course in Khmer art history. Later pieces are particularly quite expressive. See chapter 7.
- **Tuol Sleng, Museum of Genocide (Phnom Penh, Cambodia).** Be warned that a visit here is quite

intense—too much for some. The museum is simply the shell of Cambodia's largest prison from 1975 to 1979, when the entire country was turned into a concentration camp. Originally a high school, Tuol Sleng was the site of

horrible atrocities and, though there are some exhibits of photos, the experience of the museum is in wandering the small cells and learning the tragic tale from experienced local guides. See chapter 7.

7 The Best Festivals & Celebrations

- **Chinese New Year (Singapore).** If you're in Southeast Asia around the end of January or the beginning of February, hop up to Hong Kong or down to Singapore for the festivities. It's a 3-day party, with parades (complete with dragons and stilt walkers) and fireworks. See chapter 8.
- **Songkran (Thailand).** Every year from April 13 to 15, Thais welcome the New Year (according to their calendar). Because Songkran falls in the middle of the hottest season in an already hot country, how do you think people celebrate? Every Thai heads out into the streets with water guns and buckets of ice water (sometimes laced with talcum powder, just to add to the mess), and spends the next 3 days soaking each other—and *you*. Foreigners are especially favorite targets. Don't get mad—arm thyself: Water bazookas are on sale everywhere. Have a ball! See chapter 4.
- **That Luang Festival (Vientiane, Laos).** Thousands of Buddhist followers from all over the country, and even a few neighboring countries, converge on the

spectacular That Luang temple in Vientiane. There are alms-giving ceremonies and flower processions, and then the whole affair dissolves into a carnival that stretches over several days. See chapter 5.

- **Bun Song Hua/Dragon Boat Races (Laos).** Celebrating the end of Buddhist Lent, Dragon Boat races are held in every riverside town in Laos (and that's most towns, really). The races are exciting, the betting is frenzied, and there's always a small carnival with handmade rides and the standard rigged skill games. See chapter 5.
- **Thaipusam (Singapore and Malaysia).** Around the end of January and the beginning of February, Hindus celebrate Thaipusam. Men give thanks for prayers answered by carrying *kavadis*, huge steel racks attached to their bodies with skewers piercing the skin. Cheeks are pierced, and fruits are hung from the skin using sharp hooks. A parade of devotees carry these things in a deep trance—and the next day they wake up virtually unharmed. See chapters 8 and 9.

8 The Biggest Cultural No-Nos

- **Photographing a member of a Hill Tribe Without Permission.** There's nothing a visitor wants more than to take away indelible images of the colorful, rustic lifestyles of the Vietnamese ethnic minorities. However, many rural

people are superstitious about photographs or might resent the intrusion of privacy. Ask first. See "Etiquette Tips," in chapter 2.

- **Losing Your Temper in Laos or Thailand.** The Lao and Thai people follow Buddhist traditions in

their daily life, approaching even unfortunate events with calm cheerfulness. They would be shocked and dismayed at anger or ill temper, and raising your voice won't achieve any purpose whatsoever. No matter how frustrated you become, keep it under wraps, or the people around you will see to it that you never get where you need to go. See "Etiquette Tips," in chapter 2.

- **Looking (or Being) Poor in Singapore.** You probably won't run into too many cultural faux pas in cosmopolitan Singapore, but poverty is the pits in this city. Bring your smartest clothes if you want to impress people here. See chapter 8.
- **Using Offensive Body Language in Bali, Malaysia, Thailand, or Laos.** Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists all reserve the left hand for "unclean" toilet duties, never for pointing at anyone or anything, handing objects to others, eating, or touching other people. Similarly, in Buddhist and Hindu

cultures, the head is revered as the most sacred part of the body, while the feet are the lowest. Never touch another person's head or shoulders, not even a child's. Never point or gesture with your feet or use your feet to perform any tasks other than walking. See "Etiquette Tips," in chapter 2.

- **Hanging Clothes out to Dry in Bali.** Or otherwise out in public (off hotel balconies and chairs and the like).
- **Showing Too Much Skin (Regional).** Except perhaps in Hong Kong, Singapore and Bangkok or other heavily toured areas, modest Southeast Asians accept beachwear at the beach, revealing vacation clothing at resorts, and sexy attire at discos. Everywhere else, dress with respect for the locals and their traditions. See "Etiquette Tips," in chapter 2.
- **Wearing Shorts or Short Skirts to a Temple or Mosque (Regional).** It'll get you tossed out. See "Etiquette Tips," in chapter 2.

9 The Best Resorts & Luxury Hotels

- **The Oriental (Bangkok, Thailand).** The original address in Thailand, The Oriental has seen modernization detract from its charms of yesterday, but there's still ambience all around. See p. 109.
- **Rayavadee (Krabi, Thailand).** This seductive bungalow resort in exquisite Thai style will thrill even the most discerning guests. See p. 206.
- **The Regent (Cha-Am, Thailand).** Luxurious Thai-style suites, excellent restaurants, a multitude of activities, and the most amazing swimming pool you've ever seen await you. Don't forget to meet the resident water buffalo

family—they work the resort's private rice paddies. See p. 156.

- **Sofitel Metropole (Hanoi, Vietnam).** The history of the Metropole, one of Vietnam's premier grand dames, tells the history of the last tumultuous century in Vietnam. If the walls could only talk. Though everything is luxurious and comfortable and you're in a prime downtown location, you'll certainly feel like you've walked into old Indochina. See p. 309.
- **Ana Mandara (Nha Trang, Vietnam).** The details are perfect in this small-scale resort, from the incense burning in the open long-house-style lobby to the small signs identifying tropical fish in

the lobby's pond. Each stylish room has the air of a secluded hut with its own verandah, many overlooking the palm-lined coast. Both the food and the staff's smiles are perfect. Also check out the new **Evason Hideaway** nearby. See p. 361.

- **Sofitel Dalat Palace (Dalat, Vietnam)**. It's real old-world colonial opulence in the king's former castle in Vietnam's Central Highlands. Private spaces are decorated in a cool colonial baroque, and lobby and service are, in short, kingly. See p. 370.
- **Settha Palace (Vientiane, Laos)**. Once the address of note for visitors to the French colony, the Settha Palace only recently returned from obscurity and is now one of the finest hotels in the region. It's a nice marriage of colonial elegance and modern comfort. See p. 256.
- **La Résidence Phou Vao (Luang Prabang, Laos)**. Lording it over the town in boutique luxury, the gardens and large suite rooms of the Phou Vao (formerly the **Pansea**) are comfort and atmosphere done to a T. This is typical of other **Orient Express** properties in the region. See p. 271.
- **Raffles Hotel (Singapore)**. For old-world opulence, Raffles is second to none. This is a pure fantasy

of the days when tigers still lurked around the perimeters. See p. 468.

- **Four Seasons Hotel (Singapore)**. Elegance and warmth combine to make this place a good bet. Consider a regular room here before you book a suite elsewhere. See p. 474.
- **The Regent (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia)**. For my money, the Regent offers the smartest decor, best service, and best selection of facilities in the whole city. See p. 554.
- **Four Seasons (Jimbaran, Bali)**. With its individual bungalows and plunge pools overlooking the blue sea and its famous Four Seasons pampering, this is one of the great hotels in the world. See p. 621.
- **Amandari (Ubud, Bali)**. Its individual bungalows overlook a deep green gorge, and the Amandari offers another sybaritic Bali experience. If you can afford it (or the Four Seasons Jimbaran), do. Even if you can't, do. See p. 626.
- **Raffles Grand Hotel D'Angkor (Siem Reap, Cambodia)**. A classic Indochine colonial, the Grand is indeed grand. With fine services to connect you to nearby Angkor Wat, a great central pool and spa/massage facility, and beautiful rooms, it doesn't get any better. See p. 436.

10 The Best Hotel Bargains

- **The Atlanta (Bangkok, Thailand)**. Located in a prime spot off of central Sukhumvit, the Atlanta is the oldest hotel in Bangkok (without structural renovation) and quite quirky and atmospheric. See p. 119.
- **Tamarind Village (Chiang Mai, Thailand)**. If you're going to travel on a budget, do it with style—and style is what Tamarind

Village has wrapped up in its quiet courtyard in the middle of Old Town. Rooms are new and rather spartan in concrete and rattan, but everything is tiptop. See p. 219.

- **Spring Hotel/Mua Xuan (Saigon, Vietnam)**. Not especially luxurious, rooms in this privately owned downtown property (one of few nongovernment places in Saigon) start at \$34. It's light on amenities

but very comfortable, convenient, and friendly. See p. 394.

- **Day Inn (Vientiane, Laos).** So it's just a few notches above your average guesthouse, but there's a comfortable, laid-back feel here and many long-stay visitors can't be wrong. You'll find rooms for \$25. See p. 257.
- **RELC International Hotel (Singapore).** For a safe and simple place to call home in Singapore, RELC can't be beat. You might wonder how they keep costs so low when their location is so good. See p. 479.
- **Traders Hotel (Singapore).** "Value for money" is the name of the game, with all sorts of promotional packages, self-service laundrettes, vending machines, and a checkout lounge—just a few of the offerings that make this the most convenient hotel in the city. See p. 479.
- **Swiss-Inn (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia).** Tucked behind the market tents in Chinatown, this bargain find has the look of a higher-quality hotel, but in mini-size. If you plan on spending your

time out exploring the city, why pay more for empty space? See p. 557.

- **Heeren House (Malacca, Malaysia).** Bargain or no bargain, this boutique hotel in the heart of the old city is *the* place to stay in Malacca if you want to really get a feel for the local atmosphere. See p. 566.
- **Telang Usan Hotel (Kuching, Malaysia).** An informal place, Telang Usan is homey and quaint, and within walking distance of many major attractions in Kuching. See p. 588.
- **The Home Stays/Losmen of Bali.** These small-time accommodations will give you a large, comfortable (though no-frills) room or bungalow with a big, often fancy breakfast for about \$5 a night for two. See chapter 10.
- **Goldiana (Phnom Penh, Cambodia).** It's no frills but friendly and cheap here in a quiet neighborhood south of the town center. It's popular with long-staying visitors and NGO workers. See p. 426.

11 The Best Local Dining Experiences

- **Street Food (Bangkok, Thailand).** On every street, down every alley, you'll find someone setting up a cart with an umbrella. Noodles, salads, and satay are favorites, and some hawkers set up tables and stools on the sidewalk for you to take a load off. This is Thai cafe life! See chapter 4.
- **Pho (Vietnam).** Don't leave the country without sampling one, if not many, bowls of this delicate noodle soup, made with vermicelli-thin rice noodles, chicken (*ga*) or beef (*bo*), and several fresh accompaniments, according to the chef's whim or local flavor: basil, mint, chile peppers, and bean sprouts. See chapter 6.
- **Ngon Restaurant (Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam).** It's a restaurant, but really like the classroom for Vietnam Cuisine 101. It's loud and busy, but diners have their choice of food from the many authentic street stalls that line the central courtyard. Locals eat here; though they have an English menu, go with a Vietnamese friend or ask for a recommendation from the friendly (but always busy) staff. See p. 398.
- **Kua Lao (Vientiane, Laos).** Kua Lao is traditional Lao cuisine in a

similar setting, including music. Situated in a restored colonial, with a series of dining rooms, it is the premier Lao restaurant in the country. The extensive menu goes on for pages. There is an entire page of vegetarian entrees and another entire page of something you don't see often: traditional Lao desserts. See p. 260.

- **Hawker Centers (Singapore).** Think of them as shopping malls for food—great food! For local cuisine, who needs a menu with pictures when you can walk around and select anything you want as it's prepared before your eyes? See chapter 8.
- **Gurney Drive (Penang, Malaysia).** Penang is king for offering a

variety of Asian cuisine, from Chinese to Malay, Indian, and everything else in between. Visiting this large hawker center by the sea is like taking Intro to Penang 101. See p. 577.

- **Balinese Warungs (Bali).** Just a local cafe, the Balinese equivalent of the greasy-spoon diner in America, *warungs* can be found on every street corner. Our favorite is **Satri's** in Ubud. With 24-hours advance notice, Satri's will cook you a smoked duck or banana chicken feast, a whole bird, plus three plates of salad or fabulous vegetables, rice, and fruit for dessert, for about \$7 for two. See p. 632.

12 The Best Markets

- **Chatuchak Weekend Market (Bangkok, Thailand).** One word describes it: huge. You can easily get lost and certainly spend hours wandering this labyrinth. Don't buy anything until you spend at least a half-day wandering down the endless aisles eyeballing the multitude of merchandise available. See chapter 4.
- **Night Bazaar (Chiang Mai, Thailand).** Most of those gorgeous handicrafts you find all over Thailand are made in the north, and at Chiang Mai's sprawling Night Bazaar, you'll find the widest selection, best quality, and best prices. See chapter 4.
- **Central Market (Hoi An, Vietnam).** On the banks of the busy Perfume River lies this entire city block of narrow, roofed aisles. Produce of every description is for sale inside—handicrafts, household items, and services such as facials and massages. On the outskirts, an entire warehouse is devoted to silk and silk tailoring. See chapter 6.
- **Morning Market (Vientiane, Laos).** Laos's famous market is three huge buildings with traditional tiered roofs. Silver handicrafts, fabrics, jewelry, electronics, books, and much, much more occupy each building's several floors. The aisles are wide and made for wandering and poking through the wares, and the proprietors are friendly, gentle bargainers. See chapter 5.
- **Arab Street (Singapore).** Sure, Singapore is a shopper's paradise, but it needs more places like Arab Street, where small shops lining the street sell everything from textiles to handicrafts. Bargaining is welcome. See chapter 8.
- **Central Market (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia).** This is one-stop shopping for all the rich arts and handicrafts Malaysia produces—and it's air-conditioned, too. See chapter 9.
- **Central Market (Phnom Penh, Cambodia).** This is where it all happens in Phnom Penh. The main building is a massive Art

Deco rotunda with wings extending in all directions. It's an anthill of activity on any given day, and

you can get some interesting bargains and unique finds. See chapter 7.

13 The Best Shopping Bargains

- **Antiques (Thailand).** Before you head out on vacation, visit some Asian galleries in your home country and take a look at the prices of the items you like. Once you're here, you'll be amazed at how little these things really cost. Most places will be glad to pack and ship purchases for you, and you'll still come out ahead. See chapter 4.
- **Tailored Silk Suits (Thailand and Hanoi, Hoi An, and Saigon, Vietnam).** For a fraction of what you'd pay at home, you can have a lined silk (or wool) suit tailored in a day or less, including a fitting or two. Bring pictures of your favorite designer outfits for a clever copy, and an empty suitcase or two for the trip home. See chapters 4 and 6.
- **Silver or Lacquer Handicrafts (Vietnam).** The workmanship is tops and the prices low throughout Vietnam, particularly for lacquer ware. Bargain hard and make sure that the silver is genuine. See chapter 6.
- **Hand-Woven Textiles (Laos).** The Laos hand weave textured fabrics piece by piece on primitive wooden looms. Such painstaking work costs more than a few dollars, but, ranging from sophisticated silk to gaily colored ethnic prints, the designs are pure art and uniquely Laotian. See chapter 5.
- **Silver Filigree Jewelry (Malaysia).** This fine silver is worked into detailed filigree jewelry designs to make brooches, necklaces, bracelets, and other fine jewelry. See chapter 9.
- **Pewter (Malaysia).** Malaysia is the home of Selangor Pewter, one of the largest pewter manufacturers in the world. Its many showrooms have all sorts of items to choose from. See chapter 9.
- **Fabric and Woodcarvings (Bali).** Even with the "rich man's tax" for tourists in Bali, just about anything you buy on the island is a bargain compared with the same stuff back home. Commissioned fabric and woodcarvings are a particularly good deal. See chapter 10.

14 The Hottest Nightlife Spots

- **Patpong (Bangkok, Thailand).** Yes, *that* Patpong. If go-go bars and sex shows aren't your style, you'll still find plenty to do. After you're finished shopping in the huge night market, you'll find plenty of restaurants, pubs, and discos that cater to folks who prefer more traditional nightlife. See chapter 4.
- **Saigon (Vietnam).** From the tawdry to the socialite scene, you'll find it in Saigon. With rooftop garden bars like Saigon-Saigon and cool spots like Q-Bar, Saigon has a rollicking scene. Most evenings begin with an elegant (but very reasonable) French or Vietnamese dinner; then it's bar-hopping time in the city's compact downtown, mingling with trendy locals and fun-loving expats. See chapter 6.
- **Disco Lives! (Laos).** Go to a disco . . . any disco. It's like a bad junior high dance and just as

innocent. In the basement of Vientiane's Lao Plaza Hotel is a reasonable big-city facsimile, but ask around in any small town for what's on. The music is Asian pop, but it's refreshing to watch young gentlemen ask the ladies to the floor with a bit of pomp and circumstance, and then it's cheek-to-cheek or stilted boogie until the big cheer when the music stops. It hearkens to an America of the 1950s. See chapter 5.

- **Singapore.** Nightlife is becoming increasingly sophisticated in Singapore, where locals have more

money for recreation and fun. Take the time to choose the place that suits your personality. Jazz club? Techno disco? Cocktail lounge? Wine bar? Good old pub? It has it all. See chapter 8.

- **Bangsar (near Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia).** Folks in Kuala Lumpur know to go to Bangsar for nighttime excitement. A couple blocks of concentrated restaurants, cafes, discos, pubs, and wine bars will tickle any fancy. There's good people-watching, too. See chapter 9.